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STREET CARNIVAL

That morning I severed an earthworm and it bled red. One half survived. The soil was good—black and loose. I turned over chunks of sod and shook the dirt out.

Now, as I stepped toward the wrecked car, the reality became as tactile as a beetle unearthed by my shovel. I had been walking down Howe Street. I looked up and saw an oncoming SUV flip onto its roof. An iridescent black carapace, wheels spinning uselessly in the air. It clamoured like a trash collecting truck, lifting metal bins into itself.

There was no explosion, no alarm, no wailing or screaming. It was a cinematic stunt devoid of its glossings. Where else but the movies does a car flip onto its back? Oh my God, said the couple walking behind me. They began to run and so did I.

As I jogged closer I could see fragmented glass and the car's buckled shell. I primed myself as a witness to a serious accident. Parked cars along the side of the street limited my view to patches at first, but I could see a large vehicle, a new BMW four-by-four, now transformed like a sculpture, its undercarriage leaning rakishly to one side.

I imagined injuries and perhaps deaths, blood pouring from an eye, a torn dislocated limb latticed with blood and studded with winking glass. CPR and the Jaws of Life. Fumes leaking out to form a toxic cloud, the gas tank exploding and a yellow-orange marigold of flame burning to black. I glanced at my watch and saw that I was already ten minutes late to meet my friends for lunch. I had walked all the way downtown from Kitsilano and was wearing tight shoes. I got my phone out and called.

"Hello?"

"Hey ... this is weird, but I just witnessed a car accident. It looks pretty serious and I think I'm going to have to give a statement. So, I just wanted to tell you guys to have fun without me because I don't think I'm going to make it."

"You saw a car crash? Seriously? Is it bad?"

"I'm still just walking over, but yeah it looks bad, I mean the car is upside-down."

"Holy shit."

"Yeah. Hey, I'm almost there, I'm going to let you go, okay?"

The front of the car was crushed and a spray of green glass littered the asphalt. I envisioned myself telling the story later. Experiences like that bear repeating. That morning, while digging my vegetable patch, my sister came out and sat on the porch steps and watched me. Read me a story, I said. So she brought out

a novel and started from the beginning. The opening scene was a bank robbery. A teenage slacker inadvertently stops the crime by convincing the robbers to let him move his car that is parked in a 15-minute tow-away zone. It was turning out to be a good book. But as I listened, pulling grass and unearthing bugs, part of my mind held itself apart from the story. Bank holdups do not happen in real life. One does not simply wander into that kind of situation. Later that afternoon, when that car flipped over, my mind opened up to unexpected possibilities¹.

One by one, we crouched in the glass and probed for life.

I once read about Kitty Genovese, the twenty-nine year-old New Yorker who was famously stabbed to death outside her apartment in Queens in 1964 by a lunatic named Winston Moseley. It was an incident one never expects to actually happen—the murderer was unknown to his victim. The attack occurred in the middle of an empty but well-lit street lined with trees planted at regular intervals. Her neighbours heard her screams and they all saw it happen. But no one called the police—because, seeing lights on in other apartments, each of them assumed that someone else already had.

What a contrast to Howe Street. At least fifteen people were on their phones and a good number of them seemed to be dialing 911. Suddenly, there was a real reason to be late for work. Everyone was trying to be the Good Samaritan. Only, there wasn't very much going on.

Inside the crushed car there were no screams. No mangled bodies or pouring blood. The car was unoccupied. People began to whisper. "Where's the driver?" Amid the sudden confusion, fleeing cars and rushing passers-by, the driver had either gone missing or become worked somehow into the inner machinery of the vehicle. And so, each of us stood there in curious expectation, the skin creased between our eyebrows: what's going to happen next?

Everyone gathered around the huge hulking structure as if it were a great grand-parental storyteller bending on its wrinkled knees, divested of its technological lustre, slowly revealing some truth that we had not yet come to understand. What will crawl out of this damaged shell, what narrative will it unfold?

For a hushed moment we stood there and slowly admitted to ourselves that there was nothing to do. No real need for us to be there. Sirens in the distance.

Two police cars, a fire truck, and an ambulance slid in. Officers and paramedics began to jog out. Like us, they stopped short when they realized that there was no one inside. They began to question people. It took a few minutes. Then, all of the sudden, I saw one officer extracting a young woman who was standing in the audience right next to me, his hands on her shoulders, and walking her to the ambulance. She walked shakily, with a cute little bruise on her cheek.

Somehow, due to a miracle or conscientious vehicle design, she had survived unscathed and had, in shock, surreptitiously crawled out. In the confusion and excitement, no one had noticed that the shocked driver was standing among us.

I thought about the momentous turning force that could cause something to become uprooted, uprighted, flipped over from its natural inertia. Such an abrupt change of state. The girl didn't look drunk but it was hard to tell. A police officer was

standing near me. I asked him if he knew what was going on and he just shook his head.

“I saw the car flip over. Do you want me to write a statement?”

“No, I think we’ve got all the information we need. You can go.”

I looked at my watch. A lot had happened but not much time had passed. I was only twenty minutes late to meet the girls.