

Timeline of a Car Crash

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Six Months before Car Crash

"I still see you as the person I want to have kids with," he said before he said it wasn't that he didn't love me.

"You're my best friend in the whole world," he said before he said he needed to know he had the chance to get me back someday.

"I'm leaving you," he said before he did.

Five and a Half Months before Car Crash

On a playground at almost ten o'clock at night toward the end of a very long, very cold January. He had given me socks for my twenty-first birthday and asked whether my parents hated him. I stood in the middle of the merry-go-round as he turned it, then when he sat, stood between his legs with my arms around his neck. His hair was wet. His jacket that he loved so much, the new one he bought in Warsaw, damp around the collar despite his woven scarf. He started crying when I did.

"I'm afraid I'm ruining my life," he said, burying his face in my chest. My fingers in his hair without my meaning them to be, and his hair was wet, his jacket that he loved so much, the new one he bought in Warsaw, it wasn't cold anymore, it wasn't January or Illinois and I wasn't twenty-one and we weren't on the merry-go-round where he kissed me on our first date.

And it wouldn't stop spinning, even without him to make it move.

Four and a Half Months before Car Crash

His fraternity brother had his mouth on my vagina.

I had too much to drink and too much weed.

It was the middle of the night.

I did not know the word "no;" I said nothing until I said "yes, there, that's good" and after I said it enough times, he stopped.

Four Months before Car Crash

It wasn't a wake-up-and-see-it kind of realizing. It was an over-months realizing that left a bitter taste when I'd scratch off lipstick after a party. Lipstick I was allowed to wear without him. In the dress I was allowed to wear without him. I was scrambling, making up for the almost-two-years of drinking I was finally allowed to do. I was drowning myself.

I told one friend the story over lunch, about the way he'd gripped my wrists so tightly they bruised on a night he got angry that I wasn't happy.

I told my roommate the story in our room, about the times he reminded me of insecurities I'd never felt, that I was weak and unfit to keep my jobs, unfit to write my



Fall Out Boy

"Hum Hallelujah"

Infinity on High

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Island

essays and poems, unfit to earn my good grades because, “that professor just likes the way you look.”

I told another friend the story on a walk, about his insistence that I was remembering falsely, that I was trying to hurt him by claiming not to know about our agreement to take someone along with us on a trip to the store. The agreement we never made.

It wasn't a wake-up-and-see-it kind of realizing. It was an over-months realizing that the reality I had lived in had never existed. An insidious understanding that crying every day you are with the person you love is not normal, that missing classes and work, terrified to be left, is not normal. Curling up on the concrete basement floor and fantasizing that you could just lie down and wait on the railroad tracks is not normal.

My body echoed everywhere I went. I saw him from across the street and stopped breathing. My psychiatrist prescribed Xanax. I spent more and more time indoors.

Three Months before Car Crash

Drunk on tequila I'd begged her for, I lay on Katie's floor at four in the morning and ruined my makeup.

One and a Half Months before Car Crash

Stephen propped the little instrument higher on his knee and sang “The Real Slim Shady” while he strummed. From my vantage on the brick railing of the porch in the dark, he looked maybe perfect. We were all gathered, giggling, for an impromptu celebration of his twenty-second birthday—Emma on the floor against a pillar, Forrest propped on the window ledge with a cigarette dangling between her fingers, McKenzie beside me with my guitar in their lap, Sithara in a chair with her eyes closed, Jess, silent and still. Beer had been brought out, pizza was on the way.

There is probably not a word that means “the first time in a long time that you feel whole” but I felt that. Felt family.

Walking home at midnight I saw them, streetlight-lit, his arm around her shoulder, her dress the same color and length as the one I'd worn a year before. Chest shrinking I stumbled back to the porch.

I told them, Stephen, Forrest, McKenzie, and Jake, who'd arrived after I left. I chain-smoked on the porch and I cried and I told them and they were angry because they loved me.

One Month before Car Crash

On Forrest and Stephen's couch in the middle of the night I cried until I could no longer move. He had come out publicly against the boy who assaulted me after months saying I'd made it up. He had decided to tell everyone he was angry with this boy when he had said he was angry with me.

I could not explain to Forrest, as she held my hand and offered sips of water, why finding this out felt like being beaten. Felt like spinning so fast I was sick. Felt like every time he'd fucked me on our bed in the room we painted, every starlit car ride, every smile turned into the night he hit me with his belt during sex and then said he was sorry—like a whole life condensed into the *déjà vu*, the glitch in the system, the break.

Forrest said the word aloud. She said it before I did. Before I could.

Said, “abuse.”

Two Weeks before Car Crash

In my bathtub with candles lit, at home, the day before he graduated. 900 miles away and still waking up in the middle of the night afraid.

Three Hours before Car Crash

“Have you ever dried dope?” my dad asked over lunch in Denver.

“You mean pot, right?”

“Yeah.”

“A couple times, yeah,” I said.

“I used to do that back in college.”

“You were a pizza delivery guy at UC Santa Barbara, Dad. I kinda figured.”

This was the most honest we had ever been with each other. There was so much not to say.

We traipsed 16th Street, watching families and couples, maybe the only diverse place in the whole state. A group of mimes in front of the Aveda School. The Green Peace guy with his pamphlets trying to shame us for not being better people.

We got in the car after I bought a blue dress from H&M that he thought was too short.

Less Than Thirty Seconds before Car Crash

I got a text from someone: “How’s your summer?”

My dad’s hands at ten and two, he glanced into the rearview.

I decided not to respond until we got home.

“Wow, that guy is going fast. Oh my god. Oh my god *oh my god we’re about to get hit!*”

Car Crash

Hanging by the seatbelt of the passenger seat in my father’s blue Honda Civic, direction has become relative. I reach up—or possibly down—into the shattered and muddy windshield, to switch off my iPod. This feels crucial. Fall Out Boy is not an appropriate soundtrack to a car crash.

“Can you get out?” my dad says. He is panicked, his voice sharp.

This has not occurred to me. The radio is between us on the ceiling—the floor— with wires like veins tethering it to the cracked dashboard. I unclip my seatbelt. It has not occurred to me that I might fall on my head, but I find that suspended-from-the-seat-of-a-flipped-car is a surprisingly simple position to remove myself from. On my hands and knees it does not occur to me to worry about putting weight on the filthy, wet, broken windshield, but I find that it’s not sharp. I pull at the handle of my door, press against its window with my boot.

There is a stranger pulling the door from the other side. Together we force it open. He takes my hand. He may have brown hair. He pulls me up and out.

My father scrambles behind me.

"Who else is in the car?" the stranger says. He says it as though it is urgent. It has not occurred to me how this must have looked.

"Nobody," one of us says. "Just us."

It is sunny. Near-sunset. Broomfield, Colorado, near the county line into Superior. Less than five minutes from my father's apartment. Still June, still summer. The mountains have not moved. Highway 36 blurs by, louder from outside a vehicle, louder standing in the irrigation trench off the right-hand shoulder just before the exit, louder from beside the Honda whose bumper is several feet from its body.

There is a cop. There are six or seven other cars, all pulled over, most with passengers outside. The cop finds my dad. The stranger puts his hands on my face.

"Look at me," he says. "Your eyes are a little dilated. Your face is bleeding."

I reach up to my right eyebrow, which stings. My fingers come away rusty red.

"And your legs," he says.

I look just below the hem of my skirt, just below my kneecaps. There are long, dripping blood tracks down each shin. My left shoulder might hurt. My shins do not.

My dad makes a *Big Lebowski* joke and the cop looks at us like we're crazy when we laugh. "Dude's car got a little dinged up."

A recollection of spinning. Of impact. Of thud. Of invert. Of my father: "Oh my god, oh my god we're about to get hit!"

The iPod is somehow in my hand. So too my cell phone. Medics and firefighters have arrived. All I can think to say: "Can you get my purse" and "Thank you."

Spinning.

Two and a Half Hours after Car Crash

I will stand, shaking, from the gurney on which I have been wheeled into the x-ray room. I will press my swelling face against a board so that the nurse can get a good picture. Everything will ache. The last time I was in an emergency room he drove me, Valentine's Day the year before.

I will be in the ER because, an hour after the accident, I will feel dizzy and we will decide to play it safe on the concussion front.

I will be wheeled back into my little room, my father and his best friend in the chairs beside it, and the doctor will be cleaning my dad's hand, the only injury he has sustained in the crash. I will check my iPod, which has migrated back into my purse, and find that it is paused two-thirds of the way through "Hum Hallelujah" by Fall Out Boy, not the song that was playing when we were hanging upside down in the wreckage of the Honda, but the song that features a choir, features "hallelujah" repeated over a crunching guitar riff, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah.

Three Days after Car Crash

I will lie on the massage table as Allison holds my feet. My eyes will be closed. Cranial-sacral work is strange; very Boulder, very hippie, very good timing, she will say before starting, because it can help the body to process a trauma. We have instinctual intelligence deeper than our consciousness and sometimes this can wake it up and let it do what it needs to without the brain getting in the way.

She will ask how the energy in my body feels. I will tell her “circular” and she will know what I’m talking about.

When her hands reach my face I will begin to float up out of my body. I will begin to spin. And spin. And spin. Faster and more urgently and always to the left, to the left, my right shoulder pulling up and over my chest, my neck tilting, my head lolling. It will not stop.

She will tell me my body is trying to protect the part that is hurt, the left shoulder that was x-rayed and discovered to be sprained. She will tell me my body is processing the accident. The car rolled over to the left. My left. I think. It might have. The left. Spinning.

The spinning will stop ten minutes before the session does.

Two and a Half Weeks after Car Crash

I will sit down to write about it. It will be newly July, or perhaps not, the time on my laptop still not changed to reflect Mountain Standard over Central. I will sit down to write about it and it will become a story about him.

But the spinning will have stopped, without him to move it.

My shoulder will ache in its bearing after an hour of Allison manipulating and pushing it—she will have recommended ice and I will not yet have heeded her, but will long to as I sit at the kitchen table in my mother’s house where I never, ever write, writing at what is either one in the morning or midnight and maybe July. The mountains will not have moved. I will watch my cell phone battery drain down beside me on the table as I type, music churning from the speakers, the record to which I fell in love with him two summers ago, two years before the car crash. It will not hurt.

But I will change the record. I will change it and I will re-read and not cry.

Hallelujah, hallelujah, *hallelujah*.