

Denis Johnson

CAR CRASH WHILE HITCHHIKING

The narrator of “Car Crash While Hitchhiking” is an individual detached from human connection and even the human condition. With no responsibilities and nothing to tie him to any human being, he wanders the country, hitchhiking and connecting to any sense of emotion through the aid of various drugs. Intoxicated or high, the narrator feels *something* though that something itself is artificial, not linked to natural stimuli or even emotional or psychological stimulus. The narrator is an emptiness occupying a body, an apathetic void. Still, enough humanity remains inside him to allow a single day and its tragic events to invade this fog of existence.

The story as a whole follows the stream of the narrator’s consciousness, as he recounts the events of a day, traveling back and forth in time and in his own mind. The narrator summarizes the events of the day and his completely detached perception of them in the first disconnected paragraph of the story. After a string of rides and shared drug use, the hitchhiker catches a ride with a family, the seemingly safest of his contacts the entire day and they have a car accident that kills a man.

After summarizing, the narrator jumps back to his roadside and soaking wet position at the edge of a highway pre-accident. Numb to this misery, he expresses his indifferent resignation to waiting out the rain, knowing that the possibility of being picked up is slim: “What was the point, even, of rolling up my sleeping bag when I was too wet to be let into anybody’s car?” Yet, a family in an Oldsmobile offers a ride and kindness.

He jumps from riding in the Oldsmobile, peacefully sleeping, to a description of the other people and cars he’s been in that day. The impetus of these moments is the brevity and meaninglessness of the connections, the narrator’s photo album of snapshots of people’s various quiet desperations and constant drive to escape by whatever means necessary--mostly drugs.

The central questions of the story are implied rather than readily apparent. Why, of all the more likely candidates to have an accident, is it the family with the most to lose and the least reason to lose it the ones to careen into another car and kill another human being? In other words, why is there suffering? And, why do bad things happen to good people? Where is the balance?

A second set of questions is motivated by the strange foreknowledge of the accident the narrator asserts and by his ghostly presence throughout the story. As the family’s Oldsmobile pulls to a stop and offers him a ride, he conveys awareness followed directly by jaded response: “I knew a certain Oldsmobile would stop for me even before it slowed, and by the sweet voices of the family inside it I knew we’d have an accident in the storm. I didn’t care.” Completely unfazed by impending disaster and unafraid of losing his own life as meaningless as it is, he sleeps in the back seat, next to a baby on the opposite end of the same carefree sense of reality as he is.

A final set of questions surrounds the narrator’s detachment and his response to the tragedy, a response that seems to be the only event that impacts him in a way he is unable to forget. When the narrator witnesses the dead salesman’s wife learn of her husband’s sudden and unexpected death, the piercing scream of her emotion stays with him and etches in concrete the events that lead up to it. But why does it stay with him? Why does the narrator remember it through a cloud of drug-abuse and a fog of social detachment? He describes the moment of hearing the woman’s scream of grief with a sense of macabre awe: “It felt wonderful to be alive to hear it! I’ve gone looking for that feeling everywhere.” Perhaps he answers the questions of the story within this statement; perhaps he wanders as hitchhiker in search of the nakedness of life, people experiencing the most dire extremes and perhaps the drug abuse is about reminding himself that it is possible to feel, to be alive. This notion of an answer is also present

in the moment he witnesses the salesman's dying breaths, not with a pity for his death but in grief for the lack of connection: "he couldn't tell me what he was dreaming, and I couldn't tell him what was real." The narrator is desperate to be alive despite his seeming utter detachment.

The question that girds the entire story is the cause of the narrator's fundamental detachment. What can lead a man to become as fundamentally indifferent to the humanity that surrounds him and that is a part of him? How can he see the blood of a car accident as mere "liquid . . . rain[ing] down on [his] head?" What possesses him to climb from the car, to "run away" with the baby in his arms, a tangible connection to the event?

It's the narrator's confusion about the answers to those questions that makes the story as uncomfortable for readers as it is. "I'd thought something was required of me, but I hadn't wanted to find out what it was." No reader wants to believe a human being could be so detached or to see the possibility in him/herself. The narrator realizes in these moments of looking at himself and the people around him that he is vitally incomplete; that too much is futile and without explanation. Is the narrator really the only honest human being, the only not "ridiculous" one?

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