

Terry Kitchen

THE WIND AND THE ROAR

NOTHING CAN HAPPEN TO ME. Yes, I'm on a Harley-Davidson XL1200, gliding down Old Route 17 faster than I should. And yes I only have the bike because the previous owner spun out on a curve and crushed his femur. But I'm vigilant, don't daydream, keep my eyes on the road. Because I mean it, nothing can happen to me.

The kids are old enough to fend for themselves, if they had to. The boy's in college, one year in. Physical education major. Wants to be a wrestling coach. We laugh at that movie *The Breakfast Club*, Emilio Estevez as this jock wrestler eating this huge lunch. Mikey never ate more than an orange and a box of raisins during the season, always trying to make weight. He can hunt, too. One deer and that's meat for the winter. He'd inherit my rifles. The girl, Casey, is in her last year at the high school. She'd probably move into town, maybe even down to the City. The woods are tough on a girl. I can see her being a nurse or a health care aide, she's so good with her mom.

I slow down, turn off Old 17 onto Beaverkill, and rev back into gear. Some lady kneeling in her garden gives me a dirty look, the Harley's decibels disturbing her Sunday afternoon. Fuck you, it's a Harley. It's *supposed* to be loud. Beaverkill starts climbing, the road following the stream up the valley. The cabins and cottages are split about fifty-fifty between old poverty and new money – I pass a shack that's leaning precariously, then a property with new fieldstone retaining walls and solar panels on the roof.

I come to the split. Heaven or hell. Fuck it, it's late enough in the spring. I go left onto Mary Smith Road. It's pretty, idyllic even, some late afternoon sun poking through the clouds, shining down onto dandelion-filled meadows. Then the pavement gives out. Red dirt, wet with just-melted snow, with rock ledges poking through as the track climbs. A city car might lose its tailpipe up here. The woods close in from either side, the still bare branches reaching out like witch's fingers. It's not quite Slide Mountain, but I'm getting up there, and I can feel pressure building in my ears.

My wife and I discovered this road, from the other direction, coming back from some bullshit party we had to go to. It looked like a shortcut, and we wanted to get home since we were paying a babysitter. Luckily we were in my pickup so we made it, but it was getting dark, and sometimes we couldn't tell if we were even on the road. We came back that summer with our trail bikes, busted our butts up Mary Smith, then found a clearing for a picnic. Sun was out so Liv took her shirt off to sun bathe, and one thing lead to another.

I pass the clearing but don't stop, start heading down the other side. I take it slow – out here something happens and who knows when they'd find you. I didn't tell anyone where I was going, just said "out," and nobody but Liv knows I come here. And she can't exactly say. Don't get me wrong, she can speak, but she has to fight for every word. And, between the tumor, radiation, chemo and steroids, I don't really know what she remembers.

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Glioblastoma. I had to look it up. It started with headaches. Then one day she couldn't walk. I took her in and they found the tumor. They shipped her downstate ASAP – our little county hospital probably does surgery with a hacksaw. But they didn't want to operate, wanted to see if they could shrink it. They're still trying. Another round of this, another round of that. Steroids to counter the effects of this drug, something else to counter the steroids. Liv's in limbo. On a good day she can walk to the bathroom. But her balance is off so I have to help her up, help her down, spot her so she doesn't fall. It's a good thing Mikey is a wrestler; he's had to pick her up more than once. Casey's more patient, and has a better feel of what Liv can handle at a given moment. Liv's theory is she got the tumor worrying about her own parents – her mom got dementia and set the house on fire, but that's another story – so I tell Casey not to worry. Whatever will be.

The road rises, followed by a steep drop. It would be tempting to take it at speed, leave the ground for a second, but I don't. Nothing can happen to me. Liv's parents have passed now, and mine are getting up there. Liv's sister is stressed out enough with her own life. They'd put Liv in some kind of rehab hospital, and God knows when the money runs out. We're up to almost a million in actual billing. Yeah we just do the co-pays and whatever's left after insurance, but it's a whole other full time job even figuring out what that is.

Mary Smith empties out onto Beech Hill Road, and in a few hundred yards I hit pavement. First sign of civilization. I feel bad, almost, taking my loud Harley putt-putting through the woods, but some trail bikers got jumped by a mountain lion, no shit. On this thing I'd just run him over.

Liv and I had that conversation, how do you want to die, pretty early on, when we were just dating. She wanted to drown, swimming in the ocean, on her hundredth birthday. She'll be lucky to hit half that. Fuck. And what's the point if her only choice is chocolate pudding or vanilla.

Mountain lion, drowning, or my Harley taking me over a cliff, all sound pretty good. Just not in a hospital bed, with tubes coming out of my arms. And not yet.

Beech Hill takes me to 30, an actual highway. I should turn left, head home, check on Liv, start making dinner since my folks are coming over. But I'm not ready. I need a few more minutes. I turn right, gun the engine, and disappear into the wind and the roar.