



Accident

a short story by

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It was a car accident, of course, the most common of contemporary tragedies. And there was no way she could reasonably blame him (the other driver's fault, totally, as confirmed by multiple eyewitnesses, not to mention a silver-haired judge's ruling and an insurance board's unanimous decision), but sometimes she did blame him, later, when exhaustion and doubt got the best of her. He had been the one driving while she'd stayed home. He had been the one in control, supposedly, of the vehicle, her car, the crap Festiva, because his was in the shop. He was the one who'd decided, after several discussions that eventually escalated into halfhearted arguments (neither could really summon the energy for a full-blown tussle when so many other issues were more pressing, more argument worthy), that

PHOTOS: RITA BERNSTEIN

they needed a new VCR even though they couldn't afford it and their current one only occasionally caused videotapes to jitter and jump and distort. He was the one who, on that seemingly inconsequential summer day in 1997, had opted for the mall rather than Best Buy, which was a little closer and probably even a little cheaper. He was the one who'd spaced on getting gas the previous day and then had to stop at a gas station, which meant the trip took an extra five minutes and required a slight detour from the usual home-to-mall route. Had he not spaced on getting gas the previous day, they wouldn't have been crossing that particular intersection at that particular time and thus would have avoided the accident and one Matthew Ronald Kimbrough (blood-alcohol level well above the legal limit). And, she thought, he had been the one who'd chosen to make the trip in the late afternoon as opposed to the morning, on Saturday instead of Sunday, because on Sunday there was a game of some kind, and no, he couldn't tape it, because that was another problem with the goddamn, piece-of-shit VCR, which just proved his point even more, he said. And she'd learned that these things — these simple, apparently random things that do not appear to mean anything at the time — have their repercussions; they add up and fuck you and shape your future whether you realize it or not. And why hadn't he been able to avoid the other car? All crashes are avoidable, are they not? His driving skills, when she really thought about it in the aftermath, had always been somewhat suspect. He was one of those one-handed, cool-guy, Southern California drivers who barely grasp the wheel and concentrate more on the scenery and the radio station than on the road and the death and horror and destruction looming everywhere. So she wondered: Had there been a brief lapse there, a moment when a bikinied billboard model or a Led Zeppelin song he hadn't heard in years had taken precedence over the safety of Anabelle, their six-year-old child, their world? Had such carelessness been the real culprit, despite the overwhelming evidence against Matthew Ronald Kimbrough, who'd wept repeatedly in court and didn't have a child of his own and said he could only imagine what it must be like, and he was sorry, sorry, a thousand times sorry, Your Honor, adding that the one positive thing to come out of this whole mess was that he'd found God, whereas before his life had been sans God and pretty much unfocused and empty, and, sure, like everyone else he'd always been skeptical of people "finding" religion in jail, but now he understood; he understood completely how guilt brings you to God . . . And then there was the fact that he, her husband, was only bruised, merely sprinkled with cuts and laughable lacerations and also a sprained wrist, but nothing that required a hospital stay. He was in and out of the emergency room while their daughter fought for life.

He blamed himself as well. Naturally. He was the questionable parent, always had been. This was how the casting of their marriage went: she the vigilant, suffering mother who had the final say on everything; he the reluctant father who yank back when had suggested that maybe they weren't

ready for this and shouldn't have a baby just yet and as a result forever felt guilty of having committed some basic parental transgression that would never be forgiven. The accident, then, confirmed what was already well documented. He hadn't seen the other car creep up, then accelerate toward them, into them. Hadn't seen. Their seat belts were on, secure. So he was OK there. And he was sober. Completely and utterly sober. (But how many times had he piloted a vehicle while whiskey and Coca-Cola hummed in his veins? How many times with his very own daughter and wife in the car? Was the accident a kind of cosmic payback for all the lives he could have destroyed but hadn't?) Still, it was his fault. No matter what the law and the judge and the jury had said; no matter how much the settlement had been; no matter how badly the doctors and the hospital had fucked up. And it was all so sudden, like a sucker punch that staggers you. He was driving, and Anabelle was there in the back seat, and then the tires and the unrepentant roar of metal against metal. He reacted as best he could, turned sharply to the left, locking it up like in a video game, skidding uncontrollably, but there wasn't enough time. It was too late. Nothing had ever happened so quickly, with such fierce, brute force, so true and final, as if the universe had never been more sure of anything; as if the gods had willed this to be, and now it was so. Immediately he knew it was bad. It was just a question of how bad. The car was flipped around backasswards, and he'd lost all sense of direction. Where were they? He was OK basically. His head was a thunderstorm of guitar feedback and his heart a riot in his chest, but not so bad, considering. The passenger side of the car, however, had crumpled in on itself like a crushed aluminum can. His daughter was bloody and squashed. That was the word exactly: *squashed*. The silence afterward chilled him. Such fury, then such quiet — which was worse? He started screaming. For how long he didn't know. What he was saying he didn't know either. It was just a primal moaning, pure lament. Pain that had to be released. They dragged him from the car (still screaming, he was later told), but they had to wait for the Jaws of Life for Anabelle, and he kept hearing that — *the Jaws of Life, the Jaws of Life* — and it didn't really register what they were talking about; it was that device you see on the news that they use to pry people out of cars, and it usually means death, not life. He dropped to the sidewalk. It was happening, and it wasn't happening. Maybe he was more injured than he thought. His wrist throbbed. *Ouch*. The left one. The one he'd been driving with, holding the steering wheel. Where had his right hand been when it happened? The car that hit them had apparently then rammed another car and another, though neither as bad as his. There was a man on his knees. The man was saying something. Cops and fire-trucks arrived. The curious. Something dark and disturbing had transpired, and how could you not look? He'd probably have done the same thing if he'd been passing by or standing there, part of the crowd and not a participant, as he now was. People hovered stupidly. They seemed afraid to talk to him. *He must be the father*, someone was saying, and it was his inclination to deny this, to tell them no, he was not the father; he was not worthy of such a title, the way his father hadn't been,

and the way his father's father hadn't been, shitty parenting having been passed down from generation to generation, and how can you break a chain like that once it gets going? Waiting, waiting. The concrete warm from the sun. Telling the paramedics he was OK, but his daughter . . . The last time he'd seen his father was a few months before he'd died, and they'd had dinner and said very little. In the ambulance he got his first real look at her. One of the paramedics talked about head trauma and lack of oxygen to the brain and how every second counted. *My wrist hurts. I think it's broke*, he wanted to tell them, but how could he say such a thing at such a time? A wrist hardly mattered. Clumps of blood clung to Anabelle's hair. Her eyes were closed. She was strapped in, and the ambulance snaked and wailed. He couldn't really make out her face, recognize her as the girl he'd left home with. Everything mangled and red. They had put one of those neck braces on her, and now that was bloody too. Another paramedic cradled her head, as if his hands were all that was holding her skull together. And maybe they were. Up front the driver yelled: *Fucking cars! Fucking traffic! What do people not understand about the concept of flashing red lights?* A group was waiting for them in the hospital parking lot: activity, a lot of words he didn't understand. The words had a strange power because they were secret. Was he standing? Was someone holding him up? They wheeled her away, and he followed, and one of the doctors asked if he was OK, and he said, *Yes, fine, I think*, and the doctor said, *We'd better check you out just to be sure*, and that's when he told them about his wrist, which was throbbing worse by then. He tracked down a pay phone. He had to call first, before anything else. He almost forgot his own number. Maybe it was shock. He slammed the phone in the cradle because he couldn't remember the number, and people stared, and he leaned there against the phone until the sequence of digits came to him finally. He waited for Karen to pick up. What was he going to say? Where to begin? Shit. What had he done? Later he would wonder: What had Anabelle been saying before the crash? He couldn't even remember. It was probably nothing out of the ordinary: *I'm hungry. When are we going to get there? Can we go to KB Toys? Why was Mom mad at you this morning? When are you going to like each other again?* But even that would have been something. His daughter was quiet, mysterious, given to staring out windows and sitting on the sidewalk and mumbling to herself in that weird made-up language of hers. The last words she might ever speak, and he couldn't remember them. His failure was complete.

She had been at home, paging through one of the women's magazines that she fell prey to in checkout lines, or maybe not even that, just sitting there doing nothing at all, perhaps contemplating housework and dishes and the *Buns of Steel 4* videotape that someone had given her two Christmases ago (a hint?) and that was still shrink-wrapped, or wondering which bills could be put off and which couldn't, or vaguely deciding whether she was going to shower that night or wait until morning. Did she know something was wrong when it happened, the

accident? Did she feel something deflate and die inside her at the moment of impact? No, she was too immersed in her stupid reveries, too glad to have the house to herself for a while, enjoying the silence and peace and space and still wearing her slippers and absently scraping off the last of her burnt-sienna nail polish. How she'd like to change that part of it. How she'd like to have intuited that her daughter was in danger right when the crushing of metal and flesh and skull occurred; that their lives were about to turn inside out. But she didn't. Her motherly radar wasn't motherly enough, apparently. She'd tried her best to be the kind of mother worthy of those sappy Mother's Day greeting cards — the raised lettering, the elaborate cur-sive fonts, the couplets chronicling love and patience, understanding and sacrifice — but she knew that whatever she did or didn't do, it would never be good enough; that it was her fate to fall short; that people have kids for all the wrong reasons or no reason at all, because it's just what you do, and she was no different. *They* were no different. You bring a child into this world, and you had better be prepared for the consequences. When he called, she almost didn't even pick up the phone. *Just let the machine get it.* But she got up. His voice did not sound like his voice. It had a fear in it she'd never heard before, not once in nine-plus up-and-down years of dating and breakups and makeups and marriage. *John?* she said.

(end of excerpt)