

A S H
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A N O V E L

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SIX CROOKED HIGHWAYS



IT WAS THE DEEP DARK BLACK OF NIGHT. I'd been driving for seventeen hours. The coffee on my breath, the glaze over my eyes, the subtle vibration of the engine moving through my legs—I loved it all. Christy was beside me, asleep, her gargantuan feet splayed out across my lap and her head snuggled tight on a pillow against the passenger-side door. The Nova rattled on as the miles clocked behind us. I couldn't tell if Christy had been asleep for twenty minutes or ten hours. Another set of headlights hadn't appeared for what was beginning to feel like days. For me driving is a passion, as sensuous and hypnotic as anything else I've ever experienced. I can drive twenty-four hours straight, no problem.

Focus and attention to detail, that's the key. You have to watch the road ahead of you while incorporating your knowledge of the road behind. Mark the cars, count them. An old woman in a Cutlass smoking a cigarette, 62 mph. Two Caucasian males approximately twenty-five, drinking large cups of soda and laughing in a '96 blue Dodge

pickup, 72 mph. Always be aware of what the cars around you are up to. It takes two bad drivers to have an accident; we all know that. Stay ahead of the police. Use your brain. A good driver can see a speed trap before it happens. Stay alert and engaged in what you are doing. Never pass on the right; that causes more wrecks than any other highway infraction. No emotion. Fast song, slow song, good day, bad day: no difference. The world is still turning and you're still watching three cars ahead and two behind. Note the landmarks as you go. That way if you get lost or need to return, you'll be able to find your way. Trust your instincts and make your decisions instantly. If you make a mistake, acknowledge it and keep on truckin'.

Shaking my head like a horse with a long mane, I pushed the Nova up to 95 mph. It rests easier there than at 70 or 80. That's the other thing: Know your car.

Christy looked pretty when she slept. The muscles in her face completely relaxed into a madonna-like expression of calm, her cheeks and lips flushed red with blood. The gold wedding band wrapped around her finger flashed and glittered, reflecting the green dashboard lights. The matching ring on my hand was tapping the steering wheel. We had been husband and wife now for twenty-nine hours, and the panic that would arise momentarily had not yet arrived.

The wedding had gone off fine. Before the service I'd been assigned to wait in a little cloak/dressing room with Father Matthew to the left behind the altar until the set music cue, at which time we would both step out and the service would begin. Christy's father and stepmother had flown in from Houston for the service. Chance was there too, with her nitwit husband, Bucky, and their kid, as was my mom; they were pretty much the only ones in the church. I just stood in the dressing room bouncing my johnson around in my pants, nervously waiting while Father Matthew arrayed himself in all his priestly regalia. The tuxedo on my back was rented, but it was an antique wool beauty hanging off my shoulders perfectly. Father Matthew started off handily, talking to me about the perils of jealousy as he unbuttoned his black oxford shirt, revealing a thin worn white V-neck over his barely

living skin. I didn't want to read too much into what he was saying, but it seemed like he was hiding some kind of lesson or metaphor inside his idle chatter. Maybe he was just trying to distract me from my nerves. He talked about what a source of pain jealousy had been for him. It was surreal listening to the old guy talk like this as he slid on his robes. The priests, he said, were always bickering over who got appointed bishop and things of even lesser significance.

"All this ridiculous jealousy. Why aren't people satisfied with who they are?" he asked me.

"I don't know," I answered, my hands still deep in the pockets of my tuxedo.

"To know who you are and then to accept it—that is life's journey," he said, dropping a mammoth silver crucifix around his neck.

He was reminding me of a game I sometimes play with myself at the gym. I stare around at all the other guys lifting weights and try to figure out in what ways I'm better than each one of them. It usually makes me feel buoyed in superiority until something happens like Captain Powers'll come in: He's Special Forces Airborne, a great bowler, his wife is both smokin' hot and nice, he's got two boys and combat experience in Desert Storm, he saved some new recruit from blowing his brains out in a barracks bathroom—the guy is awesome. He can drink a fifth of vodka and still shoot the bottle from fifty yards. His parents both died in a plane crash when he was only fourteen, so it's not even like you can think he's spoiled and hasn't suffered. The game doesn't work with him. I'd sit there and watch him bench 240, and the burden of the world's unfairness would fold in on me. I know I should use him for inspiration, but the physical discomfort I felt, as if somehow his excellence was piss on my face, made any warm feelings I could muster evaporate.

"God loves you better than your best friend, sees and loves your soul better than any lover, and he always will," Father Matthew said. "He also loves everybody else. It's important to remember that."

I couldn't figure out why he was gabbing to me about all this.

Then, rather sharply, he turned to me and said in an irritated tone, "I got passed over for bishop again. Can you believe that?"

I shook my head in disbelief, my hands still deep in my pockets.

Driving south, parallel with the Mississippi River, I was in a state of steady untroubled bliss. A honeymoon in New Orleans and then onward to Texas to deal with the military and get settled in for the birth—that was the plan. I'd had so much sex in the last day or so, my mind had reached a rare tranquil calm like that of a patient recovering from hours of intense electroshock therapy.

Christy's feet were so damn big they made me laugh. She was still asleep as we passed the state sign for Missouri, her toes lightly squirming in my lap. I looked again at the gold wedding band around my finger. It was a fraction too big, but I liked it that way. After I was dead, I figured, my kids would keep the ring and believe I had large mythic powerful hands. Not that my hands are girlish or anything, it's just sometimes I wish they were a little more commanding.

The cathedral had been glorious. We did it like Christy wanted: at night, lit by candles. The place was glowing amber as she walked down the aisle, her pouchy belly pushing out the bright luminescent white dress, her father holding her arm with this monster of a smile. Yes, she looked ravishing, and yes, she looked delicate, but more than anything else she looked confident.

That's what breaks my heart when I think on it now.

Glancing over at her spread out on the Nova's front seat, lit in the dim green glow of the dashboard lights, I could see she was still sound asleep. She had a thick wine-red wool sweater on, with several different-colored scarves wrapped around her neck and my blue knit hat on her head. Sharp gorgeous locks of her dyed black hair were shooting out across her white forehead. Grace the cat was asleep beneath my seat. A faint smell of Kitty Litter filled the car's interior. We kept a small box in the back, cleaning it religiously, but even the smell

of fresh Kitty Litter is less than appealing. The radio was off, but even without it the Nova was anything but silent. That bad bitch makes a hell of a commotion. The odometer creates a loud quick clacking sound, the heater has a deep rumble, and whenever you're traveling above 65 mph the whole front console jitters and shakes like it might drop off. When the music is cranked it's no problem (I put in a sound system that requires its own battery supplement), but with the tunes turned down you may as well be rattling along inside a B-52 bomber.

Still wide awake and traveling at about 85 mph, I tried to concentrate on my driving but sometimes my mind would drift away. Time was so different for adults. I missed junior high: first period, second period, and the clear structure of days, months, and years. First semester, second semester, seventh grade, eighth grade: It had all been clearly drawn out, pass or fail. Now I was floating, rudderless really—across the country, across space. The army was probably over for me now. Anxiety sifted down on my shoulders as I remembered my lieutenant yelling at me over the phone, telling me to get back on base. He'd threatened dishonorable discharge; I figured that was the worst thing that could come out of this whole stunt. My buddy Eric was submitting me for an emergency leave of absence, and his dad was the colonel, so maybe some kind of pardon could be worked out, but there was credible skepticism as to whether or not I'd handled my departure in accordance with the proper military protocol. I didn't give a shit, but what was I gonna do next? An uncle of mine made a million dollars in meat processing back in Cleveland; he always said he'd hire me. I'd be a good stockbroker or a cop, maybe; it's easy to get a job on the force coming out of the military. On the other hand, dishonorable discharge might botch that up.

Oh, my God, I thought, I might have just fucked up my whole life!

The best thing about being young is that you can be "promising." By now, however, a big chunk of my life had already gone by and it was almost all undistinguished.

I know it's an average dream, but I did want to be an athlete. If I

could live my life over I would dedicate myself to swimming. Some people thought I could've gone to the Olympics—I mean, if I'd really applied myself. I held the Ohio state record in the 50-meter butterfly for a couple of years. Ultimately, I guess, I really am too short, and even athletes seem kind of feeble and depressing when they get older. It's not like accomplishment is a ticket to being a significant person. All I wanted, my life's goal, was to be a person I could admire; it was that simple. I thought marriage would kick-start that for me, but I was surprised how vulnerable I felt now without the army.

Christy wanted me to sell my car—it was not "baby friendly"—and I knew she was right. To her this automobile was the full expression of my all-encompassing inability to mature. If the damn thing even made it to Texas, I'd have to sell it. Who would I be then, some dweeb with an '89 Taurus? I know things like cars and clothes are external and frivolous, but it was difficult to picture myself in a civilian domestic lifestyle. The good thing about the military is it keeps you young. It's a young man's world, full of young men's toys. Snowmobiles, firing ranges, fast cars, fast boats, strippers—they were all amusing, but it was the long-standing promise of adventure that was gonna be so hard to live without. Not that there ever was any adventure, but still. Man, life was so much more subtle than I'd anticipated. All I wanted to do was love a girl right, and the next thing I knew everything I understood about myself was blowing away like leaves.

We were still in Missouri when the black night sky started shading its way toward navy blue. New Orleans was probably ten hours away. I'd have to sleep before we got there. Christy was starting to wake up. She squirmed uncomfortably for a moment and then sat up and rubbed her eyes. Her face was squashed up in the grumpy expression of a two-year-old. She reached down onto the car floor, pulled up Grace, and situated the gray cat on her lap, gently stroking her, as all three of us silently observed the beginning stages of the dawn. I couldn't believe we'd done it. We were married.

The most nerve-wracking thing about the actual ceremony for me had been the whole consummation aspect. I can't explain it, but from age eleven or so on I've had this nightmarish paranoia that I wouldn't be able to get it up on my wedding night. A shadow of inadequacy and failure would fall over our memories of the big day. We'd throw the pictures away. A mental block would form and I'd go permanently impotent except with hookers and weird kinky transvestites.

I've been playing out that scenario for as long as I've been thinking about marriage. So you can imagine the dark annals of anxiety I'd reached by the time I was saying "I do." I wasn't focusing on my vows or thinking *Oh, I'm so happy!* I just had my hand in my pocket, lightly shaking my johnson back and forth through my tuxedo pants, making sure the old boy was still vital. By the time we were done kissing I was so jacked up I gave Christy the business in the church lavatory right before we did the pictures.

Now, usually when I was having intercourse with a girl I'd wind up daydreaming about another scenario that I'd find even more titillating, a sexier girl or a more electrifying situation, but looking into Christy's face with the wedding dress spread out over the porcelain sink and the white skin of her naked legs wrapped around me, I knew I was living right then a moment I would dream of and long to return to my whole life. There was no fantasy better than right now. Life would no longer be defined by the maybes—maybe at this party I will meet the love of my life, maybe at this new job I will be introduced to my soul mate, maybe that girl behind me on the train will be my blazing eternal love. No, my blazing eternal love is sleeping in the car right beside me with ludicrously large feet, my eternal love is four months pregnant and addicted to ice munching, and my love wants to know why I'm having such a problem maturing.

Peering out into the highway in the distance, maybe two hundred yards ahead, I could see the dark shapes and yellow eyes of deer darting into the trees. I could still hear the sound of Father Matthew's Massachusetts voice.

"If you are to love one another well, you must first love the truth. You must seek the spirit of God breathing inside each other, you must somehow enter deep into the mystery of God's love for all of us." This was the only sermonlike advice Father offered up at the altar. He didn't do any preaching during the service, for which I was grateful. It was a brief ceremony that Christy and I had mapped out with him, and we all felt good about it. But with his lax relationship to the scriptures it wasn't too hard to understand why the higher-ups weren't rushing to make him bishop.

I thought the service was heartfelt and touching. My mom, however, thought it was "short and goofy," and she got testy when she noticed the continual omission of all the more didactic language. She'd been such a bitch. I don't want to be mean—"Honor thy mother," right? and I do—but this whole event taxed her. Christy thought it was important to invite her to the wedding so I did, but her attitude was atrocious. It was a hassle, the timing was bad, she had a business trip the next day.

I drove her to the airport the morning after, and she didn't have one nice word to say.

"Too bad you didn't have any music.

"Why was the service so short?"

"Boy, Father Matthew sure has gotten old."

"How much weight has Christy gained?"

She felt our brief ride to the airport was the opportune time to inform me that she didn't really believe in marriage and her only advice was not to get too "stressed out" if everything didn't turn out like I hoped.

"Marriages seem to work out well, at least from my perspective, when the two people involved don't have any real desire to live a deeply explored life," she said, holding her purse uncomfortably in her lap. "People who are really interested in appearances—those are the ones marriage seems to be most successful for. I worry that you're not that type of person. Maybe you are; I don't know." She was sifting through her bag for her ticket. "Well, I should say, I've never enjoyed being

married but I have enjoyed the ceremonies, so I hope you guys had fun." And she looked up, not at me but out at the flat Ohio landscape.

"Don't you have anything positive to say, Mom?" I asked, trying not to be oversensitive.

"Oh, don't take this the wrong way. It was a beautiful service and I'm very happy for you, I really am." Her voice was clear and musical as always. "It's just, frankly, I hope you don't feel rushed into anything. You have to be careful. Pregnant women don't always think too sharply."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I said, both hands firmly on the wheel.

"God, Jimmy, I don't know why you're getting so uptight. I wish you guys the best, I really do."

"You keep saying that, Mom, but that's not what it sounds like."

"Look, I'm just not the biggest advocate of marriage, I hope it works out better for you than it did for me. If all you want is the sunshine report, maybe I'm not the right person to be talking to. Sharing your life with somebody is not what it's cracked up to be." She was doing her lipstick now, studying herself in the tiny mirror I'd glued to the visor. "In my experience one person seems to get larger and the other gets smaller, and I don't want you to be the one who shrinks."

"You don't like Christy?" I asked.

"I don't know her, sweetheart. If you love her, she must be terrific." She kissed her hand to get rid of the excess lipstick.

"You know something, Mom? I don't think I'm gonna talk to you for a while, all right?" I was trying to stay calm, but I felt like I was turning inside out.

When we arrived at airport Departures, I helped her with her bags and kissed her good-bye.

"Do yourself a favor, will you?" she said, before stepping away. "Get rid of that car."

Watching her walk through the mechanized departure doors, I rubbed the muscles around my navel to try and settle my nerves. I'd

never felt so much like an adult. There was no doubt about it, I thought. The umbilical cord was gone.

My mother was spot-on in regard to one subject, however: that car. With all the praying that'd been goin' down in the last week, I'd forgotten the only thing I should've been praying for: that sack-of-shit Chevy Nova. For every mile we passed, I tried to be grateful. For every turn up ahead, I braced myself. If it rained we were done for; there weren't any wipers. I took them off to replace them with better ones, but you know how these things go.

As we left Missouri and entered Arkansas, almost immediately the highway we were driving on ceased to be any kind of main through-way. The road was narrowing and beginning to wind and ascend a large slope. I couldn't figure out how this had happened, I didn't remember exiting and the incline was becoming so steep that I was terrifyingly aware of the engine's rpms revving into a high-pitched whine. Christy wasn't worried yet; she was playing with Grace's collar, spinning it around and pushing back her ears. How did I make a wrong turn? I thought to myself. I'd been so careful. I wanted to remedy the situation before Chris realized we were lost. Maybe everything was fine, I tried to reassure myself.

We arrived at the peak of the hill and immediately began a descent. The pull of the brake pad against the wheel was discernible in my intestines. Needless to say, I don't have power brakes.

At the bottom we turned and immediately began the ascent of another steep hill. Christy reached over and flipped on the radio: static. The SEEK button spun all the way through the dial without stopping once. She clicked it off and put on her seat belt, situating the strap comfortably under the bulge of her belly.

"This car better make it to New Orleans, cowboy," she said quietly.

"Or what?" I asked.

"Or you're in trouble, Ratskin!" she said, licking her finger and

pushing it into my ear. I tell you, the more pregnant she got, the harder it was to bring her down. Progesterone happy head, she called it.

“Give me a break,” I moaned, leaning away from her. I was edgy about where the hell we were headed and how far off the track we might be. It was still dark; dawn was not coming as rapidly as promised. A truck was barreling toward us, its high beams blazing. I flashed my lights at him but he didn’t respond. I dimmed mine anyway, acquiescing; one blind driver is better than two. For a moment I could see nothing, not even the line marking the center of the road, my eyes whited out in the glare, but the moment passed and we were still traveling, rattling like a bag-a-bones forward up this old country hill.

I snapped my brights back up.