

We Won

It's a bluebird sky day as the clouds float away leaving behind distinctive dry desert air scoured by sagebrush, tumbleweeds and settled sand. As for me, I cozily sit in a floral patterned recliner by an open window drinking in hot tea and cold air from the open window. Biscuit "puppy purrs" wedged between the arm rest and me. Her features are concealed by white fur giving her the appearance of a couture throw pillow whereupon I rest my elbow. I take deep breaths and rest between the sighs knowing that I have all that I need. It is from this vantage point that I view the terror of just a few nights ago...

...Twilight in the desert descends softly as we drive into the sunset towards Payson to visit our beloved Jennifer. After a stop for gas, a quick walk for Biscuit and an unsuccessful search for my night driving glasses we are on the road again. All of a sudden the sun is in a hurry to set unlike the languishing gushes of color that stretch across coastal California for an hour before going black. At once it is thick with dark so deep that I comment to Anne that "I can't even see a single star." The lull of our new car is the backdrop to our audio book that keeps us entranced in the Dust Bowl days and the epic trials of those in the Texas Panhandle. We pause our entertainment to respond to Jennifer's text with a phone call back. Our conversation starts cheerily as I give our whereabouts and ETA and is suddenly punctuated with my exclamation, "Asshole, what is he thinking?" A silver sedan with darkly tinted windows is tailgating so closely that I immediately feel threatened.

The two lane highway is deserted and I am dependent on the voice emanating from the Waze app. "What the hell!" quickly follows as the car careens in front of us,

pulls partially onto the shoulder and stops. Jennifer directs us with “Get off the phone and call 911!” Anne calls 911 at 7:47 p.m. and hands me the phone. The dispatcher asks for our whereabouts which I rely on Ann for since she has been our navigator extraordinaire the entire trip. She reports highway 60 and milepost 72. Imploring the dispatcher for help, holding the phone and driving instinctively, I swerve into the empty lane of oncoming traffic in an effort to pass the silver car. The car accelerates again making it impossible for me to pass. I am stuck in the lane of oncoming traffic for minutes which is mercifully empty. Another car pulls up behind me making it impossible to fall back behind the silver sedan. Eventually, that car fades back into the other lane, and I am forced behind the silver car. Now, we are stuck between the two cars at a speed of at least 80 mph. I am shrouded and can only see the car directly in front of me and the glaring brights just feet behind me. I can’t see if the road remains straight or if there are shoulders or drop offs on the sides. I scream “DLL BDK, Oregon license plate” to the dispatcher and beg for help. She says that the state troopers are on their way and I keep imploring, “Where are they? How long will it take them to find us?” She does not give me a direct answer which incites me and distills my desperation down to plaintive pleas of “Help us, help us, help us.”

I am aware that Anne and Jeff connect on the other phone but do not hear a word as my mission to save myself and my daughter dominates every sensation. A story floats to the surface about a young woman who was boxed in on a highway, abducted and trafficked which informs my next impulse, “Anne put a hat on to disguise yourself.” Anne cries out as she understands why. “There’s no hat, mom.” She grabs her jacket and covers herself with it instead. The jacket becomes “God’s downey wing” as

we realize later that it shields her vision from the terror. The call with Jeff is dropped several times along the way but for now my 911 call miraculously endures. Knowing that Jeff is present with us bolsters our strength.

The car behind turns off its lights magnifying the unknown, “Are we still being followed from behind and risking being boxed in again if we try to pass the silver car directly in front of us?” The thoughts are preverbal and take the shape of impulses that guide me on what to do next. I gun the engine and pass the silver car which is going 80 mph. I stretch over 100mph and the car is staying by my side as I look ahead and see oncoming lights in the distance. In a millisecond I assess the risk and know it is better to risk our lives on the road in harm's way of the approaching car than on the side of the road in the clutches of an evil unknown. The oncoming car evaporates and for a split second relief floods me until I am jolted back into my reality of brights a foot behind flashing angrily for many minutes. Speeding headlong into the darkness, the dispatcher's calm manner feels nonchalant, infuriating me as I scream “Help me, he's trying to run us off the road, he's trying to kill us.” My whole being is laser focused on surviving each moment that the future does not exist and anything else than right now is a distant past, obsolete and unnecessary. Surviving each millionth of a second is all that matters.

The evil one pulls up beside me and is now in the lane of oncoming traffic. I am lit by the dashboard's dim light and surely seen holding and speaking into my phone. I look over and see tinted windows obscuring any human form. This car is being driven by a nefarious force. This realization incites my senses and propels my primal instinct of protecting my child. I know that I must overcome this present darkness to save our

lives. We are side by side hurtling down the highway at high speed as his car tries to overtake mine again. I succumb not from defeat but from fear that he will continue to try and pass me or run me off the road. I slow to about 80 mph which he then uses to jump in front of me. He instantly slows to 15 mph which reflexively makes my left hand on the steering wheel and my right hand holding the phone like steel traps. The slow speed plays on my vulnerability and is uttered again in pleas, "Help us, where are the troopers?" I begin to shake not knowing what lies behind, "Is the other car going to box me in again?" I feel desperate like a caged animal awaiting slaughter. My entire being screams "No." Anne's pleas for help add to the cacophony. Still clutching the phone I yell to the dispatcher, "He's slowing down. I am stuck. Help me."

Suddenly, I am in the runner's mindset who is racing for her life. As a runner, it is at times advantageous to hang back behind your opponent and then do a sneak attack and pass them on the home stretch. Other times it's better to lead by setting a stringent pace that will drop the faint of heart. Without thinking and acting purely within neural pathways that were drilled down through many races, I know that this race will not be won by hanging back and exploding forward at just the right moment towards the finish line. Every cell screams in synchronicity, "I must keep my lead." With the phone in one hand and steering wheel in my left hand, my body tightens expecting the onslaught yet again of being barricaded into oncoming traffic. The dispatcher is still with me as I breathe into the phone, "Gotta get past." This time the car threatens to swerve into me as it zigzags in and out of the lanes creating a barricade. I am single focussed, "I must be in front for our survival" is imprinted instantaneously throughout my nervous system and becomes part of me with each pinched exhalation. The truth of this fact is with me

as I use a sure foot to press past the car at well over 100 mph. The blinking, blazing brights immediately harass us from a foot behind our car's bike rack that serves as a bulwark.

Time is warping as the present compresses us into living second by second. The evil one pulls beside us again taunting us with his proximity. No matter how fast I drive the car seems to sneer in a stalking stance meant to intimidate. "Will it push us off the road, will it pass us and slow down to a crawl again? Is it getting ready to shoot us?" We are transferred to a different dispatcher and I report, "Milepost 101." I cry out desperately "Help us, help us" as I reach the end of myself and terror threatens to overtake me, Anne screams, "God help us!" In that moment which seems to last many minutes the car edges inches from our side and in another instant makes a sharp left turn onto a dark road, disappearing.

Anne and I brace ourselves for the other car to move in for an attack as soon as it thinks we have let our guard down. We plow through the thick veil and icy specks that splatter against the windshield. Moments before our call fails with the second dispatcher he tells us that "a state trooper is waiting for you on the side of the road at mile 110." I am distrustful and I let him know that "I want him to meet me in a well lit public place." I know that we are not yet safe because there could be more evil up ahead setting a trap for us in the guise of a state trooper being part of a malevolent ring. Anne speaks into my wise fear with "Fear not, God is telling me that you can trust the trooper." I settle slightly into the hope of her words. After about ten minutes, I see the state trooper SUV. I pull in front of it and wait for the sargeant to come to my window. I refuse to roll my window down and insist that we carry on to a public place. Another ten minutes pass

and we pull into a ballpark parking lot that is lit brightly from a game that has recently ended. Another state trooper meets us there. I cough up choking tears of rage and relief. Anne clutches her neck and gasps, "I can't breathe, I can't breathe." Her cries continue through a racing heart, bulging eyes and a clasped throat. I stop the sergeant through my slightly cracked window from calling a fire truck with EMTs to aid Anne, knowing that will not assuage this onslaught of panic that is overtaking her. I force deep breaths so I can comfort her with, "We are safe now, Anne." Biscuit joins in with shrill barking at the troopers who approach our car.

After many minutes Anne moves from hyperventilating to crying. I hesitantly enter the freezing night in my t-shirt to give a report to the sergeant. I continue in my distrust of him and become ill at ease as he holds a hanger and stands too close to me. I snap, "What is your hanger for?" He looks down at the hanger and up at the sky and flatly states, "It's snowing, mam, I just got my coat on." I am relieved to know this hanger is not intended to be used as a weapon against me. My words are like roadblocks to overcome as I start to narrate a report that he video records from a camera on his lapel. Suddenly, I gasp and run to Anne who remains in our car with the deputy sitting on the driver's side tire well. I forcefully order him, "Do not question her." The deputy calmly states that he won't be getting a report from her. Jeff is on speaker phone so he assures me that "the deputy has deescalated Anne and she is being taken good care of." Knowing dad and deputy are supporting Anne renews my resolve to get through this report.

Between the cold and cortisol the story emerges with stops and starts mimicking the cadence of the event itself. I am immediately frustrated to learn that it is my word

against the evil one's word and that is not enough to get them arrested. I implore the sergeant to see if there is a warrant out for their arrest. He coolly states, "I can't share any information with you about what transpires." The coldness of his words slap me in the face as it seems like evil has triumphed. He belies his training to remain neutral when he emphatically expresses, "Mam, you did the right thing not to pull over. Never pull over in a situation like this." His subtext confirms my instinct, "Better to risk our lives being a badass driver than face what would have befallen us if fear had put me in 'freeze' instead of 'flight'." We are here and very much alive. The victory is ours.

The sergeant informs us that more uninhabited highway lies ahead which is quickly getting covered in snow. He suggests we stop at a hotel in Phoenix. I am terrified about getting back onto the dark road and unable to comprehend his simple directions to Phoenix. Seeing this he allows his deputy to lead us the fifteen miles to the interstate that will bring us to Phoenix. This kindness loosens my chest a notch. When I return to Anne she is not only calm but seems happy. Jeff later tells me that the deputy was amazing and communicated with her like a skilled psychologist. The deputy's skill and unexpected kindness kick starts our healing .

Meanwhile Jeff is on the phone struggling to find us a room because everything is booked with baseball spring training. Anne and I stop at a couple of places scanning the parking lot before venturing into the hotel lobby. The proprietors reiterate Jeff, "I have nothing. I have nowhere to recommend. Everything is booked." Undaunted, we pray for "room in the inn." It's nearing 11:00 p.m. so it takes nerve for me to call my former colleague who just moved to Phoenix a week ago. "Hi Makayla, ummm, any chance my daughter and I can crash at your place. I think we are about an hour away."

without a beat I hear “sure.” My “thank you” is blotted with tears. We arrive around midnight and are welcomed by Makayla’s and her family which includes a giant puppy. Makayla’s thirteen year old daughter, Grace, gives us her room. As we settle in bed with Biscuit between us I finally hear myself breathing, “We are safe.”

The morning sun crashes in proclaiming, “God’s mercies are new every morning!” We relax in the warmth of Makayla and Grace until noon before heading to Jennifer’s in Payson. Makayla provides much more than a place to lay our heads; she provides hospitality that nourishes the healing process. She is a direct answer to our prayers and we leave with our hearts full of her kindness. Before heading back onto the highway for the two hour drive to Jennifer’s, we say our traditional prayer for protection which is imbued with gratitude for last night’s rescue. Jennifer greets us in the driveway and with tears in all of our eyes we recount what we overcame. Jennifer and I put the pieces together by looking at our phones and collective 911 time stamps. We realize that we fought for our lives for twenty-eight minutes and were in distress for at least another ten minutes before seeing the first state trooper on the side of the road. Kindness wins again as Jennifer takes us into her heart and home, a sanctuary that lends the needed refuge to distill my anxiety from informed fear.

...As I reflect on this experience I refuse to ask “Why us?” and instead ask “How will God use this for good? How can we learn and grow from this?” I don’t know all the answers to this aside from the basic ones like never ever driving desolate, dark highways again. I do know that we are not alone. Jeff was with us as much as the reception allowed him to be, later I learned that Jennifer was on the phone for the entire time with a dispatcher who sat next to the dispatcher who was speaking with us. I

believe that prayers brought angels to encamp around us. Anne astutely asserted that “An angel drove our car.”

Loss of innocence comes from encountering and overcoming such darkness. It is here that I lean into God’s vast imagination to transform what was meant for evil into a beauty beyond my own wildest imaginings. We are not victims, we are warriors and we are not abiding in a shadow of shame that the assailants would like to imprint onto our psyches. Bitterness will not get a foothold into my heart even as the waves of anger pass through me. The demonic driving of the attackers is a projection of their own misery. I envision a shield of light around us that incinerates their dark energy transforming it into a refining fire. The corners of compassion begin to appear in me as I consider the emotional damage and addiction our attackers likely endure daily.

Kindness prevails as the most powerful force in this world. I am empowered by saving our lives and the belief that we have good work to do in this world, work worthy of being spared. I am renewed with a heightened awareness that within the fragility of my mortality there is great strength that will continue to overcome. I will not be shaken.