

Parallel Highways

by James Van Pelt

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The semi-trailer truck's rear tires rumbled a yard from Jack's window. A faded sign in red, HORIZON TRANSIT, in giant letters, decorated the trailer. In the rear mirror, another eighteen-wheeler's grill loomed just off the bumper, and in the right lane a line of cars slid by, no more than a half a dozen feet between them.

White knuckled, Jack gripped the wheel. Backwash from the semi rattled his little car, and he fought the tug that pulled him toward the tires spinning to his left. Blurred at the tip, the speedometer needle hung just beyond eighty-miles per hour.

"He's coming over," said Debbie. Her voice cracked. From the corner of his eye, Jack could see she'd balled a handful of skirt into her fist. She sucked in a breath as if she were about to scream, but instead she murmured, "He's coming."

"I can see," he snapped.

The semi's trailer of ribbed aluminum, rivet studded and coated with dust, crossed the line, narrowing the space. In the truck's mirror, dark glasses hid the driver's eyes, but he seemed to be looking right at them.

Jack whipped a glance over his shoulder. The other semi behind them had moved up, now nearly touching their bumper. No break in the line of traffic to his right, but he signaled anyway, stomped on the accelerator and slid over, hoping for a gap. Traffic behind him stretched in a domino row of glaring windshields, and he realized no one was going to let him in. They couldn't let him in.

Inexorably, the truck closed the distance, squeezing the lane.

"Oh, no," Debbie moaned.

"I've got it," Jack said. "I've got it."

He dumped into fourth gear, winding the car's little engine into the top of its RPMs; it jumped forward. They passed the trailer's front wheels. A woman in a beat-up station wagon on their right leaned on her horn, flipping them off, but she moved over a bit, and so did the Volkswagen in front of her.

Jack scooted close to them, crossing the lane stripes, passing the station wagon, the semi's wheels roaring in his ear. He jukeed the car right, bumping the Volkswagen; metal crunched, and Debbie fell against him, her chest heaving, her arm slippery with sweat.

The face in the Volkswagen contorted in anger and fear.

Better you than me, Jack thought. Although his car was small, he knew the Volkswagen didn't have any weight at all. If he had to, he could force himself into its spot in the traffic.

Now, horns all around them blared. Traffic in front of them rippled. Tail lights flashed. A pickup that had been blocking the Volkswagen cut left in front of the semi, and its air horn erupted, but now there was space to the right.

Sobbing, Jack pulled in front of the Volkswagen, clipping its bumper on the way, and another opening appeared on his right, which he took.

Two lanes separated them from the trailer-truck, now bombing along as if nothing had happened. Jack pried a hand loose from the steering wheel and wiped his mouth. His chin was slick.

He checked the mirrors. As far back as he could see, traffic. The highway faded into the blue distance. Same in front. One more lane over, a cement retainer separated them from the city, a numbing series of dirty, grey warehouses.

He took deep breaths, letting himself calm down.

"Missed us that time," he said, and he tried to laugh, but it came out tight and fake, like it felt.

Debbie sat up straight, smoothing her skirt over her legs. She looked out the side window, pressing her hand against it. Long brunette hair with just a hint of a curl at the end brushed her shoulders. Her face reflected a little in the glass. Deep, brown eyes. No makeup. A serious woman carrying despair in the lines of her frown.

Beyond, building after shadowless building rolled by. The sun stood exactly overhead, but smog or mist fuzzed away its outlines, so the sky glared hot, white and without form.

"We should have let that car in," she said.

"Which?" He knew what she was talking about. It was an old argument.

"We shouldn't have been in such a hurry."

Jack checked the mirrors again, then closed the distance between him and the next car to get the guy following him off his tail.

She said, "I don't recognize anything."

"I know."

"It could be L.A." She looked at him without moving her hand, her eyes so tired that they appeared as if they'd been punched.

"Or Pompeii."

"That's not funny."

"It's a superhighway from somewhere. Just as well could be Pompeii. Or maybe Rome, just before Nero burnt the sucker."

"Stop it."

"Do you think there was a freeway between Sodom and Gomorrah?" He laughed a little easier this time

but bitter.

"Sodom and Gomorrah," she said, "L.A. What's the difference?"

If it were L.A., we might be able to get off. Merge lane," he said. Whatever the junction was, a spray-painted white hand obscured the name. "Should we take it?"

"I thought that was Anaheim we passed yesterday," she said wistfully. "I always liked Disneyland."

"I'm taking it."

Jack scanned his left, tapped the brakes and eased into a space between a Bronco with tinted windows and a guy on a motorcycle. The cyclist's head wove back and forth as if he were listening to a private symphony. Hair spilled out beneath his faded bandana and streamed in the wind. Ahead of them, taillights blinked and cars jockeyed for position.

Traffic split, and Jack followed the curve of the road beneath an overpass. A green highway sign said, *Carmilhan—76 miles*. Within a few minutes, the warehouses disappeared, replaced by desert and twisted Joshua trees streaking by behind the concrete retainer.

Jack sighed. Highway reached before him straight to the horizon as unwavering as a knife edge. Here, the cars spaced themselves a bit. Twenty to thirty feet between them, but the asphalt still whined under the wheels at a steady eighty miles per hour. He laid his head back and stared at the ceiling for a second, then blinked hard and rubbed his hand across his eyes.

"I'm exhausted. Can you handle it for awhile?"

Debbie nodded, moving next to him, onto the emergency brake. She put a hand on the wheel and arched up as he slid underneath her, the back of her blouse wet with perspiration. Now, almost sprawled across the seat, the brake's handle digging into his back, he kept a foot on the accelerator. She stepped over his legs, careful to keep from turning the car with her hip as she dropped into his place.

"What should we do at the next junction?" she said.

Jack reached into the tiny backseat for a Jacket, folded it over several times, then wedged it into the corner between the top of the seat and the doorjamb. He rested his head on it and closed his eyes. Humming wheels whipping over road whispered against his cheek. "It doesn't matter," he said. "Go where you want."

Speed varied as Debbie adjusted for the traffic. Air rushed past the window, whistling a little in some crack he'd never been able to find. After a while he drifted into a kind of false sleep, not quite dreaming, not quite aware of where he was, and he felt like he was floating. Then he said, or thought he said, or maybe even imagined he said, "How come all roads lead everywhere, but you can't get there from here?"

Debbie didn't answer, so he let the car's motion lull him further. He thought about treetops waving back and forth and a time when he rested beneath them, watching diamonds of sun coming through the leaves. All he wanted was to sleep and to wake up there—to wake up anywhere other than on the highway—not to be pounding out the miles and watching the bumper in front of him. Jack wanted to sleep and to wake up and to sleep again far away from the roads and horns. Far away from the zombie motion of driving the car.

He lurched, bouncing his forehead against the glass. No telling how long he'd been asleep. It didn't feel long. He squinted against the pain, then peeked over at Debbie. Her chin was down, eyes closed; her hands loose on the wheel.

Too late, he jolted upright, reaching for her. Concrete whizzed inches from the side window. Metal screeched. Sparks fired from the front of the car. Debbie shot up. Overcorrected.

The world keeled over and slowed as the car went sideways and rolled. Jack floated to the ceiling as it crumpled toward him. Glass shattered into the passenger compartment. His arm broke first, a wet snap above the elbow, then his shoulder. Then he hit the ceiling. And last, as the car rolled, he saw through a red veil the semi bearing down, an avalanche of metal and momentum.

* * *

Jack's consciousness surfaced in the half-death in a white flash of agony, and through the shock he thought, pain slows time. Agonizing second after second. He thought, terminal cancer victims must hear clocks in their blood slowing down. Any minute and every minute an infinite reach. Unstoppable and dispassionate. Waves lapping against the sand. Everyone like the first; none the last. All bones crushed. All flesh mangled. Pain living forever. All of it over and over again. For infinite time, his bones broke one after another, and like Prometheus, without healing and without cessation, the bones broke again. He had no way to tell, nothing to measure it against, but the crash seemed to replay for a thousand years.

* * *

"I'm sorry, Jack." Debbie held the wheel in one hand and touched herself with the other. First, her face, then across her chest and onto her leg. "Oh, god, I'm sorry."

They passed under another sign, *Carmilhan—8miles/Alice Mar—104 mile/Titanic—156 miles*. On the dunes beyond the cement retainer, isolated Joshua trees spaced themselves between long patches of bare sand. Each like a mutant sentinel, holding mutant limbs to the brilliance of the white sky.

Jack felt his own arms, stretched his back. Nothing broken. Nothing even sore. "It's inevitable," he said. "It's not your fault. We're bound to get tired."

She shook. Her hands trembled on the steering wheel. "I can't do that again. It's not fair that I should have to do that again."

Cars bunched up in front of them, closing the distances. Looking in the mirror, Debbie switched lanes, away from the congestion. In a minute, they passed a four-vehicle pile-up, two cars, a cement mixer and a bread truck. Broken glass crunched under their tires as they went by. Debbie looked away.

"Dying's the best rest I get," said Jack. "It's a silver lining."

"I don't know why we get sleepy. We don't eat. We don't go to the bathroom. The stupid car never needs gas!" Debbie said, her voice on the edge. "You know what else? I don't see enough accidents. If everybody's like us, then there ought to be accidents constantly. There are people all by themselves in half the cars. Who gives them a rest? But most of the time, traffic's moving. Why is that?"

"Well, if we're logical . . ."

"You're not a scientist anymore! I'm not a student in one of your classes. Nothing's logical about this!"

Debbie's lips paled; her face was so tight.

Jack touched her arm. "It's O.K. It's just conversation."

She took several shaky breaths, then relaxed. For a second, Jack saw in her face a semblance of his wife the way she was aeons ago, when they climbed in the car and left for the commute. They'd been uptight; they'd argued; they were late; it was her fault; it was his fault. He'd cut into the traffic viciously. Someone beeped at them; then they'd settled into the flow, and she'd relaxed, just for a second, like she did just now.

"Not logic, then," Jack said. "Thinking it through, though. If there are solitary drivers, and they're like us, then they ought to be crashing left and right, but they don't. So they're not like us."

"I guess we know that."

Jack peered into the car beside them, a shiny, blue Lexus. Inside, a man in a business suit stared straight ahead. Lots of commuters looked like him, focused in a kind of catatonic way. Locked on the road, frozen into position as if posing for portraits. Lost in their thoughts, he supposed.

But some of the cars that passed . . . the occupants weren't possible . . . were painful to see. He noticed that Debbie had quit looking long ago. But how often do we really see the people in the other cars on a commute? thought Jack. Maybe the highways had always been like that. Maybe I never paid enough attention. He had a theory that this is the way it had always been: traffic consisted of demons, civilians, newbies and the damned. Sometimes it was mostly civilians: drivers who got on the highway, went somewhere and got off, never knowing what drove beside them. Sometimes it was mostly the damned, like them, who died and lived and kept on driving. Sometime there were newbies: the damned before they died the first time. And then, there were demons. Jack shuddered thinking about the sunglassesed face looking back at him in the semi's mirror. That driver had known there were there, but he came over anyway.

Jack said, "We have to sleep, or we'd go insane, and if we were insane, this wouldn't be so bad."

"You're assuming we're being punished."

"It's like the fate of Sisyphus. He pushed that old boulder to the top of the mountain in the Greek underworld, but it wouldn't stay there. So his curse was to walk after the thing and roll it back up. If he only had to roll it up, and he could never stop, he'd never have time to think about his sins, but the rock rolled down, and he'd go after it. The punishment was in the walk down, while he was resting. We have to sleep so we can wake up and realize again what our task is. It's our walk back to the boulder."

"So, are we wimps or heroes?" said Debbie. "Are we resisting our fate or giving in?"

"Well, I guess if this were a movie, we'd be wimps. We're not solving our problems. But in real life sometimes the most heroic thing you can do is stay even and not give up. So we're heroes."

"I don't feel like a hero. I haven't done anything."

Debbie let her hands slip to the bottom of the wheel. She was steering with the tips of her fingers barely draped. Back in the Joshua trees, a black shape moved; Jack only caught a glimpse of it. It was like a bear, but its arms were loose-fleshed, hairless and yellow. It looked up from whatever it was feeding on. Eyes glinted.

"We're not in our world," he said.

"I'm sure that was Anaheim the other day. Maybe we're there part of the time. If we could find our way back."

"One freeway to another. Merge lanes and junctions—there's never an exit."

"I remember the signs: Hermosa Beach and then Long Beach. We were going west on the 91. Maybe these are like parallel universes, except they're parallel highways. Part of the time we cross over. Do you think anybody saw us? Do you think we looked different?"

Debbie drove for three hundred miles before they switched. She rested her head and closed her eyes immediately. Ahead, a line of hills rose out of the desert, and soon he was climbing steadily. Joshua trees gave way to pinion as the road wove higher and higher. Occasionally he passed a camper or heavy truck laboring in the right lane, belching exhaust. A sign read, *Slower traffic keep right*: No stopping on the shoulder. He smirked. They'd tried stopping twice, pulling against the cement retainer, only to watch the following traffic pile into them, as if they were incapable of stopping themselves. The second time they'd burned. A thousand years in the fire.

Once he'd seen a man jump from a car; maybe he was a newbie, desperate to escape the road. The man slowed as much as the flow allowed—maybe fifty miles per hour—then opened his door and rolled out. Jack had been three cars back, and passed him as he slid and tumbled on the asphalt. Craning his head over his shoulder, Jack saw the man, amazingly, stagger to his feet just before a bus creamed him.

No stopping on the shoulder, Jack thought. No kidding.

A road sign read, *Mary Celeste—14 miles*. "That's a phantom ship," he said. Debbie turned on her seat; opened her eyes.

"What?"

"Sign said, Mary Celeste. It's a ship whose crew never made port. they found her floating around, perfectly seaworthy, but no one on board."

"I know about the Celeste," said Debbie, her eyes closed again. "We're more like Vanderdecken."

"Who?"

Debbie covered her face with one hand. Jack couldn't tell if she were crying or not. "Vanderdecken captained the Flying Dutchman. During a storm he swore an oath that he'd sail around the Cape of Good Hope or be damned forever."

"What does that have to do with us?" Jack said. he could feel the anger welling inside him. She's always bringing it up, he thought. She can't give it a rest.

"We should have let that car in. You shouldn't have said, 'Damned if I'll let someone cut me off this morning!' They died because of you." Her voice wasn't angry, but it was flat and tired, as if announcing news she'd accepted long ago.

His heart pounded in his ears. She won't leave it alone, he thought. It's always my fault. He remembered the morning this started, holding his own in his lane, the early commute streaming toward its destination, when he saw the mini-van coming toward him from the on-ramp. He'd measured its speed, watched it, and saw that it was going to merge in front of him. He was in a hurry. He was edgy in that special manner that driving in traffic made him. The min-van approached. Jack would have to give way to let him in. "Damned if I'll let someone cut me off this morning," he'd said, and he smashed the accelerator. For a moment, the mini-van paralleled them, the driver leaning to his left, searching for a break in traffic.

He must not have seen the broken-down car on the shoulder. Jack didn't until the last second, just a glimpse of a jack holding up the driver's side read, or a tire laying on the road, of someone on his knees holding a lug wrench. Then the mini-van plowed into the parked car.

Jack pictured the crash. "I don't want to talk about it. I don't even want to think about it anymore." He heard his voice straining.

Debbie didn't say anything. Curves held Jack's attention for a moment. The road had gone to two lanes, and he had to concentrate on driving. Then the hills opened up, and the ocean spread out before them. The highway fell toward the sea. Soon they were driving a road that held close to cliff edges overlooking stony places where waves lapped dully against kelp-encrusted rock. Even through the window, he could smell the salt and rot.

Then Debbie said, "I would have done the same thing, Jack. I wouldn't have let the van in that morning."

Jack remembered the smoke from the accident. As they had driven on, a pillar of smoke had risen behind them, climbing into the sky like an angry spirit, black and red and writing.

The memory of smoke clear in his mind, he drove on.

They stayed on the costal highway for 3,700 impossible miles before a car coming toward them crossed the lane, catching their side, driving them off the road, over the cliff, tumbling against the rocks for five-hundred feet. The last thing Jack heard was water hissing against hot metal. Then the sea rushed into the car.

* * *

No one knows about pain but those who are in pain. Only the hurting know what it is. Memory of pain is not pain. Description of pain is not pain. Small hurts are not like great ones reduced. True pain lives in the ever-present moment, expecting nothing, owing to nothing, overwhelming all other thoughts. For a thousand years, Jack tried to scream. Water filled his lungs. Everything was broken, and he was always drowning.

* * *

"You were saying?" said Jack, trying to sound as if nothing had happened, as if no time passed, but Debbie didn't answer. For the longest time she kept her face to the window, so that all Jack could see was the back of her head. He turned inland and the junction to Palatine, and soon the lanes multiplied, and they were in city traffic again.

"Our driving record sucks," she said finally. "They should pull our driver's licenses." She started laughing, and it built on itself, an insane-sounding layering of laughter until Jack couldn't tell if she were laughing anymore or shrieking. It scared him. After minutes of this, she quieted down, although every once in a while, she'd chuckle, and Jack was afraid she'd start again.

She said, "You know what I'm thankful for?" She paused a half beat. "That we don't have to pay car insurance anymore. It's just a relief." The chuckle came out of the back of her throat, and she wiped tears from the bottom of her eyes.

Jack drove for twenty hours straight, 1,600 miles before switching. Mostly they passed through baking desert, their air conditioner battling vainly against the heat pouring in; the glare off windshields stabbing his eyes, but every once in a while, buildings would loom up on either side, warehouses, factories, strip malls, and he could read the signs: AAMCO, QUIZNOS, BIG O, WINCHELLS, AMERICAN FURNITURE WAREHOUSE, WAL-MART. Sometimes he couldn't read the signs; they weren't any language he recognized. But never an exit, just junctions. Highway leading to highway; concrete bridges twining over, under and around each other, filled with cars streaming end to end.

Their drivers studied the road with the peculiar dead look of the long-distance traveler. In some cases the passengers slept. In some, they read books. Jack saw kids and old folks and dogs, all closed in, all isolated in their eighty-mile-per-hour fish bowls. And in some cars, he saw monsters.

Debbie covered almost nine-hundred miles before giving Jack a turn, and he went for 1,300 more. They switched a dozen times, often saying nothing for hundreds of miles; often times both awake, watching the road unreel before them.

A low set of hills shrugged up on the horizon, and soon they wound through dry, grass-covered slopes. For miles, rows of giant windmills lined the hills, their huge, high-tech blades spinning in a wind they couldn't feel in the car. Then they passed the last windmill and other highways joined theirs, adding a lane or two each time. Jack was driving when they rounded a curve and a great city sprawled in the vast valley below. Through the haze, as far as he could see, rooftops and roads, and the traffic drew them in.

Something touched his hand on the emergency brake. He looked down. Debbie's hand rested against his, and he took it, pressing his fingers between hers. They drove into the city, hand in hand.

Debbie scrutinized the buildings as Jack eased from one lane to another, always on the lookout for potential trouble. His back ached; his eyes burned with weariness.

"It's L.A. again," she whispered. "We're on the 10."

"They all look the same," Jack said, but he noticed the palms growing beyond the retaining wall and the manzanita in the median. "I haven't seen a sign."

"I think it's L.A."

"I hope it isn't. I couldn't stand it if we were this close." But he sat up more in his seat, a little less tired.

"She squeezed his hand. Malls flowed by and R.V. lots. Trucks filled the road: tankers, movers and the semis. Cars darted like smelt among the shark, moving around their ponderous bulk, giving way, sliding over, clearing a path. In the distance, a series of high rises peeked out of the haze.

"I remember audio-books," said Debbie. "If you weren't with me, I could start one in the morning and finish it on the way back. I used to think my commute was half a book long."

"I didn't know that. For me, the drive was time to get good thinking done. From Banning to San Bernardino I'd formulate the problem. From there to Pomona, I'd come up with various approaches, and by Pasadena I'd have the day planned out."

The traffic flow varied. Cars slowed and came together for miles, crawling at fifty or sixty miles an hour. Then, without any perceivable reason, they would speed up and spread out. Jack thought of it as "accordion traffic," and it took all his attention. Now he drove with both hands on the wheel, watching for the sudden cut, keeping out of others' blind spots. Drivers looked tense and focused. They snapped glances in their mirrors; kept a thumb near their horns. Blinkers flashed. Cars vied for placement as

junctions came up every mile or so.

Jack changed lanes twice to get into position for the Santa Ana junction. It was L.A. he decided. Maybe a parallel one, but L.A. just the same. He could get them to Anaheim at least. Debbie could see something familiar before they followed the road back out to alien landscapes and meaningless junctions that led them nowhere at eighty miles per hour.

He could get them to Anaheim.

Traffic flowed slightly faster in his lane. They crept up on cars, taking minutes to pass them. A semi to their right, ahead of them, blocked the signs. Jack wanted the Compton junction that would take them west on 91, but he didn't know if he needed the left or right side of the highway. A sign blinked by, and he missed what it said.

Slowly they closed the distance. The semi's wheels roared by Debbie's window, and Jack suddenly got scared. Everything felt the same as it had once before. He'd heard these tires before.

"What's that truck?" he asked, voice tight.

Debbie pushed her face to the window and read the side. "Horizon Transit. Why?"

"Jesus," said Jack. He couldn't see the driver's face, but a leather-clad arm rested on the driver's door. Only a few feet separated Jack from the car in front of them, a green lowrider with maroon tassels dangling in the rear window.

Jack tapped the top of the steering wheel. Both lanes to his left were packed solid, hardly a hand's breadth between them. No chance of cutting over and away. All he could hope for was that nothing would happen, because there was nothing he could do to protect himself.

At mid-trailer, the truck's turbulence buffeted them and pulled them over. Jack leaned on the wheel, keeping them in the center of their lane.

Debbie said, "That's the same one, isn't it?"

Howling, the trailer's front wheels passed the window in a blur of rubber and spinning metal. They were beside the cab. Jack could see the foot rest and the bottom of the door. They were by.

Closing his eyes for a second, Jack breathed easier. The lane to their right was now open for a hundred yards, as if no one wanted to be in front of the semi. Keeping one eye on the truck in his mirror, Jack scanned the road ahead for junction signs. He couldn't remember how long he needed to stay on 57 before hitting 91. It seemed like years since he'd driven this stretch of road. Years of driving and driving, but never arriving.

After minutes more, they caught up to the car that was immediately ahead of the semi, now a hundred yards behind. Jack kept looking for the signs as they inched past.

"Oh," said Debbie. "That poor man."

In the car beside them, a yellow Volvo sedan with two little boys in the back seat, the driver was wide-eyed and weeping. The man rotated his head left and right, and Jack could see in his face disbelief and growing horror.

A newbie, Jack thought, and he remembered when he and Debbie realized they were trapped, how the sickening dread had welled up inside them. The traffic wouldn't let them stop; there was no place to exit,

and they were trapped. They must have looked like this.

The man's face was pure anguish. He didn't even appear to see Jack and Debbie looking in at him, and in the backseat the children played, two little boys with their heads down, studying something between them. Maybe a coloring book.

What could they have done to deserve being here? The image of the children waking up in the half-death after their first inevitable crash boiled up within him. A thousand years (it seemed) of pain and death. What could they have possibly done?

Tears glistened on the man's face. He barely seemed to be paying attention to the road as he wandered from side to side.

Jack felt a fist in his throat. He couldn't take his eyes away from the man. Then the car behind Jack beeped, a short angry beep that said, "Keep up, buddy. You're slowing me down." A gap had opened in front of Jack.

He checked his rear-view mirror. The driver behind beeped again, but what Jack saw was the semi closing fast. The hundred yards was now fifty. Black exhaust streamed from the truck's twin pipes above the cab, and the windshield glared like a rectangular sun. Directly in front of it, the unknowing newbie waited to be squashed. He didn't see the traffic. He didn't see anything, and his boys played on.

Debbie saw it too. She looked at Jack.

Their eyes locked, and hers brimmed with sadness.

Twenty-five yards back, the semi leapt eagerly. It growled in triumph.

Jack checked behind him. He put his hand on the emergency brake. Debbie saw, touched his hand and nodded.

He grazed the brakes. A horn blared behind him, and metal crunched, snapping Jack's head against his seat, but the Volvo scooted ahead. Their bumpers cleared, and Jack jerked the wheel to the right, pulling the emergency at the same time.

The truck was on them before they started to roll.

* * *

Pain's the dark flip-side of excitement. It doesn't bore. It's always freshly minted. Blood in the wound glistens, and pain's world opens wide, all-encompassing. Jack squirmed on pain's hook, but there was no place to go, and he was all alone. Like Vanderdecken tied to the rudder off the weather-whipped coast of Africa, beating his way into the knives of wind, never arriving, never making port, and each wave a reminder of the death that had already claimed him. Like Sisyphus with his shoulder to the rock, unable to see around it, having no idea how long it would grind into his shoulder, how long his legs would quiver beneath him, begging to collapse.

Pain, as long as it lasts, is unending.

* * *

"I never believe we will come back," said Debbie.

Jack stroked the wheel. It felt so good to feel anything, even the steering wheel.

"It makes me want to kiss everything around me," said Jack.

Automatically, he moved into the left lane. The sign said *Compton Only*, and he followed the curve around with all the other cars. Four lanes joined them on the left. The highway was congested, but moving well.

"Do you think he survived?" asked Debbie. "Do you think that it made any difference?"

"Maybe," Jack said. "At least for a moment."

They passed under a sign.

Debbie turned and grabbed his arm. "Did you see it, Jack! Did you see it?"

He was already checking his mirror and signaling. "Yeah."

The sign read, *Harbor Blvd. Disneyland exit/Left Lane, 1/2 mile.*

"It's an exit. Can we make it, Jack? Can you make the exit?"

Four lanes of solidly packed commuters moving at eighty miles per hour stood in between him and a way off the highway, the first exit they'd seen in who could guess how many years. At eighty, a half mile takes only twenty seconds.

Four bumper to bumper lanes. Twenty seconds, and the Harbor Blvd. Exit into Anaheim and Disneyland.

"I think so," he said as he made the first merge. "I'm good in traffic."

the end