

Death by Car

... a short story.

The man with the knife was following me. I was sure of it. It was a wicked looking blade he'd been brandishing, back there in the bar, and when I'd left a few minutes later, I'd heard him come out of the door behind me.

You're at it again, aren't you? Trying to write a story that's way outside your comfort zone. Don't you ever learn?

Oh. It's you again. Can't you leave me alone when I'm trying to write??

You call that writing? 'The man with the knife was following me'? Not exactly a gripping opening, is it?

I walked faster. I'd only been in the bar for about thirty minutes

Maybe you should start again. Pick a different setting. What do you know about bars? You haven't been in one for years. Write about what you know.

Look ... I've been having trouble writing lately. Short stories, anyway. I thought I'd do one that's a little different.

Different is good. But what was wrong with stories about teachers with kids with problems? I liked those stories. You even submitted one to a contest and won something.

Honourable mention. The nineteenth one of twenty. And they didn't even publish it.

That upset you, didn't it?

Not really. I only entered it because some people told me I should. Now can you leave me alone so I can get back to this story? I have some good ideas.

OK, let's see what you've got.

I'd only been in the bar for about thirty minutes, and the person I was supposed to meet didn't show up, so after a drink or two I left.

A drink or two?? Weren't you counting?

... so after a few drinks I left. The man with the knife had been at a table near the back, and the whole time I'd been there he'd been playing with it.

You spelled 'there' wrong. Didn't you write an article about that last month? 'There', 'their' and 'they're'? I thought you knew better.

Sorry.

... and the whole time I'd been there he'd been playing with it. And watching me. And I was pretty sure he'd followed me out of the bar.

Walking to the parking lot, I wondered what I would do if he really was intent on doing me harm

Wait a minute. That's awfully lame. 'Doing you harm'? I think you can do better than that.

Walking to the parking lot, I heard him behind me. I didn't want to turn around. But I could hear his footsteps getting closer and closer.

Much better. Say, you could still turn this into a teacher story. Maybe he's a former student who just wants to thank you for encouraging him to stay in school and become an outfitter. You know, the knife ...

That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. If you don't want to help, just be quiet, OK? I'm trying to think.

Sorry.

I could hear his footsteps getting closer and closer. And as I reached the car, his hand grabbed my arm.

"Just open the door and get in. I'll be right behind you in the back seat. Don't do anything stupid". He jabbed the knife into my back as he yanked the door open and pushed me into the car.

All right, I admit it. Maybe you've got something good here. I'm really wondering what will happen next.

I sat behind the wheel. He was behind me, and now the knife was touching the back of my neck. "Drive. Away from here. I'll give you directions once we're on the highway"

"Look, what is it you want? Money? Just take my wallet and let me go, all right? Or just take the car."

"Shut up and drive. Do it!" I felt the knife pierce the skin of my neck.

I hate to say this, but your writing has gotten better. Do you have the whole story plotted out in your head this time, or are you still making things up as you go?

I know exactly what's going to happen.

Incredible! You actually listened to me last time, didn't you? Did you ever follow up on my idea for the story about God talking to you while you were at work?

That wasn't your idea, it was mine. And, yes, I wrote it. It turned out to be one of my favourite stories. A few people actually read it, too.

That's even more amazing!

Listen, for a figment of my imagination, you're awfully rude!

I'm not a figment. I'm you're subconscious.

And you're not a very good speller.

Sorry.

I felt the knife pierce the skin on the back of my neck. So I turned the key, started the car, and drove. I was worried. Not about me, but about my family. I didn't really want to die, but I didn't see how I could get out of this.

That paragraph was a little weak. Maybe you should ...

I felt the knife pierce the skin on the back of my neck. As I drove out of the parking lot, the man in the back with the knife said nothing. I had no idea what he wanted, but

Better! And how on earth are you going to get yourself out of this?

I know what I'm doing. Let me write.

... but whatever it was, I knew I would do it. I didn't want to die. Not yet.

As we approached the highway, he told me to turn right. I'd been hoping he would direct me toward town, somewhere where there were people. Somewhere I could attract attention. But turning right meant we were heading for the city, a full forty miles of highway devoid of any houses, and usually empty of traffic at this time of night.

"Now just drive. And don't try anything".

Not bad. Although I still like your stories about Bonnie and Darren the best. You do humour pretty well. Are you ever going to do another one?

Not likely. I like to keep Bonnie happy. She's a good friend, and it's not nice to make fun of your friends. Besides, she gets even. That scares me.

But ...

And Darren's my boss now. That story about him being chased by a chicken is the reason I'm teaching Paige and Naomi how to use a glue gun this semester, instead of teaching math.

I think you're exaggerating a little ...

You think it's *fun* being in the same room with Naomi when she's wielding a glue gun??

OK, point taken. Maybe you should get back to the story now.

Don't interrupt any more, all right?

I'll try not to ...

I drove. And I didn't want to die.

That made me think. Maybe he didn't want to either.

So I drove faster.

As my speed edged up past the posted limit, the man in the back spoke again.

"Keep your speed down. I don't want any cops".

I drove faster.

"Listen, asshole, I said to keep the speed down!" I felt the knife at the back of my neck.

Uh ... you don't usually use profanity in your stories. At least, not since that first one, the one where everyone was being raped and killed ...

That story was an experiment. I wanted to see if I could write about something way outside my comfort zone, just to see if I could do it. Besides, if you write about evil people, you have to sound authentic.

Well, it was definitely authentic. I cried when I read it.

I'm touched. And I have to admit, it was a very hard story to write. I had a few tears too.

I know. I was there.

Uh, yeah. OK. But let me keep writing, all right? I'm on a roll!

Go for it!

I felt the knife at the back of my neck again.

But it was my turn. "You know, if you kill me now, you're going to die too. We're going a hundred and fifty".

"Yeah, well, smartass, you'll die too!"

"I know. I've been thinking about that. You know why I was in that bar?"

"Who gives a shit!"

"Well, I'll tell you. My wife just left me. Took both my kids. I was in that bar because I was wondering if I have any reason left to live".

"Look, just slow down". My speed was close to one sixty. I hadn't known my little car would go this fast.

"I figure that maybe this is a good way to go, you know? Hitting a tree will be instantaneous. I won't feel a thing. And I'll be doing the world a favour at the same time by taking a lowlife like you with me!"

As I said that, I swerved violently toward the shoulder, and then quickly back into my lane. It had been close ... I almost hadn't been able to recover in time.

You're right, the profanity is necessary. I don't like it, but it's necessary.

Shut up and let me write.

"Look, buddy ... just slow down, all right?"

I stomped on the accelerator. The car didn't have much left to give, but the rising whine from the engine made our speed seem even greater.

"No, I think I've decided. This is a good way to die. I've always loved to drive. It will be a good way to die. And I think it's about time".

I swerved again. There were a lot of trees on this stretch of the road. It would make a messy end for both of us. As I swerved back onto the road the man behind me yelled.

"You asshole! Don't do that again! I'm warning you ..."

I laughed. "You're warning me? What, that you're going to kill me? Well, save yourself the trouble. I'll do it for you!"

I swerved again. This time the wheels hit the gravel at the side of the road, and the car started to fishtail back and forth. But I managed to steer back onto the road. It had been close.

"OK, OK. Look, take it easy, all right? Look, I'm putting the knife away!"

"Throw it out the window!" That last was a gamble. Would he catch on?

"All right, all right. Look ... it's gone". I heard the rush of air as he put the window down, and I caught a glimpse of the knife bouncing on the pavement behind us. "Now slow down, all right?"

I slowed down. Fast. When our speed dropped below a hundred I slammed on the brakes as hard as I could. I was belted in ... and he wasn't. I'd noticed that. You should always wear your seat belt.

As my car came to a stop, the tires were smoking. And the man in the back seat wasn't in the back seat any more. In fact, he was mostly in the front, his head somewhere down on the floor to my right.

I jumped out of the car and went around to the other side. He was pretty shaken up, but I didn't care. I grabbed him by the hair and pulled him out onto the road.

I left him lying there as I drove off ...

Wow! You really nailed that! But I think I have some bad news for you!

What!? Can't you see I'm trying to bring this story to a close?

I think somebody else already wrote this story. The plot, I mean ...

Huh? Are you joking?

Uh ... no. I think it was Harlan Ellison. Early seventies. You read it later, when you were in college ...

Oh ... yeah. I remember now. But that means...

It's still a good story. And you did it very well. It's not like you stole the idea on purpose ...

But ...

Besides, in one respect, it's much better than the original.

How's that?

It's got me in it!

Well, there is that.

What's your next story going to be about?

It's about a very smart dog ...

Uh ... didn't you do one of those already?

... told from the viewpoint of the dog.

OK, sorry I asked. What about that story about your first date? I don't remember you ever finishing it ...

I didn't. It was way too embarrassing. Some things are best left alone.

You're right about that. I was there, remember. I can't believe you actually ...

Don't.

All right. Well, I'll leave you to finish this one. You did a good job, I must say, even if you did steal the idea ...

I prefer the word 'borrow'.

I left him there as I drove off. It definitely wasn't a good day to die.

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This is the first short story I've written in over a month. And the plot is recycled. But if you're going to steal ideas from someone, steal from the best! Harlan Ellison is a truly incredible author.

This is my sixty-seventh short story, and I'm currently working on number sixty-eight. All my stories can be read at <http://www.worsleyschool.net/stories/stories.html> including the very violent 'Choices' mentioned in this story.