

Getting Sideways On Douglas

by Joseph M. Owens

Under the dirty orange glow of sodium streetlights, the glistening pavement looks slick, but it's only just wet. The mid-November temperature is cool—quite mild, actually, for this late time of year—still hovering in the upper 30s—so far posing only the slightest threat for patches of treacherous “black ice” to materialize. The night air, fraught with chill and gelidity, rips past the sensuous curves of the luxury sports coupe at 40-plus miles per hour. The two of us inside are physically immune to the air's refrigerated sting, more or less luxuriating within the climate-controlled dimensions of the speedy metallic cocoon. Omaha's downtown quarter gives the impression that it belongs to a much larger city from street level. Tallish buildings rise up into the night sky on either side of the street like imposing black obelisks.

I pilot a brand new Infiniti G37 Coupe—a hot IPL[1] model—through the streets of downtown Omaha, imagining myself possessing the skill and panache of a Formula-One driver. I'm only test-driving the car for the weekend but I'm already in love with it. The feedback between the closely-spaced gearbox, the viscous limited-slip differential, the clutch, the 14.7:1 sport-tuned steering and my own my input, the driving experience is kinetic—simply instant, fluid. The precision of this timeworn mating ritual between human and automobile is erotic, intoxicating.

Ashley's hand rests on my thigh and I'm getting a hardon, though, *admittedly*, it's mostly because of the car. Ashley can tell what's happening inside my slacks and smiles; she smiles that fucken *million dollar smile* she's got and it drives me wild. My wife, my passenger, her coyness and basic overall sexiness are doing very bad

things to me. I want to skip the gala tonight and get the two of us a room at the Hilton instead.

But while I'm thinking dirty things about Ashley, my right eye twitches unnecessarily and my erection vanishes just about instantly, prompting me to inspect my tie in the rearview and assess the knot that I'd finally decided on—all of this almost by reflex and in less than half a second. I'm suddenly feeling unnerved, a particular emotion I don't at all care for. It feels like a weakness and a character flaw, and those are two things I've always associated with punks and pussies.

Ashley notices the sudden change in my mood—which has kind of been a theme between us lately—and asks if everything is OK, which I tell her *yeah, of course it is*, as I try to resume driving as I had been before. Only now, she's taken her hand back from my thigh and clasped her fingers together in her own lap, gazing absentmindedly out the passenger side window. The mood has officially taken a turn for the chillier.

We're married now, but opening up still isn't easy for me. Hiding things like this feels like lying. I don't think it's easy for either of us. Ashley doesn't know the full extent of my “headache problem,” as we affectionately call it. I'd told her the doctor said I was just experiencing migraines and not to worry. I didn't mention the Dr. I'm seeing happens to be my best friend, Drew Marinovich, and he only mentioned migraines in comparison to my cluster headaches, which, in reality, there isn't even the slightest fucken comparison at all.

I'd also conveniently left out the part about Drew and I trying some pretty experimental treatment options—i.e. so experimental the FDA hasn't gotten around to entertaining the idea yet, let alone approving it. Drew, being the fucken scholar that he is, read about some really remarkable and really *far-out-there* research going on out East at Harvard University where a group of doctors are treating patients who suffer from cluster headaches with LSD. Of course, the trial is full; plenty of applicants showed up to claim whatever was necessary to have legal approval to drop acid and

hang out with a bunch of other people doing the same thing—the majority of course had to be turned away.

But here in Omaha, Drew and I decided we needed to improvise.

I steal a glance at Ashley and she's still not looking in my direction. I know she thinks my behavior's related to something she did, but she's so wrong. Only I just can't tell her yet.

It's not you baby, it's me—for real this time.

I want to tell her but the time isn't right. And I'm not 100 percent sure, but I think my tie is at odds with my collar again, which has me back repeating my mantra and deep breathing techniques. I have to.

So after *mantra* ing my ass off for a solid two or three minutes, I realize the radio is off and even the slightest sound of anything besides rubber on concrete is absent. In cars as posh as this one, the refined acoustics allow you to hear even your passenger's subtlest exhale. Her body language right now is demanding distance. The little bit of white residue remaining under her nose, however, begs for commentary.

So I do—provide commentary, that is. I ask her *what's that?* while I pretend to itch at my nose theatrically with my drink-hand—*sniff, sniff*. It takes her a second to realize what I'm doing while she pats uselessly around her lip, but when she does—when she gets it—it's like a switch just flips inside her. Her face hardens and she swings at me, closed fist, the blow a decent shot that connects with my shoulder—the shoulder connecting the arm holding my drink to my body, to be exact—forcefully discharging my glass's remaining liquid contents all over the console of a brand new car that isn't even mine yet, and I'm—when all is said and done—simply and utterly stunned. Like seriously, *what the fuck?*

“What the fuck?” I actually say, my voice cracking somewhat unmanly-like. *What the fuck?* is all I got. It's the only thing I can think of. I mean, I can't believe it, I can't believe she hit me. A second later, the second *only thing* I can think of finally comes to mind: “I can't believe you actually *hit* me!”

“Well,” she says, pausing for emphasis, “that's what you fucking get,” which she says like saying it like that signals the end of the matter. Like *that's what you fucking get's* the bottom line and the discussion's over. The discussion is *not* fucking over.

“I was fucken *joking* with you. You know what a fucken *joke* is?” I really just can't believe it. Not because I don't think Ashley will hit a person. She's scrappy as hell, of course she'll hit a person. She grew up with older brothers. What I can't believe is how I'm pretty sure I just officially bought this fucken car that I was only test-driving because now it smells like a bathroom stall in a college bar. Plus I'm really pissed that the spilled Jack and Coke's made my right hand all sticky, which, my newly sticky hand is making me drive like shit since I'm more focused on trying to grab some fucken napkins out of the glovebox than I am on manipulating the Infiniti's clutch and brake pedals.

I mean I can't even begin to explain how much I *really* hate it when my hands are sticky.

“Wasn't a very funny joke,” she says finally, but not really to me and I can hear that some of the hardness has left her voice.

I pull up to the Brandeis and say, “This discussion is *not* over,” because this discussion is not over, like I said. Ashley gets out of the car and wordlessly *click-clacks* her way up to the building's entrance where she pauses at the doors, and ten seconds later gets buzzed in. I'm so fucken pissed, my head feels like it's going to split in half, so I reach for the very back of the glovebox where I've stashed a bottle of Xanax samples and pop two of them.

I can't decide what to do with the sopping Jack & Coke napkins so I just throw them in the street.

Because I'm not sure how long Ashley plans to be in with Meredith, I punch up Radio Moscow's station on Pandora which features music that sounds like Radio Moscow and where The Black Keys' “I Got Mine” is finishing up just before R. L. Burnside's “Let My Baby Ride” comes on. The Dead Weather's “Die by the Drop” is halfway through when Ashley emerges from the Brandeis building with a bulky manila envelope under her arm. She *click-clacks* back

up to the car, opens the passenger-side door and, before I can say anything, she says, "I'm sorry."

I'm not prepared for an apology yet because I still want to be mad so I don't say anything.

"I'm sorry," she repeats. "I shouldn't have hit you. That's wasn't OK. I don't want to be a hitter. I'm just really stressing this gala tonight, and that's not really an excuse, but it *is* the reason, the only *good* reason, and I'm sorry for taking it out on you."

"It's cool," is all I say, is all I can come up with, which I feel really lame about. I mean, that was a pretty kickass apology Ashley just gave me, and the best I could do is, *It's cool?* I'm already forgetting about it though because it's been about ten minutes and the Xanax has finally started dissolving in the lake of Jack Daniels in my stomach. "Yeah, it's cool," I repeat just as lamely, "No worries. I mean, like, don't even worry about it," I say.

She looks at me like I've had too much to drink but says nothing. As soon as she *snikts* in her seatbelt, I punch the gas and get some decent scratch from the new 245 width tires. With 348 horsepower underfoot, the Infiniti gets a little *squirrelly*—a little sideways—before I straighten her out and we rocket down Douglas Street a half mile before hanging a fast left on 10th.

[1] Infiniti's Performance Line

