HIT AND RUN

by marci stillerman

The parents of the Confirmation Class of his synagogue had kept their rabbi later that he'd expected. There'd been so many questions. Today's children were confronted with many dilemmas. These days the line between right and wrong was so blurred, so wavering, that it was difficult to be sure you were on the right side of it. The questions were hard. Should a boy sacrifice his life for his country if he knew in his heart the war was wrong? Should undue pressure be put on a suspect of a terrible crime to get the truth out of him? Should a person avoid risking his life to save a stranger's if he had a family depending on him? No man had the wisdom, Joel told the parents, to answer these questions. The best he could tell them was to do what in their hearts they knew was right. In this way God would be advising them. Suddenly the night grew black, as if an alien bent on mayhem waved his arm and doused all lights. Damn! Another mid summer late night ——it was ten thirty—— power outage and Rabbi Joel Lerner was still blocks from home on one of the streets in gang territory. Kerst Avenue, known as Cursed for its unsolved killings. Kerst was avoided at night and Joel's solitary headlights glowed like disembodied ghost eyes. It was as if he wore blinders. He could see nothing on either side or ahead of him beyond the few feet illuminated by his car lights. The lights made him a target for an invisible sniper and he would have turned them off but he needed to see where he was going. He locked the doors. Kerst was several blocks long with side streets leading into it, all gang turf. If you drove the speed limit, you'd be off the street and on the freeway in ten minutes, but because of the limited visibility, you'd have to drive snail's pace to avoid hitting anything crossing, or coming from one of the intersections. If some homeboy, high on drugs, felt like offing an enemy——anyone driving a Mercedes was an enemy——Joel was toast. With luck, no one would be out on the hot, muggy street and he'd soon be home. He squinted his eyes to see as much as possible. His heart pounded like a trip hammer. He

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was griping the wheel so hard, his hands were cramping. His neck and the back of his skull ached with tension. The silence was making him crazy but he didn't dare turn on the radio. He drove so slowly, barely ten miles an hour, that he was conscious of every bump in the pavement. There were several, probably speed bumps. Most residential streets had them. There seemed an unusual number of bumps. His windows were shut and the air conditioner was humming, but Joel was conscious of sounds in the street, perhaps his imagination or the high state of his anxiety. He heard voices, a baby's cries, he felt presences around the car, brushing against the windows, but hard as he tried to pierce the darkness, he saw no one. There had to be people looking out the black windows on both sides of the street, hearing a car pass in the darkness. He felt their eyes on him. Te best thing to do was to continue, slowly, minding his own business. Why did he feel the gathering of a small crowd several feet in front of the car? He could see no one. Should I stop, just in case? He wondered. His lights didn't reach that far and he could see no one ahead of him in the street. He slowed down even more. The crowd seemed to be dispersing. When he came to where he'd thought they must have been standing, if they were there at all, he was hardly moving. No one was there. This is crazy, he thought. You're hallucinating. Just drive on. And he accelerated. The car seemed to hit a solid mass———a dog? A child? ———He'd hit something, he was sure. Run over it. In a panic, he stepped on the gas and the car spurted ahead and without further thought, Joel drove on until he reached the burst of light and motion, the sound of vehicles driving by that was the freeway. He didn't slow down on the ramp. Shaking with relief, he joined the stream of cars heading toward his exit. He was breathing heavily, panting. He'd hit something, someone, back there. He could still feel its impact. Had he heard a cry? He could not be sure. Had some child come outside alone? A dog? Could someone have seen what happened from one of he windows and called 911? Or was it too dark? He doubted anyone could see to get his license number, but you could always identify a Mercedes. If so, by the time they got there, he'd have been gone. Hit

and run! He could have killed someone. Joel expected to hear the sirens of a police car. They'd be looking for a Mercedes 550. With a dent in its engine. Mercedes were not rare in this part of the city, but there were not that man. They would question every Mercedes owner in the area, look for a dent. Would he have time to have his car fixed before it was located? The police would question all repair shops. Why was he thinking like a guilty man? He didn't know he'd hit anything. It was almost midnight when he got home. He parked the car in the port wishing he had a garage so it would be invisible from the street. He'd look for a dent at daylight. He could get a flashlight and examine it now, but if he found one, nothing he could do about it for hours. Why not forget about it and get some sleep. Hilary had left the porch light on for him. She was in bed. He wished her to be awake, waiting for him. He wanted to tell her about his scary drive home. She'd remind him she told him not to take the short cut to the freeway, to stay off Kerst even if it took him the extra fifteen minutes. Should have listened to her. She was asleep. Well, maybe it was best. He'd have to think the whole thing over. Decide what to do. Should he go to the police, confess he might have hit something during the blackout, were they looking for a hit-run driver? Was it foolish to look for trouble? His father had always said if something isn't broken, don't fix it. Still, it would go better for him if he had confessed than if they found him. What if he'd only knocked a child down——he was going so slow——and someone else came along and ran over her and killed her. He'd be blamed. His lawyer would probably advise him to confess, so he'd have a case. Everyone was looking out for himself. But could he live with himself if he'd killed someone and got away with it? There were so many killings, accidental and deliberate, on Kerst, it probably wouldn't be reported. The police put up a show of investigating every one, but Joel's friend, Captain Lou Holiday, had told Joel confidentially that they put very little time and effort into what happens on Kerst. Whatever happened last night, Joel knew in his heart he'd never be found out. He'd get his car fixed in another neighborhood, maybe drive the fifty miles to Zenith and have it fixed there. It was a matter

between himself and his conscience. Should a man who preached from his pulpit every Sunday morning, advising his congregation that the only way to live a righteous life was to do what his heart told him was right, sacrifice his life to give his followers an example of an act of righteousness, or was he more useful to them and his children to continue to be there for them as long as they needed him? He dreamed that night of a small black child lying in the street, unable to cry out because of the way she'd been injured. The victim of a hit-run driver who, the coroner said, if he'd stopped, could have saved her life. When in the morning, they found her dead, no one would ever know who killed her