

Black Ribbon

by Thaddeus Howze



Ain't no sunshine when she's gone. -- Bill Withers

The highway stretches out in front of me, a black ribbon winding into the future; a collapsing probability of possibility connecting me with the past and through it to the future.

Music streams from my radio, a carrier wave connecting me with myself in the futures I head toward. My twenty-five year old self hurtling home from a party, a jamming party.

One filled with beautiful hunnies, hot, sweaty, bodacious women of all shapes, sizes and colors; from an elegant ivory to a Nubian black, each smiling, tempting, thrilling me. Even me, an ordinary Brother, just happy to be invited.

The highway stretches out in front of me, late from work, too many hours, too much work, too many responsibilities, trying juggle all of the things my life has in it. Thirty-five came with so many things, so fast, and without warning.

Music streams from my radio, and it's my wave, my signal from the future to the past. I jam and for a moment remember that evening in my youth when I met the woman who was going to be my wife and I am so happy, so thrilled she wanted to head out with me to a restaurant and sit and talk with me until the sun came up. She was everything. My light, my moon, her voice was the silk of the morning breaking, slow, subtle, yet suddenly brilliant with light, with wisdom I wondered how I ever lived without.

The highway stretches out in front of me but I am not slowing down. I drive faster than ever, late at night, trying to get home. Knowing it will already be too late. She is already gone. Forty-five came with fear, indiscretion, loss of faith, loss of love, fear of an impending death, more time behind than before.

Music streams from my radio, that song again, this time it feels tempestuous, like my life, up-ended, topsy-turvy, like a child's bedtime story complete with Cat and Hat, and all of the instability of that. She takes the kids and heads to her mother's. She tells me to keep my secretary since she was doing double-duty, she might as well get to come home, too.

The highway stretches out in front of me. I told her I was sorry so many years ago. We were friends before we were lovers. I realized how much I missed her every time we came together to watch our daughters graduate. Fifty-five is when I got my mind back, and my wife.

It's that music again. You know it. The one with the familiar feeling. It takes you back in time to so many moments in time, each bound by this series of sounds, of consonants, of vowels, of beats and rests. The one that takes me back in time to a place where I was still young and foolish, filled with myself, all bluster, no wisdom, all rhythm but no soul. Too much liquor, too much ego, never knowing when to stop.

The highway stretches out in front of me. I am peaceful in the knowledge, I have done right by my daughters. My wife and I the best of friends again at sixty-five, come from another grandchild's christening. The lateness of the hour brings me back to the ribbon of time. My ribbon, connected by the carrier wave of my life, bringing me to this point.

Music streams from my radio, that song which is playing on the radio, reaches back through time to my sixty-five year old self, reminding me to tell him to send back, to my fifty-five year old self, reminding him to put his issues on the back burner for a moment and to connect to my forty-five year old self, who's on the highway headed toward a dalliance with our mistress, to take a moment and remind his thirty-five year old self who is so in love with our wife he can barely see, and so proud of his young daughter as they come home from a national spelling bee, to spare a moment for his twenty-five year old self who has fallen asleep at the wheel with the woman who will later become his reason for being.

Remind him as the carrier wave of our life is playing on the radio, the soundtrack of our lives, as we wind down a road very much like the one we have and will drive all of our lives.

Wake up, you dumb bastard. Now!

A blast of the music wakes you from your trance-like state, a crash of the music, a burst of awareness, passing through time, something clear, hard, sharp, a jab in the spiritual third eye, which wakes your mind, and your two less-attentive eyes. A ripple through yourself, from yourself, to yourself.

Music streams from my radio. And the accident is averted, we scream as the car swerves out of control and then after spinning and spinning and slowing to a stop. On the other end of that black ribbon, this is now a sigh we call memory.

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