

18 Wheels

It was early spring and I had two tickets for the Moody Blues concert in Lake Tahoe, Nevada. At the very last minute, my driving companion backed out of the trip, leaving me with no other option than to go alone. I set out in early morning, the day before the concert, from Seattle.

I knew how to follow the map there, and was determined not to miss a chance to see a band I'd heard since being carried by my mother. I also had a raging fever, from an inopportune infection that had manifested days earlier. My start on the trip was delayed by having to secure a doctors appointment and antibiotics before setting out. I left Seattle in my Honda, with a 102 fever and my resolve.

Due to the nature of the infection, it was necessary to pull over at each and every rest stop between Seattle and Lake Tahoe, something that consumed depressing amounts of time. There was however, no avoiding this as the antibiotics had not yet set in. As the driving wore on, it was increasingly difficult to stay focused and alert. In an effort to keep awake, I started to play with the car lights, switching them on and off, on and off in the diminishing light. Near the base of the Siskiyou Mountains, I pulled over at another rest area.

"Are you having car trouble?" a short thin man asked me when I exited the women's bathroom.

"What?" I replied, appalled that this stranger had been standing there, waiting for me.

We stood near each other, under a dim street light at the rest stop. It was late and there weren't many people nearby. I was convinced he was at the very least, a stalker but was simply too sick and too tired to care much. He had no coat on against the night cold, and was gazing intently at me.

"I noticed that your lights were flickering on and off, so I pulled over at the stop to see if you needed help" he explained.

My fevered brain was trying to understand how he'd intuitively known to pull over at the same stop I was heading for, since he was in front of me, driving a huge 18 wheeled truck. He may have noticed a strangely behaving Honda in his rear view mirror, but to guess that I'd pull in after him to the same rest area was odd. As was his perfect timing as to when the driver of said Honda would exit the women's bathroom.

I told him I was heading to a concert, and was playing with the lights to literally stay awake. He asked where and when the concert was, and I told him. Then he asked me if it was worth dying to get there.

"Have you ever driven over the Siskiyou's at night?" he asked. Then went on to tell that even folks who were familiar with the roads, had trouble at night. He held out one hand,

and began to count the available hours between that moment, and the concert curtain time. With amazing mathematical acuity, he calculated the number of remaining miles and available hours. He then offered that if I followed him over the mountains, I could stop at the next town, sleep exactly 6 hours, resume driving and arrive at the destination alive and on time. His hand punctuated the timing deliberations, then pointed to his large truck parked on the asphalt.

“You can follow me; I’ll make sure you’re always right behind. Just follow my tail lights and I’ll guide you through the mountains. As soon as we’re down the other side, you can stop at the next town...you’ll see the lights. And I’ll continue on my way.” he explained.

I was so exhausted and ill, I just nodded, anxious to get back to the safety of my car.

We set off through the night and I began to truly appreciate this stranger’s guidance. My fever was still running, and my eyes could no longer focus on anything, except the blurred red glare of his rigs tail lights. It was a beautiful clear night, and the weaving road seemed ethereal, a vague ribbon in darkness. I thought it was most likely a blessing that the cliffs and drop offs that were surely there just outside the roads edge, were obscured by the night. It was like a game of sorts, following the red orbs through the hills, speeding up to reach them on the declines, catching up with them on the hills.

Finally we broke free of the mountains and began a long descent towards a soft low glow of a distant town. I was so relieved to see some semblance of civilization with its promise of a resting place. My truck driver (he never offered his name) tapped his brakes several times to signal that his responsibility was coming to a close and he picked up some speed. I flashed my lights to acknowledge his message. Surprisingly he then turned on the right hand blinker and began to pull his huge truck in that direction. At first I thought he was stopping to hold another cryptic conversation but as we approached a small overpass, it was evident that he was going to take his enormous truck off onto a tiny exit.

Then I knew. The rig disappeared from view off of Interstate 5, down the exit. I pressed on the gas, with an idea forming of the view from the overpass vantage point. The exit offered only one option, a small two lane country road that traveled perpendicularly into lowlands. Nothing. No one. There was no truck, no red lights, no large gray shape suddenly parked. There was only the ghostly outline of the empty street below.

The glow in the distance grew brighter and near midnight, materialized into the promised small town. There was a hotel still open with its vacancy light on, and a woman there who answered the bell. As I set the alarm clock for exactly six hours, I realized that my companion guide was no accident, no coincidence of good fortune. Our fortuitous meeting had been arranged by some beautiful magic that delivered me safely through the Siskiyou, then safely to Tahoe the next day with 40 minutes to spare before curtain. This chance encounter caught caution on the wind, and grounded it in grace.

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