

Four Little Words

by Mary Severson

My husband takes a sideways glance at my feet as I work the imaginary brakes on the passenger's side of the car. He understands that the phrase "sit back and relax" has no meaning to me when I'm not the one behind the wheel. I sit here with my seat belt securely in place on the side of the car with no control, looking at any one of the many magazines or books I keep on hand. Face pressed into the pages, I don't see the oncoming cars or any of the other normal sites on the road that should not cause anxiety but keep me tense. Tapped brakes or a slight swerve both cause my heart to thump that extra bass sounding beat, my head to snap up, and my hands to put a death grip on the helpless pages. The squealing of tires, whether from my car or another, causes a wave of heat to rush through my body and the pounding of my heart to fill my ears. As we continue down the road, a shaky breath leaves my body. I tell myself I should have slid into the seat with the wheel when I first got in the car.

Stepping back in time, I relive the events that ultimately cause these reactions. Sixteen years old and arrogant, I knew that nothing bad could happen to me, only to other people. After work on a muggy Friday night, four friends and I hopped into a four-door, lime green, ugly but powerful car. Stepping over crushed cans and old food wrappers, I climbed into the back seat between two good friends. Popping open that first beer, I sat back to enjoy the ride.

Unfortunately, I didn't realize the rest of the occupants in the car had been drinking for the last two hours. We headed out of town to some lesser-used roads. The teen behind the wheel was driving as if he was a professional racer, not realizing that it was the beer and not his skill that was making him brave corners at speeds faster than was safe.

One corner in particular proved that his skill was not as sharp as he thought. As we rounded this corner, the car slid sideways. The tires screamed in my ears as they scraped across the blacktop. The sound went on and on. Suddenly, silence, and one thought: are we stopped? Too scared to look, I sat with eyes shut so tightly that it squished up my whole face. That thought barely left my mind when I was thrown out of my seat and up into the roof. Not quite landing, I went up again, this time landing on something that sent pain through my whole right side. The car stopped. Hesitantly, I opened my eyes. I disengaged myself from the pile of bodies on the seat and looked up. Nobody was in the seat as before. We were scattered around like fallen limbs off a tree after a storm.

Desperately I looked around to see if anyone was hurt and then smelled gasoline. The car could blow up at any moment. Yelling for everyone to get out, I climbed out over the seat, half pushing one of the kids out with me. Half-running, half-crawling we all scrambled across the road to the other side and down into the ditch.

Lying in the ditch we took a head count and found we were short one person. Looking back at the car, we saw him. His head and shoulders were on the ground while his legs were hidden from view in the car. Two of us ran back, grabbed him by the shoulders and dragged him across the road to safety. He opened his eyes, seemingly unharmed. As we laid there in the ditch, catching our breath, we realized that nothing more was going to happen to the car.

Two of us were minors, and with alcohol being involved, we needed to get out of there before the police showed up. Running down the road as if wild dogs were on our heels, we hid behind trees and dropped into the ditches so no one in passing cars would see us. Doubling over and gasping for air, we slowed to a walk. Thinking we were far enough away, we stopped at a house to call a friend to come get us. We made up a story about running out of gas so the people at the house wouldn't connect us to the accident if or when they heard about it.

An hour later, I wasn't feeling so well. Pain shot through my neck and side. Friends talked me into going to the hospital under the assumption that I could be examined without my dad finding out about the accident. That is not how it works. Since I was a minor, the hospital staff needed to call my dad to get permission to treat me. Letting him know what had happened was not what I had planned. Now, not only was I in physical pain; I was in emotional panic too. The hospital released me with nothing more serious than bumps and bruises.

I headed home, knowing dad would be waiting up for me when I got there. All kinds of speeches went through my head: how I was going to explain what I had been doing, why it wasn't my fault, and all the other things I thought I would have to explain to keep from getting in trouble. When I opened the back door to my house, dad was sitting at the table, as I knew he would be. He just looked at me. I looked everywhere except at him. Stepping into the kitchen, I waited, but there was no yelling. Sliding his chair back, my dad stood up and asked if I was all right. Not able to find my voice, I bobbed my head up and down. He walked out of the room and went to bed. At this point, I thought I had gotten off lucky. I went upstairs to bed. I didn't know that tomorrow would change me forever.

Waking up late in the morning, I had temporarily forgotten about the car accident. Stretching brought it all back. Every muscle in my body felt like it had been over-worked. I dressed slowly and went downstairs. As I was finishing breakfast, dad came in and told me we were going for a ride. Not sure if I was in trouble yet, I did not argue.

Getting directions from me, dad drove us to the crash site. His plan was making me uneasy. I wanted to put the matter behind me. Grounding didn't sound too bad. Reaching the area, we pulled over and got out. What I saw left me speechless.

A high voltage pole had been severed about five feet off the ground, which meant we had hit it in mid-air. The garage behind it had the door completely smashed in, and the car inside that garage was totally crushed up to the windshield. I just stood there. Looking up at my dad, I saw the shock, relief, and finally pain cross his face. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, they were filled with tears. Dad looked at me with what I can only describe as raw pain and whispered the words that changed my life forever, "You should be dead."

Not until that moment had I ever thought about dying. Those four words ran repeatedly in my head. The image of dad blurred as tears filled my eyes. I could have died last night!

Remembering as clearly today as I did that day, my eyes still mist up over what could have been. As my husband glances over at my tear filled eyes, he sends me a silent message that says, I understand. I relax my grip on the pages in my hands, if only for a short while, as we continue our journey.

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