

Thursday, 1:17 p.m.

TIME STOPPED WHILE I was crossing the street at the intersection of Jenifer and Wisconsin Avenue. It was 1:17 p.m. on a Thursday. End of May. The D.C. summer heat hadn't kicked in yet. Sunny and 71 degrees. My frozen world was downright balmy.

I was going somewhere. I had no idea where. But I needed to get out of the house because that's where my dead mother was. And I didn't know where to go. I had my music on. Loud. I was crying.

So I had put on the mix I made for my mom. All '80s, all the time. Not the crappy '80s, but the '80s that she loved. She was one of the few people who would argue that the '80s was the pinnacle of music. Screw the Beatles and Stones. Forget Zep and Pink Floyd. Don't even bring up hip-hop or country or classical or whatever. My mother loved The Clash and Talking Heads and the English Beat and Elvis Costello and The Specials and those first few U2 albums and all those bands that now get lumped together under the bizarre grouping of Classic Adult Alternative. When she was only a little bit sick, I created Mom's Sick Mix. Here's the thing: I told her I was using "sick" like

awesome, not “sick” like diseased, but after a while I started to feel like it was just “sick” in the head, but that was even worse because she had a brain tumor, which really was sick in the head.

All of this was going through my mind as I stormed down the street, angry at everything, not paying attention because nothing really mattered anyway.

The next part I’m kind of making up because I might have mentioned that I wasn’t paying attention. But here goes. I stepped off the curb into the street. I didn’t realize the light hadn’t changed. I didn’t hear the car barreling toward me, trying to make it through the intersection on the yellow. I didn’t hear the people shouting for me to get out of the way. I didn’t realize that I was about to die.

Then, the music stopped.

I was listening to “Begin the Begin.” R.E.M. Not a bad last song. If you’ve got to have something stuck in your head forever with no real possibility of another song coming along randomly to shove it aside, well then, it might as well be some R.E.M. from an early album.

I fingered my phone, trying different combinations of swiping and poking to get it working again. Nothing. It pissed me off that I’d probably have to go to the Apple Store in Bethesda to get it fixed. But it also distracted me for a moment, from where I was going and what I was trying to leave behind. Standing in the middle of the street, all I could hear was the last bars echoing in my head.

Another song that might have been better: “Stuck In A Moment You Can’t Get Out Of.” U2. Yeah, that would have been funny.

The Mercedes had stopped inches from me. Dead frozen forever stopped. Still distracted by the malfunctioning phone, my brain was slow to process the car. It was way too close. If it had come to a stop that abruptly, I would have heard the screeching of the brakes. I should have flinched. Or maybe

I was so out of it that I nearly walked into the stopped car. And then there was the problem of the engine. No sound. I wondered if it was a hybrid.

I looked at the driver. His face would make it clear if this was his fault or mine. I was ready to pound on his hood or at least give him a dirty look if he seemed guilty. If he was angry, I'd lower my head and cross the street quickly, hoping he wouldn't get out of his car.

His face looked weird. I didn't know what to make of it.

The man's lower jaw jutted out and his lips curled back, exposing his teeth. His eyes were perfect circles, open as wide as possible. The muscles in his cheeks were tensed, pushing into his nose, which bent slightly to the left. His expression would have made a pretty scary Halloween mask. Terrified man frozen in time.

That's how I interpreted it. Fear, paramount. *I blew it. I'm going to hit this guy.* His body, reflexively, was trying to save him. I could see the steering wheel turned in his clutched white hands. The front wheels of the car followed, obliquely angled, ready to take it on a different path. Despite his best efforts, he would have hit me with the right side of his bumper. Anger mixed with the fear. His eyes bore down on me fiercely. How dare I step off the curb? A layer of regret, possibly—but that could be something I was seeing because I wanted to see it. I wanted him to be sorry for what he was about to do. I wanted him to feel the pain I was about to receive. And digging deeper—surprise, confusion, sadness.

The driver was clearly late. Why else would he be running the red? Maybe arrogance. Driving that expensive car, wearing that perfectly tailored suit—*I can make it*, he thought. Maybe he lost focus. Thinking about an important meeting. Or a fight with his wife. Maybe he had just gotten off his cellphone, looked up, and realized he was going too fast to stop. So he sped up. Or maybe not.

Meanwhile, I was background processing a far more

important observation. Nothing at that intersection was moving. Nothing except for me.

At first, I tried to be still too, wondering if I was about to be captured, fearing the very phenomenon that had just saved my life.

The man stared at me through the windshield, his bared teeth becoming more threatening by the moment. He looked like he wanted to eat me, like his face must hurt.

There was nothing for me to do but move.

Sometimes it is difficult to read expressions in a static world. The movement of muscles, the interplay of facial components, the momentum of emotion—all these things are absent. Everything is a still photograph, and those can be cryptic.

From the corner, three people watched. A bike messenger with dreadlocks and an oversized tote, his expression hidden behind wraparound sunglasses and hip facial hair. The car must have been coming pretty fast for a bike messenger with no respect for the laws of traffic or physics to wait patiently on the curb. Maybe he was looking forward to watching me die. *Better than YouTube, dude*. I knew I was not being fair to him, but compared to the two people standing next to him, he was complicit with the driver in my mind.

The second person—a young man in a button-down shirt and khakis, possibly on his way to a job interview, maybe going to grab a late lunch from his low-paying job at a non-profit—wanted to rescue me. He was in the process of raising his arm to point in my direction. His brow was furrowed and his mouth was partially open, ready to shout. This man quite possibly was about to dart out into the street to save my life.

But it was the woman next to him—early forties, light brown skin, wearing a business suit—who was the easiest to read. Her face a mask of shock and despair. Tears already formed in her eyes. She did not want to see what she knew was coming. It will devastate her, haunt her dreams and torture her days—watching a man die. Her faith would be tested and she would

find no reason for my death except pure awful dumb luck.

Around that one intersection, there were dozens of other people—some in cars, some walking, the food truck guy leaning out the window and handing a taco to a teenager, a homeless guy sleeping on a bench, folks waiting for a bus. To varying degrees, they were all aware of what was about to happen, most of them more so than I was. Some had turned to look at me over their shoulders and would catch a glimpse of the accident but doubt their own recollection of it. Some would notice after the event, when I lay dying, a bloody carcass interrupting the normal course of their lives. Others would see it all, beginning to end, and feel powerless to prevent it, thankful it was not their day to take the blow.

I stumbled away from the Mercedes. There were no cars in the intersection itself. On Jenifer, the drivers had paused at the green, anticipating the Mercedes. And on Wisconsin, all the other vehicles had stopped on the red.

All the people continued to stare at the space I had occupied, the one I'd just vacated. Their expressions did not change. But I was gone. I had disappeared. Yet, they all still saw me there, about to get run over.

It felt safest to stand in the dead center of the intersection, away from all those living statues. I drifted there and waited for something to move. Anything. I turned myself into a statue too. Perfectly still. I didn't want to stand out. I didn't want to move.

I didn't want to be alone.

My cheeks still wet with tears, I fell to my knees and threw up. My body continued to be racked by dry heaves after the contents of my stomach had emptied onto the asphalt. No one came to comfort me. No one asked if I was okay. No one moved.

The smell of my vomit filled my nostrils, pummeling me with another wave of nausea. I couldn't stay there. So I ran. I didn't look at anyone or anything. I pretended that nothing had changed. I closed my eyes, and I ran.

And as I ran, snippets of “Begin the Begin” flickered in my mind, taunting me.

Miles Standish. Martin Luther. Something about grabbing a bird.

None of it made any sense.

Somewhere, Michael Stipe was frozen solid like everyone else. I wanted to find him and kick his ass for writing such cryptic lyrics.

None of this made any sense.