

Collisions await

Rotella, Carlo . Boston Globe ; Boston, Mass. [Boston, Mass]03 Aug 2011: A.11.

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ABSTRACT

First one, backwards, landing in a crouch, sand and dark hair flying; then the other, upright and running in the air so that she appears to have one foot momentarily on the low sandbar island out in the harbor beyond, the first of several giant steps - island, boat, buoy, wave - that will take her out to the horizon.

FULL TEXT

WHEN THE lifeguards go off duty at 5 o'clock, the kids remaining on the beach swarm up into the chair and take possession. Some sit on the high bench seat and look out over the ocean, oily green in the end-of-day Cape light. My daughters jump. First one, backwards, landing in a crouch, sand and dark hair flying; then the other, upright and running in the air so that she appears to have one foot momentarily on the low sandbar island out in the harbor beyond, the first of several giant steps - island, boat, buoy, wave - that will take her out to the horizon. Then they swarm up the ladder-like sides of the chair and jump again.

They've been doing it since they were 4, and they're landing on forgiving sand, but still I feel the swooping and tightening inside me that I've always felt when they jump from any considerable height. It's like the inner plunge and twist I felt as a child when I pumped as high as I could go on a swing and unseated myself, suspended for a long moment as I fell away and out, the fingers of one hand trailing on the chain, imagining I could still re-grasp it and reseat myself but already anticipating the foot-sting of landing. I feel it, too, when I take a curve too fast on a dream highway, futilely working the useless pedals and steering wheel, and realize that I'm going to crash.

Once, years ago, before the girls, I was coming back to Boston on the Mass. Pike late on a summer afternoon. I was in the left lane in fast traffic, growing sleepy, pressing to get home. On the radio, drive-time jocks were counting down their top-10 TV theme songs: "Hawaii Five-0," "MASH," nothing surprising. They had just gotten to their number one, "The Addams Family," when I crested a rise and saw below me three serried columns of stopped cars. The sun, slanting in low from behind, struck highlights off metal as their red-lit brake lights seemed to rush upon me.

Instantly wide awake in a singing storm of adrenaline, I stood on my brakes and came to a tire-scorching, fishtailing halt so close to the car in front of me that I could see tiny dings on its trunk. "The Addams Family" theme continued on the radio in the ensuing moment of stillness.

A close call, I thought, and life goes on, but then I looked up in the rearview mirror to see a car growing impossibly huge as it closed from behind. Too fast to stop. It would crush me against the mass of metal in front of me, and there was no time or room to do anything about it. My insides swooped and twisted, bracing for impact.

But the blow didn't come. Mercifully choosing not to plow head-on into the stopped cars, the driver braked into a

curving slide and put his left headlight and bumper solidly into the metal barrier off the left-hand shoulder. The car half-spun and rocked to a halt, scattering broken parts on pavement. Further bangs came from the screeching, slewing chain of cars behind him.

I wanted to get out to see if the driver was OK and to thank him, but the cars ahead began moving, starting up as mysteriously as they had stopped. I told myself that dozens of drivers must have called 911, that the state police would surely be there in moments, that I would only be in the way if I got out. Even as I pretended to decide what to do, the incident fell away behind me, rapidly receding into the undifferentiated mass of other people's lives glimpsed in the automotive distance.

"The Addams Family" came to an end as I accelerated away, the knot of preparation in my guts slowly undoing itself. But when I hear it now, and when I watch my daughters jump from the lifeguard chair or from anything high, I feel inside me a gentler version of what I felt when I looked in the mirror on that summer afternoon and saw the car approaching like a prophesied event.

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Illustration

Caption: istockphoto

DETAILS

Subject:	Traffic accidents & safety
Publication title:	Boston Globe; Boston, Mass.
Pages:	A.11
Publication year:	2011
Publication date:	Aug 3, 2011
Section:	Editorial
Publisher:	Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC
Place of publication:	Boston, Mass.
Country of publication:	United States, Boston, Mass.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN:	07431791
Source type:	Newspapers

Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Commentary
ProQuest document ID:	880639899
Document URL:	https://proxy.bc.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fsearch.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F880639899%3Faccountid%3D9673
Copyright:	(c) The Boston Globe Aug 03, 2011
Last updated:	2017-11-18
Database:	Boston Globe

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