

Never Knew What Hit Him

[“Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” as the saying goes. I’ve always been a tremendous *Twilight Zone* fan. Back in the Fifties and Sixties, as a kid watching the episodes first-run, I worked hard not to miss this half-hour every week. I thought the shows were the best thing on TV; better even than *Star Trek*, another of my favorite shows. I can’t remember when exactly I wrote this story—a definite *TZ* tribute—but I recently read it to my wife, Marilyn, and found myself using the cadences Rod Serling used on the show. See if you think I captured the mood. – T. H. Pine]

It is five p.m. Rush Hour. The city could be anywhere in the world. Thousands of individual people, their daily toil over for another day, are grimly intent upon completing the homeward leg of their twice-daily migration. Together they comprise that great, congested mass of humanity called commuters.

Let’s focus our attention on one individual in particular. There he goes now, winding his way through the human stampede on Commerce Avenue. Name: Gregory Parlin. Occupation: Rising Young Executive. In a few moments, he will reach the lot where he parks his car. Once inside, he will begin the journey that will take him to a neat, middle class house in the suburbs, an attractive wife, in a marriage of ten years, two rambunctious children, and a dog. Today, however, Greg’s journey will end somewhat differently.



At first Greg didn’t notice the old man who materialized on the seat beside him. This was understandable because, at the moment, he worked at trying to avoid hitting a driver who cut in front of him without warning. As soon as he reached the open road though, and relaxed a little, he noticed a movement to his right. Turning his head to look, he saw, for the first time, the tall, gaunt figure that sat stroking his long, gray beard.

“Hello Gregory,” he said in a surprisingly rich baritone.

“*What the—?*” Greg exclaimed, nearly sideswiping the car in the lane to his left.

“I’ve come for you Gregory.”

“Come for me? Who are you? How do you know my name? And what the *hell* are you doing in my car?”

“Of course. You don’t know what I’m talking about yet, do you? Let me explain.” The old man stopped stroking his beard and looked intently at Greg. “For want of a better name, you may call me Father Death. I have come to take you from the land of the living.”

“Father *Death*? What kind of a nut *are* you?”

“I’m not a nut, as you so colorfully call me. I’m who I say I am, though my name varies. You will be dead in exactly fifteen minutes.”

Greg looked at his watch. It indicated five-fifteen. “Okay, I’ll humor you. You’re Father Death and you’ve come for me. How will I die?”

“Your vehicle will plunge into the river that parallels this highway.”

Greg looked to his right, past the old man. The river’s calm surface threw back a myriad of distorted reflections from its oily, black surface. “Why would it do that? Will I blow a tire or something?”

“Exactly. The right front tire will blow out. As a result, you will lose control of the vehicle.”

“That’s ridiculous! Those front tires are only a week old and besides, I’m a very safe driver.” Greg realized the foolishness of his argument as soon as he had spoken.

“The tire is defective,” the old man explained patiently. “A moment of inattentiveness at the factory allowed it to slip by unnoticed. Because of this defect, the blowout will be so sudden and catastrophic, you will not have enough time to regain control of your vehicle.”

“What about my wife and children?” Greg asked, changing tack, getting into the swing of the conversation. “What will become of them?”

“Your life insurance will take care of their financial needs. Your wife, encouraged by your lawyer, will bring suit against the tire company and win a hefty settlement. Of course, she’ll mourn your untimely demise, even as she enjoys her extended, Tahitian vacation. She’ll meet someone, remarry, and enjoy a long and healthy life. She will never quite forget you though. Come now, Gregory, must you ask such obvious questions?”

Greg glanced at his watch again. It read five-twenty one. “So I’m to end up fish bait in nine minutes, am I? Tell me, old man. Will I suffer?” Greg tried to sound nonchalant. Somehow, he doubted that he succeeded. This crazy conversation had really gotten to him.

“Your head will hit the windshield, breaking your neck and killing you instantly.”

Greg studied the old man’s expressionless face. He could read nothing there. Could his mind be playing tricks on him? Could this old man, who called himself Father Death, really be sitting beside him? Just then, a thought struck him.

“Wait just a minute! What’s to stop me from simply pulling over and stopping the car?”

“Why don’t you try it?” came the emotionless reply.

Greg tried to move his foot off the accelerator and onto the brake pedal. It wouldn’t budge. His hands wouldn’t obey either, for he couldn’t change lanes. Nothing seemed to be holding him against his will; he simply had no will to move.

“You’ve taken control of my body!” he screamed.

“No, Gregory, I haven’t. Your body is acting as it *should*. Don’t you see? Isn’t it plain to you by now?”

Greg pondered the question. As if reading his thoughts, the old man continued. “I’m not speaking to the outer Gregory the world sees. You are his soul. Since the soul is a separate entity, it exists apart from the physical body. It isn’t your carnal body that perceives me at all. To it, the seat I occupy is empty.”

Greg, or rather his soul, looked at the wristwatch. It read five-twenty five. Five more minutes. A chill of premonition swept through him.

“So I crash, go into the river; then what? Tell me, Father Death. Where am I going?” As he asked, Greg cast his eyes upward.

“I can’t tell you that beforehand, son. I’m just a messenger who is to bring you from your life as a mortal to your everlasting home, wherever it may be. I don’t decide your destiny; I merely carry out its end.”

Greg’s soul felt fear now. Was his life as a mortal good enough? Would he go now to an eternal reward in Heaven? Or would he suffer endlessly in ... with a shudder, he broke away from the thought. The very thing he did his best to dismiss from his thoughts on a daily basis confronted him. It just didn’t seem fair. He tried to remember all the things he had ever learned about an afterlife, about reincarnation. Greg always believed in some sort of Supreme Being—or did he? He hadn’t been in church since he was a teenager. In college, his professors had seriously undermined his belief in the supernatural. Since college, all he had thought about was his career—getting ahead—providing for his family. He really loved his wife and his kids. Did that count for anything? He wasn’t such a bad person, really. He obeyed the law, paid his taxes, and got along with his fellow man. Was there a God? Perhaps the evolutionists were right and we evolved from some lower form of life. Then, when we died there would only be oblivion.

Then it came to him. Of course! This was nothing but a bad dream! In a few moments he would jar awake, the clock radio playing in his ear, some newscaster commenting on a traffic accident. His

mind would have built on what he had heard in his sleep, placing him in the picture. That's it! It was all just a vivid nightmare!

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The car speeding along a highway could be anywhere in the world. Its right front tire explodes and the imprisoned air inside rushes out in one convulsive spasm, leaving the tire torn and flaccid, mere tattered rubber still attached to the rim, which radiates sparks like some grisly fireworks display. The car's occupant takes one last, split-second glance at the world he is about to leave, just before the car smashes through the guardrail, weakened by years of exposure to the elements and highway department neglect. His head meets the windshield. There is a momentary, agonizing stab of pain—then blackness. The watch on his wrist shows that it is exactly five-thirty, p.m.

The car plunges into the waiting river. It floats for a minute or so, then sinks; a torrent of bubbles troubling the surface, as if to mark the watery grave of one Gregory Parlin, once a rising young executive, now a lifeless corpse, sinking in the river silt in a coffin of sheet metal.

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Hours later, a crane pulls a battered, late model automobile from the river, which parallels the course of a well-traveled highway. It drops the car heavily onto the pavement. An EMT from the rescue squad opens the driver's door and stands back to allow a torrent of trapped water to escape. A policeman joins him and together they remove a body from the front seat, place it gently in an open body bag on a waiting gurney and roll the gurney to the ambulance.

"Pronounce him, Craig," the policeman orders.

Craig places one hand on the body's neck and looks at his watch. "The victim is deceased. Time of retrieval, eight-fourteen p. m."

In the meantime, another policeman examines the car for clues as to the cause of the accident. One of them discovers the torn tire.

"Hey Bill! Look at this tire!" he calls to the other policeman. "I think this musta done it."

Bill walks over and squats down to examine the shredded tire. "Yeah, this did it all right. The driver must have lost control when it blew and went through the guardrail; this whole stretch of guardrail is rotten. Poor guy, he never knew what hit him."