



Real Women Write:

Sharing Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives

An Anthology of Fiction,
Nonfiction, and Poetry
by
The Women of Story Circle Network

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Story Circle Network

*The Organization for
Women With Stories to Tell*



17.4 Seconds

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It happened in a matter of seconds.

So many things happen in mere moments, both life-altering events and everyday occurrences, yet in our minds we believe they must take longer. A man proposes to a woman and she accepts. A baby enters the world, takes a breath, and lets out its first strong cry. A professional diver gracefully leaps from the cliffs of La Quebrada in Acapulco and lands in the sea below.

If someone had asked me, even an hour before the crash, "How long does it take for a car to skid on a patch of black ice, collide with an oncoming car, roll over and over and over into a ravine, and come to rest in a crumpled heap at an unnatural angle against a giant oak tree?" I would have confidently proclaimed, "A full minute, at least."

In fact, it was 17.4 seconds.

The police directed traffic, guiding the few cars and trucks on the road at that hour into a single lane. Emergency personnel—paramedics, firefighters, and wreckers—needed space for their large vehicles, a buffer to ensure everyone's safety, and room to work unimpeded.

No one asked me what had happened. I suppose it was evident.

The other car, the one I had hit, was nowhere in sight. It must be on the other side of the road. I heard more sirens approaching, the shrill sounds echoing in the frosty morning air. I knew I should go over, make sure the young family was being cared for, but I was mesmerized by the scene unfolding before me.

Firefighters in full gear scrambled around my car as they frantically calculated the best method of extraction. The passenger side had become lodged against the tree. The driver's-side door was too badly damaged to open. They were a well-choreographed group, these highly trained men and women. They had done this many times before. I wanted to enter the fray, assure them everything would be fine, but they had a job to do. Who was I to claim otherwise?

One of the First Responders used a hydraulic device with pinchers at the end to cut away the roof, snapping metal in two like it was kindling wood. The other firefighters huddled around maneuvering pieces of the car until the roof gave way. Two of them wrenched open the driver's side door, metal creaking and grinding as they stretched the hinges beyond capacity, practically pulling the door off the car. I cheered at their success.

The first firefighter on the scene, the tallest one with dark hair and light blue eyes, turned and shouted to the paramedics; his voice carried up the hill on the wild, cold wind. The paramedics scrambled down the embankment with a stretcher in tow, unable to roll it because of the snow blanketing the ground.

The temperature had dropped to 25 degrees during the night. I had left the house in a hurry, my coat and gloves never entering my thoughts. I should have been shivering as I stood in the snow, yet no one approached me to see if I was okay; no one offered a blanket.

Then, I remembered.

He returned to the kitchen after taking a private phone call in our bedroom.

"Again? Really?" I said, knowing his deception before he spoke.

His supervisor had called. He needed to go in to work.

"Please don't lie. Just tell me the truth for once," I begged.

I knew the signs but wanted him to confess his sins, to come clean about this latest tryst. I couldn't take it anymore. Why didn't I just leave? There was nothing keeping me here. No children. No close family. Just leave.

Openly sobbing, I ran from our house, grabbing my car keys, but neglecting my parka, gloves, and purse by the back door.

I was driving too fast, trying to escape the emotional pain that had surrounded me for the last five years. His latest affair was the tipping point of my sanity. The patches of black ice on the road were invisible in the pre-dawn hours.

Without a seatbelt, the initial impact threw me into the windshield. Then I bounced around inside the car like a rag doll as it rolled over and over. My body ended up sprawled across the passenger seat. One of the paramedics climbed into the car to lift me up. Taking care to avoid the jagged metal, they worked as a team to gently remove my body. My favorite blue sweater was covered in blood. My short auburn hair was matted and sticky.

Why hadn't I been wearing a seatbelt? I always wore my seatbelt. It was as though I was watching a movie in which I had been cast in the starring role without my consent.

The firefighters stood back, their faces betraying their desire to remain professional and detached, as the paramedics placed my body on the stretcher. They checked for a pulse, for breathing. They looked up and shook their heads.

It was Sunday. The road should have been clear of other cars. Why had that family been on the road, at that place, at that moment? It should have just been me. I did not mean to hurt that young couple or take their children from them. I would not be able to tell them how sorry I was to have altered their life plans, forcing them, as parents, into the dark void of loss.

My pain ended in 17.4 seconds. Theirs had just begun.

