



## **Ladykiller - "You Drive"**

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## You Drive

excerpted from *Ladykiller*

What could happen next besides gravity, besides the falling?

The windshield smashed. Glass shattered, grains of glass hung suspended in confused air. Seconds elongated. Their guts compressed like they were submerging in fluid, a cold miasma of uncertainty. The airbags inflated in great slamming puffs against their chests. They gulped the sudden rush of cold air. Life ripped open, as by a sharp metal hook, and suddenly all things became possible.

The seat belt, the very device that was supposed to save her, ripped at the bowl of her pelvis. She thought she heard his breath amidst all the crushing noise, or perhaps it was her own.

His brand-new truck buckled in all around them, so light for all its heaviness. Metal groaned. Inside the truck plastic twisted and snapped in a spray of snow and ice. The ends of her hair whipped around her mouth. Something hard and sharp struck the back of her head. The truck tumbled with their bodies inside, so slowly and easily that it felt like a cosmic joke. His arm slapped her body as the motion ground down to a shuddering stasis. This was the only sensation that hurt.

After an eternity of jangling motion the truck came to rest right side-up, nose-down at a hideous angle. The crumpled hood obscured her view of the slope in front of them. What had stopped their fall? They teetered for several long minutes until it seemed the teetering had always been so.

He heard the clicks and hissing of the ruptured engine. Snow powdered the air. He couldn't turn his head. He made a question of her name.

"I'm okay," she heard herself say as simply as if they were lying next to one another in bed.

Visuals gathered. The airbags deflated in their laps. The front end of the vehicle had compacted like the flimsy metal of a tin can. The dashboard pinioned their legs. She could no longer see their feet, and it made

her want to cry. Her face was wet. She touched her own cheek and found blood trickling through her hair from the back of her head. She turned her head to see the steering wheel rammed up against his chest.

She gasped.

"It doesn't hurt." He meant it. He felt etherized, drunk on the absence of pain.

She discovered she could move her arms without much struggle. She touched his parts. Cracked ribs? A punctured lung? She was no doctor. These were the crude diagnostics of an ape-wife, mere guesses at wounds unseen.

He couldn't stop thinking. He huddled away from his body inside the cozy caverns of the mind. In the pit of his belly sat a crystalline feeling, a feathering of cold.

A dull ache spread up from her knees. She shivered into the realization of cold. They lay pinned like fractured insects. The carpet of snow thickened around them without so much as a breath of wind. How long before a passing motorist took note of their lonely tire tracks above, the vanishing hollows in the snow? Small waves of panic cascaded through her body. How long would it take for their rescuers to come? Minutes or hours? They weren't built for this, their soft torsos weren't made to survive this kind of trauma. Was this how one died, without knowing it?

She kept touching him, disrupting the work of his thoughts. Blood screamed through his vessels. Red cells raced like fire trucks to put out his body's fires. But nothing hurt, nothing. His blood was a frenzy of hemoglobin. He had never felt so high.

He was a botanist, of sorts. In his basement he nurtured a plantation. His crops were fed by a complicated array of tubes that dripped perfect ratios of liquid nutrient. Thousands of lumens fed his thriving plants. Timers ran their circadian rhythms. He loved the sappy smell. He loved the constant subterranean summer. He liked to wander between the rows and hear the leaves rustle. The hum of things growing.

Time unfolded as a marathon of seconds. More reality crept in. She caught herself thinking about their blood and how to get it out in the laundry. Look at the mess they were in. She raged with impatience. How long would all of this take?

He laughed out loud. "If we blow up the whole province will get high." He could hear his ribs creak.

"We're not going to blow up," she said. That only happened in movies.

They feared and hated the police. Their prayers for the arrival of the authorities were new and ironic. They nudged each other from the temptations of unconsciousness. Are you awake? Don't fall asleep. They related the story lines of films they'd seen, faking the plot when they couldn't remember. When they ran out of movies, there were the domestic scenarios, the beauty of the life they could have. Someone would have to learn how to cook. They could fill his house with things and more things. She could make feasts and their friends would come by. She could learn how to sew and sell hats at the local fairs. Babies, jars with dried foods in them, explosions of wrapping paper at Christmas. No more lonesome pot pies, eaten off the arm of a chair. No more rides from strangers to the far fringes of destiny.

Out of distant universe came the blessed wail of sirens. They heard them arrive, the rescuers who tumbled down the bank with their headlamps and their radios and their rubber gloves like an army of curious aliens. Now the cops had come to make arrests, to peel them apart.

He asked, "Will you be my wife?"

"You're in shock," she said.

"How do you know?" he said.

She didn't know a single thing. They had gone over the falls like two people in a barrel—perfectly fused with the moment, completely conjoined with each other. Now they drifted in the spume and the mist of the aftermath. Every single second took them farther away. They should have been moaning in agony. They were damaged. They were amazing. Made of soft flesh and yet look how indestructible.

The rear wheels fishtailed here and there and she could see how it pleased him, the tautness, the veering towards and away from danger. His driving terrified her. It made her angry and brave. She twisted in her seat to face him. "Are you trying to kill us both?" she asked, wanting to push it all over from doing to done.

He jabbed at the stereo's volume button. The interior went quiet except for the engine, the purr of tires on snow.

She wiped a circle of fog off the window and stared out at the winding road. Her thoughts were rotten. She wouldn't say any more.

Around the broad sweep of a curve, the tires slipped a little underneath them. More, then a little too much.

She dug her elbow into the armrest, rising up and back against the seat. From the blur of whitened evergreens, it seemed they were sliding

sideways. She looked to him, to the strange orientation of his shoulders, and the sensation was confirmed.

The truck slid out like a secret. It glided obliquely, wider around the bend. He pawed at the wheel, hand over hand as the world outside slurred centrifugally. Of course he would correct this avalanche of motion, negotiate them back from danger to safety. When everything stopped, when their breath returned, she would ask, What if? Can you imagine? He was an expert. Nearly everything had happened to him before.

He knew better but braked anyway. The wheels locked. The tires floated over the ice and snow as if treadless. They careened. Sideways, backwards. He turned to her and said plainly, without any trace of panic, as if such events occurred every day of his life: "Hold on."

The rain rolled over them in a spattering torrent. The wipers could barely keep up. They climbed up and up into the next ridge of mountains. The temperature dropped. The road turned slushy with snow.

His truck clipped along through a nondescript channel of forest. In the back of his truck were many pounds of prime-grade, hydroponically cultivated marijuana of a strain he himself had derived and gardened to fruition. He had packed it lovingly in garbage bags and Rubbermaid bins. Now he couldn't wait to liquidate it. Now his nose played tricks on him. He could smell money everywhere. He drove hard. He drove to meet a guy named Maurice, who lived in the outer suburban flats of Vancouver. A guy who paid in U.S. cash, who sat far away from tables with a suicidal glint in his eyes.

He drove aggressively. He felt like pushing things to the brink and then bringing them back to safety. The stereo crunched out his music. As a passenger, his last girlfriend never complained. She never got mad. She indulged him in everything. Together they sped, they passed. His last girlfriend bored him to the verge of dementia.

"Could you pull over?" she asked him. "I think I need to pee."

He swerved onto the shoulder. She fell meekly out. In the side mirror he watched her squat in the margin between the shoulder and the ditch, and he thought about driving away.

Snowflakes stung the back of her neck and the fronts of her thighs. She wore a mere patch of skirt. She wondered about her own proclivities, always sexy over sensible.

She came back with snow in her hair. It melted before his eyes. "What would you do if I left you right here?" he asked.

She looked up and down the highway. Not a single car in sight. She stretched her sleeves down over her hands and let her chin tremble. With men, things went so predictably, cataclysmically wrong. She nudged herself into these endings, as if they were pre-written, and in a peculiar way it satisfied.

He looked out over the steering wheel at the white, wet road. "Get in," he growled.

Why did he bother? Crisis. Complaints. Misery. Maintenance. He had a problem. He ran into women like telephone poles for the pain, the intensity, the continual drama. He knew exactly why. They distracted him from a disease of too much quiet. The sad secrecy of life as a criminal. Which, he reminded himself, was exactly what he was.

She shrunk down in her seat and faced straight ahead. From the folds of her clothing she produced two metal balls and sat them atop the dashboard's smooth gutter. He pointed his eyes at the road. The balls clinked together and rolled apart with each movement of his hand on the wheel. They chimed and clacked, chimed and clacked. On the armrest between them he stretched fingers wide then balled them into a fist. Three of his knuckles cracked. He lowered his window and the cab filled with chilly wind. He hurled the metal orbs, first one, then the other, out into the open air. She watched their lazy arcs as they hurtled towards the ditch.

She drew her knees to her chest and tugged at the roots of her hair. She said, "I am sorry. What makes me do what I do?"

He was relatively clean-cut and relatively clean shaven. But look close. Check out the grime under his fingernails. Look at his unwashed hair. Everything about him was dirty, in constant need of laundering. Her dirt was on the inside. She'd like to make them clean with dreams. With lightheartedness. With love.

The truck climbed up over the freezing point. Everything went frigid and drastic and wintry white. The arms of the trees were clotted with snow. The world looked unreal, like the inside of a snow globe.

Clouds roiled and raced. There was no avoiding the bad weather. It was either coming or going, he couldn't tell.

He sat in his truck and waited for what seemed like an inappropriately long time. She strode back to the gas bar, with purpose, head down, on the balls of her bare feet, like a woman in imaginary stilettos. She

climbed back into the truck and her body parts arranged themselves into a sly and uncharacteristic quietude. She clicked the tongue of her seatbelt into place, and then he was truly suspicious.

A kid in a red shirt—knock-kneed, pear-shaped—stalked towards them along the same path she had taken. The loaf of fat above his waistband jiggled with every step. The furious pace was a result of something she had done or failed to do. He could tell. He looked at her accusingly. Next he turned the key in the ignition, and the engine purred up. The kid walked the strip of pavement and stopped with his hips aimed at the truck's grill. She kept her attention fixed on the boy, slid her fingers up to the ceiling and through the loop of the handhold.

The clerk approached her window and leaned a forearm against the glass. She looked at the hair and the whitened oblong of skin and thought of a mollusk stuck to the inside of fish tank. She watched the clerk's eyes dart all over the inside of the truck. They fell on the leather interior and the CDs strewn in the foot well and the stainless steel cup in its holder. The flat of her lap and her flaming cheek. Until she was tired of his gaze all over everything. Tired of his teenaged lust, shot through with contempt. Men found her sexy and freakish and low-life all at one time. Which she was, underneath it all, as well as on the surface.

The boy rapped on the glass with his knuckle. She buzzed her window down an inch and no more.

"What do you want?" she hissed. This, she knew, was the secret to lying. She made big, pre-emptive shows of indignation. She made others feel foolish for thinking their thoughts.

The clerk put his mouth to the space above the window. "You stole," he said. He was a lumbering, insecure hick who spoke with a gummy mouth. She was a woman with a keen sense of her own survival. She thought this proudly, and for a second she felt bad for the boy, who might later be whipped for her crimes.

The moment cascaded into a thousand constituent fragments. She shook her head and wagged her finger at the boy. She wondered how life had crept through her, how she crept through life and arrived into right now. The boy's arm fell away from the truck. She turned to her companion and wondered who he was and how she had come to know him. "Drive," she said.

He rammed the truck into gear. He let the clutch out, and the truck rolled. In the rearview the kid's shoulders hung in bewilderment. In the rearview the red shirt shrank and shrank.

He stomped on the gas, and they zoomed past particle-board houses and animals at the end of their chains. Next to him, she arranged herself cross-legged on the seat. She leaned forward towards the windshield and stared out at the road as his dog often did. Sadly, as if rueful about the pavement yet to pass under the tires. They left the town in their wake like they left all unsavoury experience. They tried to shove it in mental receptacles for events not worth remembering.

From her sleeves she produced the things she had stolen. They rested on each of her palms. She gazed at him expectantly, as if they were a gift.

The hairs stood up on the back of his neck. Blood chugged through his ears. He turned violent corners. The air smelled to him like metal. It charged him up, exposed his nerves, rendered him alive. "Do you have any idea?" he snarled. "Do you think about anything at all?"

There was a dead deer splayed across the pavement. He swerved to avoid the corpse.

"Oh," she gasped, covering her eyes.

Her contradictions astounded him, the hard and the soft. She was the kind of woman who carried spiders out to the grass and pretended elves lived in the cupboard. But she whacked his pet and dangled mice from the pantry by their tails. He thought about love and he thought about lust and how easily the two were confused.

She pulled over on a depressing strip of highway with a Petro-Can and a gift shop and a pub with a sign that was lettered in rope.

He opened his eyes, and they fell on her as if she were a stranger.

She shut the truck down and dangled his keys. "I'm done with driving," she said. "You just fall asleep."

He made a squiggle with his finger all around her face. "I wish you'd get rid of that shit."

She wore beads in her hair. Glass beads and dreads.

"It looks bad," he said. "It makes you look like a pot farmer's girlfriend."

"Am I not?" she asked.

He didn't reply.

He said sexy things and hurtful things, and the trouble was that she lived and died by what fell out of his mouth. She felt tears jet up out of her ducts, and she whipped herself out of the truck before they could overflow.

Her bare foot flashed. He saw the upturned edge of her skirt. She left him to pump the gas and pay for it. She hadn't had money since the first day they met.

She crossed the parking lot and took in the sad backwater tableau—the mobile homes and little kids on rollerblades right on the fringes of the highway. She tread gingerly through some dying grass towards the gift shop with its screen door and hanging flower baskets and its promise of feminine refuge.

It occurred to her to worry that he'd drive away without her. And if that happened she'd be left without shoes or a single cent on her person. She would have to sleep in a room above the tavern until she met some gum-chewing jerk with manure on his boots. Then she'd get married, become a Jehovah's Witness, squeeze out litters of children and by some trick of human adaptation learn to call it happiness. Who would save her from such unfortunate contingencies? She looked back at her man, pumping gas with his eyes hidden behind the reflective lenses of his sunglasses. She needed him more than he needed her, but she was working on ways to make that not quite so true.

She stepped into the store. The clerk was a teenaged boy with zits and hair gooped with gel. He slumped over a magazine with his face against his fist. His eyes travelled up and down her body, stopping at her forehead and again at her shoeless feet.

She cruised the aisles of geodes and wind chimes and wooden tulips. Her fingers skimmed a set of Chinese meditation balls, and she picked one up and held it to her ear. The buffed steel, the tumbling inner chimes. She studied her stretched, fish-eyed face on the surface of the ball. The bulbous reflection of the store behind her. The stupid useless wood, the trinkets all around.

She left the shelves and paused in front of the counter. The clerk lifted his cheek from his hand. She ran him clean through with her gaze. She tightened her eyes and kissed the air between them, but it couldn't stop him leering, nor thinking his thoughts. She banged the door open and flew from the store in a funk. A funky, tear-streaked whirl.

A highway patrol car came around the bend. It lurked towards them like a white shark. He fixed his eyes on the headlights. As the two vehicles neared each other he felt his own car sway towards the yellow line as if drawn by the gravity, the pull of self-destruction. He flexed his fingers back against the wheel. The two vehicles passed. In the rearview

the cop's tail lights lit up. His pulse leapt up in his throat. His face burned. Then the lights went out and the cruiser sailed around a fringe of trees, continuing on its vigilant way.

After that he said, "You drive. I'm tired."

They stopped to exchange seats. She got in behind the wheel and adjusted the mirrors to suit herself. She took her shoes off and threw them into the tight wedge of space behind the seats. She did bad, grinding things with the clutch, and this he tolerated in the name of a nap.

She drove like someone who had never owned a car. She veered messily around the fat parts of corners instead of hugging the insides. She drove with both hands on the wheel like a girl who followed the rules. He didn't trust her at all. So he closed his eyes. He folded his arms over his vital organs and pretended to fall asleep.

His body slumped. She looked at him in disgust.

But he owned a wonderful house, and she couldn't let herself forget it. It was a tumbledown shack half-wrapped in Tyvek. But inside, the floors were heated, tiled with slate. He lived like a spy, kept his wealth to himself. In the kitchen a stainless steel fridge contained beer and coffee, drinks he consumed in quantity at either end of the day. The biggest, flattest TV she'd ever seen. It sat in the living room like a time machine. You crossed the room in front of it and let it swallow you up.

The morning air had lost its chill. He pulled off at a rest stop. It was empty. Nevertheless he parked in a clump of trees far from the toilets and the sign-posted map of southern routes. He didn't need to look at any map. He knew exactly where he was.

He led her by the hand over a knoll landscaped with kinnick-kinnick. He was a botanist, a farmer, and his cargo was his life. Just carrying it around made him feel zingy and endangered. He left the truck unlocked. He felt like acting reckless just to see if the universe was with him.

She carried a rolled-up towel under an arm as if it were a picnic blanket. She threw her shoulders back like she had every right in the world. And there they were: about to spread out the towel and screw in the dappled grass barely out of sight of the highway. They knew one another medium-well, though not through time and vicissitudes.

They were experienced and did an acceptable job pleasing each other. They had easy, separate orgasms. His pants were bunched around his ankles. The back of her skirt was smeared with dandelion pollen. They laughed at the sweet stupidity of their whims and of their mutual need.

They swung their hands all the way back to the truck. Their hands came apart. "We should go to Cuba," she said over the gleaming hood.

"Sure," he said carefully, sliding behind his sunglasses. "Okay."

They climbed back into the truck. She folded her arms and turned away to the window. They had had sex. She felt owed. It was an old-fashioned way to think but it crept up on her anyway.

He turned the key.

"We are the most amazing lovers in the universe," she said.

"Yes," he said. "Indeed."

His valley was a narrow north-south furrow. The sun rose late and set early behind mountains. It burned hotly in the summer, when the hills grew thick with vegetation. But the mountains had been logged many years before, and in winter they still looked bereft.

He looked out the truck windows first at the larch trees and the mountainsides patched with clear-cuts. He was a soft-hearted farmer. He couldn't go anywhere without looking at the way plants grew, without thinking about the angle of the light. They were driving to meet a man named Maurice whom he visited each year, whose address was etched in his mind.

He ate malt balls. He shook them in his fist and threw them into his mouth one at a time. His jaw clenched and unclenched. The sun came out. He put on dark glasses. He felt the deep need to be alone, to crawl inside his brain. He was going to leave her in Vancouver, only she didn't know it yet. She had wacky moods. She didn't believe in reading the newspaper. She'd screw his best friend if he failed to keep her happy, and he wasn't sure he could stomach it.

He settled in for the long drive and prepared for his mood to worsen. He plucked the first of four joints from a Curiously Strong Altoids box on the dash. They drove. Up. They held hands. Over the pass. The air became lighter. The sky grew wide. They smelled dead skunk. They didn't talk at all.

His pot fetish tired her out. She wondered how long it would take him to smoke all four joints and then ask her to roll another. She gazed at the drooping telephone wires and considered just how far they stretched.

Just the sound of the flame, the crackling of cellulose and crystallized resin—it soothed him instantaneously. He skimmed his hand down her bare thigh and whistled. "I love you in that skirt."

And then she was changing her mind. She could be so in love at the drop of a hat, and nothing annoyed her more.

They left the house after omelets and bacon. They left the plates smeared with grease, the pots piled high with the handles sticking out of the sink. They closed the door on the mess they had made.

They got into his truck. Its slick paint looked like India ink. He slid a disc into the slot of his car stereo. The stereo nipped it smoothly from his fingers like the soft mouth of a digital bovine. It pleased him. He had been a poor farm boy once.

She sat next to him in her hemp skirt with a paper bag of apple rings on her lap. She felt virtuous and anachronistic and as close to a wife as she ever had.

Only he wasn't her type. For a start, he had a taste for synthetics. He liked music from cold urban plains. He wore expensive shirts made out of polypropylene as if he were an mountaineer or a professional athlete. He wasn't. He was a farmer with a soft belly, but he owned a wonderful house.

He felt wracked with the anxiety that he'd left something vital behind. He looked at his house and wondered if he had remembered to do everything. Had he rolled up the hose? Tightened the taps? He wondered if she'd locked the windows as he'd asked. His house stood empty, shut up like a fortress.

They backed down the winding gravel. She played with the idea that she would never return to his beautiful, isolated, enchanted place with the orchard and the unkempt rock gardens and the privacy of the tall grass. None of it was hers, though she thought perhaps one day it might be. She gazed at the roof as if they were embarking on a long and fantastic adventure. The terror was titillating. Life churned like a stomach. Everything turning over.

As they rolled away down the driveway his dog froze, mortally betrayed. Its tail swished between its flanks.

Love. And they weren't even young.

She grew up in Ontario. Her dad was a welder. Her mother cooked meat every single day. Her parents were alive with nothing left to do. They never quarreled, and they watched too much TV.

His house was the house he grew up in. His last name was Russian because his parents were Doukhobors. They had taught him how to garden and prune fruit trees. But now they were dead.

His town had eight corners and two stop lights. She busked in front of the liquor store. She couldn't quite play and she couldn't quite sing. But she wore a halter top that made him want to ruthlessly scratch an itch. It was no good, this feeling. He looked himself over and saw few things for a woman to like. He threw a red bill down on the purple fur that lined her guitar case.

She winked.

"Come over to my house," he said.

She glanced down at his money. "Later," she teased. "When I'm not so busy."

The house was clean and disused, like it was waiting for somebody. Or mourning someone who'd gone. He didn't cook. Either could she.

"Stay," he said. And she did.

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### **From the same author on Feedbacks**

Ladykiller - "Hush" (2005)

"Brian loves Patty in a quiet, sublime sort of a way, always has. He feels lucky, exempt from the marital cycles of jagged passion and boredom. But lately? He hears her shoes on the steps and his ass clenches. Since his accident, as he likes to think of it, or perhaps even before, there's been something new. "



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