

On Laurel Street

by [Brian Doyle](#) in the [August 5, 2015](#) issue



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One time years ago my wife and children and I were driving down a narrow dark road in my town. This is Laurel Street, which has a steep stretch with no lights, a stretch in which the road is pinched along a ledge between a perpendicular cliff and a precipitous bluff. A hundred times I warned our kids about that stretch, when they were biking and skateboarding and skittering free in our neighborhood; a thousand times I warned them about it again, when they began to drive the clan sedan; a dozen times I wrote to our civil servants, inquiring about the possibility of streetlights, or reflective medallions, or *anything* in that tunnel; but that steep shadowy stretch of Laurel Street remains as narrow and dark today as it was that spring night years ago.

As I remember, we were coming home from some burbling event at the elementary school, Field Day or a parent-teacher conference or graduation night, and as I remember, it was a russet spring evening, warm, the children happy and weary, jumbled like sweaty puppets in the back. Down the hill we drove, slowly, smiling at some joke, no one elbowing anyone for once, when suddenly there were high beams behind me and an idiot blaring his horn! and this just as I had entered the narrow dark chute on Laurel Street, in which a sensible driver slows down to a crawl and hugs the right side of the street, along the guardrail, just in case some reckless fool comes roaring up the chute from below, probably not realizing that the street narrows, to the point where two cars can pass each other, but only by the slimmest of margins, really and truly two or three inches, if even that!

But this guy behind me is blaring his incredibly shrill strident horn, and racing his engine, and now he is *flashing* his high beams at me, and I am rattled and angry and fearful, and trying not to curse out loud, and wincing from his high beams in my mirrors, and squinting into the velvet dark to see how far we have left in the chute before I can inch even *farther* over to let this jerk pass me, can he not see that *I have children in the car*, can he not wait another 30 seconds for us all to get out of the narrow dangerous chute?

And then, inconceivably, unbelievably, unthinkably, he guns his engine and passes us! In the chute! At about 80 miles an hour in a place where you should go ten miles an hour! And he is still leaning on his horn even as he passes us so narrowly I instinctively lean away and my shoulder touches my terrified wife's shoulder! And then he guns his car even faster and roars away at what I will later tell the police sure seemed like—no kidding—a hundred miles an hour! On a street with kids and dogs and bicyclists and old people out for their shuffling evening constitutionals while holding hands! And also speed bumps! I hope he hits that first speed bump and the entire chassis of his car falls off and he skids to a stop losing several layers of skin in the process!

I was so rattled that I stopped the car for a moment after we got out of the chute, and we all checked on each other, and we were all still frightened. We drove slowly home, a matter of two minutes, and then I called the police. No, sir, I had not seen the license number, and no, sir, I was not sure of the make of the car, but yes, sir, I was all too sure of the speed and behavior of the driver, whoever he was. Somehow I knew it was a guy; something about the rage of his horn, the savagery of the way he passed us, the violence of his impatience.

The next day we heard what had happened after he blew past us in the chute. He had driven at more than a hundred miles an hour directly into traffic coming the other way. He died instantly. Somehow, incredibly, the other drivers were not seriously injured. Speculation was that he was drunk, on drugs, terribly depressed. He was young. Most of all I remember that he was young. I do not remember his name.

For years what I remembered best was the powdery chalky bitter fear in my mouth as I pulled over after we came out of the chute. He could so easily have killed my wife and children. He could so easily have snuffed my children out of existence, in a heartbeat, in roaring flame and shrieking terror. I remembered my towering rage at

such incredible arrogance and recklessness, such epic mismanagement of the torpedoes we drive so thoughtlessly, so casually, as if we have forgotten they are ferocious weapons, which we *have* forgotten, which we never think about, except in moments like that, and I am no different from you, and we should both be ashamed that we are so casual about the awful weapons into which we strap ourselves so carelessly every day, thinking about everything other than the terrible weapons we are about to set into motion.

But this morning I find myself remembering that he was young, and addled, and suicidal, and dark, and probably lonely, and probably frightened. He was someone's boy. Probably people loved him and feared that he was lost and feared that no rope or hand or word could reach him anymore. Probably he got in his car just about the time we piled into ours, and we set out for home, and he set out to die. I will always be furious about that haunted moment in the narrow chute, I will always feel a quiver of fear when I remember how close we came to death, but now I also feel a shiver of something else for that poor boy. The idiot who came within inches of killing my children was a rattled child himself. A good dad would pray somehow for that child, if all children are our children, which of course they are; and so yet again I have to try to find mercy inside pain, which is, as we both know, the work of a lifetime.