

Did you happen to read about that four-car pile-up on the Woods Memorial Bridge a few weeks ago? Well, my daughter and I were in car number 3, which, as it turns out, is not the best slot in line.



Picture this scenario: It's almost 4:30 on a Tuesday afternoon – the cusp of rush hour – and we're heading home to Pigeon Point from a very pleasant after-school interlude at Dairy Queen on Lady's Island. The traffic is 4:30-ish, but flowing nicely, as we crest the top of the Woods Bridge, then begin our descent toward the Bay Street light. Said light has turned red, so the cars before us are gradually slowing, and I begin to follow suit. I'm feeling perfectly relaxed at this moment, listening to my daughter's backseat chatter, enjoying her truly delightful company, wondering, vaguely, if she isn't a tad too sarcastic for a six-year-old, but hardly concerned. Life is good...

Then... what? How do I describe it? "Sudden" is an understatement. "Shocking" doesn't cut it, either. Violent. Yes, violent. Thrusting forward, then back, then forward...hard...so hard... into...what? (Oh... airbag...right...) Loud. Shattering glass. Screams. Smoke. Pain. Silence.

Oh my God.

After a moment (second?) of pure disorientation, I manage to unstick my door (thank you God), run around back, and free Amelia, who is not hurt. At all. Thank you God. (And thank you Volvo.) I'm holding her tight, and my hand hurts - my whole arm, really – and she's crying and crying and crying... Mommy Mommy Mommy... I wanna go home I wanna go home I wanna go home...

I look at my car. The front is crumpled. The back is gnarled. The doors are hanging open - all sprung out - never to close again, I'm thinking. Behind me, an older man is emerging from his Ford Expedition, which looks much better than my Volvo. Ditto for the car in front of my Volvo, and the one in front of it. Everyone's milling around, checking their limbs, checking their cars, checking each other. *What happened? Does anyone know what happened? Is everybody okay? Is the little girl okay?*

Everybody's fairly okay. Thank you God.

I sit on the curb along the bridge, holding my child, who's shaking and shivering and clinging to me like she did when she was two on her first day of preschool. *It's okay, Amelia. We're okay. Daddy will come get us. Daddy's coming. I'm calling Daddy right now.*

Cell phone's dead. Of course. A fellow wreckee lends me hers.

I call Jeff, who's appropriately concerned, says he's on Ribaut Rd. and will be there as soon as possible. He's always calmly heroic at times like this. I feel soothed.

I also think I have a broken pinky.

I finally look beyond my mangled vehicle and my trembling little girl and my purple-sausage pinky and realize... there are four cars piled up on the Woods Memorial Bridge. At rush hour. *I am now one of those people who holds up traffic on the Woods Memorial Bridge at rush hour.* I am mortified. This is a good sign, I think. Things are getting back to normal.

And then the fire department's there, and the police, and the EMTs. One of the EMTs is my

neighbor, Mike. It's great to see a familiar face, even if he does concur that my pinky's probably broken. Everyone on the scene is very kind – if a little too official to suit my mood – but they keep asking me “what happened?” and *damned if I know*. All I can say is that one minute, the world made sense, and then suddenly, it didn't.

We find out later, from an eyewitness out walking on the bridge, that the kindly gentleman in the Expedition behind me had “failed to maintain proper speed,” thus slamming full-steam into me, which sent me flying forward, etc. etc. I never saw it coming, but I doubt he did either. “I just looked up, and there you were,” he'd said, when we first emerged from our cars, both bewildered and frightened. I assume he'd been watching the sailboats on the river, as I often do, on that lovely fall afternoon.

All the usual stuff ensues, none of it much fun. The dreary, jam-packed ER at Beaufort Memorial is never where you want to be, especially when you really need it. But, of course, you go – everyone makes you go – and sometimes you spend five hours there, only to be told that your pinky is not, in fact, broken. Cold comfort, at that point, but at least you can finally go home, put on your pj's, and curl up with your husband and child, who have never looked so beautiful.

And then there are insurance people to deal with, and a rental car, and your neck aches for days, and your pinky still ain't right. You're a nervous driver, now, always checking the rearview mirror, sweating a little when you drive onto the bridge, breathing a sigh when you're over it. The world seems a little less safe, a little less sunny. Two days after the wreck, your daughter begs to stay home from school (delayed reaction?), then sleeps on the sofa for eight hours straight. You can hardly take your eyes off her.

But your friends call, and even some folks you don't know that well, and everyone's glad you're okay. People care, and you didn't know how much, and it feels great. Even the insurance agents are helpful and fair. And then it's Thanksgiving in California, with your husband's family, whom you love; and you know you're the luckiest girl on the entire West Coast, and definitely the most thankful.

You get to zoom around gorgeous San Francisco, your husband at the wheel, and the traffic's hell, but he's a terrific driver, and you begin to relax and enjoy the energy of the city. Your nagging fear – it's been with you for over a week now – is starting to subside. You're getting a grip... things are going to be fine.

Two weeks after the wreck (has it really only been two weeks?), you're driving home from Bluffton in your brand new (okay, used) Volvo cross-country wagon, and you have a big fat car payment now that you didn't have before, but it's the best car you've ever driven. You smile at your daughter in the rearview mirror, tell her it feels like driving on air. “That would actually be impossible, Mom,” she replies, and her droll literalism warms your heart. She's back.

On the radio, James Taylor's singing “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.” It's your new favorite version of your favorite carol, having recently usurped that status from the Karen Carpenter rendition. Taylor has chosen to go with the original lyrics, written for the 1944 movie “Meet Me In St. Louis,” which are different in a few subtle (but significant) ways from the lyrics made popular by Carpenter and other artists. We all know that later version: “Through the years, we all will be together, if the fates allow... Hang a shining star upon the highest bow...” Taylor's lyrics, however, have a melancholy flavor, perfectly matched by his pensive baritone: “/n a year,
we all will be together, if the fates allow...
Until then, we'll have to muddle through

somehow.

”

It’s a poignant take on the holidays – on *life*, really – and it suits me. I know I can’t count on “the fates” for much of anything; I can’t count on “being together” with those I love indefinitely, “through the years.” (“In a year,” maybe. Hopefully.) I know that things won’t always be good, as they are in this sweet, sweet moment, but I also know that things never stay bad. They always get better. It’s the idea of “muddling through somehow” that really touches me, though, as I drive home in my new car beneath a splendid November sunset. Because that’s what we do, isn’t it?

We muddle through, somehow. It’s the

thing you

can

count on.

It’s a cliché, for sure, but I think it bears repeating: *Our lives are so fragile*. One minute, you’re cruising along, happy and carefree. The next minute – wham! – something hits you from behind, and your illusion of security, of permanence, is completely shattered. Not to mention your windshield. And maybe even your pinky.

But if you’re lucky, as I am, you rest upon the love of family, the generosity of friends, the kindness of strangers, and the faith that things will get better. And you muddle through.

And somehow, from the midst of all that “muddle,” come moments of astonishing clarity... radiant and fleeting as a late-autumn sunset.