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Limit

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Description

This piece, written in vignettes, utilizes intellectual appeal and disparate memories to analyze the human tendency to push limits through magnifying the story of a traffic accident.

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Nonfiction

LIMIT

KATIE MILLIGAN

*O God, our heavenly Father,
whose glory fills the whole creation,
and whose presence we find wherever we go:
Preserve those who travel [in particular ____];
surround them with your loving care;
protect them from every danger;
and bring them in safety to their journey's end;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

—Thomas Cranmer's
Book of Common Prayer, 1549

20 mph—Or, ADRENALINE

limit [lim-it] /noun/: the final, utmost, or furthest point as to extent, amount, continuance, procedure, etc; enclosed within boundaries.

derived from early 15th-century Old French limite and the Latinate limitem.

I have to slide the seat of my dad's truck all the way forward to be able to reach the pedals. We're in the gravel parking lot across the street from David's Greenhouse on our road, probably only a mile away from our house. My fingers quake slightly as I grip the steering wheel, too thick to hold comfortably, but the bumpy stitching of the leather giving purchase to my sweaty hands. I've never driven before.

Adrenaline production begins in the adrenal glands, which nestle above the kidneys. Its primary purpose is to prepare my body for the fight-or-flight response to an external threat. It releases the hormone epinephrine throughout my brain, ultra-dilates my pupils (to let more light through), quickens blood flow to my muscles (which may cause shaking limbs), speeds the heart. It acts like a strange drug-in-reverse: I feel less pain, I have more strength, I think more clearly. Addictive.

From the passenger seat, my dad coaches me patiently, almost giddily as he watches his first kid in a driver's seat for the first time. I'm more nervous than he is; isn't it supposed to be the other way around? His confidence in me worries me instead of encouraging me.

Three primary causes of adrenaline: excitement, stress, a threat. Activities that can trigger an adrenaline rush: An interview. A nightmare. Roller coasters. Cliff-jumping.

More causes: Witnessing a near-accident. Getting mugged. Fire alarms. Waking up to 7 missed calls from your mother, 11 from your best friend, and 18 from your boyfriend. The tingling drop of your stomach as you call back, squinting in the oblivious sunshine as words like "accident" and "hospital" and "gone" enter your eardrum but fail to process through your brain.

A few more: Driving fast. Consuming alcohol.

And suddenly I'm on the road. I shakily navigate to the right side of the yellow line, but I feel like I'm about to dive right into the ditch. Dad cheers. I edge forward.

"You're doing it!" he yells. "How does it feel?"

It feels great. Edgy. Grown-up. I'm going 20 miles per hour, but it feels like 90.

Ways to counteract an adrenaline rush, to calm down: breathe into a paper bag. Do yoga. Get fresh air. Picture a single image: my dog shaking herself dry after a bath. Choose and repeat a single word to distract your brain from the buzz: serendipity. Serendipity. Serendipity.

35 mph—Or, TYPES OF ROADS

There are three basic types of roads: arterial, collector, and local.

Arterial. These are the roads with the highest speed limits. They have the fewest access points, only through entrance and exit ramps. They feature dozens of varieties of interchanges: full diamond, diamond with slip ramps, full cloverleaf, partial clover, parclo or four-quad, trumpet, directional. They spread over the map like blue veins. Arterial. A slow bleed at a disorienting speed.

One February morning, I'm driving my brother to school. The snow from the night before coats the road in a deadly diamond-bright quilt, spotted with sheets of black ice and tire tracks

of cars that have ventured before me. It's early, maybe 7:15, and the sky is a watery rose color as the sun begins to blush behind the clouds. I keep my speedometer around 35 because of the conditions.

Collector roads are middle-of-the-road, no pun intended. These are county roads, whether country or city, balanced speed limits of 45-55 with more access points. More intersections, more travelers running perpendicular to each other. More chance for collision. Where greed flourishes—doesn't everyone do 5 over the posted limit? Collector. Taking more than you need.

All it takes is a second of my distraction—the sky is the exact color of my grandmother's rouge, and the ice makes the trees look like crystal chandeliers—and my eyes snap back into focus to find my wheels resisting my brakes, skidding through the snow banks on the road, floating serenely past a stop sign and out onto a busy highway.

Local roads have the slowest speed limits because of blinking stop lights, roundabouts, Ped Xing, Children At Play, backing out of the

driveway. You have to cruise so that you can window-shop from the car, so you can read the diner's Tuesday special while you wait at the four-way stop, so you can ease over to the other side of the road to avoid bikers. Local. Speed bumps and police cars sitting at corners. Leisurely, somehow the most dangerous. I think I read somewhere once that most accidents occur under 30 miles an hour, or in parking lots. But maybe not.

My arm flails across my brother's chest, and I gasp. The rouge sky is now searing and the chandelier-trees now menacing. And something slows my wheels and we stop just short of the line of traffic.

The miles around my home are filled with winding country roads with the universal speed limit of 55. My speedometer leaps up a little higher the older I get, the more comfortable and familiar I am with the roads. If I'm late for school or practice, I give myself extra grace to reach into the sixties. Especially on long, straight roads, like 235 and 36, I glance down to find my needle edging closer to 70 than it should. I like the rush of looking down at the berm and seeing the white line, the weeds growing

through pavement, and the asphalt boiling down to a smooth shade of grey. When you get to a certain speed, details like color and texture disappear.

I wonder if, on that night, he had time to throw his arm across her chest. I wonder if he saw the truck's headlights approaching too fast in his rearview mirror. I wonder what song was playing on the radio, if the radio stopped after they were hit. I wonder if he wishes it had been him in the passenger seat so that she could have survived. I think if, instead of Gabe and Sara, it had been me and my brother, I would spend every night on my knees, begging to switch places, pleading for a chance to do just one miniscule thing differently.

Often, driving these roads without seeing many other cars and the ones I do see going faster than me, I become desensitized. Maybe that's why I was surprised when I got pulled over. I was in a hurry, going the speed of traffic. The speed of the sun setting on the horizon, in sync with the bass of the radio. But ever since then, I'm wary. I ride the brakes. I take curves extra slow. My speedometer needle behaves itself.

I follow the slow-fast bleed of the arteries, negotiating the limits. Daring someone to stop me. But I'm less reckless when my passenger seat is occupied.

45 mph—Or, THE HUMAN DESIRE FOR RISK

"Can you at least go the speed limit?" My brother wiggles his legs impatiently. "I'm hungry."

My blood pressure increases, but my foot's pressure on the gas pedal does not. I tighten my hands on the steering wheel and watch the grey sky melt into twilight, blurred by the rush of red tail lights.

"I can't wait to get my permit. Mom said she would schedule an appointment for me next week. I've been scoring pretty well on those online practice tests," he continues, fiddling with his lanyard like he's a driver already.

I don't respond. All I can see is purple sky and Sara's sleeping face and no stars.

In the brain, the nucleus accumbens is the center for risk: it decides how attracted we are to taking risks, releases dopamine, and regulates the "reward and pleasure" phenomena. Dopamine,

the “feel-good and risk-taking” chemical of the brain, is responsible for happiness, satisfaction, and the natural adrenaline-esque high. Isn’t it funny that such fundamental human emotions can be traced back to chemical activity?

A Mazda SUV zooms around me.

“C’mon, now you’re getting passed. It’s 55 through here, and you’re only going 45,” he whines and reaching across me for the steering wheel.

I snap. I scream. *Do you even understand what just happened? She didn’t do anything wrong, and now she’s gone. Just like that. It’s dangerous. You shouldn’t be so excited. What do you think I would do if something like that happened to you? I can’t trust anyone.*

I’ve pulled off onto the shoulder. Some animalistic emotion sends quivers down my spine. The funeral was today. I can still feel the red-velvet pews beneath me, see the long stems of orchids by the casket, hear the annoyingly serene piano music and feel the soggy tissue clenched in my hand.

He is silent for a moment. Then, with a quiet resolve, “You can’t live like that. In fear. You have to trust.”

“But risks must be taken because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing...the person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing, is nothing...Only a person who risks is free.” So said author of “inspirational maxims” William Arthur Ward. I do not agree. Or do I?

I wish he’d stay 15-and-a-half forever. My eyes are too puffy; I can feel my heartbeat in my eyelids. I feel like there are rubber bands wrapped around my head.

I take risks sometimes. I buy a new shirt without trying it on first. I try the clam chowder even though I might not like it. I wait to turn in an assignment until twenty minutes before it’s due. But I don’t think I want to take such a risk with my brother.

limit : a restriction on the size or amount of something permissible or possible. example = The law limits my brother from being a licensed driver until he reaches age 16.

55 mph—Or, PENNIES

On impact, her glasses flew out of the car and landed on the road. They didn't break. The blue and white ambulance lights bounced off the lenses like sparks off a welder's tool. No one stepped on them. They just shone.

Keara said she heard it was their first kiss that night, right before the accident. Andrew heard that it happened at 11:00 on 235 by Kizer Lake, just past the fishing docks. Jenny said the other car was pushing 90, 100. Logan said he heard the impact from his house a street over, that it sounded like an explosion.

Molly said she heard that he sat in the car with her for minutes, full minutes, waiting for help to arrive. Dillon said he called his mom saying, "I killed her, I killed her." Andy said he heard that their car was in the middle of a left-hand turn, that she hit the cool glass of the window and was gone immediately, didn't feel any pain. Carafa said she was wearing a seatbelt, that he was going the speed limit, constant at 55, that it wasn't her fault or his fault. It was the alcoholic fire coursing through the veins of the other driver.

People began finding pennies the night that it happened. Eric said there was one on the road next to her glasses. Olivia found one on the sidewalk outside the school. Kaitlin found one in her laundry basket, Mark found one in his jacket pocket, Carly and Hailley both found one in their volleyball shoes. Three or four congregated by her locker at the high school. Pennies appeared in car cup-holders, backpacks, bleachers, mugs. I found one on my desk in my dorm room.

Pennies have been important more than once in history. During World War II, when the US needed copper for weapons, pennies were made out of zinc-coated steel. Right now, there is a penny on Mars for the rover Curiosity to take photos of over time, to see how the elements affect the metal and test the high-resolution camera quality.

Beyond the typical luck of happening upon a coin on the street, finding a penny has taken on a specific spiritual meaning. Popular folktale believes that if you begin finding pennies, it's a sign that a departed loved one is trying to communicate with you. So maybe Sara isn't the

only angel who scatters pennies. Or maybe it's all ridiculous. I tend to be a little cynical when it comes to otherworldly phenomena.

Seigniorage is a beautiful French word that denotes the disparity between the production cost of a coin and the coin's actual value. It also signifies something claimed by a sovereign or superior as their prerogative, right, or due. Ironically enough, pennies (the smallest coin-value) cost more to produce than its face value: each 1-cent piece costs the government 1.7 cents to mint.

Six months later, at the trial, the other driver was found guilty of one count of vehicular homicide and another of vehicular assault. The judge took into consideration that his blood alcohol concentration was almost three times the legal limit, that he violated his parole by drinking again within weeks of the accident (something I will never understand). He got 10 years in prison, 3 years of community service upon release, and his license suspended for life. He will be punished for only about 60% of the life that he took (is that enough?). Sometimes, the intoxication isn't worth the cost.

But all I can see is her glasses sitting on the road, in perfect condition, a constellation in the midst of a galaxy of scattered window-glass and copper coins. Maybe God just decided to claim her as his seigniorage.

65 mph—Or, RESPONSIBILITY

The speed limit on OH Interstate 70 as you pass Huber Heights goes down from 70 to 65 quicker than many people notice. State troopers, their silver bullets with blue lights, Dodge chargers that look like beetles with all their attachments (license-plate readers on the back dash and laser speedometers and coiled radio cords, caged back windows and antennae and boxy lights on top). Each time I pass by the Huber Heights exits for 201 and 202, I slow to obey.

That's my father's city. He speeds around in one of those black beetles, tuning into the static dispatch on his radio, running plates on his car computer and accelerating to get through every yellow light. Each time he knows I'm driving by, he merges onto the interstate to give a quick wave, a light flash, a siren-wail. He says he does it just to wish me good morning before work, but really, I think he just hates to think

of his daughter as just one face whizzing by, driving too fast, one soul in a car-cubicle in a highway of many, many others.

Sara's mother teaches in the health sciences department at the high school, so when we lost Sara, we lost half a teacher, too. At the viewing, which packed out the gymnasium, the mother was strong, weepy but grounded. But when I got to the front of the line and hugged her father, I heard the empty echo of my whispered apology. He was silent, numb, saying nothing in return. There is something qualitatively different between a father losing a daughter and a mother losing a daughter; he should have protected her. Kept her safe somehow.

Synonyms for "limit" = Curb. Restrict. Retain. Control. Demarcate. Govern. Bridle. Inhibit.

Though at first I was hesitant to drive, timid, I quickly warmed up to the challenge. But as I got more comfortable, my father got more uneasy. I had to download an app to my phone that would give him access to my location at all times, my top speed and travel time. He gave me a curfew until I was too old for one; then, he

just silently waited up in his La-Z-Boy recliner to see the slice of my headlights pulling in the driveway, my shadowy form easing the door shut behind me. Even now, when I don't live at home, he lies awake at night, watching the little bubble that signifies my location until it comes to rest at my apartment. Then he texts me: "Goodnight... xoxoxo."

"I have seen too much," my father tells me. And I know that he has. I see horrors lingering in his tired eyes, scenes too graphic for me to imagine etched in the wrinkles around his lashes and the bloodshot veins in his scleras. When I think of those eyes, I instinctively slow down.

70 mph—Or, ALCOHOL

My best friend can drive with her knees. She often drives with no hands at all, holding her phone in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. Taking any kind of road trip with her is something like watching an acrobat perform at the circus: at any given time, she'll have her left foot tucked under her or resting on the dashboard, or her hands in the air to dance, or bid me to take the wheel as she reaches for the aux cord in the glove compartment.

Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to drive drunk. It must feel something like a virtual world, like you're encapsulated in a video game you're not quite sure how to play. As the alcohol takes effect and your cognitive processes slow, as your vision blurs and your reaction time feels weighted and you're tempted just to drift into sleep as you lose concentration—you think it's okay to be a daredevil, to ram into other cars. They're just simulations, right? The screen will say game over—then you'll start again with new lives to burn.

I wasn't as close to Sara as Molly was. We played volleyball together, but that was the extent of our relationship. Not Molly and Sara. They went to Chipotle, baked cheesecake, took long drives to country music marathons. When we heard of the accident, my first thought was of Molly.

No, that's not true. My first thought was guilty: guilty of so many things. Because I was so much closer to Gabe and I felt a wave of relief hearing that he would be okay, even as my heart sunk to hear that Sara wouldn't. Because I didn't give enough to Sara when I had the chance, even though I knew she looked up to me. Because I

didn't feel like I knew her well enough to have any right to grieve. Because I don't know if she knew that I really did love her.

Molly's hand grips mine through the entire line at the viewing. As we walk up to the casket together, when we get close enough to see her stick-straight brunette hair, her glasses resting delicately across her upturned nose, Molly collapses against me and buries her face in my neck. I can't look away from Sara. There is guilt, but a strange calm, a muddied sense of consciousness, a faint awareness that I can't let Molly fall.

Once, during a late night trip to McDonald's, Molly barreled right through a stop sign at probably 70 miles per hour. I didn't see it coming, but when a flash of red hurtled past us and she flung her arm across my chest in a good-intentioned but ill-executed attempt to protect me, a high-pitched buzzing filled my ears. It was an honest mistake. Country roads, in the dark, are deceptive: elbows of hills harbor secrets and hidden turns. No other cars were coming, luckily. We tried in vain to laugh about it, but for a few minutes after we just sat in silence, stunned, thankful.

Alcohol is a depressant. It slows down your brain's activity, and if you're over-dependent on it, your brain can actually decrease in size, the grey matter contracting and shrinking. You become, in effect, less intellectual. Less creative. Less human.

But maybe, slowing down isn't always a bad thing. Maybe it makes you realize things before it becomes too late.

For nearly two months after the accident, every morning, Molly texts me: "Have a great day, I love you."

100+ mph—Or, THE INFINITE

lim·it /verb/: to restrict by, to confine or keep within.

20th-century colloquial meaning: the very extreme, the greatest degree imaginable.

Many factors go into deciding the speed limit for a particular stretch of road: the density of traffic, the height of hills, the arch of curves. Experts cannot deny the correlation between speed and crash severity, since severity increases geometrically as speed increases. But

controversy surrounds whether speed affects the likelihood of a crash occurring. To me, it seems intuitive.

But there are the wild cards: road conditions, weather environment. Vehicle malfunctions. Driver behavior and age. The seductive nature of alcohol. The human tendency to risk.

I have never driven this fast, into the triple-digits. Part of me hopes never to experience it, but the small slice of my chemical makeup that craves adrenaline feels a thrill at the idea of traveling at the speed of light, everything a blur outside tinted windows, feeling the car rumbling beneath you like an incensed beast of wires and gauges and engine. I'm sure that if you drive high on the influence of some substance, this adrenaline multiplies exponentially and colors take on a new lucidity and flying feels more possible, even likely.

Antonyms for "limit" = Increase. Allow. Assist. Encourage. Release. Liberate.

But then I remember Sara's small, serene face, 16 years old, no trace of a smile. Hauntingly pale. Nestled into the casket like she was just taking

a nap. When I think of her, I know that no car was meant to be driven quite so fast, no human being meant to reach the speed of the gods.

limit [in mathematics] = a point or value that a sequence, function, or sum of a series can be made to approach progressively, until it is as close to the point or value as desired.

Maybe the best way to protect my brother, to ease my dad's fears, to hold tightly to Molly is to stay within the limits. To respect them and not push them. To be content.

So why do I continue to press against these limits, to resent them, to try to find ways to manipulate them?

I think it's because I'm human. I want to climb closer, closer, closer to that unknowable, unreachable place of pure speed, unadulterated adrenaline, where I feel like I'm underwater, dry-mouthed, clammy palms, euphoric. Transcendent. Immortal.

The Spanish poet and essayist Jorge Luis Borges writes about "the great Whoever-It-Is that sets a term, a secret and inviolable end to every shadow, every dream, and every form,

that ravel life and knits it up again." Maybe that great Whoever knew that not all risks were meant to be taken, but still understood that we need to feel infinite, so He carefully wove for us a web of arterial interstates with cloverleaf interchanges, sprinkled with reflective signs that wobble in the wind, so that we can try to fly. But He will always have to take his seigniorage, regardless of how immense the cost, and I think sometimes He does it with tears in His eyes, like a father who feels like He's failed His daughter.

That is why the limit still exists, and always will.