

The Curve

Residents along the dirt road scurried out of its path when the monstrous vehicle roared down the lane, raising clouds of dust or hurling clods of rain-soaked earth. From habit, the truck turned into the drive of the largest house on the block. A middle-aged man emerged from the driver's side.

Across the street from the man's Victorian-style mansion, a new resident of a flagstone house, a blonde with a ponytail, knelt in her parking strip planting a tree. The man strode across the street, and without introduction said, "The cottonwoods you're planting will be a pain later when they start shedding all over the neighborhood."

The blond with the ponytail ignored the man and continued planting her cottonwood tree. He was miffed. He stalked away, thinking, *"I'll have to find a way to put that little lady in her place."*

A few days later, the woman with the ponytail drove home a new, silver sedan with a unique feature in its rear axle. She could drive at an unusually high speed around a curved embankment such as the one that led from their street onto the roadway into town.

When the man noticed the woman taking the curve, he bought a stopwatch. The same day, stopwatch in hand, he approached the curve in his SUV. His pulse heightened as he clicked the stem setting the watch in motion. The needle swept around the face of the watch as he completed the curve. Then he snapped the stem to check his time. He attempted to improve his time each trip around the corner, if only by a fraction of a second.

The points he chose for timing himself were so obvious he could also time her car, her new car, as she took the same curve. Her time was not even close to his.

One day the blond with the ponytail was having coffee with the neighbor who lived at the corner where the street curved. As the SUV drove past, she observed the driver's left hand in the air, holding something—what, she wasn't sure. When he rounded the curve, his hand pumped.

She said to her neighbor, "I believe our neighbor is timing himself. Could he be jealous at how fast my car takes the corner?" *What a putz*, she thought. *First, he tries to tell me what tree to plant. Now, he wants to race. Well, if that's what he wants, bring it on. He can be number one, but only if he earns it.*

On her way into town later, she rounded the curve at a daring, even reckless speed. Without looking, without seeing the man, she knew he was timing her. Later in the day, she stared as his vehicle took the curve as if it had suddenly become his enemy.

The woman began having coffee with her neighbor each morning to observe his expression. When she had succeeded in besting him, he looked tortured. But once he had trumped her, even slightly, he smirked like a bully who had taken over a playground. His smugness provoked her to go even faster the next time, forcing him back into his melancholy.

She studied the curve like a professional racecar driver, practicing the exact moment when to hug the inside and when to accelerate. A few days later, seeing him in his driveway, she gunned her motor. In her rearview mirror, she saw him reach into his pocket. The watch was surely coming out. Her engine growled as she backed out, moving quickly to high gear, rushing headlong toward the turn.

Nearing the corner, she jammed the accelerator to the floor. Her car dived for the inside of the curve, caroming into the outer edge. Her tires gripped the road like tigers' claws. Euphoria swept over her as she straightened out on the opposite side. In a few minutes, she returned, stopped in her driveway, and killed her motor.

Standing in her kitchen, she heard a roar from across the street. He burned rubber as he zoomed toward the curve.

As he shot past, she thought, *I'll give it to him. He's got the guts to take it at that speed.*

The second she saw him enter the curve, she gasped. His front wheels leaped over the top of the arch. His SUV shot into the air like a plane taking off. It soared over the embankment, and floated for a second like an iron blimp, and landed with a thud—right side up in an open field.

For an instant, she was concerned he might have hurt himself. She thought about getting in her car and driving to the corner to check on him. Then she heard his wheels zinging, trying to get traction. When she saw his vehicle over the berm, she retreated to the inner sanctum of her house to watch from her window.

He turned slowly into his driveway, got out of his car, and placed an object under the rear tire. Then he got back into his car, closed the door, and carefully and deliberately backed over his stopwatch.