

Eric Seiley

The B Side

Nov 2, 2025

3324 Words

All Quiet on Route No.9

Tom Rhodes didn't plan to stop that night. He'd been awake nearly thirty-eight hours working back to back to back shifts at the garage and needed some serious sleep. Not to mention it was now past midnight and the storm howling down Route 9 was leaving ribbons of black ice hard to detect in the dark. But kindness was a muscle memory Tom refused to ignore lest he end up like his old man – selfish and unloved with no one to blame but himself. So when he saw the BMW sedan barely off the road, precariously stopped on the dirt shoulder, hazard lights blinking in pulses, he pulled over.

Please don't be some entitled jerk, Tom thought, I had enough of those kind out in California.

Instead, Tom could see the driver was a woman nervously gripping the wheel while a little girl sitting next to her was holding herself tightly and rocking. So he put on his most sincere grin and walked up.

"You guys okay? Need some help?" Tom asked knocking gently on the window.

The woman cracked the door a little. "We lost power and now the heat's gone. And my daughter's freezing. We're trying to get home."

"I'm Tom," he smiled. "I happen to be a mechanic. So if you pop the hood for me, I'll take a look and see if I can help. Lucky I was passing by in this storm. Almost no one uses this road anymore since they put in the highway."

The woman blinked. "I'm Elise. This is my daughter, Mara. But I don't know how to open the hood. Sorry."

"No problem." Tom opened her door a little and reached in to hit the latch. Then went to the front of the car and popped the hood. Where he discovered the timing belt had snapped. "Your timing belt is fried. Give me a sec and I'll grab one from my truck and replace it." When he had, Tom dropped the hood and called over the blasting wind, "Try it now."

The engine coughed, then hummed to life.

"Oh, thank the Lord. You really saved us," Elise breathed.

"Glad it worked out. You should be good to go now. Merry Christmas. Drive home safe," Tom said. "Storm's bad tonight."

"Thank you," Elise replied, "Merry Christmas to you too. But, we were never meant to make it home tonight."

"What?"

Either Elise either didn't hear or chose not to respond. She just closed her door and drove off. Leaving Tom confused. *I probably misheard her is all*, he thought, *with all this wind and snow and all*. So, he walked back to his own truck, letting her comment drift off with the wind.

Only he was still thinking about what she said on his drive home. *She probably said, 'We're heading straight home' or something like that*, he thought. Only she hadn't. And her

comment had properly spooked him because it somehow held the ring of truth. Though he couldn't say why.

When Tom reached home, he had to park on the street because there were three additional cars in the driveway covered in snow. Which was unusual. And walking up to the front door, he noticed the porch light was burning bright and yellow in the darkness. *Billy must've finally changed out the burnt bulb*, he thought. But when Tom noticed the porch had patio furniture instead of the cans of stacked motor oil, tool boxes and assorted car parts normally stored there, he thought, *Did Billy have a manic attack and clean the front porch? That wouldn't be like him. What is going on?*

Tom put his key into the lock, which slid in and turned easily. So easily, he didn't have to jimmy it in the lock. *Did Billy oil the lock too?*

"Billy?" Tom called stepping into the living room. "You here?" His older brother was usually up late helping their elderly father, who lived in a small room off the kitchen, get to bed. Dementia had slowed him considerably and, for some reason, required him to go pee at least three or four times each night before he was able to settle down for sleep. And since his Dad refused to wear the adult briefs they bought him, Billy had the unenviable task of taking their father to and from the bathroom during the times Tom worked extended shifts at the garage.

"Who's there?" A man asked stepping out from the kitchen, wiping his hands on a dish towel. "Can I help you, son?" when he saw Tom standing by the front door confused.

Tom did feel confused. The living room was clean, with new furniture, and nicely decorated for Christmas, including a big fir in the corner with a star on top. The man greeting him was clean too and looked exactly like his father—same face, same crooked smile—but much younger. Now middle aged and nowhere close to the senile seventy year old he knew. "Umm, Dad... it's me."

"I'm sorry, but I don't know you. I think you have the wrong house."

Tom froze. "Wrong—"

"I've got it, Dad," Billy said quickly walking into the room. "He's, umm, a friend from school."

"A little long in the tooth to be in college. What are you thirty-five?" Tom's father asked him.

"Billy's younger than he looks, Pop. But yeah, he's a bit older. He just started back to school so he could finish off his degree after dropping out when he was younger."

"Ahh. Well good for you, son. Never too late and all."

Tom should've been offended. But he was too busy looking back and forth between his father, who looked too young, and his older brother, who looked even younger. Like he was barely out of his teen years and not the forty year old brother he'd said goodbye to two days earlier.

"I got this, Dad," Billy continued. "Go on up to bed and I'll help my friend out. He just stopped by to pick up a few study notes for class and will be gone shortly."

A woman from the top of the stairs came out onto the upstairs landing. Tom recognized her. It was Elise. The woman he'd just helped on Route 9 not even an hour earlier.

What is going on? Tom thought. *This is some truly bizarre Twilight Zone shit.*

"It's okay, Mom. I've got this," Billy called up. "You guys go to bed. I'm gonna take my friend home." Billy turned, taking Tom by the arm, and pulled him out the door.

Tom let himself be led, stumbling onto the porch while hearing their father call after, "Stay warm, son. It's freezing out."

The door shut. The lock clicked. The porch light went out.

“Don’t say anything yet,” Billy whispered. “I’ll explain everything shortly. Let’s drive over to Minnie’s 24-hour Diner first and get some coffee.”

On the ride over, Tom looked around at the quiet streets and darkened houses.

Rahway, New Jersey was still the old town he knew for sure. Founded in the 1850’s by British, Irish and German settlers and pretty much the same in architecture and layout. But there were a few subtle changes here and there. Many of the houses were decorated for the holidays. And there weren’t any abandoned cars lining the streets or homeless men sitting around metal barrels spewing fire along the downtown corridor. Tom had some serious déjà vu, fighting to understand why the familiar felt so strange.

“Billy,” Tom asked once they’d settled into a booth at Minnie’s. “What’s going on!? How are you younger? And who is that woman, Elise? I just saw her an hour ago stranded on route 9 with her daughter. I even stopped to help her out.”

“All I can say is,” Billy replied, “some kind of strange cosmic karma vibe thing is happening. I put Dad to bed a couple hours ago and was sitting in the kitchen with Natalya when everything changed. I saw you vanish from all the pictures on the fridge. And the house furniture changed. And instead of being in his room, Dad called down from upstairs asking if Mom and Mara had returned from midnight mass yet cause they were overdue. Natalya noticed I looked younger too all of sudden, but she hadn’t changed. Then I realized I had two sets of memories. One with you and me where we were bachelors taking care of Dad with his dementia and all. And the other without you where Mom was still alive and I grew up with an entirely different family. Then Mom and Mara came home and I nearly flipped out.”

“What?” I asked. “Mom was there? Our mom, Sandy, who died ten years ago? I only saw that woman, Elise.”

"No, not Sandy. Sandy was actually just your mom. Remember? My biological mother was Elise. She died in a car accident when I was barely five. After her car broke down on the side of the road one night and a truck came along and crashed into it killing her and my little sister, Mara. Don't you remember? Dad used to tell us the story every year on their anniversary when he got drunk. Dad only met your mom, Sandy, after the funeral when she came to comfort him. Then they got married and your mom, Sandy, got pregnant with you a year after that."

"I guess I forgot all that."

"Natalya said she'd read about this kind of thing before in one of her necromancer books. She said we were experiencing a chronurgical displacement in time."

"Your girlfriend, Natalya? Where is she?"

"She went back to her place to get the book and said she'd meet us here at the diner."

"I think I need a drink."

Natalya walked into Minnie's Diner thirty minutes later, saw Billy and Tom in the corner booth, and joined them. "Hi boys," she greeted. "Well, Tom, I see you haven't changed. Which answers one question I had about the time shift. And helps clarify a few details."

"You haven't changed either."

"No, but I'm not part of your biological family. So this time change wouldn't affect me directly. Except now my forty year old boyfriend is barely a twenty year old boy."

"I'm still your boyfriend."

"Sorry Billy, I don't date boys. But that's a conversation for another time. I've been reading up on temporal and chronurgical time shifts where it applies to genetic

timelines and I learned they're irreversible. So you're not going to return to being my forty year old boyfriend. And if that woman who came back to the house is really Billy's birth mother, and Tom isn't in any of your photos, then there's a good chance Tom may very well not exist anymore. That's what the book says anyway."

"Tom doesn't exist? He's sitting right here."

"I don't think for very long though," Natalya responded. "Sorry Tom."

"Because," Tom realized, "if Elise didn't die in a car crash, then she would still be married to Dad. And Dad would never have met Sandy, let alone marry her and have a kid."

"Exactly," Natalya replied.

"But why?" Billy asked. "That doesn't make any sense. It's so random."

"It might look random, but according to the book, these events generally occur in order to fix an altered time line from its originally intended course. The book says that when a person commits a quintessential act within an altered time line, the result will revert the current iteration back to its originally intended time line. The one that was supposed to be."

"Like stopping to help a woman stranded on the side of the road?" Billy asked.

"Yes. If that was the catalyst."

"After I helped Elise," Tom said, "she said the strangest thing. That she wasn't supposed to make it home that night. Could she have known about the shift? And if she knew then did she know her and her daughter's death had altered what was supposed to be?"

"I would say, yes. Temporarily at least. They may forget once the original timeline has been re-established though."

"Well, that's messed up. Do something nice for someone and the universe screws you out of existence? Is that what you're telling me? That I wasn't supposed to exist?!" Tom asked.

"I don't know why such things happen, but the book says they're supposed to be a blessing. A correction from an illegitimate timeline back to its rightful one. It seems like that's the case seeing your dad and Elise and Billy here. But I guess not for you."

"A blessing." Tom growled trying to absorb this new reality.

"Look, Tom," Billy cut in. "Nothing has to change really. You're still my brother. And Dad is still your Dad. Only he's younger and a much better person now, right? And Sandy is probably still alive. Somewhere. At least I think so. She's just not here, but we can still go find her."

"And tell her what. Hi, I'm your son. Or would've been if my timeline hadn't screwed everything up? She'll just think I'm crazy."

"So what do we do?" Billy asked. "We can't just let it all happen like this. Is there anything in your book that says, I don't know, we can make a few adjustments to the timeline to include Tom after the change?"

"No. But look at it this way, Tom. You saved two people's lives. That has to count for something."

"And erased my existence in the process. I think I need that drink now."

"Oh, wait! Here's something I missed," Natalya said, turning the page in her book and reading the small print. "It says the distortion will remain open for a short period of time depending on how big or small the catalyst event was. And that, until it fully

closes, the timeline can be re-structured away from the original and back to the alternative time."

"Which means if I undo the catalyst, everything returns to the way it was for us?" Tom asked.

"It sounds like that, yeah. If you cancel out the catalyst, then Billy goes back to being forty, your Dad back to his old bastard self, and Elise and Mara die again, I guess."

The three of them stared at each other.

"Is that what you want to do?" Billy asked.

"Yeah, I guess so. Why wouldn't I?" But then Tom realized what he was asking.

"Look, brother. I'll do whatever you decide," Billy said. "Even if it means going back to the way things were. I guess that's the right thing to do and all. And I don't want you to think I'm being selfish, or don't love you, but I admit seeing my mother and sister again tonight hit me right in my heart. Sandy tried her best and all, but seeing Elise and Maya made me realize what I missed out on. And Dad being, well, a better version of himself and all because Mom didn't die? Well, it's like having the family I was supposed to. It's gonna hurt to give all that up again."

"You boys need to decide," Natalya said. "Cause the book says we have to get back to the point of contact with the catalyst before the rift closes if we want to change things. So if we don't go now, there's a chance the time displacement will close and it won't matter anyway."

Tom paid the bill and they left. Getting into his truck, Tom drove them through the storm back to Route 9.

"There," Tom said, pointing. "There's the car."

Through the storm, they could see it all: the moment of catalyst. The BMW stranded on the side of the road, Elise and Maya inside, Tom standing in front of the BMW with the hood up, flashlight in his teeth, changing the timing belt. Snow falling all around.

"That's me," Tom breathed.

"That's the catalyst," Natalya said. "You fix it, things reset to the way they were."

"How do I change it?"

"You let them die," Billy said softly.

Tom's stomach twisted. "What do you mean? How? I'm fixing the car for them. And as you can see, there's no accident."

"You're not going to like it," Natalya said, "but I think we have to cause the accident. Drive up and crash into them. Billy told me his mom died in a car crash on route 9. But I don't see anyone but us around. So I think we have to crash into them. Then everything resets back to the alternative. Billy's mom dies, he goes back to being my forty year old boyfriend, your Dad becomes senile again, and you return home. I don't see any other way."

Tom shook his head. "There's no way I can do that. I can't kill them."

The storm hissed all around them.

"I don't see any other way," Natalya said. "Not if you want to stop the time shift."

"Well, if you're going to do it," Billy whispered. "Do it now. You have the right to take your life back, I guess. Plus, look at it this way. Elise and Mara already died before. They said as much and are expecting it. So you won't be actually killing anyone. They already died. So just do it. I won't fault you or hold it against you, I promise. No one will."

"I will," Tom replied. Kindness was a muscle memory for him. "How can I do that? It would be selfish. Not to mention, what would we be returning to? Life wasn't so great for us anyway, was it? Dad was an abusive jerk all through our lives. And then he turned senile and now all we do is take care of him."

Natalya leaned over and kissed Tom on the cheek. "It's your right to have your life. Not to surrender it to some cosmic God or Buddha or whatever that set this whole thing in motion. Maybe they made the mistake in the first place. Who knows? But if you don't act now, there's a chance you won't exist after the rift closes. According to the book anyway."

"I know," Tom said. "I thought about that already. But I can't do a bad thing just to keep my life when it hurts other people I love to do so. I promised myself a long time ago I wouldn't be a bad person, or harm others because of my own selfishness. That's why I returned from California to help Billy when Sandy died and Dad got sick. And why I work so many shifts now. I always do the right thing. Well, here it is, my chance to do right. Even if it costs more than I want to pay."

"Tom," Billy whispered, reaching across for his brother's hand. "You're a good man either way. I love you."

Tom decided and put the truck in drive. Pushing on the gas till his truck lurched forward toward the BMW. And kept going slowly till they passed and the car receded out of sight in his rear view mirror.

"Let's go get that drink now," Tom said.

Dawn came. The road was clean, clear, and freshly plowed. The mile markers were in order. Billy woke in his bed feeling a little sad, but not really knowing why. Then he heard his mother call up that breakfast was ready. And heard the sounds of his father and sister heading downstairs. And smelled the bacon and pancakes and coffee. So, he

shrugged off the bad feeling, climbed out of bed, threw on his robe and headed downstairs to join his family for breakfast.

It's gonna be a good day, Billy thought. A real good day. Nothing to feel sad about. All is at it should be.

The End.