

2 The Drive

Saturday evening, July 5, 2003



The sky was completely clear on this comfortably, and unseasonably, brisk summer evening, and, as I wind down Mandeville Canyon Drive, I can't help but think about the intricate web that is my life. The tenuous situation that had developed between myself and a few others, and the latest turn of events, had ensnared several of us in quite a risky arrangement. I drive on. Driving always helps to ease my mind, especially when the night is clear, like tonight. As I look up through the glass of the sunroof at millions of bright, crisp stars, sparkling in the night, I drift into the twinklings of complacency as the stars mesmerize my mind. The tranquility of the ocean always soothes my soul, too. When I hit Sunset Blvd, instead of turning left and jumping on the 405, I point the Porsche towards the beach — and the ocean.

It took only a brief instant of mental solitude for the typical barrage of thoughts to arouse and begin their routine assault on my wounded mind, so I channel my nervous energy down through my foot and into the fuel injection turbines of the little German roadster and, with brutal exhilaration, accelerate through the twisty turns of Sunset, heading towards Chautauqua Blvd.

A glance at the little green digital clock on the stereo tells me it's 10:52 p.m. on this Saturday evening. I am to meet [Dominic](#) (Bird is his street name) at 11:30 pm sharp at Lake Hollywood. He was coming alone, as was I, per our agreement. Too many people were involved already. I tightened my grip on the wheel, blasting through an insanely tight left onto Chautauqua.

Winding down the hill towards PCH, dim silhouettes of palm trees stand tall against the dark backdrop of the night sky. The palisades push up out of the earth to my left and the hills of Malibu sit majestically in their looming perch behind me. Though dark, the view is soothing and comforting.

As the water comes into view, my thoughts turn to peaceful memories. Memories of Paulina – my sweet Paulina... ..memories of our baby... ..memories of the family we had started. All of that seems so fresh, yet the accident was now three years ago. Life still seems so devoid. I fucking hate it.

My name is Ethan Alexander Portfidio. At 38, I have been a physician for 5 years now, as I finished med school in 1998. We were furious back in school — with everything we did. We were furious with studying; we were furious with partying. School made us mad. We would have gone full-blown insane if it hadn't been for the girls, and the beach, and the mountains, and Vegas and TJ, and the intern initiation parties. School made us freaking crazy and we soon donned the entire sanctioned medical education institution as “mad” school. Gastro Intestinal medicine is a comprehensive study in vital organs, their interaction, and their specific individual needs. Med school is an 8-year endeavor, and that's after undergraduate and graduate studies are complete. Med school is indeed “mad” school. It's perpetual education. Sometimes, though, I wish I could go back. That “educational era” seems like such a carefree time now. Everything we add to our lives — each of these supposedly life-enhancing enrichments — has a tendency to, a strong proclivity toward, an undeniable way of piling on a plethora of complications as well as conveniences.

SERENA CHAPTER 2 - THE DRIVE

My wife and daughter were killed three short years ago on the 405 freeway here in Los Angeles. They were struck from essentially head-on. Paulina and Amber had gone up into the San Fernando Valley to see Dr. Lawrence Aguilar, our pediatrician, who practiced up in Burbank. Amber, having just turned three, was due for her scheduled check-up and IPU (Immunization Profile Update). Paulina hated traveling so far for the appointments, but Larry and I were good friends and we traded services as a professional courtesy. Dr. Aguilar and I had gone to medical school together, along with Jim Dresdon, the Hospital Administrator at Cedar-Sinai, and Dennis Sabine, my gym partner and exercise buddy in general. On their return drive from the doctor's office, Paulina and Amber came down from the Valley and into the L.A. basin on the 405 South. At the same time, something extraordinary happened. An industrial size produce truck was carrying a massive load of fresh oranges in an open top trailer-tractor on a Volvo Mack Truck on its way to the central delivery hub for metro distribution to the multitude of outdoor fresh-produce Farmer's Market locations. The driver was apparently over-driving the big rig and could not (*did* not) adequately negotiate the winding descent down the 405 Santa Monica Freeway. Given the guaranteed erratic nature of L.A. traffic, this unfortunate truck pilot should have damn well known better. Somehow, over-breaking into a skid, the truck jack-knifed, crashing into the center median and overturned, spilling hundreds of thousands of beautiful oranges all over both directions of travel on the freeway. Just as the oranges were flying all across the freeway, two workers **on lunch break** coming from the opposite direction entered **the barrage of oranges and an ocean of pulp. They spun around, smashed the divider and flipped their van right up and over the center median and straight into oncoming traffic. The car carrying Paulina and Amber happened to be right there in the vehicular trajectory of the airborne van.**

The truck driver walked away from the accident uninjured while three innocent motorists lost their lives and some half-dozen others received non life-threatening injuries. Criminal negligence litigation in the civil case of wrongful death is pending. I don't even care anymore about the restitution, just the needed improvements to flawed standards and practices in the industry as a whole.

My pregnant wife and 3-year-old daughter were killed instantly as the van came directly into them. I will never stop thinking about Paulina and Amber. Ever.

Left on to PCH and accelerate. Clock: 10:59 pm.