



## The Construction Zone

By Daniel Charles Ross

**T**raffic sucked. Traffic always sucks, of course. The worst form of standing in line is in traffic. My little town, a suburb of another already small town, had found a chunk of federal road budget they had to spend or lose it, so they tore up the one primary intersection in town to replace a bridge and install a traffic circle during mild spring weather. They hoped to have it completed by summer.

So traffic sucked, daily.

I sat in line where our road narrowed from two lanes to one. Orange plastic barrels lined the shoulder and directed the traffic to flagmen. Upon a radio command from a leader on one end of the construction zone, one flagman stopped traffic and the other let his through. Then the signs were flipped. Now the Stop sign says Slow, and the Slow sign turns to say Stop. This allows the conga line built up on the opposite direction of travel to have its turn.

Today the flagman for the westbound lane wasn't a man at all, but a woman. Not just any woman, either, but Karen Turner.

Karen Turner, of all people, homecoming queen of my senior year in high school. When? When doesn't matter. Like, three of my marriages ago. Since color TV, but before the Internet.

The last couple of cars drove past me coming from the other way. I saw her say something into her walkie-talkie and her sign spun from Stop to Slow. I touched my window button and the tinted glass whispered down into the door only about a third of the way before I pulled up on the switch instead. What did I think I would say to her? We knew each other in school, traveled in a couple of overlapping social circles, but I can't say I'd expect her to remember me without some prompting. And what was I going to say to her, these decades later, here in the construction zone where everything was being built up but my hopes?

She had been our superstar all through high school. Honey blonde hair, cheerleader. Cover girl of the self-indulgent annual "literary" magazine. Homecoming queen in sophomore, junior, *and* senior years, by popular vote. The odds of me seeing her ever again in life were probably slightly better than seeing her managing traffic in a construction zone. My car inched forward in the lane and my palms sweated. Karen Turner. Christ Himself would not have been more astonishing at that moment if he popped up next to me, changing the satellite radio to a Christian channel.

How do I describe her? She was still starkly, magazine-cover, take-your-breath-away beautiful. I'll grant you her years. Our birthdays shared a month and year, and I knew how old I was, so I gauged her on that as my car crawled forward. Still simply, utterly stunning, with slightly deeper laugh lines that had already etched her in high

school. As I drove past I sort of side-glanced her way, afraid she would see me. Afraid she would recognize me.

Afraid she wouldn't.

She looked intently up the road to the backed-up traffic and never saw me. But I saw her, full face. Lord, I *saw* her.

She had never attended any class reunions, hadn't married a classmate and, far's anyone knew, had not stayed in contact with anyone. That guaranteed no shortage of Karen Turner rumors. She'd had breast cancer. She had been in a horrific car accident and was killed or disfigured. She was living in the Middle East as the trophy wife of some desert potentate. Her legend grew with every theory, mostly fueled now by women, classmates, who had been envious of her for decades. Criticizing the Karen they'd lost touch with was easier than explaining their weight gains, or drug-addled children, or spouses gone to prison or other women.

Only I knew the truth. She was directing one-lane traffic not a mile and a half from my own house.

The next day was Saturday, so I drove to Mazie's Place, a breakfast joint slightly off the two-lane, where I could get a window seat and see if Karen came back to work the next day.

Who knew if she worked every day? Who knew whether she'd be assigned in the same place to direct traffic? I didn't. I didn't know anything. I did know that I just had to see her again, though, no matter what. Had to try, anyway. Even if it was lurking from 300 feet away.

I hadn't yet asked for my second cup of coffee when a dirty-white Chevy crewcab pickup rolled through the space between barrels and stopped on the grass. Two overweight men emerged from the front, and Karen Turner got out of the back.

She hadn't yet pulled on her reflective safety gear, and her smooth contours in the lime-green safety T-shirt stuffed into worn blue jeans were just as I remembered them from high school. It was a vivid memory. Maybe she was just a bit heavier, but weren't we all? She'd always been too thin, anyway. But that face.

Even from this distance, yet unshaded by her hard hat, her face took me back in time to the last senior class party at our youth center, where we all gathered to inscribe each others' yearbooks with goofy platitudes, peace symbols and inky smiley faces. We exchanged yearbooks and she wrote in mine and I in hers, something not too sickening, but sincere and appreciative. *To one of the coolest girls ever, thanks for being so funny in Algebra! Congrats on the Homecoming thing! Stay cool! See you during the Summer?* And my scrawled initials trailing off into a cartoon mouse that I had drawn on things since 7th grade. Everyone usually wrote *See you during the Summer?* Even kids you knew you wouldn't see. It was code, I think, acknowledging a shared panic over loved things we knew were ending, and scary, unknown things that certainly were coming.

*See you during the Summer?*

About ten o'clock, the April rain really came down hard. Karen and her opposite sign swapper both stopped traffic in each direction long enough to pull on translucent plastic ponchos from somewhere, and their work resumed.

I got in my car. I just had to roll through Karen's position again, just to see her up close. I knew I didn't have the heart to approach her, but I had to look at her one more time, think fond high school memories, and move the hell on.

I came from the other direction this time, though, so she was on the passenger side of my car. I would only get to see her as I approached, and then again receding in my rear-view mirror. The wet cars in front of me moved forward slowly. Then Karen held her arm out as the car in front of me passed her, and she turned her Slow sign to Stop. *No! No no no, lemme squeak through, please God.* But my urgent prayers fell on deaf ears. Karen spoke into her radio and turned to face my line of stopped cars, looking me dead in the face.

We locked eyes for a moment. There was an electric second or three before recognition, the slightest frowning of brow, and then a smile sprouted on her face exposing perfect, white teeth. She raised the hand not holding the sign and pointed at me, mouthing *Tom!*

She stood the sign in a tube sunk into the shoulder I hadn't noticed before and I rolled down the passenger-side window. Walking the few feet over to my window, she swept the wet poncho hood off her perfect, backlit hair and leaned in.

"I thought that was you!" she said, her laughter like music. "How the heck are you, man?"

We reached out and shook hands. The grip of her thin, feminine hand was firm and warm, despite the chilly spring rainstorm. But before I could answer, before I could

even catch my quickening breath, her radio crackled with a squelch break, the sound cop radios make in movies, and a male voice said, *Okay bub, your turn to go.*

Karen Turner reached into her pocket and withdrew a ChapStick. She reached inside the car to the window switch with her left hand and raised the glass just a few inches, and I noticed two things: No rings, and no telltale white tan lines where rings used to be.

Stepping back, she used the ChapStick to write a waxy ten-digit phone number backwards on the outside window. *Gotta go*, she said. *Call me! Let's get caught up!* She walked back to the Stop sign and rotated it to Slow, smiling broadly back at me as if *I* had just made *her* day.

As I drove past her, she leaned over at the waist and said through the open window, *See you over the Summer?*