

## ROAD

Max Ruback

A GIRL IN A WHEELCHAIR is an easy target for a lonely man.

She knew this, used it to her benefit. Paralegic from waist down, car accident late at night, two lane highway, ten years ago, her twenty-first year. A rabbit in the road. Drunken swerve, skid marks, flips, locked in her seatbelt hanging like a bat. The rabbit running through the woods. She passed out and awoke in the hospital. Tears from loved ones with, Your life is going to change faces.

Years ago, before the accident, the night of the accident, standing in front of the mirror, touching up her makeup, there was an excitement with her face and her body, the way she looked in a bikini during the summer months, going through boyfriends, waiting for that special one. Nowadays, the thickened middle, the muscular arms, the jellied legs, nothing she could prevent. Often, she took a man home with her from a bar. She knew men liked to put that on their sexual resume: sex with crippled girl. She did not take the pill, could not get pregnant. She did not practice safe sex, could not feel anything. In a way she would only admit to herself, it would not matter if she contracted aids. If that happened, then she would just be taken away quicker, away from this life. Because she could not feel and did whatever she could to feel something, she gained pleasure from touch, her skin, her breasts, behind the ears. When it came to intercourse, she liked it rough, hard, fuck me she would say, fuck me hard, harder, harder, harder. But there was no feeling no matter how harsh the friction was. She liked for guys to come in her. Perhaps, a fluke would get her pregnant. She dressed New England conservative, sweaters covering her arms, long skirts covering her legs. Only her face showed. The chair was always a part of the way she looked. Like someone always following her.

Before the accident, her expectations for the future were high, marry a rich wasp, live a wasp life, have wasp children who went to wasp school. Fashionable clothes because they were fashionable. Gold and diamonds. Driving from shopping mall to shopping

mall in a silver beamer. Not for one moment did she think a man would take her to be his girlfriend, let alone his wife, and she did not want a man to cater to her like the lonely ones did, the ones who would do anything for her, the ones that could not find a girl to be their girlfriend, for one reason or another. You're so pretty, men would say. But what they meant was, You're so pretty for a girl in a wheelchair. She liked to hurt them, to make herself feel better. She did not accept their sent red roses, their invitations to dinner. Only beers on the weekend. This was how she lived her life. Her parents knew about her reputation. Everybody knew. Population 12,000. Yet that was not a problem. She was popular. Everybody knew her, or of her. The girl in the wheelchair. Her friends remembered her when she could walk, and when they talked about their youths she tipped the bottle to her lips and tried to feel something other than the truth she felt in their drunken talk. But she remembered less of those years, and tried to reinvent the past with her imagination, still wishing this was a nightmare she could wake up from. It was like a children's story, A long long time ago, there was a very pretty girl who could walk. They talked about love and death and college and happiness and marriage and children. But they remembered less and less of those years, life took place, and everybody suddenly got older and laughed and complained about the kids, the marriage, the ex, the schools, the politicians, the job, some still holding onto dreams of happiness, and if not dreams, saying they were planning to leave, escape to somewhere else where life was better, warmer. Or so it seemed the later it got. The bars closed around three.

Driving home, she would always take the same road back, the accident road. That road where the future changed. Sometimes a man would be in her car, smoking a cigarette, or rubbing the thigh she could not feel, afraid to ask about the special steering wheel. Sometimes a man would follow behind her car. Yet with the spot nearing, it was not the man she was thinking about at all. It was the road. It was smooth, newly paved. A history of skid marks covered with

tar.

She liked it when headlights came from the opposite direction, making her tighten up and feel a thrill of danger, the possibility that it could happen again seemed not too far off. Sometimes she hoped for a head on, a quick death. She would live like this for years, challenging death, inviting its welcome, until she settled for the comfort of a man because it was the comfort of a man, no matter how good or bad things were, that made her feel wanted, from the inside out.