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SNOW ROAD

Everything was ugly that morning of the first accident. I woke up with a pain in my neck that promised a major headache by noon, and a weight on my leg that reminded me that I was sharing a bed. Very gently I opened my eyes to my companion... definitely the last girl in the bar. A match for the morning.

A long, lazy, fart signalled the start of the day, and I rolled over to find David grinning at me, and making definite departing gestures to me. David in his bronze and blonde glow, looked tanned and fit as a cat.

I rolled onto my knees, and buried my head in the pillow, trying to ease myself into awake. A particular twitch in my scalp told me that my hair was bent the wrong way, and would, as soon as I stood up straight, do the same.

David arose from his bed and began methodically to get dressed. He paused to give his head a good morning scratch with both hands, and then with curls intact, turned to check on my progress.

As I sat up pain sparkled itself to my right temple and then stopped, and the heaviness of my eyes slid south to swell pouches beneath them. My opinion of male bonding rituals hit an all time low. Carefully, I began to dress. David helped by prowling the room in search of my clothes, and rolling them into balls aimed at my head. Socks and underwear weren't bad, but jeans with a belt buckle across the bridge of my nose, filled my eyes with water and my heart with revenge.

A sudden shuffling of blankets and rearranging of limbs, reminded us that our immediate departure was necessary if we wanted to avoid a morning confrontation with last night's female entertainment. So revenge aside, we did a runner into the thick gray Sunday morning.

We drove quietly for awhile, shivering until the car heater began blowing warm air, the haze inside our heads matching the haze outside. The regular slap, squeak of the windshield wipers added to the edge of

the day as there wasn't enough moisture to leave them on, and too much to turn them off. Finally Dave turned them off with a snap that left the knob in two pieces, in his hand.

"Shit".

We drove on silently, and soon, myopically.

I found myself thinking of the girl I had left sleeping. Cheryl, or was it Sharon? Maybe Shari? I couldn't remember. Her face was already vague in my mind. There have been a few women whose memory has created an actual lurch in my gut. Somewhat like drinking whisky neat on an empty stomach. But, what's her name wasn't one of them.

I wondered how the women we left behind would have behaved if they had been awake first. Would they have left their apartment hoping that we would be gone by the time they got back? Or, would they have continued last nights' diversion and then cooked us breakfast? Then I remembered looking into the fridge last night in search of beer, and finding a bag of trail mix and a quart of milk. We would have had to take them out for breakfast in Raleigh, on Sunday morning, in broad daylight. We had made the right choice.

My head bounced off the side window, as a result of David's giving the wheel a snap.

"Sleeping?" he smiled. I rubbed my head and the rising bump. David hated boredom and he bored easily. He was at his most dangerous when bored.

"Let's go to my place and snag some breakfast."

We turned towards town. Raleigh, like Rome, was built on seven hills, but the similarity ended there. The majority of the hills could be more accurately described as cliffs. A few pioneers had built on their summits, but they had perpetual water problems. In the winter months they had to leave their cars at the foot of these cliffs and walk home.

The main part of the town however, was built on the flat at the foot of the cliffs. Raleigh's main street, called Snow Road, had been progressively erected over a ninety year span. A high percentage of its' buildings had the high frame, fronts that gave the town a definite frontier flair. Boardwalks, hitching rails, and a community pump, would not have seemed out of place.

There was one hill that, because of its easy access, gentle slope, and excellent view, had been taken over by Raleigh's wealthy. This area was, and still is simply called The Heights. To live in The Heights in Raleigh, says it all.

Snow Road starts in The Heights and proceeds to bisect Raleigh as it travels down the hill and turns into the main street. As it proceeds

eastwards past Starr Lumber Company, the property values gradually drop until they bottom out at the dirt floored shacks of the Royces and the Whitneys. At this point the road becomes county road two and ends in the municipal dump.

When I was a child, the Royces' and the Whitneys' poverty was treated as a curiosity, and an example of how we would wind up if we dropped out of school, or engaged in premarital sex. But a few winters ago, a Toronto newspaper and TV station did a series of articles on, "Northern Ontario's Impoverished Hillbillies". The Royces and the Whitneys were cast as victims, to everyone's surprise, including their own.

The rest of the town was pictured as hard hearted and uncaring to let such a situation exist. "What was the government doing about this?", was the common theme of the outraged letters on the editorial page of the Raleigh Packet and Times.

The government did step in. A medical team descended on the underprivileged families and discovered that they were well fed and healthy. The children had no cavities, and didn't need braces. Although some of the houses had dirt floors, they were warm and clean. The houses had electricity, hot and cold running water, and bathrooms. The old outside privies that had made the front pages of the Toronto newspapers, had long ago been converted to woodsheds.

The freezers might have been old, but they were clean and full of fish from ice fishing, garden vegetables, moose meat, venison, duck, and partridge.

Both families had squatted on the land for so long that technically, they owned it. Since no one would admit to owning the houses that they lived in, it was assumed that the Royces and the Whitneys actually owned them themselves. At this point there was a movement from welfare to disqualify the families' benefits because of their landowning status, but it was surreptitiously smothered.

The expose was a continuing community embarrassment because whenever an opinion from the poor was needed, the TV crews scampered north to record LLOYD Royce or Edgar Whitney's opinion expressed with the infamous privies as a backdrop, that was summarily aired on the eleven o' clock news.

The local MP Edward Lang, who neither family liked, complained that they and their privies, got more TV coverage than he did. However this was soon remedied when Edward eased two Royce and Whitney sons out of a mild skirmish with the local police. He was then considered to be, "all right", and allowed to have telephones installed in the two households, so he could be advised of any impending press conferences.

This tempered the televised rhetoric of the families and their newsworthiness faded, and along with it, the notoriety of Raleigh.

A few summers went by though, before the carloads of people asking for directions to the hillbillies, dwindled appreciably.

But sporadically, a carload of tourists would create a municipal flinch by asking at the Tourist Information Centre for the directions to the hillbillies.

But I am wandering from the story.

David and I crested the Cleek St. hill. Raleigh seemed lifeless except for a few stragglers turning into the Anglican church parking lot at the base of the hill.

David switched off the ignition as we descended picking up speed. We drew opposite the church. The latecomers had just opened the doors, and we could see the choir forming on the inside staircase. It was at that moment that David, sense of timing intact, turned on the ignition and blew the hell out of the muffler, and judging by the shrapnel, half the tail pipe as well.

The car exploded into noise as we clattered by, leaving most of a dismembered exhaust system in our wake.

"God how I hate this car!", David shouted over the roar of the engine.

"What?" said I, cupping my hand behind my ear.

"Dad always buys garbage".

"What do you care?", I returned. "He pays for it. You drive it."

We drove past the O.P.P. station. Dave gave a couple of shots to the gas. He veered to the wrong side of the road, slowed, and scooped a blue vinyl wrapped Sunday paper lying in the end of a driveway. He slapped it into my lap.

"Take it out of the wrapper," he commanded. I obeyed.

We rumbled down Cleek St. and turned uphill on to Snow Rd. towards the Heights, with David now feathering the accelerator. If it is possible for a car without a muffler to sneak into a laneway, then we sneaked into David's laneway.

We were greeted at the door with "David, is that you?" and proceeded to the kitchen where the breakfast preparations were under way.

Alice, David's mum, was fluttering over the once a week breakfast that her family consumed together.

David swooped his arms around her for a good morning hug, and a genuinely warm filial kiss. I followed suit with a bear hug and a waltz around the kitchen. She was a nice lady. I'd always found her vague prettiness attractive, even if somehow incomplete.

At that moment, the sun came out and presented me with a picture of mother and son that I'll never forget. It was one of those moments when something inside you says, "This is a memory. Remember this moment." They stood side by side, blonde curls and golden, she slightly breathless, naive blue eyes slightly smiling, he grinning puckishly. Then the clouds took over, and the moment was gone.

"Was that our car just now? The one that sounded like a tractor?"

"The muffler fell off again as we were coming down Cleek St."

"But your father had it fixed this spring."

"Mum, you know that car has been shit since day one."

"Don't use that word."

"I've never liked it."

"Why do you use it then, it's disgusting!"

"If it's that bad, get Dad to buy you a new one."

"I'm talking about your language, forget about the car. I just hope your father won't be angry, he's not been himself lately."

"He'll be okay," replied David, who knew this because his father's attractive "office assistant" had just announced that she had been accepted as a stewardess by a large airline, and was leaving for Toronto. There had been many "office assistants"- David's mother had been one.

"Just get him to buy you something better next time - like one of those new mustang convertibles with a five litre engine. You'd look good in one of those."

Alice regarded her son vaguely, and fluttered back to the breakfast. David gave me a look. A seed had been planted.

David's Dad always bought his wife something really nice whenever a girlfriend left him. He liked to advertise how well he treated those who stayed loyal to him. If he wanted to make his point though, he would have to buy something within a week, for after that Leone would be off with some good-looking pilot closer to her own age than Gord Starr.

A slight footfall on the stairs announced the arrival of Sonia, David's scary younger sister. Scary because she was fourteen going on thirty, beautiful, desirable, and she knew it. What's more, she played on it.

Sonia was dark like her father, but tiny and long legged like her mother. Dressed in a short white, cotton nightshirt with, "In case of rape, this side up", written across the front, her face surrounded by a dark cloud of curly hair, tanned and barefoot, she was everyman's fantasy, and every father's nemesis.

She padded across the kitchen to the refrigerator, and took an ice

cube out of the freezer.

"Dear, I think you should put on your bathrobe".

"It's too hot," said Sonia, ice cube in hand. This argument seemed to defeat Alice for the moment and she went back to making breakfast.

Sonia stood beside me and began sucking on the ice cube like no fourteen year old girl should suck on anything.

"Sonia dear, stop that!"

"Why?"

"It's not nice," Alice replied.

"There's nothing wrong with sucking an ice cube." Sonia attacked it with added gusto. My imagination was getting out of control and beginning to have a definite effect on my body.

"It's bad for your....teeth." came the lame reply.

"My teeth are okay".

Alice gave a hard sigh, rattled dishes, and, as a further indication of her disapproval, came down hard on her heels as she moved around the kitchen.

Sonia, wearying of the game with her mother, took the ice out of her mouth and ran it over my bare arm. She then licked at the cube meditatively as though contemplating some great truth that had just been revealed to her.

"Sonia!"

"What mother?", said Sonia, a small crease of disapproval on her adorable forehead.

"Oh!", frustrated Alice, because she really didn't know where to proceed from there. Moreover she didn't want to, so breakfast received her complete attention. The silence that resulted from the lull in conversation was punctuated by cutlery slammed into place and occasionally hitting the floor. The kitchen began to get quite noisy.

By this time the ice cube was definitely losing its' ability to factor in any game so, with one last ecstatic suck, Sonia swallowed the remains whole. I crossed my legs.

Sonia sat down beside me. "I didn't think guys sat like that". She began flipping through a copy of "Seventeen".

"Sonia dear." Alice's voice was back to pleasant now, "Would you please go upstairs and tell your father that breakfast is ready?"

"I thought he wasn't feeling well," challenged Sonia.

"I'm sure he'll want his breakfast. He always does on Sunday", said Alice, her voice higher and climbing.

Sonia started to get out of her chair, but stopped when she heard the obvious signs that her father was already coming downstairs.

Gord Starr, unlike David, was built square, like a concrete block

with arms and legs. He had built up his lumber company from scratch, and his lifestyle had taken its' toll. Once well toned flesh, his bulk had turned to flab with too many cigarettes, too much booze, and not enough exercise. He was still a handsome man with his gray accents proving a flattering contrast to his dark hair. But this morning the pouches beneath his eyes were full, and he did seem to be in some discomfort.

"I hardly slept at all last night, and you come in with a busted muffler and wake me up. I just start to sleep again, and your mother starts slamming around the kitchen, making a racket. What the hell is going on? Didn't you know that I just got that muffler replaced? What did you do to make it fall off? I'd better not find any grass stuck under the car. Have you been off roading again?", grieved Gord almost in one breath.

"That car's a piece of shit, Dad. Always was, always will be. You should buy Mum something decent to be seen in. Sorry about the noise. I tried to be as quiet as I could. I got you the morning paper."

The father-god was appeased and eyed David speculatively for a moment, gave a non-committal grunt and proceeded to hide behind his son's offering.

The sudden ringing of the telephone stirred Alice's memory, "David, that might be Susan. She called last night about eleven. Why do people have to call at meal times?. It never fails."

David answered the phone and yes, it was Susan. Susan, like David, worked in Toronto, and if David wasn't available for the weekend, would stay there rather than face a two and a half hour drive up and back.

Sonia glanced at her brother answering the phone, and sat smiling all knowingly. I could imagine antenna rising from her head and twitching to tune into the sound waves.

"David didn't come home last night," she smirked. Her father scowled.

"Why are you looking at me like that? Mum, I'm just sitting here, eating my breakfast, and Dad's giving me dirty looks!"

"You know too much for your own good, young lady", came remark number twenty-one from the manual of trite parental remarks.

"Know what? I'm just eating my breakfast. Can't anybody do anything around here?" wailed Sonia. Her father retreated once more behind the Sunday paper. No one was going to pursue that argument.

Alice and I started to talk inanities, mainly to cover up David's conversation with Susan. I could tell by the amount of talking he was doing, that he was justifying his not calling her last night. David's

methods were good, mainly because he used truth as his basic theme, and composed enhanced variations depending on the needs of the moment. Susan would believe him, besides, she wanted to believe him. I'd heard him talk himself out of worse situations. I thought that maybe someday she would step back, look at the big picture and see a pattern to all those Saturday nights alone. Or, maybe she would go out with the girls some night when David was away, and meet somebody else. But so far, she hadn't. She was virtuously loyal to David who made no attempt to return the favour. She was a strikingly pretty girl, blonde hair, big vacant blue eyes, kind, but not too bright. Someone once said that men tend to marry their mothers, and, if a wedding evolved between David and Susan, this would be proven true.

"I had to stay with Donny. He was feeling bad again," seeped through Alice's chatter. It was her turn now to make the attempt. I found myself smiling inanely, nodding in agreement to whatever it was she was saying, while eavesdropping on David's conversation.

"You know I can't leave Donny alone when he's feeling like that. What if something happened?"

Sonia's eyebrows shot up at that one. Donny was one of our drinking buddies who, after failing an exam, and losing his girlfriend, had decided to end it all by gassing himself. His attempt, like his exam and romance, was unsuccessful, not because he was found too soon or the car ran out gas. He made sure of the gas by filling the tank before going home and then locking himself in the garage. But Donny had made one vital, as it turned out to be, error. He shared the car with his brother, and neither one being even slightly maintenance minded, had checked the oil. The red light had come on while Donny was just beginning to get drowsy, and, preoccupied with his impending death, Donny ignored its' warning. Had the car been a North American model the tragedy might have happened as planned, but it was early Japanese, and the engine died before Donny.

His wayward girlfriend had found him, and seeing the evidence had called in the proper authorities, and decided that she loved Donny after all. Donny took a "make up" exam, got his failed subject, and all was right in his world once more. Except for his brother that is, who never really forgave him for the motor. Donny had to pay for the repairs himself. This, then, was the "Donny" that David referred to in sepulchral tones, as he lied his way into Susan's good graces once more. It made me wonder how many times he had used this buddy-in distress routine, and how long he would continue to use it.

Soon evidence of David's success came through with an obvious acceptance speech of Susan's apologies for misjudging him, followed by

the ritual, "And I love you too.", sotto voice.

Sonia stuck her finger down her throat and made gagging noises, as David hung up the phone and came back to the breakfast table.

"Really David," said his father, lowering the paper, and looking his son squarely and sternly in the eye, "You push that girl too far. If you're not careful you're going to lose her. You shouldn't treat a nice girl like that." Whereupon Sonia rose from the table and muttered, "I'm going to puke", as she passed close to her father. This remark drove Gord behind his paper once more, and successfully ended the breakfast and the conversation.

We hung about the house for a couple of hours, helping with the breakfast dishes, moving patio slabs, splitting and stacking firewood and finally inspecting the damaged muffler with Gord. I remember that day and how the tasks flowed one into the other, and how, between the two of us, they were easily done. It had been all at David's suggestion with the reasoning, "while there are two of us". Soon the whole family was in the backyard working and making suggestions, and the bumps of the morning were smoothed out. The sun came out to stay, and the day was looking fine.

When the time came for David and I to head off for Toronto, it was Gord who suggested that he take the Japanese road rocket while the muffler on the other car was being fixed. [They were a four car, one truck family]. David, managing to keep the eagerness out of his voice, graciously accepted. I must say he didn't start to look smug until we were well out of his father's sight.

Then, I made one of those decisions that in looking back, might just have saved my life. I decided that since there wasn't going to be enough room for four people, plus me and my gear in the road rocket, and since I would be returning mid-week, that I would take my own truck.

David offered some resistance at first, but then realized that I was right. He would get Donny and Todd, and we would meet in Toronto tonight.

We drove down the leaf gold cottage road to my place by the lake. Some scraps of brilliance still danced on branches and caught the sun. Other lighter, browner, relatives, blew up in whorls as the car went by.

Thanksgiving had past, so most of the cottages were closed for the winter. Lawns were dotted with tarpaulin covered, upside down boats, and dock sections. The bows of canoes peered through the shadowy concrete pillars of cottage foundations.

Some sections of the road were so densely thicketed with evergreens

that the lake was entirely hidden, but sudden, brief scents of woodsmoke would betray the presence of a nearby dwelling.

The few cottagers that had come up for the weekend were already on their way home, willing participants in the weekly pilgrimage to the country and back again.

A hint of green apple met us as we turned in to my laneway. It came from my parents' place next door, as well as mine. Dad had started a fire for me in order to take off the chill that a cold, damp, autumn night could bring to an empty house.

Ben, my big golden retriever, came bounding to the car, his tail corkscrewing a welcome for us. After a clumsy puppy leap that brought his head into collision with my chin, some gentle hand grabbings, that left my right arm, from the elbow down, spotted with dog drool, and a lean against my leg rollover, that left my right pant leg generously decorated with dog hair, he settled on my right foot and gazed at me with sheer adoration. Dave wisely stayed in the car, as he knew that he would be subjected to a shorter version of a Ben welcome. Ben regarded Dave with an air of disappointment, and settled for saluting his tires in dog fashion. A squirrel zipped across the lawn and Ben was after it.

He was an autumn dog, but he shed all year round. His coat was thick and gold, and he made a lovely picture against the yellow leaves, and the naked, gray branches of the undergrowth. I wish I'd had my camera but I didn't, and the picture would have to wait for another day.

Dave wouldn't, and with a touch of brake, and a dash of throttle, left two mud strips as he fishtailed down the laneway. Two ritual beeps and he was out of sight, but not out of sound. I heard him all the way to the highway.

It did not amaze me that, when driving with David I usually found myself sitting with my feet on his dashboard. David didn't seem to mind. I actually think that he took it as a compliment.

We would be driving somewhere and I would start wondering why he was smiling at me, then realize that once more my feet were braced on the dash. I wasn't waiting for a crash. I was trying to keep from being bounced around. What I needed was a five point harness. Driving with David could be exhausting.

You didn't tell him to slow down either, because he firmly believed that it was the slow drivers, the ones who went the speed limit and didn't know their car's limitations, who caused most of the accidents.

He knew his car's limitations so, if there was trouble he could get out of it. I must admit that, on a couple of occasions when I was with him, he had proven his theory correct.

But, on thinking back on that day, it could have been David's driving style that made my subconscious rebel at the thought of a long drive with him. After a very busy weekend at my tavern, and two very late nights, my psyche needed a rest.

I had a leisurely coffee with my parents, checked in on my assistant manager and Sundays' business, and then headed for Toronto.

The traffic was heavier than usual for that time of year, for it had turned out to be one of those rare hot, late autumn days. Many people had decided to get out in the country and enjoy what could be the last warm day before winter.

The farther south I drove, the more the traffic built, and I could tell that, by the time I got to the 115, it would be really heavy. I hated that stretch of road, like everyone else who had to use it frequently. Everyone coming from cottage country had to funnel through the 115 in order to get to the main Ontario artery, the 401. If there was freak bad weather, it was on the 115. If you got behind a slow car, there were few places to pass, and there were lots of hills to slow down the tractor trailers and create even more hazards.

If you were feeling at peace with yourself and weren't in a hurry, it was an okay road to drive but, as most of the traffic was made up of stressed up city people trying to get as much time at the lake as possible, there were usually a lot of traffic horrors on Friday night and Sunday afternoon.

A dash of blue metal flake rocketed past me with the ritual double beep. It was Dave, Todd, and Donny. Donny turned to wave, and then was gone behind a row of cars.

Brake lights winked up ahead and proceeded systematically down the row until it was my turn to brake. A smudge of sand blew up, indicating that someone had to take evasive action, when another pulled in line too close ahead. Probably Dave, I thought. He believed in testing himself, his passengers, and those who shared his highway.

The traffic was moving more slowly than the 50mph limit, so I could see Davids' progress ahead of me when we got to a straight stretch of road. He was about one half mile ahead. We were coming down a long hill that flattened for half a mile, before it began a long, lazy climb again. This area was recognized as the only passing spot for at least fifteen miles.

I could see the flash of blue hanging in the left lane until a crash would seem unavoidable with the oncoming cars, then it would bull its way back back into the right. Brake lights flashed on, and dust rose, as two cars pulled over to the side of the road. The right hand traffic lane slowed to a crawl, and the flash of blue was out in the

left hand lane again, challenging another line of oncoming cars.

As the traffic crept past the two cars that had pulled off, I could see that one had run into the other. Both drivers looked furious, but not with each other. They were following David's progress up the highway.

When I looked back up the highway I could see the little blue car still rushing ahead, not in the right lane or in the left lane, for now there were two steady lanes of traffic.

David had pushed a touch far. He was going up the left hand shoulder, and none too well at that. He had become involved with a ditch, and ditches have all kinds of hazards, like culvert ramps.

The car was literally bouncing down through the ditch. It came close to clearing the culvert ramp, but close was not good enough. The nose crushed into the ramp, digging a huge divot, and throwing the car into a violent end to end spin. The tail end hit, tearing off the bumper and another huge divot of black earth that clouded the entire car for a moment. Then the windows popped in a glitter of diamonds showing through the dark smudge at the roadside.

I didn't count how many times the car went over, spinning and churning. I don't think anybody did. It happened so quickly and violently that, those who witnessed the spin pulled to the side of the road and parked.

I don't remember much detail, but suddenly I was out of my car and running very hard. I just couldn't go fast enough. It was like one of those nightmares when everything depends on speed and you're stuck in slow motion.

The car had landed right side up and, as I drew closer I could see some movement inside. Steam was rising, and a sudden cloud of white obscured the car and told me that there were clearer heads than mine working fire extinguishers. I was empty handed.

People were running with me, and I became aware that there was a very definite undertone of anger.

"Stupid bastards!"

"Probably pissed out of their minds!"

"They could have killed someone!"

As I came up to the accident, I could see that the only future that the racy little blue car would have would be as a deterrent against careless driving. It looked as if giant hands had twisted it in opposite directions. Divots of grass were wedged into the rough cut gaps in the once immaculate finish, and some had even found their way inside. Thankfully the gas tank had been wrenched off in the accident, so the worst danger of fire was gone. Steam and hissing issued from

the engine as the rad, now bent above it, leaked what little fluid it had left onto a hot manifold.

David and Todd were in the front seat still belted in. Both had laps full of broken glass. They were moving stupidly about, still shocked, their nervous systems too shattered to allow them control over themselves.

Any attempt to get out was futile because the car doors were forever jammed shut. They would have to be cut out.

It was just as well, for there were many people that David had tested to-day, and if he had been at all mobile and reachable, he might have suffered worse abuse from them than from the accident. They were all going to wait for the police, so there would be an accurate picture of the events leading up to the accident. It did not look good for David, not that I had much sympathy for him.

Todd was coming back to reality now and gave me a smile of recognition, before closing his eyes in pain. In the back seat Donny had his eyes closed, and a slight smile on his lips. I thought that he had taken his seat belt off until I noticed that it had been torn off, and was draped half out the opposite window. The back seat had been torn loose, and Donny was wedged in the gap between it and the seat back. A cold, grasping, claw feared through me as I reached and touched Donny. His head unbalanced, and tipped sideways. I could tell that his neck was broken. Donny was dead.

David and Todd were held overnight in the hospital for observation, and released the following morning. When I went to pick them up, reporters were already there trying with limited success, to get a story.

Gord Starr had already provided lawyers, and David eagerly adopted their angle of the mechanical failure of newly installed tie rod ends.

When asked about his friend's death, David said, "Donny wanted to die anyway. At the beginning of summer, he tried to commit suicide."