

STILL REMAINS

by Eric P. Isaacson

I couldn't move my legs.

"You all right son?"

I looked up and saw the unmistakable silhouette of a trooper's hat.

I coughed, trying to laugh. "I think I've seen better, officer." I smiled, squinting up at the shade above me. I was lying near a small creek, the heel of my right foot and part of a pant leg were soaked. The highway was probably twenty feet up the embankment. I saw the twisted remains of the metal guard rail.

"Looks like you took quite a spill." The trooper pushed the brim of his hat up with his thumb.

I still couldn't make out the cop's face.

"Yeah," I said. "Damn deer." I coughed.

"Well, I'll be back. Gotta call this in."

I moved my head, the sun blinding me for a moment. A tree about four feet away stood where the trooper was just standing. I let my head fall back. No matter where I positioned it, a rock kept biting into my scalp.

The groaning of steel jerked my head back up. My jeep was telling me that it didn't like covering my legs and it wanted to roll over.

"What do you mean by rolling over?" I asked her.

One corner of Jennie's mouth raised, her way of saying, "Oh, please." Then she turned on her side, pulling most of the sheet with her.

“Oh,” I said, “real mature.” She just didn’t realize that there hadn’t been any construction jobs in the neighboring three counties for months now. I took a handful of sheet and jerked it over me, slamming my head back onto the pillow.

My left shoulder squirmed, forcing another wheeze out of my lips. I must have dislocated it again. Ever since the fourth grade the right pressure and force would wrench my shoulder from its socket — the arm was useless. I propped up on my right elbow to inspect the damage.

I could barely see the road over the upturned side of my jeep. Actually, what I saw was the twisted section of railing, pointing slightly upwards and to my right. But that was all. My jeep rested on its passenger side, and me. The left rear wheel still spun lazily.

I caught something moving on the other side of the jeep, blocked by the front end. I craned my neck. That deer I hit. Maybe it was trying to get up. I’d heard about this before. A cousin of mine once hit a deer on the highway, denting the shit out of his front end and spider-webbing his windshield, and instead of just leaving it there, he put it in the back seat of his Chevy Nova and drove off, thinking he was gonna have deer steaks for a few weeks. But then the son of a bitch woke up. Reared its ugly blood-smattered head

The scream sent a jolt through me, then I cried out, my right hand going to my shoulder. I squinted. The sky was a pale blue, bright, very few clouds. I was still in the shade; the lodgepole pines stretched out behind me as far as I could see, the sun only grazing the tops. Maybe it was a hawk. As I brought my eyes down I saw the deer’s

head bob. Maybe rising on one leg and dropping. Just kept doing it over and over, the dumb animal.

The jabbing pain in my lower back made me wheeze.

“Well, if you’d stop acting like you were fifteen and start acting your age,” Jennie said. She carried a laundry basket full of my just-folded work shirts and cover-alls. On top were the clothespins in a Wonder bread bag. I had just been tackled by Frank, defensive tackle in high school, now my foreman. I was rubbing my back, hunched over like an old woman.

“Just knocked the wind out of me,” I said, smiling.

I watched Jennie open the screen door in the careful way she does so that the top hinge stays in place. She stopped and looked at me, grinning, then showing teeth. She waved me on with her free hand.

“Bo,” Frank said. “Let’s get on with this.”

Frank’s team was already in formation and mine was waiting for me to call the play. It was third down and twelve. I walked over to them, pretending I didn’t feel the hot piercing from my hip to the back of my knee.

The ball was hiked and I looked out over the moving dots of thinning hair, searching for an opening, when here came Frank, all two hundred and fifteen pounds. I side-stepped him, but lost my balance and three others jumped on me.

“You all right, son?” Frank said. He knew I hated it when he called me that.

“Stay with us . . .”

“Can you do that?” the trooper said.

"Yeah. Sure." My mouth was dry. I cleared my throat.

"Can you tell me what happened?" He flipped open a pad and clicked a pen.

"Did you call an ambulance?"

"And why would you need one of those?"

"The right tool for the right job, Frank." Frank's face, normally a brighter shade of pink than it should be, went red, except for those white patches where his jowls hung.

"Well, we ain't got any nail guns."

"You mean we don't got no nail guns, but you do." The other guys had stopped pounding nails to look at us. "Come on, Frank. Just let us use it once in a while. It'd get the job done faster."

"Just like you, Bo." I turned to see Frank's wife, the former Helen Slaterly, combing her auburn curls from the left side of her face with her fingers. One side of her lips curved into a slight smile and she stared at me. "Always tryin' to get out of doin' the hard stuff." Of course, she was still the sexiest thing that ever graduated from Abbottville High.

Frank squirmed up to Helen, whispering to her, again, about coming to the site without calling first, and how can you wear that . . . thing in public? Helen pivoted on one heel, hand on hip, making sure all eyes were on her. "Now, y'all don't mind what I wear here do you?" She wore the tightest pink plastic mini-skirt that was sold in the Wal-Mart at the edge of town. My attention was drawn to the lacy black bra that happened to lend itself to view if she moved just so.

The crew responded with a chorus of no ma'ams.

"Now get back to work. All of you!" Frank touched his wife's elbow and took a step toward the office. She looked at me, biting on the red-polished index fingernail, and then turned to Frank.

I turned to see Jennie holding my lunch box. She wasn't looking at me.

She was looking at her and Dad's wedding picture on the end table, the one between her easy chair and his. Her face was wet and sounds came from her throat that I heard sometimes at night. Then I heard the growling of Dad's Ford pickup. She sniffed, putting the back of her hand to her nose.

"Mom?" Her head jerked.

"Bobbie, go outside."

I stood there, staring at her mottled cheek, the thick under-eyes. This was not my mother.

"Go outside and play!"

Just playing around, that's all. And she was liking it too. Every time I swerved into the other lane she squealed, pretending not to like it, but I heard the thrill in her voice.

"You're gonna get us killed!" One hand was braced on the seat, the other against the window.

It started out with me not trying to hit a porcupine as I rounded a corner the same time as a chip truck. It was a simple one, two jerk of the wheel and we were still on the road, still moving. She had ended up face in my lap. She rose slowly, all teeth.

“Sorry,” she said, almost a whisper. Then she reached over, her long red nails hovering over my leg. I watched the hand linger before depositing the spent gum back into her mouth.

“How long ‘til Orofino?” she said, looking out her window. I had picked Karin up on my way to drop off a load of firewood.

I watched her work the gum, her jaw muscles quivering. She put her hand to her hair and Helen flipped it to the side, a constant habit. She held a Henry’s in her left hand.

“What about you, Bo?” she said over The Snakepit’s third song. “Care to show these boys how it’s done?” Her boot tapped to the music, one beat off.

“Now, Helen, you know Bo can barely nail straight, if you know what I mean,” Big Al said. The rest of the table joined in with his hacking laugh. Helen just grinned, looking at me. She took a swallow of beer and set the bottle down.

“Well?”

My face froze in a silly-assed open-mouthed smile.

“I can’t dance, really.”

Helen slid off her stool and held out her hand.

“I’ll show you.”

Dad hugged the football in one arm.

“See? You gotta stick it here . . .” he slapped the ball with his left hand, “. . . so that they can’t knock it out and then you tuck your shoulders in and lower your head.”

Dad reminded me of that bull in the Bugs Bunny cartoon just before he's going to charge Bugs. Then Dad straightened.

"You see what I'm sayin' boy?" I nodded. He tossed the ball to me. It bounced on my chest and fell. I grabbed for it quickly and snapped upwards. My Dad was shaking his head.

"Now Bo, you can't be doin' that shit on the field. Pay attention." I nodded. "Now, tuck that ball in there and charge me."

I cradled the ball, trying to feel all around it with my arm and chest. I lowered my head and waited.

"Now!"

I ran to my Dad and then screamed as I fell back. The ball rolled off to my right on the grass. I couldn't move my arm.

"No! That's all wrong, Bo. You gotta keep your eye on your man." He went and snatched up the ball; he held it in one palm above me.

"Now quit yer cryin' and get up."

I couldn't.

"Son?"

I looked at the trooper.

"The paramedics are on their way. You sit tight."

A snicker came out of my mouth. Like I had a choice.

"Now why don't you tell me again what happened." He tipped his hat back.

"I already told you. I hit a deer."

“Deer? I thought you said it was a skunk?”

“Shit!” I jerked the wheel to the left and then to the right as a chip truck rounded the corner. The road stretched out ahead of us.

“Goddammit Bo,” Jennie said. “Why don’t you watch where you’re going?” She squinted at me.

Here she goes again. “There was a goddamn skunk in the way. If I’d’a hit it, the jeep would’ve stunk for weeks. Besides, we’re fine, aren’t we?”

She laid her head against the window, eyes closed. She folded her arms and I saw that she was working her jaw. There was a hair stuck in her mouth and I reached over and freed it with my index finger. I ran my finger over her cheek in a circle.

“Hey . . .” I started when her eyes went wide and she yelled my name.

I saw it standing there, stuck in the road, and my hands moved across the wheel. We went through the guard rail and down.

“ . . . on me in my truck, swear to God,” Big Al said. He flicked his Lucky Strike over the ash tray and then brought it to his mouth slowly. We all stared at him, waiting to hear more about his high school rendezvous with Helen Slaterly. “Oh, she’ll deny it now,” he said blowing out the hefty drag he’d taken, “but it’s true. Best fucking blow job I ever had.”

“The only blow job you ever had,” I said. A few of the guys laughed. We all knew that Big Al only took so much ribbing, especially after downing four straight shots with beer chasers, which was why he was telling us this story. That and Frank had gone home an hour ago.

Big Al stopped his hand just above the ash tray. The table suddenly got real quiet.

I looked at Big Al. "What?" He flicked his cigarette. "Al, I was just joshin' ya, man. Just kiddin'. Really."

Big Al crushed the butt, blowing out the last of the smoke at me, dug into his jeans pocket and tossed a five on the table. He looked at the guys.

"See you guys tomorrow," he said. We all watched him stumble out the Lone Star's front door.

"Nice job."

I turned to look at Helen. A damn dog had almost gotten us smashed by a log truck. My heart played the mamba and Helen sat there, a relaxed hand inches from my thigh. I stared at the hand and worked my eyes up her smooth, bare arm, over to her hiding belly button and flat stomach, and up past her denim top.

"Thanks," I said to her reddish-orange lips.

The tongue came out, moistening. "You're welcome," they said.

Then a hand crawled over to my thigh, gave it a gentle squeeze and slipped onto my crotch. My legs parted slightly. The other hand joined in, helping the first undo my fly, pulling it out like some prize catch. The eyes stopped just over my thigh, saying something I've wanted to hear for a long time. The mouth was open.

"Shit!" The jeep jerked to the right, slamming into the barricade

The tingling in my legs has stopped now — the only part of me that doesn't feel cold. The sun was low in the sky. I looked from side to side, slowly, so my head

wouldn't pop. Where'd that trooper go? And where were the damn paramedics?

What happened?

"I don't know!" I told the trooper again. "All I know is that . . ."

It was Jennie. Coming back to town in her dad's station wagon. I was looking at Karin (young firm breasts and full lips) and drifted. I saw the wagon, catching Jennie's wide eyes, and swerved, and Helen was down on me (mouth pulling hard) and I drifted, slamming into Karin and Jennie screamed (one hand covering the womb) and we hit the deer and . . .

Dad was hunched over on one knee, the ball holding up his right arm. He was coughing, but it was a gurgling that I'd never quite heard before. His face was turned away from me but I could tell it was the color of a ripe watermelon. I looked at him and he seemed so small to me now. He tried to stand, then fell to the one knee again. He tried this over and over, the whole time hacking and taking in short, loud breaths. I stepped toward him but he shook his head and the hacking got louder. I stopped. I blinked at him as he tried again to stand. I was cold and I kept blinking until I couldn't make him out in the fading light.

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