

“There at the Bottom”
by Dustin Quinn

There at the bottom things opened up. Flat, level ground, the road dry and gray.

Safe.

We were safe. We were in control, right?

I looked at Polly’s feet on the pedals, her grip on the wheel. We were between the lines, in the exact middle of the road. The road was straight now and we were moving slowly, headlights steady, trees passing on the sides. My right hand was clutching the seat. My feet were dug into the floor: No traction? Use your feet.

I relaxed a little, uncurling my toes. Polly stared straight ahead. Polly kept it together.

We’d just slid down a mountainside for over a mile. As we descended, we saw a deer—that’s what stuck with me. It came out of nowhere, looking up from the grass and the snow; it looked at us like we were crazy, and we went sliding by. We couldn’t stop, couldn’t even slow down, the wheels grabbing just enough traction every few hundred feet to keep us from sliding into an abyss. It was dark; we didn’t have an idea what was down there, probably a river at the bottom—roads followed rivers—probably white-water tearing into rock, boulders like bottle fragments. But we didn’t know how far down it was and we didn’t want to know; we prayed that we wouldn’t know—and Polly drove. That steering wheel—I’d seen the Power Team before, these flat-top Christian guys that rip phone books in half, twist crowbars like coat hangers and say prayers and turn red. *God*, they say, *God* is the one that does it, God is the *real* power. And that’s how Polly drove, like she was tearing the yellow pages over her knee. Polly was normally a catastrophe behind the wheel, and we touched nothing—

No trees. No cars. No guardrail. Nothing—

We should have hit *something*. We had no control. We were powerless. We just *slid*.

We survived and we should be dead—that's what this meant to me.

I turned to Polly. "We should be dead."

"Shut the fuck up," she said.

We pulled over; gravel crunched beneath the tires. I could hear every piece of it, every jagged edge as it popped underneath and zinged in different directions. As we stopped, sudden silence, I could hear everything for miles—the slapping tread of a truck's blown tire striking the interstate in the distance, its grumbling engine. I heard the river—there was a river—and felt it rushing. The river felt like it was underfoot. My heart surged in my ears. I could feel the hot fluids there breathing, swishing, gulping—

I could hear Polly's quick breathing. Polly was panting, asthmatic without the wheeze.

"You okay?" I asked. She looked okay, and not okay. She looked horrible.

She left the engine running. We sat in a small alcove next to a dirty snow bank, headlights cast down into a brown, half-frozen puddle. She checked her mirrors—were we off the road, out of the way? A truck coming down that hill could—

She still had her hands on the wheel. She moved her jaw around; it made little clicking noises. She looked at me: Is that *normal*?

"Does it normally do that?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"I don't think it does," I said. "Does it hurt?" That was my universal diagnostic tool: did it hurt? That was normally followed by *where* does it hurt, and *how*, and is it muscle or is it bone?—

I reached across to touch her face; she jerked away. "What?" I said.

"I don't know," she said again. "Just fucking *relax*. Just—"

“Okay—” I unclicked my seatbelt and let it flop against the door.

She folded the mirror down from the sun visor; the lights lit up. She inspected herself, leaning forward. “My teeth hurt,” she said. She touched them with her fingers. “They feel loose.”

“Your teeth are fine. You just— That was stressful. You probably grinded them.”

She checked the side of her head. “I think I hit the window.” She touched softly.

I kept my hands to myself. I sighed, creating steam on the glass. “Well, are you going to make it?” I said. It was a line I used on her nieces: scraped knees, fist-fights, tragedies on bikes—

“Don’t screw with me,” she said. But she threatened to smile.

I held up my hands innocently.

I was filled with excitement—adrenaline, I guess. I felt like—this is strange—I felt like a hunter. I could still hear the river, the entire mountain, the live things in there. I felt *alive*—

Polly was looking at me. “You don’t look so stressed.”

It was true; I wasn’t. “Do you realize the car turned completely to the side?” I said to Polly. I moved in my seat, my elbow against the door, to demonstrate. “You were like this. You were fucking *sideways*. The car was—”

“I know. *Jesus*.” Her voice was a hiss. “I just went into this other *mode*. I don’t know what it was—”

“I’m glad you did. I’ve seen you run over shopping carts.”

Polly shook her head. Suddenly, on the verge of laughing, she was emotional. "I didn't want to do this trip, Robert," she said. "I had a feeling. I just knew... the whole situation, the funeral—"

"I know," I said. I shushed her with my hands.

"Yeah, *you* know," she said. She looked at me sideways.

I could hear cylinders clacking, vacuums hissing—it was getting stranger, this adrenaline thing, the hearing. I wanted it to stop. "Kill the car," I said.

Polly killed the car.

The lights of the city lay in front of us. Huge, expansive stitches of lights, yellow lights and white, blinking lights and static ones, an ambulance far off, sitting there in a parking lot—all of it way down below, out of reach. The lights lay out like a blanket, darkness at the edges, dry, sand-colored mountains beyond, everything snow-covered but the roads, the whole scene a white computer chip surrounded with rocks. The sky was a black bowl of shimmering pin-pricks, the moon a fingernail sliver, Orion rising—
What city is this?— It's Albuquerque. New Mexico—

It all came back to me. Bill James.

We were traveling to Utah, up from West Texas. Amarillo—we were all from there in some past life: Polly, Bill, and me, and all the others that came around, too many to say. Bill was an old friend and an old man—older than the rest of us by thirty years, thirty-five—and he was crazy, and now, dead. It wasn't entirely a surprise; at this point it was almost funny, in a bitter, pointless way. Bill had fallen off a billboard, straight down sixty feet into a ditch. And that was it. A fire put out by gravity. In the morning, somebody stopped to tie down some furniture at the side of the freeway and—whoops!—there was a dead man. A dead man surrounded by splattered paint.

The funeral was at a bar, a bar that doubled as a bowling alley, a bowling alley that was some kind of church—we'd heard vague things, all of them outrageous, the way Bill would

“want” it. They say that life is a paradox, a confluence of opposites, a lot of seeming contradictions that work in harmony. Bill was that, to a tee—just add alcohol and lust for teenage women and an interest in spirituality. Being around Bill—even now, just *thinking* about him—was like being the center of a joke. A joke with no punch line, a joke where everyone laughed but no one knew why. Bill himself said that tragedy and comedy are the same thing, and that God is a bowler, and then he laughed that harsh laugh and lit up a joint, scratching his ass with the bricks on the side of his house, looking concentrated as he humped up and down—

Maybe “Wild” Bill James was a confluence of bullshit. Maybe it was a suicide—who the fuck knew? This isn’t a mystery story. Or maybe it is, in some different way.

Polly clicked her jaw again, touching her fingers to her cheek. She sat still for a moment and breathed, staring at her own face, not sure whether to laugh or cry or probe her skin for acne. She made her eyes big, like to wake herself up, like in a horror movie. She turned in her seat to look up at the mountain behind us, rolling down her window so she could see it. She opened the door and put one foot outside, turning back. It was dark outside, light in the car; she couldn’t see anything. “I’d like to see that thing during the day,” she said.

“I don’t ever want to see that thing again,” I said. “We’re going back a different way.”

She nodded. “I can’t even believe this car,” she said. “Do you know how old and beat up this car is, Robert? Do you know how many miles I’ve got on this fucking car?” She ducked her head to consult the odometer, peering under the wheel.

Out loud, in an official voice, she read the numbers—

“I love this car,” I said. I stroked the dashboard, then patted it, like a big dog, then went back to stroking it again. I leaned forward and touched the vinyl to my cheek, smelling the smell of this car. I told the car, privately, that I loved it very much. In the front, beneath the hood, there was a contented clicking sound. I felt like I’d been kissed by a child.

By now, I guess you can see what happened.

I had to get out. I opened the door; the light came on next to my head. Above, the stars were cold, softened by the glowing city, but the air was warm and gentle, or maybe I was warm. I breathed steam—thick steam, billowing out like smoke and rising, tiny crystals dissipating into black—and that made me realize. It was cold, probably in the thirties, *lower* thirties. I felt nothing. I felt gentle warm air.

I needed to relax. I'd never been worked up like this before. What *drama*, Robert! *You don't do that*, something in my mind insisted. You *don't* slide that far down a grade like that, through twists and turns like a ball of yarn, you don't do that and survive untouched. *Untouched!* That was *sheer ice!* So many things!—

There was an argument blossoming inside my head:

You *could* do that. These things happened.

They *don't* happen. Not like that. It went on forever. A thousand long seconds.

It just felt *like* forever. You were lucky, Robert, that's all. *Lucky*. Be glad.

I wondered what Bill would say. Bill would have something to say.

Bill had once stepped out into the yard to take a piss—he was prone to do that, especially at night; he made a big deal out of how good it was to piss under the stars—and when he came back in he left things *out*. It was shocking, but not entirely shocking. Polly was there—we were both there, and somebody else, but they were sleeping on the couch—when Bill came inside the door, his briefs pulled down around his testicles.

“What if,” Bill proposed, loudly, “what if Jesus came inside the door looking just like this? Just like *this?*” His knees were cocked, his hands slicing down to show where the attention was to be focused. On his face he wore an insane, scholarly expression, eyebrows raised, glasses crooked on his haggard, sun-dried face. Bill was an ugly man.

I remember what Polly said. She sat there in a stuffed recliner, her own immovable, unshockable expression on her face. "I'm sure Jesus would be better hung," she said. And she smoked and held up a crooked finger—a limp, pitiful, dangling finger.

I remember Bill glared at Polly like she'd missed the point entirely—he had that special you-missed-the-point-entirely look, so exasperated, were he could never position his glasses quite right on his nose. He could never quite get you under focus when he was feeling that way. He left his pants down to spite her—a night's worth of comedy—and I don't remember where it went from there. Probably straight up his ass.

I remember, like so many times, wondering what the point was. And I recall, vividly, the crumpled state of Bill's dick, the sounds of somebody on the couch snoring, the smoke hanging around Polly's beautiful face like a curtain, the mystery of Mona Lisa in her eyes.

Now, I looked upward. I half-expected to see a connect-the-dots kind of constellation, a note from Bill, or maybe from God himself: You're Welcome, Robert. You're Very Welcome. There Are Special Things In The Works For You...

I was calmed enough to feel stupid for that thought.

Bitterly, I laughed at myself and the stars stayed where they were, the beautiful disarray. I lit up a cigarette; the match sizzled in the snow. I took the smoke deep into my lungs and held it there. I began to relax; my breathing was normal, my volume in my ears dropped a few decibels. Thinking of Bill, I began to laugh. Then felt like crying. I was a mess.

Polly stayed inside the car. She had her phone on her lap; she needed to call and tell somebody the story, and quickly. Probably her mother—they talked every day, especially her being on the road, all the hazards—Polly dialed the phone furiously, testing it against her ear, dialing again, talking *at* the phone, the voice-memory thing. She waited while the phone rang. She opened and closed her fist under the light, inspecting it, turning it over. She looked across at me and smiled. She held up her hand to show me: It works!

I found a boulder, a granite black chunk of rock with snow on the top, smooth but full of pits, and leaned against it. I slid down and was squatting, elbows on knees, palms on my cheeks. The boulder was volcanic; it seemed that I could feel the heat, this intensity alive

in the rock, this vitality as old as the earth. I'd never had senses like this before. The sounds, the smells—

A truck appeared on the road and approached cautiously. It was a cop.

I stood up. He shined his spotlight directly at my face and instantly I was blinded. Instantly, I felt like a criminal; I dropped the cigarette and realized I just littered. I smiled politely into the light. You could communicate with an alien with that light.

He took the truck out of gear and stepped out onto the gravel. His face was unclear, blurred at the edges, like birds in the sunset. I saw his dark uniform, the badge, things hanging from his hip, all those things cops carry—

“How we doin’?” he hollered.

I shielded myself from the light. “Fine! Taking a break!”

I glanced through the window at Polly; she was deeply involved in telling the story, her hands flying around like a person enveloped in bugs. She was lost in it—it was definitely her Mom. Her Mom's name is Molly—Molly and Polly; they were a duo, renowned. I caught her eye by staring at her; with my eyes I directed her to look behind her. She turned in her seat, switched the phone to her other ear. She turned back to me and mouthed: *What the hell is this—?*

I shrugged: It's a cop. I smiled at the cop. I felt like laughing.

Polly said something into the phone, then a pause, then a lot more things. She kept talking, her eyes half on me; she was being pulled by two forces. She shrugged: *Fuck the cop; I'm talking to my Mom—*

The cop leaned into his open window and shut off the spotlight. I almost dropped to my knees—I don't know why. My eyes went blank; I saw tie-dye at the edge of my vision, mingling with the white of the snow. He moved toward me; he walked like stiff leather boots. He wore a giant nylon parka, fur-lined, a hat made from an animal.

“Not a good place to park,” he said. He indicated the mountain we’d just come down, looking up at it like he’d taken part in building it. “People come sliding into the ditch all the time. Nastiest road in New Mexico, right there.”

“Looks like it,” I said.

“You just come down it?”

“We did. Nasty.”

“You got that right.” He offered a whistle. He stood there like a cop.

He apparently wanted to hang out. He wanted to tell stories.

I thought of telling him our story, our narrow escape, the dark chasm below, a mile-long sheet of ice— I *wanted* to tell him; I’m a naturally personable man, a man who had just witnessed an outright miracle, a moment—several moments, maybe minutes—of what they called *grace*. But I thought better of it.

You don’t tell cops anything personal; it’s a rule. Cops are not your friends. Cops penalize candor and despise personable individuals. To a cop, if you acted kindly, casually—personably—you were one of three things. You were intoxicated, unintimidated, or an ass-kisser. All three were anathema to a cop, to different degrees.

The rule: keep your mouth shut. Respect yourself; treat a cop like a cop.

He stood in front of me. “Trucks come down off that hill all the time, completely out of control.”

There was a moment of silence while we listened for one.

“I believe it,” I said.

He nodded. “It’s worth believing. That your cigarette?” He shined his flashlight on the smoke. It was blue against the snow.

I bent to pick it up, examining the label. "Must be," I said. I crunched the ember in the snow and held the butt to my side. "Sorry."

The cop grunted. "Forest fires get started that way. Just a leeeettle carelessness—"

"You're right," I said. I didn't mention the hundreds of miles of snow, the blanket that covered everything, the function of snow in fire prevention. Bitterly, I thought it—

He smiled to soften his words. "Just a friendly warning," he said to the air above. He was looking up at the stars, marveling, thumbs hooked on his belt.

"Educational more than anything. Now isn't this beautiful?"

With his flashlight the cop showed me a traffic sign. It was run completely over, level with the snow, bent over like hurricane footage. I wasn't sure if I was being reprimanded or educated. I nodded and crossed my arms.

"Just had this re-erected last week," the cop said, his voice grave. "Now somebody's gone and run it down again, just—what?—two nights ago? Can you believe that? Soon as we get it fixed up again somebody comes sliding down the hill, runs it into the ground again. Then they take off."

He knelt to examine the sign; his whole uniform made a creaking noise. "I don't blame them, it *was* a helluva storm—" He stroked his chin and shook his head; nothing new of interest with the sign. He stood. The case of the sign, it seemed, would remain unsolved. "I don't know how they got out of there, whoever it was—"

I felt cold. "We're just taking a break," I said. "We just came down. We felt we needed a break. We'll be moving as soon as we can." I looked at my watch; I didn't have my watch. Where the hell was my watch? I patted my pockets; no watch. I came up blank—

The cop nodded his understanding. "Good to take a break if you need one. Good to be responsible. Plenty out there who aren't." He gave me a meaningful look.

"Plenty," I said. I nodded full agreement.

He scanned the windows of the car with the beam of his flashlight. I saw our clothes in wads in the back seat, the box with the bananas and packages and litter. There were the granola bars, a carton of Marlboro's, Polly's dress she would wear to Bill's funeral—

—Why was he staring at our things? What the *hell*? I stared at him, the planes of the side of his face, the animal hat. I wanted to rummage through *his* truck—

"We've got nothing illegal," I said. I made no effort to contain the spite in my voice.

He nodded absently, the light held like a shoulder-cannon next to his ear. He lighted the back of Polly's head, the straight brown hair, through the window. Polly shot him a look that reminded me of the deer, except she expected it. She smiled politely—it was more of a scowl.

Good girl.

She leaned across to roll down the window. "Hey," she said. She had the phone sitting in her lap, the face glowing green. She had apparently hung up with her mother. "Did we do something?"

The way the cop looked at me I expected him to clap me on the shoulder in congratulations. "*Did* you do something?" he said. The cop smiled, still holding his light to Polly's face. He adjusted the knob on his radio.

I was annoyed; I wanted him to leave. I lit up another cigarette and dropped the match into the snow. I looked at Polly, sitting uncomfortably in the driver's seat, leaning across, the parking break handle across her ribs. The light in her face made her look like she'd just woken up. Polly looked at the cop, her mouth stuck for words, trying to figure out if he was joking—

The cop held up a gloved hand and smiled; he was apparently kidding. I hated this man. "I was just explaining to your friends here about this road," he said. He pointed back up the mountain, as if there could be any mistake about which road he meant. "Nastiest road in the state," he said. He stood staring up at it like it might do something unpredictable at any moment. "Five deaths on that road just last season. *Eight* the

season before that.” The cop was patient with himself; he spoke slowly. “You see that sign?”

“Yeah—?” said Polly. She pressed buttons on the phone with her thumb. The phone made robot noises.

I loved her. She understood everything.

I smoked with confidence. I watched the smoke mingle with the stars and drift away. The cop regarded me for a moment. “I’d recommend you get moving,” he said. “This is a dangerous road.” He offered a smile, and was gone.