

## FALL FROM POWER

Twilight ushered black into the sky, deepening the old tarmac road to black and camouflaging its irregularities with tree shadows. The shadows were thrust into one another until the line dividing the road from the gravel shoulder and ditch was almost obliterated. A long finger of smooth, slimy, black oil trailed to an unfinished end, filling a dip in the road. Its menace was signified by a pale reflection of the moon upon its shiny surface. It was at this point that the road flew into a hairpin turn. Even in the dark, the history of ancient skids could not be covered but took on the appearance of shadows instead – a legacy bequeathed from the lights of a nearby farmhouse. The evening was not silent. The sounds of day were hushed by an awe and terror that seemed dangerous to destroy. The road was rarely busy, although used regularly by several families whose farms lined the miles beyond the curve.

A thin shield of clouds, like a gossamer lampshade, veiled the crescent moon. Only a weak glow was emitted which deepened shadows in their mergence of road and ditch. A pale glint upon the oil was the only acknowledgment to the light. It was a dangerous stretch of road at the best of times, nicknamed 'Deadman's Curve' by local families. For years people had been worrying about it - yet no noteworthy action had been accomplished.

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Her laugh was shrill with excitement and fear; her eyes round as full moons, possessing an almost maniacal light. Her entire body betrayed nervousness, with its shaking, twitching and sudden bouts of movement to release suppressed tensions. Every so often, she would bounce up and down in the seat, abandoning herself to the thrill as only a child can. She was small for her eight years; her face thin, with a pasty complexion. She had a wide mouth, expressing more of a grimace than a grin, which revealed a row of yellowish, slightly over-lapping teeth. Her nose was long and thin, if a little large, and shock of straggly, thin hair was loosed from its ponytail to frame her ears. Her fear in tight control, she continued to vent her excitement with determined enthusiasm. Breathlessly, her shrill voice yelled to the driver of the car, who was seated in front of her.

"More - faster, Adolph - faster!" The car replied to the request with an extra surge of speed, inciting the girl into another bout of laughter as she bounced back against the pale brown seat.

There was a passenger in the front seat as well - a teenage girl, who sat forwards, tensed; her eyes glued to the road with horror. Her face was not a pretty one, though often described as attractive with its sharp features and pale countenance. But an excessive pallor emphasised her features to the extreme, washing her of all claim to comeliness. She appeared to be caught in a paralysis. Her pupils were dilated and her dark hair hung in an uneven line about her shoulders. Her shapeless brown, dress was

creased from the continual clutching and releasing motions of her hands. Her mouth hung open slightly, moving at regular intervals as if to speak, but no sounds ushered forth. Her fear was written clearly in the drawn contours of her face. Her chest heaved convulsively as she drew huge, uneven breaths.

The speedometer crept upwards; a red needle marking ninety-five...ninety-eight...a hundred. The driver studied the road with an intensity of concentration that blinded him to those within the car. He seemed to be willing the car into flight and gloried in the power within his hands. His tongue was firmly imprisoned between his teeth as he devoted his entire being to speed and direction. His brown hair was greasy, and fell untidily across his forehead to touch his eyes, causing him to jerk his neck at intermittent intervals in an attempt to throw it aside. A faded, blue plaid shirt covered his thin frame, unbuttoned at the neck, overlapping stained jeans. His bare foot exercised yet more pressure in the gas pedal. Forehead and cheeks were marred by acne. His upper lip held the stiff fuzz of promise. Knuckles were white with strain as he clutched the steering wheel in a death grip. His whole being seemed to thrive in the excitement and suspense of the ride. Eyes began to narrow as slow recognition of familiar landmarks penetrated his memory.

His young sister reached a thin hand from the back seat, clutched his shoulder, and dug her fingers into it. A slow fear permeated her features. The young man's foot flew to the brake and pressed. The girl beside him squeezed her eyes shut, only to reopen them...her throat heaved but no sound was emitted. The car wheel hit the oil skid.

The driver's right hand flew up to his eyes in protest; his sister was frozen behind him in a half standing position. The girl at his side opened her eyes wider and wider. Her scream found sound, but was not shrill - it was hoarse and deep, one, which was to scar the memories of all within hearing for a long, long time...

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The radio news echoed hollowly within the sterile atmosphere of the doctor's waiting room. A large clock upon the pale green wall was the only object competing for sound during the sudden lull in the movements of the room's occupants.

The people tensed themselves at the words of the news commentator - allowing the sound to penetrate fully, before forcing themselves to relax and allow a feeling of reprieve to sweep them.

*"...car skidded at 'Deadman's Curve' and crashed into a tree. There were three occupants in the vehicle; Marie Dupays, 16, in fair condition; driver, Adolph Bohmer, 17, in serious condition and his eight year old sister, Wanda, in critical condition in hospital..."*

An elderly woman, seated away from the others in the room, straightened her back with determination, and sniffed. Her grey hair was severely trapped in a bun at the nape of

her neck, her face set in a disapproving frown. She gazed down her nose through a pair of round glasses, to the knitting on her lap.

"Humph - probably speeding anyway - serves them right - can't trust anyone on the road these days." She gave her grey skirt a quick tug, as if to insure it hid her knees, and continued with her handiwork.

A young man, dressed in a brown suit, leaned forwards, his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped in front of him. Very slowly, he began to shake his head in a preoccupied manner. A puzzled frown gathered his forehead. He tapped his fingers nervously on the back of alternate hands as if to prompt memory. The frown broke suddenly, as his puzzlement found an answer.

"Adolph Bohmer..." he was barely audible in his murmuring, "Adolph Bohmer...yeah, he was the weird guy back at High School...never liked him much." His face screwed into momentary distaste. He bushed a hand across his face, then rubbed the bump on his nose, as if to erase a memory. Picking up a magazine he sat back and stared at the cover without seeing it. The cover photo showed a circle contained an upside down 'Y' with the forked end bisected, and a circle of question marks surrounding it.

The only other person in the room was a young woman, with a baby in her arms. Her face was round and flushed, her black hair short and straight. She rocked the child, a young boy, back and forth in an absent-minded manner. Suddenly, she clutched him close to her, causing him to give a sharp cry. Her lips moved slightly in a feverish prayer.

"Oh, God - please - no more - no more -" She gazed at the child with a glint of tears hiding the sudden fear in her eyes. "Not you, love - it could never happen to you." She lifted the child quickly and planted a kiss on his forehead, disregarding the steady stream of wails that resulted.

The radio became alive with song and a door from the next room flew open, jerking everyone to attention. An uneasy atmosphere claimed the room. Showing a momentary surprise, the nurse then regulated her plain features into their customary indifference, adjusted her cap, and smoothed her stiff skirt before announcing the next patient.

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The sun gave an early light to the world, centring on the day's transformation of 'Deadman's Curve'. It revealed the gigantic boulder around which the road had been detoured - the trees opposite the ditch, and the car, half collapsed, splattered with blood, and wrapped around one of the trees. The car had managed a partial turn, but not enough to avoid the ditch. Several more feet and it would have gone down the bank into the river. The dark green vehicle was poised in an upwards position, as if preparing

to take flight. The area was unnaturally silent, but a dead echo of skidding and a scream hovered in the air, as if the slightest whisper could provoke them into sound....

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Adolph lay back and closed his eyes; his body so tensed that beads of perspiration broke out. The skin on his face was stretched tautly over his cheekbones and threatened to rip at any moment. Bandages swathed his right arm. He suffered from concussion and shock, and had damaged his spine - extent unknown. The remnants of a headache could be detected in the puckering of his forehead, which deepened with concentration.

"I can't move them - I can't!" His voice fell into a ragged silence, and he opened his eyes and stared at his father. His voice was thick and indistinct - he had practically bitten his tongue off during the crash. Every word he spoke and every move he made etched another pain into his memory. The doctor had told him he was 'lucky'.

His father was ill at ease, his hands moving continuously to scratch the bald section on his head, then to play with the fingers of his other hand - rubbing, flexing, scratching, always moving. He cleared his throat, feeling constrained and ill in the room. He sat down stiffly in a chair beside the bed. He tried to speak once again.

"Uh...now, Adolph...you...it...well, after all...it takes...uh...time, you know...er, time to...uh, know how you're feelin'..." The words sank into a pregnant silence.

"Feeling? FEELING?" Adolph's voice cracked with mirthless laughter. "Oh, god, Pa - you better believe something - I wish to god I was feeling - in my legs at least! I'm gonna be a cripple - get that? A goddamned cripple!" His voice ended on a shrill scream as he raised himself onto his elbows. Then he fell back and turned his head away from his father. He began to sob - there were no tears, but the sobs strained every nerve in his body.

Restraint broke down and his father reached over and gathered him into his arms. His eyes were staring blindly across the room as his son's words rang through his brain time and time again.

"No - you can't - you ain't gonna be - oh god, no -"

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Marie Dupays had miraculously escaped injury except for a large gash across her forehead and a fractured arm. Bruises and minor cuts were evident, but not serious. Shock had kept her under constant surveillance during the night. She was to remain in hospital a few more days, under observation. Purple shadowed her eyes and a dazed look held her face immobile, while her brother spoke to her. He was tall and bony with a

long, sharp nose and small, narrow eyes. A nervous gesture kept his hand rubbing his receding hairline. He stared fixedly at the floor as he spoke.

"Now, I'm telling you, Mar - If Ma and Pa were alive today they'd be dead set against you 'n that Adolph guy - so I'm asking - no I'm telling you, Mar - that he ain't coming to the house anymore. If he can't take care of you and hasn't the brains to take the 'Curve' slow-like - well, he ain't going around with no sister of mine. See?"

He looked up at her for the first time during his speech, anger infiltrating his face as he saw Marie brushing the bandage at her temple with her fingertips. "Yeah, sure, Fred. I'm not too keen on seeing him again anyhow." Her voice was tired, underlined with a faint trace of bitterness.

She closed her eyes and Fred arose uncertainly. He had said what he wanted to, and didn't know quite what to do next. He walked to the door, then turned. "Mar - uh...I...sure hope you're feelin' better." A few long strides carried him down the hall.

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In another section of the hospital lay Wanda. Her room was dark and her bed surrounded with instruments. She had not yet regained consciousness, and the doctors were uncertain as to the extent of internal injuries. Outwardly, with the exception of minor bruises and lacerations, she was fine. Her face was pale - almost blue in the dim room. An intravenous tube was inserted into her left arm, attached to a large bottle at the head of the bed.

Her mother was kneeling at the foot of the bed; dried tears lining her face, her hands clasped in front of her. They were rough hands with blue veins starkly marking the backs of them as she clenched them tightly.

She had kept this position for more than half an hour. She finally stood up, her legs aching so much, she could hardly straighten them. Her overweight form sagged. She spoke hesitantly to the still form on the bed.

"Well--see ya, Wanda..." There was no response from the child. The woman turned away and slowly made her departure. A remaining prayer was lodged firmly in her eyes. Hope.