**Terrified by C.B. Gilford**

Paul Santin had had a good day. Small town doctors and drug stores were doing a thriving business, and, therefore, so was Paul Santin, pharmaceutical salesman. But it had been a long day, and now it was past eleven. Santin was driving fast on the country back road, trying to make it home before midnight.

He was tired, sleepy, fighting to stay awake for another half hour. But he was not dozing. He was in complete control of his car. He knew what he was doing.

He’d passed a few other cars. Right now the road seemed deserted. He’d chosen this route just for that reason. Light traffic. And that’s the way it was – an almost empty road – when he saw the other car.

He saw it first as a pair of headlights rounding the curve a quarter mile ahead. The lights were fantastically bright, and the driver failed to dim them. Santin cursed him, whoever he was. He dimmed his own lights, but received no answering courtesy. He cursed again, vindictively switched his own lights back to highway brightness. But he sensed no real danger in it.

He was vaguely aware that the other car was rocketing toward him at high speed. Too much speed for the kind of road they were on. Mechanically, he slacked off on the accelerator, concentrated on staying on his own side of the road, and on not looking directly at those oncoming lights.

But it was much too late when he realised the other car was hogging the centre of the road. And he had to make his decision too quickly. Whether to bore right in, perhaps leaning on his horn, hoping the other driver would pull aside. Or to hit the shoulder and take his chances with gravel and dirt.

He took the second choice, but not soon enough. He saw the other car wasn’t going to concede an inch; so he swerved to the right. The blow was delivered against his left rear fender and wheel. The rear of his car skidded ditchward ahead of the front. Then the whole car seemed to defy gravity. It rolled sideways, leaped into the air, throwing Sanin clear of itself at the top of the leap.

He didn’t see or hear the final crash of the machine. All his consciousness was in the impact of his body against the hillside that met him like a solid wall; then he slid downward in the midst of a miniature avalanche of small stones and dirt. Afterwards he lay still, and so was all the world around him.

In that first moment, he felt no pain. The shock had numbed him. But he knew he was alive. He knew he was somehow conscious. He was also distantly, vaguely aware that his body was broken and beginning to bleed.

The blinding lights were gone. He was lying on his back in a patch of weeds. Above him were the stars and a bright full moon. The seemed closer to him than they had ever seemed before. Perhaps it was that optical illusion that first gave him the idea he was going to die.

At that moment, he felt no anger about it. He could remember his anger before the crash, but it was a distant, unreal thing to him. Again the thought of dying flitted across his mind. The dying feel nothing toward other creatures. They are completely concerned with themselves.

Then he heard the voices. A renewal of contact with the world. There’d been people in that other car. He wondered about them, calmly, without fury, without sympathy. But he gave all his attention to the listening.

‘He isn’t here.’ A masculine voice a bit young.

The other car had been hit too. It had been stopped. Or perhaps the drier had stopped the car without being forced to. Anyway, the people from that car, whoever they were, had walked back to his car and were looking for him.

To help him? His first instinct was to call out, guide them to where he lay. They’d been selfish in hogging the road, but now they were charitable, wanting to aid. But then another instinct rose to fight against the first. Would they really be friendly? Suddenly he felt terrified of them. Without knowing why. Surely everybody wants to help accident victims. Don’t they?

‘He must’ve been thrown out.’ A girl’s voice answering. Frightened.

‘I guess so. What’ll we do?’ The same masculine voice. So there must only be two of them.

‘Look for him,’ the girl said.

A hesitation. ‘Why?’

Another hesitation. ‘Don’t you want to know what happened to him…or her?’

‘I don’t know.’ The masculine voice trembled. ‘I don’t know…’

‘I think we ought to look around and find him.’

‘Okay…It’s dark though.’

‘You’ve got a flashlight, haven’t you?’

‘Sure. I’ll get it.’

Footsteps up on the road. The boy returning to his own car for the flashlight. And then silence again.

Santin waited, trembling in a sweat of new fear. He hadn’t liked the sound of those voices. That boy and girl weren’t people who would be of much help.

If he was dying? He was certain of it. The pain was beginning now. He could identify it in several places. His face, his chest, both his legs. And somewhere deep inside him, where nobody could reach but a doctor. That was the area of pain that made him certain of death.

So it didn’t matter, did it? Whether or not they found him with their flashlight?

‘Okay, I’ve got it.’ The boy’s voice. ‘Where do we look?’

‘In the ditch, I guess.’

Scuffling footsteps, disturbing the gravel, crunching through the grass and brush. Then a winking light, sweeping back and forth. Both the light and the footsteps getting nearer. Inevitably they would find him. He could speed their search by calling to them. But he didn’t. He waited.

‘Hey!’

The light was in his face. Paralysed, he couldn’t seem to turn away fron it. The footsteps hurried. And then they were there. Two forms standing over him, outlined against the sky. And the light shining in his eyes. He blinked, but they didn’t seem to understand that the light bothered him.

‘He’s alive.’ The girl. ‘His eyes are open.’

‘Yeah. I see…’

‘But he’s hurt.’ The figure who was the girl knelt down beside him, mercifully shielding him from the flashlight. Because of the brightness of the moon, he could see her face.

She was young, terribly young, sixteen maybe. She was pretty too, her hair dark, her skin pale, perhaps abnormally so, her made-up mouth lurid in contrast. But there was no emotion in her face. She was in shock possibly. But as her eyes roved over his injuries, no sympathy lighted in her eyes.

‘You’re pretty badly hurt, aren’t you?’ The question was right at him.

‘Yes…’ He discovered that he could speak without great difficulty.

‘Where? Do you know?’

All over, I guess. Inside especially.’

The girl was thoughtful over his reply. Her next question seemed cold, calculated. ‘Do you think you could pull through if we got help?’

He thought too, gave himself time to answer. But even so, he made a mistake. ‘I think I’m going to die,’ he said, and knew he had made a mistake as soon as he’d said it.

The girl’s face changed somehow, imperceptibly. Santin couldn’t fathom the change. He only knew it had happened. She pulled away from him, rose to her feet, rejoining the boy.

‘He’s going to die,’ she said. As if she knew it as certainly as Santin himself.

‘There’s no use trying to find a doctor then, is there?’ The boy sounded relieved, as if his responsibility for this whole thing had ended now.

‘I guess not.’

‘What’ll we do then?’

‘Nothing, I guess. Just wait here. A car’s bound to come along sometime.’

‘We can ride back to town then, huh?’ The boy seemed to depend completely on the girl for leadership.

‘Sure. We can send a doctor or somebody back. But this guy will probably be dead by then. And we’ll have to report it to the police.’

‘The police?’

‘We’ll have to. You killed a man.’

There was silence then. Santin lay at their feet, looking up at the two silhouetted figures. They were talking about him as already dead. But somehow it didn’t anger him yet. Maybe because he considered himself dead too.

‘Arelene…what’ll they do to me?’

‘Who, the police?’

‘Yes. ..You said I killed a man.’

‘Well, you did, didn’t you?’

The boy hesitated. ‘But it was an accident,’ he managed finally. ‘You know it was an accident, don’t you Arelene? I mean, it just happened…’

‘Sure.’

They were talking softly, but Santin could hear every word they said. And he felt compelled somehow to speak. ‘Every accident is somebody’s fault,’ he told them.

They were startled. He could see them look at each other, then down at him again. ‘What do you mean by that, mister?’ the boy asked after a moment.

‘This accident was your fault. That’s what I mean.’ He still wasn’t angry. That wasn’t why he argued. But he felt the blame should be established.

‘How was it my fault?

‘First of all, you didn’t dim your lights…’

‘Well neither did you.’

‘I did at first.’

‘But you switched back to highway lights again.’

‘Only after you refused to dim.’

The boy was silent again for a moment. Then he sai, ‘ But when we hit, you had your lights on bright.’

Santin had to admit it. ‘I got mad,’ he said. ‘But that’s not the most important thing. You were driving over on my side of the road.’

The boy’s face went around to the girl. ‘Arlene, was I on his side of the road?’

It seemed she giggled. Or something like it. ‘How do I know? We were –‘

She didn’t finish the sentence, but Santin guessed the rest of it. They’d been necking, or petting, or whatever young people called it these days. That was why the boy hadn’t dimmed his lights. And that was why he’d had poor control of his car. And now he, Santin had to pay the price of their good time.

It angered him, finally. With a curious sort of anger. Detached somehow, separate from himself. Because now in the long run it didn’t really matter to him. Since he was going to die.

But also Santin felt a certain satisfaction. He could speak vindictively, and with assurance. ‘You see, you were on the wrong side of the road. So it was your fault.’

The boy heard him, but he kept looking at the girl. ‘What will they do to me?’ he asked her. ‘ The police, I mean. What will they do to me?’

‘How do I know?’ she snapped at him. She’d been so calm. Now maybe the intitial shock was wearing off. Now maybe she was becoming frightened, nervous.

‘Even if I was on the wrong side of the road,’ the boy said, ‘ it was still an accident. I didn’t try to run into this guy’s car. I didn’t try to kill him.’

‘That’s right…’

‘You read about these things in the paper. Nothing much happens to the driver. Maybe he gets fined. But my dad can pay that. And even if I had to go to jail, it wouldn’t be for long, would it, Arelene? What do you think it would be? Thirty days?’

‘Or maybe sixty. That wouldn’t be so bad.’

Santin listened to them. And slowly the anger welled higher in him. Or maybe even ninety days, he could have added. Some insurance company would pay. But the killer himself wouldn’t pay nearly enough. Ninety days for murder.

‘There’s just one thing,‘ the boy said suddenly.

 ‘What?’

‘It’ll be called an accident. And mayb it’ll be called my fault. A little bit anyway. That is, if this guy here doesn’t spout off to anybody.’

‘About what?’

‘About who dimmed the lights and who didn’t. And who was on whose side of the road. But of course he can’t spout off if he’s dead.’

‘That’s right.’ There was suddenly something strange in the girl’s voice, an awareness.

‘So he’s got to be dead. Do you see what I mean, Arlene?’

‘He said he was going to die…’

‘Yeah, but he doesn’t know. And neither do we. But he’s got to die. We’ve got to make sure he dies.’ The boy’s voice went up suddenly, toward the pitch of hysteria.

Santin saw the girl clutch the boy’s arm and look up into his face. The whole posture of her body denoted fear.

‘There’s another thing too.’ The boy spoke swiftly, almost babbling. ‘My dad hs told me about insurance. They have to pay more for a guy who’s just crippled than for a guy who’s dead. They pay big money to cripples. I don’t know whether our insurance is that big. If this guy doesn’t die, and is just hurt real bad, it might cost us a lot more than the insurance we got. And, man, what my dad would do to me then.’

The girl was terrified now. ‘But he’s going to die,’ she whispered hoarsely.

‘How do we know that Arlene? How do we know?’

Santin felt no pain now. Only fury. They hadn’t offered to help him. They wanted him dead. They were selfish, unbelievably selfish. And they were cruel enough to discuss all this right in front of him.

Suddenly, the boy was kneeling, and the flashlight was probing Santin’s face again. SAntin blinked in the glare, but despite it, he got his first look at the boy. Young. Young like the girl. But not calm like she’d been. Panic was in his eyes. And he was hurt too. An ugly scalp would marred the left side of his head, and blood was matted in his hair.

‘How do you feel, mister?’ the boy asked.

Santin disdained to answer. He wouldn’t give them the same satisfaction again. He wouldn’t tell them of the hot flood of pain that washed over him in ever-growing waves. He wouldn’t tell them he’d already heard death whispering in his ear, cajoling him to let go of life.

But he saw the desperation in the boy’s face. The boy searched farther with the flashlight, playing it up and down Santin’s body. Then he stood up.

‘He doesn’t look like he’s hurt bad enough to die,’ he told the girl.

No, it doesn’t look like that, Santin thought. The damage is inside. But it’s just as fatal. Don’t tell them though. Let them sweat. And you might stay alive until somebody comes.

A sudden eruption of pain blotted out his thoughts, leaving him barely conscious.

The girl screamed, and it was as though she was screaming for him. The boy had apparently struck him in some way. ‘What are you doing?’ she demanded.

The boy’s answer was almost a scream too. ‘He’s got to die. I’ve got to make him die.’

There was a strain of decency in the girl somewhere. Or a woman’s compassion. ‘But you can’t kill him,’ she told the boy fiercely.

‘What difference does it make?’ he argued back, with hysteria in his voice again. ‘I’ve already killed him, haven’t I? He’s just got to die quick, that’s all. Don’t you understand, Arlene?’

Obviously she didn’t. She clung to him, holding him back.

‘Nobody will ever know the difference,’ he told her. There was logic in his argument. ‘He’s hurt already. They’ll think it’s from the accident.’

They were silent for a little while. By twisting his head as far as he could, Santin could see them. They were two dark shadows against the lighter background of the sky, so close together that they merged. Santin could sense the desperation in their embrace. The girl with her feminine instinct for mercy. The boy nothing more than a brute, mad with the desire for self-preservation. Yet somehow the girl could love him. And because she loved him, she was in this together with him.

‘All right, Vince,’ he heard her say finally.

And still all Santin could do was to lie there. Probably he was going to be beaten and kicked to death. Murdered deliverately, logically, to protect a weak, vicious kid. Somehow he hadn’t been so afraid of that other death. But he was afraid of this one. This death had a quality of horror about it.

‘No!’ he yelled at them with all his strength. ‘No!’

His cry broke up their embrace. The flashlight in the boy’s hand probed his face again. Santin had been proud before, but he wasn’t now. He didn’t turn away from the light. He let them see his terror.

‘Do you think you can do it, Vince?’ the girl asked. Her voice was steady. Now that she’d been convinced, she’d be the stronger of the two.

‘I don’t know, ‘ he said. ‘But I’ve got to.’

Santin saw him coming and closed his eyes.

‘Wait a minute,’ he heard the girl say, as from the far end of a long tunnel. He esisted in a red haze of agony now, and her voice seemed far away.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘You’re getting blood on yourself, aren’t you?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Look and see.’

‘Yes I am. But what difference does it make?’

‘Vince, Vince, are you crazy? They’ll see the blood. And maybe somebody will get suspicious. They can analyse blood, and tell who it belonged to.’

A spark of hope, and Santin dared to open his eyes again. The boy was posed over him for another onslaught, but now he hesitated.

‘I know what to do,’ he said finally.

He left suddenly, exited from Santin’s view. But Santin could hear him thrashing around in the weeds. And then finally his shout.

‘Arelene, come over and help me lift this.’

More thrashing among the weeds. The girl joining the boy. And the boy’s excited voice. ‘The guy was thrown out of the car, wasn’t he? Okay then, he just hit his head on this, that’s all. We’ll rearrange the body a little. Come on now, let’s lift it together.’

A slow returning of the footsteps. Wildly, Santin searched for them. Saw them. They were coming toward him together, their backs bent, straining. Between them they carried a wide flat object that seemed to be very heavy.

He didn’t scream this time. He couldn’t. Even his vocal chords were paralysed. But he could watch them. They walked slowly, with great effort. They stopped, one on each side of him, and the huge, heavy, flat object they held blotted out the sky above his face.

Then, at the very last moment of his life, he became aware of something. A soothing calm flooded over him. I was going to die anyway, he thought. This is quicker, of course, maybe evern merciful. But it’s also murder.

He prayed. A strange prayer. He prayed for a smart cop.

Sergeant Vanneck of the State Highway Patrol was a smart cop. In the grey light of dawn, he studied tyre marks on the road. They were hard to see on the dark asphalt, and he couldn’t be entirely sure.

He was a lttle surer how he felt about the pair who stood by his car and watched him as he went about his work. The boy called Vince and the girl called Arlene. They were like most other youngsters involved in fatal accidents, and they were also different. So, as the dawn grew brighter, he continued his search.

He found more than he’d expected to find. The body had been removed and the area was pretty well trampled. But he found the evidence nevertheless. It was clear, unquestionable.

He climbed back out of the ditch and walked over to the girl and the boy. There must have been something terrifying in his face, becauseit made the boy ask nervously, ‘What’s the matter, Sergeant?’

‘There are two sides to a rock,’ Sergeant Vanneck said. ‘The top side stays clean, washed by the rain. The bottom side is dirty from contact with the ground. Now you tell me, sonny, how Mr Santin was thrown from his car so that he hit his head on the bottom side of that rock?’