

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 downwards 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. They 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 driver 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 have been thrown out.' A girl's voice answering. Frightened.

'I guess so. What'll we do?' The same masculine voice. So there must be only 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.

Santini 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 care. If he was dying, they 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 gravel, crunching through 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 from 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.