

The Body in the Perch Pond

Prologue

The cold wind whipped the snow in small torrents, dashing it against the ground, the tire, the lantern, his hands, his face – especially the light. Coming in brief gasps, the wind caused eddies in the falling snow and whipped the already fallen back into the air obscuring his work. If it wasn't the snow obscuring the wheel lugs it was the snow whirling in front of the lantern's lens and dimming the light. He cursed his luck. He cursed his lack of electronics. He cursed his hands crippled both by arthritis, the cold and old injuries. If he had a radio – a simple radio – in the truck, he would have (could have) heard about the storm. That is, if he had been able to get a signal but this area was so remote that most signals were difficult to get even in the best of times. But it probably wouldn't have mattered. He still had to get her help.

His half frozen fingers of his left hand could not control the lug wrench adequately and the half frozen fingers of his right hand couldn't hang on to the lug nut, which dropped into the snow under the tire.

The Body in the Perch Pond

It wasn't the storm really, he knew, as he groped under the tire for the nut. It was really the tire – bald, over used – it had given out as he hit the last pothole. He knew it was there because he drove the road once a week and he had watched it develop through the long winter.

His groping fingers felt the nut – or a pebble – and closed on it. “*Thank goodness,*” he thought. He had already lost two and losing a third would leave him only two only on the wheel. In such treacherous weather, two lug nuts holding on the wheel that helped to power the truck would not have been good.

He put what he hoped was the lug nut into his mouth and sucked at it to clean the snow and ice. It was bitterly cold but there was no alternative. As the snow melted his tongue felt the hole in the object and could discern the sharp corners. His luck was beginning to turn. Spitting the nut into his palm, he turned his head, spat the water and remaining debris into the snow. With his other hand, still holding the lug wrench, he wiped the snow off the lantern's lens and then tried to start the nut onto one of the lugs.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the nut caught and he gave it several turns. He fitted the lug wrench to the nut – easier than the nut onto the lug – and started turning it.

“Need any help?”

The voice from nowhere startled him and he dropped the wrench into the snow. Turning to his left he could make out a form behind a bright beam of light. Beyond that were flashing red lights.

“What?” he stammered but “*Cops,*” he thought.

“Didn't mean to startle you,” the voice said. “We thought you would have heard us stop. My wife and I are on HPCP” – “Hip-Cip” he pronounced it – “patrol and saw your truck at the side of the road. You should have used a flare and had your flashers on.”

The Body in the Perch Pond

His mind raced. Things were cloudy, disconnected. Then something clicked and a semblance of understanding formed.

“No – I’m sorry.” His eyes returned to the wheel as his hand retrieved the lug wrench and fitted it once again to the lug. “My flashers don’t work and I have no flare – didn’t mean to be out in this storm.”

“Well, none of us should. Can I give you a hand?”

The Samaritan was now crouching at his side. A red and black jacket, red and black balaclava, making his face indiscernible, topped by a HPCP baseball cap. The man’s right hand held a powerful lantern the beam of which he directed at the wheel.

“Just finishing,” he responded. “Blew a tire on the chuck hole. Had to get my granddaughter home.”

Damn! Shouldn’t have said that. Too confused. Too cold. Too many things all at once.

The Samaritan’s powerful beam moved from the wheel toward the front of the truck.

“We can take her in our truck if you want.”

The Samaritan was up and moving toward the cab.

“No.” A final twist and the lug was tight. He stood up and put out a hand to arrest the other’s movement. He couldn’t take the chance – he couldn’t let the Samaritan see her. Even after so long, who knew?

“She’s fine. The cab’s warm and we’ll be on our way in just a minute. Thanks anyway.”

“You’re certain?” the Samaritan said. It wouldn’t be any trouble. We have four wheel drive.”

“Youse mighty kind,” he said. “But with the tire fixed, we’ll be fine.”

The Body in the Perch Pond

The other retreated and he moved to the back of the truck, inserted the tire iron in the jack and started lowering the car.

“If you certain...” the Samaritan said.

“Yes, thank you,” he said wishing the other would leave.

“Alright. Be careful. This storm is supposed to hang around for a while and the roads are icy.”

“Right. Thanks. We’ll be fine. Her home is very close and I’ll stay the night.”

“Okay - be careful.”

The Samaritan turned and focused his light on his truck parked on the other side of the road and made his way to it and opened the door.

John got back into his vehicle, luxuriating in the warmth. Glad to be out of the storm. In his rearview mirror he saw the lights of the truck come on as the exhaust belched a plume of black smoke.

“Is everything alright?” his wife Myrna asked.

“Yeah,” John said. “Some old guy blew a tire in a pot hole. Says he’s taking his granddaughter home. Must not be from around here. Didn’t recognize the truck – an old Ford 150, must be one of the firsts.”

John watched as the other vehicle pulled off the shoulder and disappeared into the blinding snow.

“Should we log it?” Myrna asked as she picked up the microphone to the CB.

“Nah,” John said. “We’ve already clocked out. Herb’s probably shut down his base. We need to get home ourselves.”

The Body in the Perch Pond

“We should never have gone out,” Myrna said. “We knew there was a storm brewing.”

“Well, we didn’t know it was going to hit here or hit this hard,” John responded as he pulled off the shoulder. “Who would have guessed that the storm would hit with this fury when we were completely on the other side of the lake. We should have gotten a room at the Dew Drop anyway instead of coming all the way back.”

Some fifteen minutes later and not much more than two miles down the road, his headlights picked up the sign at the end of their driveway and he turned into the protection of the evergreens.

“We’re safe now, just a quarter mile to home.”

“Thank goodness,” Myrna said and they smiled at each other.

He was anything but safe as the savage winds of this late winter storm whipped the snow against the windshield and caused the light from the headlights seemingly to flicker in and out of existence. He glanced at the blanket wrapped form on the passenger side. “*How close that was,*” he thought. His eyes moved quickly back to the windshield.

The snow seemed to be coming down harder, his windshield wipers could scarcely keep up with it. He was traveling slowly, not more than ten miles an hour when he hit a second pothole. This one was deep and the front wheel bounced in and out and he wrenched the wheel, trying to keep the rear wheel out but it was to no avail. The turning of the wheel started the truck sliding and the rear wheel plunged in, the torque of the slip whipping it against the outside lip putting such a strain on the three poorly tightened lug nuts that one of them striped almost to the end and the wheel began to wobble.

The Body in the Perch Pond

He managed to get the truck stopped sitting broad side on the road and knew that something had happened to the wheel but he didn't know what. He thought about getting out to look at it but knew that it wouldn't make any difference. He should have let the Samaritan take them ... no, that was impossible. The fewer who knew, the better. He checked the form wrapped in the blanket to his right, opening the fold and feeling her forehead. Hot and damp – hotter than before. The fever was getting worse. He had to get help.

Despite its age, the truck had continued running because instinctively he had never removed his foot from the clutch. He oriented himself the best he could, backed the truck up a few feet, turned the wheel and slowly started forward. The knowledge that she needed help – more than he could give – urged him on and once the truck was moving, he started increasing the speed. He could feel the wobble in the rear wheel and knew for certain what had happened. Something bad but there was nothing he could do about it. There was no choice but to continue on his way – she need help, help that he couldn't give her.

He knew that he was coming up to Comrock's Point and its infamous S-curve, called Dead Man's Turn by many of the locals. It had taken several lives over the years. The most recent, two earlier that year when a couple of young men heading home from a night at one of the local bars, had misjudged the turn in the snow and flown thirty or forty feet, smashing into a huge oak that now had two white crosses at its base.

He knew the road even in the whiteout having lived in the area all his life – except for those three years in that godforsaken jungle hell hole. He was getting close and would have to ... what was that? Something in the road! Something big! His right foot moved from accelerator to brake as his left foot moved to the clutch. The truck immediately started to skid to the left. Ice! He turned the wheel to the left but no – the skid stopped as he felt the tires get

The Body in the Perch Pond

traction and he released the clutch and spun the wheel to the right. Immediately, once again under power, the tires spun, the wobbly one gripping for traction but finding only ice. The truck swung to the right in another skid, he released the brake, cursing himself for his foolish response. Even as he turned the wheel the right rear tire caught another pothole, the poorly fastened lug nuts gave, and the right wheel buckled. The remaining lug nuts stripped and the wheel came off, falling and catching the brake housing and turning into a sled. The skid turned into a sidewise slide taking the truck off the road, across the shoulder – into the nothingness at the south end of Comstock's Curve. The right rear wheel spun, catching only air and swirling snow. The truck seemed to teeter momentarily, then disappeared from view.

The sixteen-point stag hadn't moved from its position in the middle of the road since it was first caught in the glare of the truck's headlights. Even as the sounds of the final crash as the truck came to its resting place at the bottom of the fifty-foot embankment hadn't bothered it.

Stillness pervaded the air. The snow whipped wildly about the stag as he slowly continued his journey across the road and into the shelter of the woods. Within minutes the winds and snow of the late winter storm had obliterated all signs of the stag and the truck. Nature was in control.