The Devil's Pass

by AJ Lowell

There's a dark road in Colorado connecting Cypress Spring to Sandy Table. It runs sixty miles from the base of the mountain, winding through the Rockies to the other side. It's little more than a two-lane short-cut, connecting one town to the other. To stay on the main highway adds another forty-five miles and an hour, depending on weather and traffic. But I was in a hurry. I wanted desperately to see Nancy one last time before she departs.

I stopped at the last gas station before the mountain. It was right off the main highway. I had just swiped the card and topped off the tank, when I remembered I needed to take a leak before I started out. So, I walked inside the service station and used facilities. My eyes felt a little heavy so I splashed some cold water on my face. On the way out, I asked the attendant for the local time. I just flew in from Texas and my watch was still set an hour ahead. For some reason, the Damned clock inside the rental car was stuck on 12 am. I dunno, I couldn't figure it out. The man said it was quarter after six. I was amazed to see it was already dark out. The man said,

"Big Mountains, cast big shadows!"

Whatever the hell that means. As I turned to leave, the man said to take it slow on the way up there. I asked what he meant by that? He said, it was warm that afternoon and some of the roadside snows had melted. Coming from Houston, I was rather ignorant of mountain dangers and wasn't ashamed to say so. I asked the man to explain. He said when the snows soften in the higher elevations like that, the cold winds blow thick sheets of black ice on the road. That stretch of road I was embarking on was known as the, "Devil's Pass." It had the highest rate of vehicle fatalities per year in the entire State of Colorado. Everyone in my state drove like a bunch of stupid rejects, so I asked the guy just how many? He replied,

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“Four thousand for the entire state!...Nine hundred on this highway alone!”

I took me a second to wrap my brain around that one. Out of the whole state, this mountain overpass claims nearly a quarter of the annual fatalities. So I asked him, how was that was possible? He said,

“I guess,...some people are just in a hurry to die!”

I didn't say anything to that. I wanted to get to Sandy Table but, I also wanted to get there in one piece. This guy was starting to unnerve me. I nodded a thank you and left out the door. The sound of the little bells strung across the handle, seared the conversation into my memory. When I got outside, I saw a dark-clad figure standing behind the trunk of my car. A feeling of dread washed over me. I felt as if I had done all this before. You know,...standing there watching him. He did the sign of the cross with his hand, as if he were blessing my car. Crippled by fear, I just stood there as his face came into light. His face was scarred by fire. The graph's extended from both ears down his neckline, where I saw the starched white collar underneath his shirt. He was a preacher, of some sorts. He smiled widely as he passed me on his way to the storefront. Just as he disappeared from my peripheral vision, I could have swore he said something. I don't know, something like,

“Bless you son.”

A cold wind started to blow, motivating me to get into the car. So I hopped-in and started it up. Strange! The clock on the dash reads fine now at six twenty-five p.m. Like nothing was ever wrong with it. I must be going crazy. Time to get the hell out of here, that's what time it was. I put the car in gear and started off. There was nobody on this road. I had the whole highway to myself. As I transitioned the first hill I realized it was steeper and farther than I thought. I slowed down and shifted in my lower gear setting. The only sound was the engine and it wasn't a very pleasant one, so I turned on the radio for the local stations. Goddamned Mexican radio! I swear their crappy stations are the scourge of the airwaves.

Oh well, it was all I could find so I turned it low. The sound of human voices in the background gave me some comfort.

About an hour later, I found myself driving higher and higher on a road growing darker and more narrow. I kept seeing lights in my rear-view mirror, but I knew there was no one back there. Whoa! The back end is starting to slip a little. That's not very good considering I'm at eighteen thousand feet. I just made a blind turn. I've never seen a hill so steep and narrow in my life and now I was going up it. Where the hell did all this wind come from? Great! Now it's snowing, and I can't see a thing. Even the radio signal was starting to cut out on me. The chirping trumpets and whining mariachis were starting to fade. The front end is sliding now, almost hit the guardrail. Just a little more, almost to the top now. What the?...

Stalled! The damned car is stalled. No room to pull over. Wait a second? Is the hill getting longer?...No I'm sliding backwards. Damned car won't start!...It won't start! Come-on baby start. Come-on!...Come-ON!...Dammit start!...I was starting to really pick up speed now. I can toggle the E-brake with the brakes, maybe that will slow me down a little. Great, here comes the guardrail!...Ouch, sparks aren't good. Christ Almighty, I must be going sixty backwards. I'm out of control!...I gotta stop this thing or I'm going to crash! What's that on the radio? I almost thought I heard,

"Get out son!"

The car spun sideways. I undid my seatbelt, opened the door, and jumped out. Eh!...I just cracked my head on the ice covered pavement. Blood was flowing into my eyes and I could barely see. I stopped sliding after eighty yards or so. I must've bumped my noggin something fierce because my ears were ringing and I saw stars. I picked myself up a bit. I had a sick feeling in my stomach. I searched for the car and looked down the hill. The car smashed through the barricade at the bottom of the hill and burst into flames. It must've fell another thousand feet before it hit the bottom. Thank God I was alive. But the blood was still gushing from the gash on my

forehead. It ran into my eyes making it difficult to see. Standing up on the slick road was hard enough. But every time I pick my head up above my shoulders, I got that sick feeling in my stomach. So I just slide on my bottom for the next three hundred yards. I think I was in shock because the cold was starting to take its toll on me. I remembered the strange lights in the rearview mirror, maybe there was some else behind me.

I couldn't go anymore. I had no energy to proceed any farther. I had to rest, and I managed to make it to the side of the road before I collapsed. I pray for someone to find me. Just as my eyes began to roll into the back of my head, I could've sworn I saw somebody walking towards me out of the cold, snowy-darkness. If it's my imagination, I'm as good as dead. If they're real, well,...I'm totally at their mercy now aren't I?

I couldn't have been out for more than two minutes when the man woke me up. He covered me with a black wool coat and helped me to my feet. That was strange?...I didn't feel quite as sick as I did before? I still felt weak but I had a little energy to get moving. The blood on my face had begun to crystallize in the cold air. I was able to wipe a little of it away with my hands. Neither I, nor the man said anything. We just slowly walked our way down the hill. At the bottom I saw the mangled barrier that the rental car had smashed through. That car must've been doing a hundred when it careened through here.

It's crazy that I'm still alive. I don't know how? But I am. We saw light in the distance winding back and forth through the hills. I had to rest again, the ringing in my ears was getting loud again. The nausea had returned with a vengeance. I was about to pass out on my feet, when the man took me by the shoulders and eased me to the ground. I moaned with the sudden surge in pain. The man rolled up his coat and placed it under my head. The lights were getting close now. I saw the man go on ahead. He was waving his arms to signal the driver. I started to fade in and out again. Wait!...I recognize him. He's the preacher from the convenience store. A few minutes later I found myself in the warm crew-cab of the service

station's tow-truck. The same man from behind the counter looked down upon me. He said,

“Stay still partner, the ambulance is on the way.”

I asked,

“Where's the preacher I want to thank him.”

“What preacher?...” He said.

“The one that saved me.” I said.

“You saved yourself when you leapt out of that car. We didn't see anyone else up here.”

I picked up my head a little and said,

“It was the same man from the gas station. The preacher!”

He said,

“Take it easy Amigo! You have a nasty bump on your head. I can assure you, there was no preacher at the station today. You were my last customer. The only preacher that comes to mind, is the last person to die on this mountain. That was more a year ago.”

I couldn't grasp why the man didn't understand what I was saying. I heard the siren from the ambulance drawing nearer and nearer. I still have the man's wool coat,...where's the coat? Wait a second!...Seem to remember now,...I heard him telling me to get out on the radio!...I heard him on the radio!...I heard him on the damned radio?...How could I have heard him on the Radio?...

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