

To Really Hear

by Terry DeHart

He's driving in the Sierra Nevada with his wife and their small daughters and the girls are fighting and he can't take much more of it. But then he forgets all about his fighting girls and harried wife and underpaid work because he's being pulled down into the abyss, void and without form. He escapes his loud, messy days, but he does it the hard way. Tragedy and dread have brought him here, though he hasn't gone anywhere since the accident occurred. The accident hasn't happened all that long ago. In fact, he's still in the flashing-hot crashing of it, and only now seeing how things will end up.

The car has gone through the guardrail and they're falling. It's simple physics. They have no choice but to roll and bounce and shred. He's a high school physics teacher, a man of science, and so he understands these things. He really believes he does. But microseconds turn into hours and the violence hasn't reached him yet because he's protected by the car's seatbelt and airbags and stout safety cage. He can sense that it's not going well for his wife and their small daughters, who had taken off their seatbelts to allow more mobility in their argument. He tries to will the damage to himself, to take it all upon himself for his family, but all he can do is watch as the forces of nature tear them apart. He's horrified and fascinated by the kaleidoscopic flashing of carnage caused by equations he's written on chalkboards.

But he doesn't have a scratch on him, and that's the cruelest outcome of all. His thoughts of work and bodily needs and monetary expenditures and his longing for tranquility have disappeared. He wants to go back to the raucous time of squalling children and short-tempered wife. He wants to revel in the sounds of rote bickering, and if that isn't possible, he wants the accident to continue for all eternity so that at least they can be together. It's a miracle he asks for. He tries to pray, but he doesn't remember how. The car is still shredding itself against the stony precipice and his

loves are gone now, he can feel it, and he's never heard such quiet in all his life.

The tumbling continues and he knows that he's alone and that the violence won't come for him unbidden. And so, between impacts, he opens the car door and unbuckles his seatbelt. The jaws of nature clamp down and pull him into the maelstrom. He tastes rock and dust and the steely gush of blood, and then suddenly he's back in the car, driving the winding mountain road.

The sky fades to yellow and silhouettes the pines and the guardrails and the rocky ridgelines, so that everything seems to be tall and two-dimensional and lovely. He wipes the wetness from his cheeks. He sits up straight and drives carefully. His daughters are fighting over the last bag of potato chips. His wife is shouting at them to behave themselves, to please, please, please at least try to *pretend* to be civilized human beings. There are shrieks and wails and accusations and counter-accusations, and he's the happiest man who ever lived, to hear them.

