

The Crash

a short story by Justin Meckes

The road was wet where the Hamilton's vehicle hydroplaned off the road. It rolled two and half times before coming to a stop. One headlight was left shining into the woods. David Hamilton's head slammed into the driver's side window. Blood ran down his face, starting just below the part in his graying hair. He slipped in and out of consciousness, sensing the scene around him ephemerally. The smell of burning oil, shattered glass on the car's fabric-covered ceiling, and the firm pull of the seatbelt against his chest. Air bags had deployed and were deflated above his head while his wife, Lorena, lay lifeless in the damp leaves and underbrush several yards away.

When David opened his eyes again, the doctor said, "Mr. Hamilton?"

David looked at the doctor. She was a tall woman with blonde hair pulled back in a barrette. He whispered, "Lorena. Where is she?"

"Mr. Hamilton," the doctor began. "I have to tell you that she didn't—" She shook her head. "She didn't make it." The doctor placed her hand on David's.

David's head fell back on the pillow. The doctor began to say something more, but David didn't hear her and interrupted, saying, "Where is she?"

The doctor didn't answer, but spoke to the nurse saying, "I'll come back in a little while."

"I said, 'Where is she?'"

"I'm sorry," said the doctor as she left the room.

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A few days later, David was discharged from the hospital. Alicia, his daughter, and her husband took him home. The right side of David's head was covered with a bandage as he was wheeled out of the hospital. As he went, David saw images from the ill-fated crash replaying in his mind. It was in slow motion and then in still images as if it had happened to someone else. He could see the blood and the shattered glass again. It was all around him as if he had just crawled out of the overturned car.

At home, David opened the passenger door of the rental car and walked with a slight limp toward the mailbox.

Hugh, his son-in-law, hurried toward him saying, "Let me get that. You go inside." "I'm fine," David said.

Hugh looked at Alicia who said, "Dad, let us help you."

David insisted, then as he unlocked the front door Alicia handed him another card.

"There's one more," she said. "I saw John from across the street when I came home to pick up some clothes to bring to the hospital."

David looked at the light yellow envelope. He was sure the card inside conveyed condolences. He shook his head as Hugh walked past him through the foyer asking, "Can I get you something to drink, Dad?"

"No. No, I'm fine," said David.

Despite the answer, Hugh disappeared into the kitchen and came into the living room with two glasses of water.

"Is there anything we can do for you, Dad?" Alicia asked. "Anything at all?"

David thought that what he needed was

his wife, but he put his hand on his daughter's shoulder and said, "No. Thank you for bringing me home. I think I just need to be alone for a little while."

"Are you sure?" asked Alicia.

He nodded and hobbled toward his bedroom.

Hugh watched him and put his glass of water down on the sofa table beside the mail. He said, "If you change your mind, we'll be here."

"Sure," David said. He thought of saying something more, but stopped himself.

Once inside his room, David began to weep. He tried to stifle the sound of his sobbing by going into the closet, but when he looked at his wife's clothes he sank into a corner, in the darkness—somewhere where he could escape the pain.

David slept and did not wake until early the following morning, before dawn. The middle-aged man climbed out of his bed, still wearing the clothes he'd had on the previous day. He sat down on his couch and turned the television on. The Weather Channel glowed on the screen before him. A woman stood before a map of the entire country showing a storm front moving slowly from the northwest. David stared vacantly, looking at the deep green storm moving across the LED screen. His skin around his eyes were puffy and his eyes themselves were glassy. He turned the station and then, after only a second, turned it back. There was a man standing in the rain, wearing raincoat in a torrent.

David stood after a moment, he looked at the glasses of water he and Hugh had left on the sofa table. He started to pick them up to take them into the kitchen. Instead, he walked toward the front door and opened it. He turned his porch light on. The green grass in his front yard was illuminated fifteen to twenty feet away. Opening the glass storm door, David moved outside. He walked into the yard and looked up at the moon. He could see it because the storms on television were hundreds of miles from where he lived. The sky

was clear and the stars were bright above him. David thought that he could be crushed under the weight of so much night.

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A couple hours later, a door upstairs opened and there was the sound of footfalls on the stairs. Alicia entered the room and sat down beside her father. She hugged him.

Hugh asked, "How are you, Dad?"

David sighed.

Alicia said, "You slept a long time. We were a little worried."

David smiled and patted Alicia's knee.

Hugh was standing beside the refrigerator. "Have you eaten, Dad?"

Alicia looked at her father.

"No and I don't think I can."

"You have to eat," said Alicia.

Hugh found a few items in the refrigerator and checked their dates. Alicia stood and moved into the kitchen. She could see the back of her father's head in the living room. He ran his hands through his short gray hair.

Hugh said, "Maybe I should go out and get a few things."

"Okay," said Alicia.

Alicia moved into the living room, holding a tissue to her eye. She put it back in her pocket along with a collection of others. David nodded to himself and listened as the front door opened and closed. Alicia leaned against her father's shoulder and said, "How are you feeling, Dad? Any pain?"

"A little."

"How's your head?" She pointed to the bandage.

"It's fine. I'm just a little sore, dear. Bruised." David pulled up his sleeve. He showed her where his arm had slammed against the door as well as his leg. There were deep purple bruises on both. Alicia shook her head and put her hand to her mouth.

"Oh god," she said as she embraced her father.

David put his arms around her.

#

That afternoon David took a nap and

when he woke he thought he heard talking in the living room. As he stood and walked out of his bedroom, he saw Alicia first. She was smiling and said, "Hi, Daddy. Did you sleep well?" As he passed the sofa table, David looked at the two half empty glasses. He also saw his son-in-law wearing an apron and a holding a hot pad.

David said, "I slept fine, but I think I might have a bit of a—"

David stopped as the front door opened. He watched his wife walk into the house. Lorena, Alicia's step-mother, was a trim woman with dark hair, shoulder-length and split down the middle. She was wearing a burgundy wrap-around dress. He looked at her and then at his daughter who had rounded the corner out of the kitchen.

Alicia said, "Hi, Mom."

"Hi, Alicia," said Lorena as her step-daughter took a few of the grocery bags from her hands. "Sorry, it took me so long. There was terrible traffic and so many people shopping." Then she said, "Hello honey," as she moved toward her husband and kissed him on the cheek.

David smiled faintly and took a step back as if the kiss were actually a slap. He began walking toward the bedroom, but before he'd completely left the living room he heard his daughter saying, "Where are you going, Dad?"

"I'll be right back."

He hurried into the bathroom. He ran the water and splashed himself. He pulled a towel off of a hook and patted his face dry. Then he noticed that his bandage was gone. There was no wound on his head. David grabbed his arm, spastically, pulling up the sleeve. There was no bruise. He stepped back and looked at his leg. Pulling up his pants revealed that there was no deep purple or yellow. David hurried back into the living room.

Lorena asked, "Is everything okay, David?"

David walked outside and stopped on the front sidewalk. He saw his vehicle, sitting

in the driveway. The SUV he'd been driving in the accident. David hurried back inside, saying, "What's going on? Just what's going on here?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Lorena.

"You were—"

David stepped back. He looked over his shoulder at the pile of mail on the sofa table. He said, "John from across the street gave us this—this card." He began to read it, but found that it was a card with a special greeting and the phrase, "Happy Birthday!"

"It's just a couple days away." Lorena smiled as she looked over her shoulder.

Alicia said, "Here, sit down, Dad." She moved her father toward the living room.

He looked again at the two glasses of water on the sofa table and at the card in his hand. He said, "There was an accident."

Alicia looked at her step-mother.

Lorena put her hand on David's face. "You're burning up." David looked at his wife and tried to understand what he was seeing. She reached for a glass of water on the sofa table and said, "Is this yours? Do you want some water?"

"No," David said. Then he grabbed his wife's arm.

"What is it, dear?" she said. "You're scaring me."

David released her. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He was breathing heavily. "I thought you were—" He pulled up his sleeve again and looked at his daughter. "Alicia, don't you remember the bruise I had. Don't you remember?"

Alicia looked at her step-mother, then her father. "I don't know what you're talking about, Dad."

Lorena was staring at her husband.

Alicia continued, "Maybe you just need to eat something."

David looked over his shoulder at the television in the living room. He could see a weather pattern on the screen. The clouds were moving closer and closer to his home.

#

Lorena asked David if he felt like joining everyone for dinner. David looked at her as wearily as one might look into the face of their torturer. He said, "I'll be right there." He stood and walked into the dining room where his daughter and son-in-law were already seated.

Hugh said, "I think we made some of your favorites."

David nodded as he looked over the different dishes placed on the table. It was close to his birthday so his family had arranged for a special meal. David sat down as Alicia asked him, cautiously, "Are you feeling any hungrier now?"

"I could eat," David said, picking up his fork and allowing himself to settle into the reality that surrounded him. His daughter sat on his right and his *deceased* wife sat to his left.

On one wall there was a still life painting hanging above a small chest of drawers. David looked at the picture as his wife spooned vegetables onto his plate. Then he glanced out of a nearby window. It was dusk, gray light cast itself into the dining room. The bulbs in the chandelier over their heads were darkened. David accepted a plate filled with three slices of ham, green peas, and a dollop of mashed potatoes.

He smiled as he ate, acknowledging to himself, if not the others, that he had acted strangely the hour before.

"How is it, Daddy?"

"It's fine," David said.

Alicia smiled as she cut her meat.

Then David said, "Everything is delicious," while, internally, he was fearful of what he had said and what he was seeing. David chewed his meal and washed it down with a glass of red wine.

Lorena asked, "How'd you bruise yourself?"

David looked at his wife and wiped his mouth with his napkin. He'd obviously had a bad dream, a nightmare. That explained what

was happening. "Well," he said, "I must've just banged it against something. I thought I'd shown it to Alicia, but I must not have."

"That's odd," said Alicia. "Why would you think that you showed me something like that?"

"I was just waking up," David explained.

"Of course," Lorena said. "Maybe you were even sleepwalking." She made a face as if that would be an odd albeit plausible set of circumstances.

"Maybe," David said. He looked at his plate and continued to eat.

After dinner, Alicia disappeared into the kitchen and returned to the dining room with a birthday cake that had a number of lit candles on top. She began to sing, "Happy Birthday."

David smiled before he blew out the candles. He started to believe that his experiences on the rainy road that night were the figments. Figments that had seemed real. He even wished that his outburst would be forgotten as he blew out the candles. He told himself that the crash had a dream. He wasn't losing his mind.

"I hope it's okay that we're celebrating early, Daddy," Alicia said. "You know Hugh and I have to get back to town before Monday morning."

David nodded. "I'm just glad you could make it at all."

#

David went to bed beside his wife that evening, but he woke up with a start. He crept out of bed and moved toward the bedroom door. It creaked as he opened it. David spun slowly to see his wife in the light that spilled in from the hallway. She was still asleep.

He moved into the living room and then the kitchen to open the refrigerator. He took out a pitcher of water and poured himself a glass. Before closing the door he saw his daughter standing beside it. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back.

"Jesus. You scared me, Alicia."

She said, "I'm sorry. I couldn't sleep, either."

"I was sleeping," David said. "I just woke up for some reason." He turned around and took another glass from the pantry. "Are you thirsty?"

"Sure."

David poured both glasses as his daughter said, "Hugh and I wanted to know if you need help with any of the preparations?"

"The preparations?" David asked.

A sick feeling came over him all of a sudden. He breathed deeply and looked at his daughter. Her head was cocked to one side as if she didn't understand. David sat his glass down on the granite countertop and moved quickly out of the kitchen, through the living room, and into his bedroom. He threw on the light and saw that the bed was rumpled and turned down on his side only. Lorena was gone. When he turned around, his daughter was standing behind him.

She said, "What's the matter, Dad?"

David shook his head. "Nothing. Nothing. It's okay. I just—"

After Alicia left the room, David climbed back into bed where he tossed and turned until he fell into a fitful and unrestful sleep.

#

David awoke beside Lorena. When he rolled over, he saw that she was already awake and smiling at him. She said, "Good morning. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," David said, but he was far from it.

Lorena nodded and leaned forward to kiss her husband. She smiled again before sighing as David's hand slid up her side and over her back. He couldn't believe what he was seeing or feeling. As he got up to go to the bathroom, David looked over his shoulder just to make sure that he wasn't seeing things. When he saw that she was still there, his attention turned to the window. David changed direction and moved closer to it. The clouds in

the sky were dark and menacing, heavy with rain.

"It looks like it might rain," Lorena said.

David looked over his shoulder at her. "It does."

Later that evening, David was waiting for his wife in the car. The rain had begun. It was a drizzle, but the tempest was to come. He watched Lorena walk out of his house, holding an umbrella. She walked quickly. David looked over his shoulder and then at the passenger door as it opened.

As Lorena sat, he said, "Let's not go out tonight."

"What?" she said as she closed her umbrella and shut the door.

"Let's just eat here."

"John and Suzanne are meeting us. They've already left."

David looked at the windshield and turned on the wipers. "It's just that I can't bear losing you."

"Losing me?"

"Yes. I can't lose you again."

"You're not going to lose me, David." Lorena put her hand on her husband's knee.

"I know you can't—" David shook his head. "You can't understand. But, in some ways, I feel like you're already gone."

Lorena put her hand on David's neck and stroked the short hair above the collar of his shirt. She said, "What are you so worried about? I love you."

David thought to himself for a moment and nodded. He put the car in reverse and backed out of the driveway. Turning on the headlights, David watched as the rain began to fall harder. He feared that it might come down so hard that he wouldn't be able to see through it. He drove until he came to the curve where he'd been in the crash. He slammed on the brakes and his SUV began to hydroplane.