

## Near Fatal at the Salmon River Bridge

**Friday, September 17, 1976** - Darlene Cassels followed the centre line along 56<sup>th</sup> Avenue, white knuckling it. Tufts of fog brushed against the windscreen like old ladies' hair: thin and silvery. She smiled. Sometimes she thought the strangest things, coming home from work. "No wonder," she muttered. By the time her shifts at the Rendezvous Pub finished she was a basket case: legs like sandbags, head thumping to the good-old country and western beat, lungs dry as an old man's wheeze.

For a brief spell, after climbing the hill past 232<sup>nd</sup>, things cleared and she enjoyed a view of the full moon sailing in the night sky. Then the car lurched forward and she descended into the Salmon River gully. Darlene tightened her grip again, muttering a curse. Even on clear nights the steep switchbacks made her nervous; in heavy fog this stretch made her feel as if she was flying by instruments.

"For Christ's sake!" she grumbled, mad at herself, mad at the Rendezvous, mad at the world.

Then it happened.

Actually the fog saved him... or it... or whatever you wanted to call the skinny waif that appeared out of nowhere. Had the night been clear, she would have been driving faster. She'd hit a possum once. It materialized in the glare of her headlights, lumbered onto the road, met its end with a sickening thump-crunch under her mashing tires. She didn't even stop that time. Didn't dare look in the rear view mirror.

The Boy appeared suddenly too, a formulation of mist. For years – forever – that ghostly form would haunt Darlene. In the instant before impact she barely had time to recognize the apparition for what it was. She slammed on the brakes and prayed God Almighty would prevent what surely had to happen from happening. The car slewed left. She released the brakes for a second and it veered into the opposite lane. Maybe, in a half-assed way, God *had* answered. She knew she was going to hit the kid, and remembered the sound of his tiny body bumping against the side of her car – like a bird,

really... no more of a jolt than that. But because the car had changed direction it struck him a glancing blow, not head on.

Thank the Lord!

Then everything went deathly silent, except for the scream that tore out of her as the Pinto shuddered to a stop.

After that, recollection blurred. She scrambled out of her car, ran around to the passenger side, and found the boy lying face up on the road.

“Fuck!”

She had enough first aid to feel for a pulse. The boy’s heart was pumping a mile a minute, but he wasn’t breathing. Mouth to mouth! Now! She’d never done it before, not on a real, live victim. Kneeling beside him, she pinched his nose, yanked open his jaw and sealed her lips against his tiny mouth.

“Please God!”

Again her prayer was answered. After one or two puffs, the boy gasped, like a creature emerging from the womb, sucking in the life sustaining air. He wasn’t conscious, but he was breathing. It was more than she could have hoped. A salvation of sorts, because if she had killed him... Darlene Cassels couldn’t bear to think it.

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Just when you thought you’d seen it all something came along that blew you away. Constable Tom Cochran knew Darleen Cassels from his rounds of the neighbourhood watering holes, showing the flag. He liked her, but had to stow that in a compartment somewhere out of sight, out of mind. He’d driven her to the station, taken a breathalyzer sample, which she’d offered willingly, then asked a few preliminary questions. He’d be muscled out of the picture pretty quick, though. He was sure of that.

“Am I a suspect?” she asked.

“We have to investigate all possibilities. That’s how these things go.”

He couldn’t say any different, of course. But in Constable Cochran’s mind, she was already ruled out. She’d left work at about one-thirty, hit the kid at one-forty-five, and had him to the hospital by two. The investigating officer would check with her boss and fellow employees, of course, but if she’d left the Rendezvous when she said, and if there were skid marks that matched her description of events out at the Salmon Creek bridge,

that would pretty well rule her out. How the kid had ended up on a collision course with her Pinto was anybody's guess, but Darlene Cassels didn't have anything to do with it. She just happened to be passing by on a trajectory that intersected with the victim's.

Who was and was not a suspect wouldn't be for him to determine of course. Regional headquarters would be all over this one, and the media. Constable Cochran had been around long enough to know how things would play out. They'd have to release details about the file in the hopes of identifying the kid; that would trigger a frenzy of media attention. This file had front page stamped all over it.

His watch commander Staff Sergeant Vince Loewen hadn't minced words. "If there's a God damned piece of lint on her collar, bag it, man," he'd said. In other words, don't screw up, because there would be microscopes within microscopes trained on everyone involved, and the biggest eyeball of all would be Superintendent Bruce McCallum's. "You don't want to get his blood pressure up, now, do you?"

"No," Constable Cochran agreed, he didn't.

Darlene Cassels said she had no idea who the victim was. That would be checked out, too.

"Do you have any children, Darlene?"

"No," she answered glumly. He'd touched a nerve.

"That's it for now," he concluded.

"I'm okay to go?"

"No," he answered, allowing a hint of apology. "We'll have to get a statement first, but that will be up to an investigating officer. We'll be keeping your car for a while. Forensics will want to go over it..."

"You're making me feel like a criminal, for Christ's sake!"

"It's routine," Constable Cochran assured her.

"How will I get home? To work tomorrow?"

"The investigating officer will get you home once he's got a statement."

"Who's this 'investigating officer' going to be?"

"Don't know," he shrugged. "Do you want a coffee?"

Nodding, she sagged in the hard backed chair on the other side of the interview room table, exhausted. Constable Cochran was pretty sure her greetings during his next few walk throughs at the Rendezvous would not be quite so friendly. Couldn't be helped.

*We all have jobs to do*, he thought glumly.

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"Shit," Ryan Ansell grumbled, pulling into a spot half a block from the Langley RCMP detachment. The Vancouver Province was already there, CKNW, CBC. BCTV. He slammed the car door and jogged the rest of the way. What the hell ever happened in Langley except horses and cows? Whatever was going down, the local constabulary were being pretty tight lipped. In fact, they'd punted the item up to regional HQ, a development which had its up side and its down: in the plus column, it would be easy to get the basic facts around the story; on the down, they would be the facts and nothing but the facts that the RCMP brass wanted the pack to feed on. Everyone would have the same story. When he'd phoned about their terse release to see if he could winkle out a few details, the receptionist wouldn't even put him through to Superintendent what's-his-name. "McCallum," he reminded himself.

Something big was in the pipe, though. Ryan felt it in his bones. He'd phoned a few contacts to see if he could get a jump on the story – that had contributed to his tardiness – but if any of them knew anything, nobody was saying. So all he had were the sparse details from a release that had come in by fax at nine that morning, simply announcing the time and place of the news conference and directing reporters to be there at eleven. He'd be under the gun if he wanted to get an item into the final edition. It would have to be a Second Coming type story for his editor to go with it.

On his way in Ryan noted a payphone in the lobby. If the item was going to run, he'd have to call it in, and the quicker the better. The receptionist directed him to a conference room and Ryan squeezed through the crowd, taking a spot at the end of the table closest to the door. Camera crews were still setting up and radio reporters were jostling to place their microphones in a bouquet up at the head of the table. He hadn't missed anything. The spokespersons for today were a cop and a doctor, Ryan noted. They were dressed for the occasion, the cop in uniform, the doctor in a suit and tie. Ryan didn't know either of them. Obviously every news outlet in the Lower Mainland had read the RCMP

communiqué the same way his assignment editor had: it didn't say much, which left a lot *to say*. Ryan tuned into the buzz in the room to see if anybody had any details. Too bad he didn't have a photographer with him, he thought...

"Good morning," the cop said. "My name is Superintendent Bruce McCallum and this is Doctor Andre Zalewski, Head of Pediatrics at Langley Memorial Hospital. Constable Don Driedger here..." he gestured toward a young man in uniform... "will hand out details of our remarks in a moment, but I want to begin by saying we've asked you here to help with an investigation that is currently underway. We won't be able to give you much information, but we'll do our best to answer questions."

Superintendent McCallum paused, scanning the room, then picked up a prepared statement that had been sitting face-down in front of him.

"At about two o'clock this morning the Langley Detachment of the RCMP responded to a call from Langley Memorial Hospital. A child had been brought in by a civilian, after having been struck by her car in the vicinity of Salmon Creek and 56<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The child is in serious but stable condition. He has not regained consciousness and remains in a coma. We estimate the age of this child to be four to five years..."

A murmur circulated through the room forcing Superintendent McCallum to pause. "Jesus!" Ryan heard himself say.

"We are looking for the parents of this child, and ask them to please come forward and identify themselves to the RCMP. The boy has brown hair and blue eyes. He weighs about 35 pounds and is just over three-and-a-half feet tall. You will find more details and contact information in the sheets Constable Driedger is handing out. I ask you to please emphasize that information in your stories, ladies and gentlemen. The child was unattended when he was struck. We have no idea who his parents are, or what the child was doing out at that time of night. There is nothing to suggest that the driver of the vehicle that struck the boy knew him.

"At this time we cannot provide more information. Obviously we are concerned that we do not compromise an ongoing investigation, but it is crucial that we find the parents or guardians of this child. Doctor Zalewski and I are prepared to take questions."

For a millisecond the room stood poised on the edge of incredulity. Then all of a sudden everyone was shouting and Superintendent McCallum had to hold up his hands like a traffic cop.

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Richard shook his head. What was the world coming to? “I mean, four years old, for God’s sake. How could anyone dump a four year old in the middle of the night?”

Nora, who was gathering the dishes from the dining room table agreed, but said nothing. Nothing needed saying. On second thought, though, she cautioned against hasty conclusions. “We don’t know if the child was ‘dumped’, Richard,” she corrected. “Maybe he wandered away from home or something.”

He looked over his shoulder from the kitchen sink, his hands still immersed in the warm, soupy water. “Come on, Nora!” he objected. “If the kid had been lost, surely somebody would have reported it by now.”

No getting around *that*. But his wife simply didn’t have it in her to condemn anyone. She always found excuses, even for the most heinous crimes. Maybe the parents of *this* child were living in poverty. Perhaps they were poorly educated, or mentally unstable, or had marital problems. Or, or, or.

Even if The Boy had been abducted, Nora would come up with mitigating circumstances. She was more New Democrat than Christ was Christian: no one was beyond the pale of social responsibility as far as Nora Daly was concerned. “What?” she frowned at his Cheshire grin. Richard turned back to his chore, still smiling. Her understanding went beyond forgiveness. Forgiving meant condemning, and condemnation was an instinct that had never developed in Nora. She was perfectly innocent – not naive, but infuriatingly innocent. That was one of the things he loved most about her. He hoped he would never be humbled by her capacity to forgive.

*Abducted*. He turned the word over in his thoughts, but refused to crack it open, didn’t want to comprehend its motives, its meaning.

*The Boy*. Funny how the media came up with phrases that encapsulated a situation. The Boy’s temporary name was perfectly anonymous, yet somehow tragic. It captured nuances of the child’s circumstance without saying anything, really. He and Nora had watched the coverage on the six o’clock news after reading about it in the final edition of

the Vancouver Sun, which Richard sometimes bought on his way home. The details were sketchy: just enough to breed speculation.

“Funny,” Nora said, grabbing a dishcloth. “Some of us want kids and can’t seem to have them; others have ‘em and don’t seem to want ‘em.”

He let the observation pass. It wasn’t meant to be remarked on really. One way or another they *would* have kids. Someday. They were *too perfect* not to: perfect lovers, perfect friends, and destined to be perfect parents. *Well, maybe not perfect, but pretty darn close*, Richard thought.

“What!” Nora snapped the dishcloth at him, laughing at his Cheshire grin.

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The Boy’s eyes blinked open. For him all time had collapsed into that precise moment, his past gone, even the concept of a past non-existent. Only later, much later, would he realize that he *should* have had one, that something *had* been lost, like a shiny object fluttering to the bottom of a very deep well, then sinking into the yielding sediment...

“Oh!”

A face peering down at him made him want to smile. But he frowned instead. He wanted to say something. But what? Here was a perfect stranger, the first person in his life, and he couldn’t think of a word to say. So he waited.

“Oh my God!” Nurse Caitlin Beskau cried. “You’re awake!”

In other circumstances, he might have questioned her reaction. After all, the mere act of waking wasn’t miraculous. He knew nothing of climbing out from under the Salmon River bridge; being side swiped by Darlene Cassels in her Ford Pinto. Nor did he know about the police investigation or the breaking media storm all centered around him – he was in eye of the hurricane, was the eye of the hurricane.

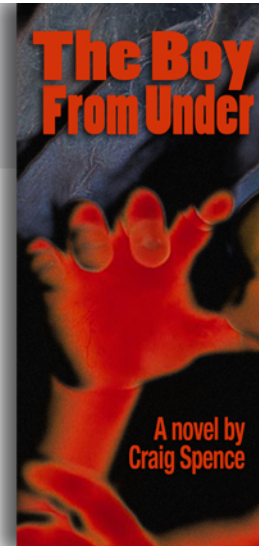
Nurse Beskau smiled brightly and stroked his hair. He flinched. But a tingle of electricity shot up and down his spine, and for the very first time in his new life, he did want to smile. He could not formulate his feelings into any sort of articulate sound, but he was grateful for Nurse Beskau’s radiance and the sensation of her hand smoothing his fine, brown hair.

After she left the room to get Doctor Zalewski, he never saw her again.

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