

Cadillac Truth

by **Jak Koke and Jonathan Bond**

Rolling down highway 126 in the middle of the night, the beams of his '69 Caddy's headlights pushing through heavily drifting snow, Albert Fodderman breathed a faint sigh of relief as his sickness mercifully faded.

Every time the sickness hit it became a force, something wild and alive with a will and purpose of its own. Like foul weather, his affliction showed itself in small ways at first, forming steel wool in his throat, bloat in his gut. It sent shivers of heart-attack pain down his skinny left arm, racking blindness into the blue of his left eye.

Albert had lived within that storm of sickness off and on since his aunt died; he had learned the ways of survival within the ache.

The ache of loneliness. Albert was sick from being alone.

He thought he knew his affliction, thought he had learned to maneuver in spite of the agony. But Albert had no way of knowing just how strong the force of his loneliness had finally become.

The sickness had reached one of its peaks near Blue River Oregon at about nine that evening. Albert had parked the worn-out, cream-colored Caddy (an inheritance from his aunt, who'd been more than a mother) at an empty rest area.

Under the dull blue lithium lights he had waited, his face hot and flushed with tears that wouldn't come, his hands trembling with need. The sickness had ranted and ravaged and finally abated because there was nothing left of Albert for it to consume. After, it shifted its focus away from him. Not leaving entirely, simply scavenging for new ways to make itself known.

When it had receded enough for Albert to drive, he pulled out of the rest area and continued east. So even though the sickness knew better, Albert believed he was in control when he saw the girl sitting on the side of the road, huddled against the biting wind, drinking from a bottle inside a brown paper bag.

He didn't think she was hitchhiking. She looked too young for that. Albert put her at about ten or twelve. Certainly no older than fourteen. Much too young to be drinking. Much too young to be out on the road this late at night, hitchhiking in foul weather.

But sure enough, as Albert drove by, the girl's arm jutted out, thumb extended.

Albert looked in the rearview mirror, straining to see his face in the dark. He smoothed a bony hand through his thinning, auburn hair, and checked his teeth to make sure that none of the beef dinner he'd eaten earlier remained wedged in the spaces.

Satisfied, Albert pulled over.

Later, he would tell the authorities he did so because he didn't like the idea of a young girl hitchhiking at night. After all, it was true.

When the girl got into the car, she reeked of alcohol. Albert guessed rum, because she smelled just like his aunt had smelled when he'd gone to stay with her after his parents' divorce. His aunt had been an alcoholic. Rum had been her drink of choice.

The smell of rum filled the Caddy as the girl shut the door.

Albert put the car in drive and accelerated away from the side of the dark road.

"Thanks for the ride, man. It was colder than a witch's titty out there. The snow's really starting to come down." The girl sat on the edge of the

cracked red leather and jammed her filthy hands up near the heater. Albert complied with her silent request by turning the heat all the way up, even though it caused sweat to prickle on his forehead.

He turned to look at her, then quickly turned away.

What the hell?

He forced himself to look again, and a wave of sorrow washed over him, a rush of sympathy that had nothing to do with his sickness.

Under the grime streaks, her face and neck had been cut—shallow razor-line slashes.

Lacerations. The word swirled itself around Albert's mind like wind trapped in a box.

The cuts had stopped bleeding, leaving rust-brown crusts but not yet true scabs. Her wounds appeared to be a couple of hours old, certainly not more than four or five.

He forced a smile, forced himself past the shock of such abuses, and looked at her, that face underlit by the glow of the dashboard, with all the compassion the loneliness had left him. "Hello, my name is Albert Fodderman." His right hand floated from its usual place on the wheel and extended itself to the girl.

She looked at it for a moment, then took it gingerly. "I'm Trish," she said cautiously. "Trish Wills."

Albert could feel the grit of dirt on her cold, soft hand; no cuts here. "Little late to be out hitchhiking, isn't it?"

She glanced at him sharply, her pert nose high, chin out. "Little late to be tooling around back highways in a snowstorm, isn't it?"

Albert laughed, and it hurt. It hurt the way an unused muscle hurts after it's suddenly called upon to perform. Albert drew the laugh out, savoring its sweet pain in the back of his throat. "Touché."

Trish smiled at his laughter; it was the genuine thing, and therefore it demanded a like response. Then she looked down at the hand that he still held in his own. She withdrew it, shrugging uncomfortably.

"Where are you going?" Albert asked, looking at her cuts, and wondering where she'd been.

Trish looked at him again, and her smile faded. She looked at him with the look that is used only by women late at night—a vulnerable, pained gaze.

Albert could see the mental wheels spin. Is this man bad? Does he want something from me? Will he hurt me? Hurt me more than I have been already?

All these things and more, calculated in a single glance. Then Trish sighed. "I'm going no place. I mean, there's no place for me to go."

The words echoed in the Caddy's interior, ringing bright like white hot metal in Albert's mind. No place. . . for me . . . to go.

Albert felt steel wool start to gather in the back of his throat, in the spot where laughter had nestled just a moment before. It clogged at his next words, but he forced them through. "What about your parents?"

"Man, you got to be kidding. They're the reason I was freezing my butt off out there."

Albert dared a long glance at her, and he saw how cold she was. She kept telling him about the chill outside, but looking at her, really looking at the little details, made him wonder why she wasn't even colder. Made him wonder why she hadn't died of exposure in all that freezing weather.

Her fingernails were the color of blue glass, and the skin over her knees, showing through the holes in her jeans, was a frozen, dry burn. Ragged and bloodless and tinged with violet.

He snapped his gaze back to the road, his heart pounding in his chest. After a pause he asked, as gently, as casually as he could, "What did they do to you?" Thinking of her cuts, he believed he already knew the answer to that question, and she didn't disappoint him.

She took a deep breath and told him. Starting slow, but picking up speed quickly until her words almost ran together with emotion, she opened up her life like a fetid weed, blooming in the dankness. And she seemed to swell with the telling, like a tumor that is full and ready to burst. She bled the refuse of her life out into the car.

She told him of the hatred, the hatred of the sexual abuse, the abuse

of the lies, leading to beatings, which she escaped by the drinking (this she told him as she downed the last of her bottle), and from there, it was just a small detour into drug abuse.

Until finally, the drug abuse led her into forced prostitution. Which was where Trish had drawn the line.

All these things happened before she made her final escape. Or so she told him. After all, it was true.

Albert didn't believe any of it. Albert clung to every word like it was gospel truth. Even though what she said was preposterous, it was what Albert had been waiting to hear all his life. Someone else with the sickness. When her tirade was over, he asked in a calm, quiet voice, "How old are you?"

Once again, she hit him with the gaze. That gaze seemed to measure him molecule by molecule, checking each to see if there was something foul hidden deep in the nucleus of his soul.

Finally, she sighed in a tired sort of way. "Seventeen," she said in a voice that said seventy or a hundred, or maybe even a thousand. No seventeen-year-old had the age that one word conveyed.

She rolled down the window, cold slicking into the Caddy's warmth, and threw the bottle, bag and all, into a passing snow bank.

"You look younger," he said.

She took the comment without any reaction at first, simply rolling the window back up, and then she turned to look at him again. "Why do you say that?"

Albert pretended to concentrate on the road while he considered her question. It had seemed to him, while she had been speaking, that she was like him. Alone. A loner. Lonely. But willing to share that loneliness.

In his search for someone, he'd visited stockyards, bars, missions. There he'd found many who had the same lonely, but they'd all been private in their illness. None of them willing to share.

Now, it seemed as if he had finally found the one who would broker the burden with him. Open, honest about her need. But something in

her reaction was wrong.

She wasn't searching for companionship the way Albert was. Or she didn't seem to be. So he tried to reach out to her on a level that couldn't be misunderstood. "I guess it's because you look vulnerable. I can understand vulnerability. It just makes you look young, that's all."

She turned away from him to watch the road slough past in drifts of white. "Well, looks can be deceiving."

Oh my, yes, thought Albert, a touch of loneliness settling on his shoulders with the caress of a lover. Yes, looks can be deceiving. As deceiving as a white lie, as deceiving as black ice, as deceiving as the kiss of a . . . child? What he said was, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you."

"That's okay."

Albert scrambled to get back to neutral ground. "So what happened to these wicked parents of yours?"

Trish swung in the seat, open hostility in her small face. "It's true, you know? Everything I said is true. If you don't believe me, you can ask the case worker that—"

Albert held up his hand, not really expecting silence, but getting it anyway. "Trish, I do believe you. I was simply asking a question." After a short pause, "You don't have to answer if you don't want."

Her voice was hollow, and as chilling as the wind outside. "They're still on the road. Ahead of us."

Then, into the dim pools of headlight. A sign. An arrow pointed to the left; next to this arrow was the word "Salem," spelled out in a series of small reflective disks. Below that another arrow, pointing to the right. Next to it was the word "Sisters." Someone had spray painted over the name in fluorescent pink and written the word "Hell" in its place.

Trish giggled as they passed the sign, "I've spent too much time in Hell, I think I'll pass." Silly joke.

By the time Albert decided they should head to Salem, bad omens and bad parents and bad all, they were well past the turnoff. Headed straight to Hell. Do not pass go. Do not collect. . . .

Trish reached into the pocket of her dirty, denim jacket. She pulled out a pack of generic cigarettes and 7-11 matches. “Mind if I smoke?”

“Go right ahead.” He pulled down the ashtray from under the dash.

She lit up. The harsh, cheap cigarette smell filled the Caddy on her first exhale. She waved out the match and dropped it into the ashtray. “So where’re you—or should I say we—going, Mr. Fodderman?”

The question tossed Albert into disorganized panic. “Uh, call me Albert, or Al.”

“All right, Al. The question hasn’t changed.”

In the time it took to answer, Albert came up with the response he wanted. “I’m going just as far as my money will take me.” He flashed her what he hoped was a devil-may-care grin.

Trish took another drag from her cigarette. “All right, let me try this from a different angle. Where do you think we’ll end up, once we pass through Hell?”

Albert felt a thrill. Maybe she really did understand. She’d said “we.” He tried to hold back his enthusiasm, his lust for a life that had something, *someone* else in it. Shivers ran up his scalp as he replied, his quiet voice vibrating with anticipation, “Well, I guess that depends on you.”

She flicked the ash off her smoke and pulled the heat knob towards the blue. Cool air seeped in and chilled the trickles of sweat on the backs of Albert’s thin legs.

“What do you mean by that?” Her voice was tired again. The voice of the hooker who just has one more trick to go before she can head home and get some sleep.

“Pretty much just what I said. I really don’t have anyplace to go either. I have an inheritance that will hold up, money-wise, for years. Now that you’re here, I guess we can go just about anywhere you want.”

He hoped against hope. So many times he’d made similar offers, only to have the slaps, the curses, the accusations of faggot or rapist or dirty old man, thrown at him. He held his breath, and the sound of the slick roadway humming raggedly beneath them, grew deafening.

She took a deep drag, let it out slowly. A billow of off white in the

green light of the dash. She took another drag and held it for a moment. Finally she let it out and turned to him again. “Are you all right in the head?” The question was gentle. The inquiry of one who knows what it’s like to not be all right.

Albert let out his breath in a long, thin hiss. “Well, no. I guess I’m just someone with no place to go to, and no one to be there if I did have someplace. You sort of struck me as the same kind of person.”

She nodded and crushed out the cigarette in the ashtray. The smoke drifted up and curled around the dash until it hit the vents, where it vanished.

Albert stole a glance from the road and gave it to her. In the dim green, reaching for her next smoke, she looked almost the age of her voice. Albert felt sorry for her.

The match flared quickly, then died to a red glow as she lit the cigarette. “Yeah. I guess you’re right. I remember all those times on the road. When Mom and Jerry would stop by the houses of his . . . friends. They would all hang on each other and say how nice it was to get together again. Then Jerry would take one of his friends aside, and the friend would give him something. Usually money, sometimes acid or ‘shrooms. Then Mom and Jerry’s friend would go to the bedroom together.

“I remember looking at those friends and trying to see past what they were doing. What they were saying. I was looking for something. Some . . . *click* . . . deep inside. Like a tightly wound spring that I could touch, and it would come loose and explain why I felt the way I did. After not finding it for a long time, I started forgetting to look. Then I forgot how to look.”

She sucked in a quick puff. “Is that what you’re talking about?”

Albert couldn’t speak. He thought of the times in the hobo camps. He thought of bars. The endless hours of paying hookers, just so he could tell them of his secret illness, then watch. Watch closely. For the reaction of someone. Anyone. Who knew what he was talking about.

Her voice was harsh from tears uncried. “Do you have the . . . ‘click’? Are you going to tell me why I feel like a hollowed-out person? Like the

dolls I used to play with. Pretty on the outside, nothing but cold air inside?”

“Yes,” said Albert. “I’m going to tell you.”

And so he told her of the sickness. He told her of the times after his aunt died of liver failure, the times after the institutions. The places where doctors in white coats had insisted his aunt was dead, though Albert could still see her solemn smile, still hear her reassuring voice. The doctors kept insisting she was dead, over and over until his aunt had simply faded away under the weight of their mantra.

Albert kept those things to himself, explaining to Trish only what came after. He unfolded to her the secrets of steel wool and bloat and heart attack pain and blindness.

He told her of the searches which lay ahead of her, searches for someone, unless she stayed with him now. He recounted the nights alone in the hotel rooms when his flesh had cried out for touch. From anyone. And so bad was his need that even the soft sheets chafed, and his clothing burned.

All this he told her in the rush of a dying man confessing his multitude of sins to the priest. Hoping for absolution. These things he told her, and she believed him. After all, it was true.

All during this, Albert watched Trish cry and laugh and clap her hands in exquisite agony, perfect understanding. He knew she’d been searching for *him* all of her short life. The short life that was at least a hundred years long.

By the end of his speech, Albert found Trish had taken his hand. Not the hand clasp of a lover. Not the caress of sex. It was the gesture of one patient in the terminal ward for another of its kind.

“I’m sorry,” she said simply. “I understand you. Wherever you want to go is fine with me.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying your search is over. I’m the one you’ve been looking for. I have been looking for *you*.”

Albert heard the words and disbelieved them. “Others have said the

same. How do I know you won’t get tired of me? Leave me like you left your parents?”

She hesitated. “I could never leave you like I left them.” Then she smiled, and despite the cuts, she was unbearably beautiful. “I’ll go with you anywhere. For the rest of your life, I’ll never leave you.” She clenched his hand. Her touch burned.

“Do you really mean that?”

“Would I lie to you? After all, it’s the truth.”

Then it happened. The thing. The ugliness. Joy of long-sought-after discovery smashed in the blink of ripped headlights, in the twist of flashing chrome, in the rending of desperate metal.

The underside of the overturned van came out of the swirling dark—a rusted ghost bathed in pools of light from fire engines and ambulances. And the tiny hatchback across the road, flipped on its back like a mangled turtle, flashed into view.

Albert screamed—a high-pitched, lady’s scream—and slammed the brakes, snapping the steering wheel to the left. On the slick roads, the Caddy went into a skid. Sideways, at almost fifty miles per hour, the heavy car swept through a piled snow bank and slipped into a spin. The tortuous, wrenching nausea of lack of control shot through Albert.

The Caddy slued to a halt just feet from the line of flares which marked a perimeter around the accident. Albert breathed a deep, even sigh, slowly relaxing his grip on the steering wheel. He turned to see if Trish was all right.

There was no one in the passenger seat.

“Trish?” he whispered with a throat made of broken razors.

No answer. She had simply vanished.

“Trish?” he called again, louder, his need edging the razors with fear. He leaned over and touched the seat where she’d been sitting. The leather was cold, as cold as the gently blowing ice crystals on his windshield.

Albert heaved himself upright and almost fainted as the world closed down in a prickly, dark wave. He shook his head and took several deep breaths. Gradually, the blackness rolled back.

Albert pushed his door open and stumbled into the snow. “Trish?” A shipwreck survivor’s cry.

“You all right, buddy?” An old man in the heavy slicker of a fire fighter.

Albert felt strong hands on his arm, steadying him, propping him up on the roadway’s treacherous footing. He couldn’t focus on the man; all his attention was taken by the scene in front of him.

Albert shrugged off the fireman and staggered around the front of the Caddy to stare at the van. In the garish, nightmare shadows created by the lights of the fire trucks, he could see the bodies.

The man hung half way through the van’s shattered windshield, the jagged glass and crumpled metal gutting him. A small knot of paramedics were trying to dislodge his body without doing more damage.

A drift of snow had settled on the man’s shoulders and head. “Trish?” A whisper, snatched by the wind.

The woman lay five feet beyond the van, a human shaped lump in the Caddy’s lights. Her arms and legs were a tangle of blood and flesh and snow. A single ambulance attendant was trying to jockey her into a black, vinyl body bag.

Albert ran.

“Hey, you can’t go in there.” The old man’s voice, a distant warning cry.

Past the markers, past the knot of firefighters, Albert made his way to the single attendant, a young woman, who had finally gotten the feet inside the bag, and was struggling with the torso.

Albert looked at the frost hard face, the pert nose, the prominent chin.

“*Trish*,” he howled, making the attendant jump as if she’d been shot.

But even as he cried, he saw that this woman wasn’t his Trish. The face was similar. Older. With the same lines but more age, more harshness than his Trish. Trish’s mother.

“*Trish?*” he screamed at the muting, swirling, drowning dark of the road as his hands started to go numb, his feet started to ache.

“Hey, buddy.” The strong arms were on him again, pulling him away. “You know these people?” The man paused. “We’ve identified them as the Wills family.”

Albert nodded.

“Were you a relative, or friend, or what?”

Albert eyes were scanning the scene, searching for one more body but to his relief, not finding it. Tension bled from him. He had not gone crazy again. There would be no institutions this time.

“Trish, I knew Trish. Those were her parents.” He turned to look at the old man, and saw sorrow and concern in those eyes.

Albert continued in a rush. “She was hitchhiking. I picked her up on the side of the road a few miles back. She’s about seventeen. I picked her up because I didn’t like the idea of a young girl hitchhiking alone at night. She was with me when we got here. Now she’s gone.” Albert took a deep breath, and stopped, wondering what he should say next. He figured it wise not to mention the abuse. The parents were dead.

No use in stirring up trouble for Trish, wherever she’d gotten to.

The concern in the old fire fighter’s eyes turned to hard scrutiny. “Hitchhiking, you say?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

Albert paused, daunted by the frank suspicion of the question. “A while ago,” he muttered, the words almost lost to the storm.

“Follow me.”

The old fire fighter led Albert to the back of the ambulance, where he could hear the crackle of the police radio. Opening the back, the man motioned Albert inside.

A third body lay on the stretcher.

Albert grew numb inside as the sickness began its assault, and he could only stare dumbly as the sheet was pulled back.

Under the grime streaks, her face and neck had been cut, shallow razor-line slashes. Her wounds looked to be a couple of hours old, certainly not more than four or five.

Lacerations. Crusted with blood, not yet true scabs, nor would they ever be.

Trish Wills was dead, had been before he ever saw her.

Albert stumbled outside to try and vomit up the steel wool that choked him, to expel the bloat from his body.

After, he was led away from the ambulance.

Then came the questions. Albert mumbled answers, sitting on the back of a fire truck, his hands wrapped around a Styrofoam cup of hot coffee, a blanket around his shoulders to keep the cold at bay. He tried to sound rational, but couldn't tell if he was successful because the pain in his arm and in his eye wouldn't let him concentrate.

"Listen," said the fireman when he'd filled out his forms. "Why don't you head into Sisters? Get a hotel room. You look like you could use a good night's sleep."

Albert couldn't move, couldn't face the idea of climbing in his lonely Cadillac, and rolling down that empty road, not when he'd been so close to happiness.

"Listen Mac, I don't know what game you're running here, with all that hitchhiker crap, and I really don't care, but if you want my opinion, it's probably mild shock, and right now I don't have the time to deal with that. So why don't you just give me a break and go to a motel."

Albert's muscles finally freed their grip. He stood, stretching his legs against the cold pain, and made his way to the Caddy. Then turned back. "Thank you," he said to the old man, who had begun to walk away. "You're probably right. Just shock, I guess."

"Sure, buddy, that's all. Now get some rest."

Albert had driven for about a mile when the sickness hit like a flood. He eased the car to the side of the road as the attack rampaged through. He gripped the steering wheel, his hands shaking in anger and need. It felt like he was choking on the broken glass of the air around him.

After a time it passed.

He pulled out onto the road again, windshield wipers beating a frantic tattoo, trying to hold back the onslaught of new snow. He felt calm.

Just outside of Sisters, he saw her. Sitting on the side of the road, hunkered down near the population sign.

He pulled over carefully.

"Thanks for the ride, mister. I thought I was going to freeze to death out there."

Albert swung the Caddy back out onto the highway, then glanced over at her. Different, but in some ways the same. Old young. Crooked teeth, eyes sunken in dark hollows of despair. In the glow of the dash, her skin was sallow, wax-like.

"No problem," said Albert.

Extending his free hand toward the shivering woman, he said, "Hello, my name is Albert Fodderman."

She nodded, "Cathy," she said, and took his hand, her coat sleeve riding up on her forearm.

Even in the dim light, Albert could see the slash, tracking up her wrist towards her elbow until it disappeared inside her jacket. The wound was bloodless, as if it had been washed, its cleanline lips puffy and swollen. Unhealed.

She should be dead.

In Albert's mind, the loneliness snickered as the steel wool closed down, choking off his scream.

But the urge to cry out didn't last. There was still the girl, this Cathy, sitting beside him, and until she too disappeared, Albert couldn't give up the hope. The hope that she might be the one.

The Caddy rolled through the small town of Sisters. It passed the local motels, not even slowing. It headed out the other side of town. Into the night.



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