

“Between The Crests” by Jeremy Schultz – Awarded Honorable Mention

Photo – Both Sides Now

Bill awoke in a cold sweat. Wet and clammy, he sat up in a daze. After a moment of finding his bearings, Bill realized he was in his drawers, and only his drawers, in the snow.

Thinking back, Bill couldn't recall how he got here, his brain throbbed in his skull and the last thing he remembered was eating mozzarella sticks in a booth at the Slippery Slope. He knew where he was, somewhere just past the reach of civilization, outside view of the ski resort, only Visible to the forests below.

Bill weighed his options, looking back and forth between the crests he was nestled betwixt until he finally chose the one on his right. He kicked away the heavy snow bank at his feet to walk around the level of the peak. Any higher and I'd have to climb, he thought to himself.

When Bill got around the base of the singular peak, the first thing he noticed was that all his toes were going numb. Once he looked around however, Bill noticed that where he expected to see the small town of Howling Heights, instead there was a plateau.

Oh no, Bill realized in horror, I'm on the wrong damn peak! His digits all numb now, Bill started to circle around, but then had the idea to turn back and walk in his own footprints.

Before he reached the other mountain top, completely prepared for the freezing trek of deeper snow on a steeper plain, Bill noticed a new set of footprints he hadn't seen before. A couple feet from the hole in which he'd woken up, the prints formed a curving line that went downhill, and were joined by an indentation. To Bill, it looked like a sign of whoever dragged him up there.

Bill leapt down to the nearest prints and hopped from them to the closest side of his own indentation in the snow, and fell flat on his face in it. Once picked back up, Bill's whole body was wet and shaking. Stepping forward carefully, Bill started to wish he'd listened to Lynn and grown a beard.

Now that Lynn crossed Bill's mind, she wouldn't cross back out. Even as he worried about hypothermia and dying alone on the mountainside, Bill reflected back to when Lynn left, and wondered what he did wrong. About a week ago, Lynn came home from church with her brother, Paul, and bugged Bill about coming with them next time while they made lunch.

The entire time the three of them prepared her grilled chicken salad, Bill uncomfortably took in the secondhand sermon from Lynn, with Paul cutting in now and then for gold nuggets of contribution. When lunch was eaten and Paul went home, Lynn started a fight, all about a year spent going out alone on Sunday mornings, before she left for good, feeling belittled.

Bill's head kept throbbing, but he had no trouble reliving that whole night; no matter where he'd gone, who he'd seen, everyone knew their entire story. A few said it was his fault, but most people who said anything felt sorry for him.

Finally, Bill made his way through the footprints down out of the snow. There still was some scattered across the area, but most of it disappeared, making way for thick trees in the height of the forest.

Bill considered his options, as each direction saw trees yield to snow eventually, until he noticed the footprints reach their destination on his

right, where they made way for tire tracks. Bill realized if whoever brought him up there drove most of the way, they probably took a trail and he'd find a real road sooner or later. The faster I get to civilization, the sooner I can get help, Bill reassured himself.

After stumbling along the tire tracks, thinking more about his last breakup for a few minutes, Bill arrived at a dirt path. Bill paused for a second, then dried his feet one at a time before stepping onto the dirt path. While his feet were still freezing cold, Bill got the feeling back in them which, encouraged him of their strength. He finally stepped forward down the path home, then started to pick up speed.

Bill started running down the path, and finally felt a little nice again as his blood started pumping. He began to feel a sinking beneath him as the path grew steeper, and the running sped beyond his control. Bill got worried he'd fall on his face, or break his neck, but he leaned back, put a little more weight into his footsteps, and regained his balance while retaining an adequate momentum.

When the road came up before him and the trees faded into Bill's background, he was already covered in warm fuzzies. The pavement hurt more than the dirt had, even with its rocks and pine needles. The way his feet bounced off the concrete, Bill had less control and more speed, but with the town coming up he reached the bottom of the mountain, and knew he needn't worry about rolling to his death any longer. With all fear gone, Bill rushed into the Slippery Slope Bar and Grill at a full sprint, madly dashing through the doors where he promptly collapsed.

"Bill," his friend Kota shouted, rushing over, "what happened?!" The bartender came over, too. "No John, just call an ambulance!" Kota took charge and wrapped Bill in his coat. Once they got Bill some coffee, he caught his breath and finally stopped shaking. He opened his eyes, and saw Paul walk in laughing with another EMT Bill didn't know.

"You! You did this to me, didn't you," Bill shouted as he leapt to his feet.

"What, Bill? Are you the one who collapsed," Paul stopped, appearing concerned.

"I remember everything until twelve-thirty last night, Paul. You were sitting there at the far end of the bar, and for once you weren't drinking," Bill explained.

"Hey yeah, I thought that was weird," John chimed in.

Kota stepped forward, "I've heard enough, you're under arrest, Paul."

"For what," Paul screamed, triggering Bill.

"For drugging me, stealing my clothes, and leaving me for dead on the mountain last night!" Bill was blindingly furious now.

"I didn't do any of that," Paul started to panic, "Kim, tell them I didn't do it!"

"Sorry Paul, you didn't come back in 'til three last night, I can't be sure of anything."

"I can, though," Kota rose from restraining Paul's hands behind his back, "after we test Bill, my captain will let me search Paul's truck, apartment, locker, hell, even your vehicle, especially if you both have access to the drugs in his system." Paul hung his head in tears upon hearing these implications.

“Why’d you do it, Paul? Was it really just because I wouldn’t go to church, or give Lynn the apartment?” Bill gloated, but it was still a little bittersweet for him.

“I don’t care about any of that, you jerk! Are you crazy? I did it because you drove Lynn away when she loved you so much, she just up and moved to Brooklyn! Not even a goodbye, just weeks of crying and now she’s gone, all because of you! I should have just finished the job and buried your corpse in the snow, you damned monster!” Paul’s admission shocked the crowd.

“You’re the only monster here, Lynn would never forgive you for this! You’re a sociopath, Paul-” Bill almost punched the maniac, but Kota stepped in, “and you have the right to remain silent.”