

HAPPY NEW YEAR

by Paul J. Wigowsky

1966

HAPPY NEW YEAR

"And Lord, make me realize this year that you are by my side every moment," concluded Boris.

Stanley prayed next. "God, protect us throughout this year, and help us to always live for you. Amen."

It was past midnight in the beginning of the new year 1966. The young people from the Russian Gospel Temple were gathered together for their own New Year's Party. It was customary to see the old year out and greet the new year in with prayer. This year the people did not feel enthusiastic about praying. Whoever wanted to pray prayed out loud while the others listened. During the past new year's parties, everyone prayed together so that someone listening to the praying would think that there was a wind storm in the building. Before, everyone wanted to lift the load of sin off his shoulders by crying out to God for mercy and for success in the future. There was always the desire to do more for the kingdom of God by making converts out of poor lost sinners. This year it was different. No one really understood why it was different, only that they felt that it was different. Some thought that the leaders weren't leading, others didn't care anymore, still others had other interests in mind, while only a few still had a faint hope of doing something about it.

After prayer, everyone filed into the food line. The girls had prepared delicious pastry, delightful fried chicken, tasty rice, appetizing salad, and other palatable dishes. Chairs were provided for everyone. Some were anxious to play games. The men gathered around the pool table, the women played Chinese checkers, the checkers enthusiasts played checkers, while the ping-pong lovers paddled the ball across the net. Those who didn't care for games chatted with friends and drank coffee. In one corner was an admirer of books who was reading about Genghis Khan and about his heroic adventures. Then, of course, there were several who didn't especially care to remain, so they left to seek excitement elsewhere. It seemed like everyone was enjoying himself. Life was not boring as long as something was being done.

The party was held at Stanley's house, downstairs in the large hall that he had remodeled for social purposes. Stanley was the social leader in the young people's group. He always tried to do his best for the group. No one really did appreciate all the former efforts that he made in keeping the group together and happy. Somehow every party that he organized was a failure. And, naturally, he was blamed for unsuccessful parties. Perhaps he tried to redeem himself in the eyes of the group by remodeling the empty hall in his house for the use of the young people. He had a food counter installed in one corner for the purpose of serving refreshments to everyone who would visit the place. With the help of some pool enthusiasts, he bought a fairly decent pool table. He constructed a couple of ping-pong tables and bought half a dozen of second-hand checker sets and half a dozen second-hand Chinese checker sets. All together, the entire construction was quite a success. Everyone was pleased with it.

By three o'clock in the morning, everyone had left except for a group of fellows who had other plans. There were six of them, and they were eager to set out for the long awaited snow trip. Stanley, who was to be the driver, went upstairs to catch a few hours of sleep. Reuben, the youngest of the group at seventeen years of age, went home also to sleep a little. Boris and Arnie went home to gather their equipment together and make other last minute arrangements. Paul and Adolf, brothers of Stanley, stayed to play some more pool. Everyone of them was to be ready to go at five o'clock in the morning. Each person felt that this was going to be a most adventurous trip, a trip that would never be forgotten. Excitement was expected, but what kind of excitement no one actually realized at the moment.

By four-thirty o'clock, Boris and Arnie had returned and were ready to go. Boris was twenty-five years old, had graduated from a theological college with a B.A. degree, and was now attending junior college with the intention of seeking a career in dentistry. He was a medium tall fellow, being several inches under six feet, was sort of stocky, but not fat, had a short ivy league hair cut, had muscular arms and had a very well built body. His face depicted another phase of his character. While his body was very manly, his face was unbelievably childish. It was not childish in the sense of immaturity, but in the sense that all the features of the face were so smooth and unsoiled. The well formed tan on his face gave him a more manly look, but nevertheless, under the tan he was still the man with a boy's face. His forehead projected just a little beyond the rest of his face, mainly because his hair was further back on his head. His cheek bones were buried under the soft layer of flesh that covered his face. The brown eyes that stood out under almost unnoticeable eyebrows sparkled with a sort of jubilant light. After observing the mannerisms of his eyes, a person could almost write an entire story about them. Perhaps most of his character was focused in the use of his eyes. Right under those mysterious eyes was a round nose that distinctly displayed two parts. It almost seemed as if two little pear-shaped bulbs were glued on the lower part of the nose. More interesting yet was the shape of his lips. They were wide and thick, but both the upper and lower lips were very fleshy. His chin fit perfectly into the pattern of a round face. On the whole, his face was a character within itself.

Arnie was quite a different character than Boris. While Boris was formed like a working man, Arnie looked like a born scholar. He walked with an erect body, as if there was a lot of the intellectual within him. No doubt some of his well-formed stature was due to the excessive training in the air force. Right now he was steadily learning about electronics in college. His height and age were about the same as Boris'. But that is where the similarities end. Arnie was more quiet, more at ease, and more content with life than Boris. Arnie was more of the practical kind, who lived life with no fear of losing anything. Boris looked for too much meaning in life, always searching for reasons and solutions to every problem. The contrast between the two could be further

depicted in their social life. Arnie was not too interested in giving some kind of an impression to every person he met. Boris desired to find favor and admiration in the eyes of his acquaintances. Arnie was intrinsically not too energetic in seeking a mate in life. Boris had suppressed that desire, even though it still burned passionately within his heart. Arnie, in general, almost seemed as a flawless person, unless some Southerner talked with him and discovered his eastern accent. But after all, his eastern American accent was quite amusing to listen to.

"Well fellows, ready to go?" asked Boris as he entered the social hall.

"Sure," answered Paul as he shot another ball in the side pocket. "We're going to have to wake up Stanley. He's probably dead asleep right now."

"Why don't you go wake him up?" advised Arnie as he followed Boris into the hall.

"I have to finish this game first," apologized Paul as he aimed for another shot.

"Don't worry. We've got lots of time," said Adolf as he sleepily leaned on his pool stick waiting for his turn.

Paul and Adolf were friendly brothers. Since Paul had returned home from Bible College, they had somehow begun to realize that they were actually brothers, brothers that could help each other and talk together about common things. Even though Adolf was ten years older than Paul, there was not much difference in their height. Both were only several inches above five feet, neither was too stocky, both had sturdy bodies, and both had a good sense of humor, no doubt inherited from their mother. But here also, the similarities end. Adolf was already thirty years old and was a bachelor throughout his long life. He was a painter by trade and an admirer of good art and music by taste. He enjoyed social life and meeting people. He didn't care too much for books, probably because of the little education that he had due to lack of opportunities. But he did care about having an enjoyable life even though he believed that life had very little to offer. In spite of a lonely life, he made the best of life by being very friendly and humorous.

Paul was just beginning to live life. Two years ago he was very naive about life, about things in the world, and about people. But two years in a theological college taught him many things about how to live. It was only this year that he began to really live independent from his parents. He always despised being in constant fear of his parents' disapproval or punishment. Now he no longer cared. His character was neither in his face nor in his actions, but in his thoughts. He had learned how to think for himself. He loved books. He enjoyed reading all kinds of literature, from novels and short stories to poetry and essays. At present he was majoring in English Literature in a junior college. Formerly a strong patriot for the cause of religion, Paul now was an indifferent person toward religion. He preferred to live life philosophically instead of practically. He enjoyed

discussing ideas and theories about life and about things in life. As in most people, he also had a variety of interests, such as music, singing, art, and food, but his main interest was to simply live.

Paul knocked on the front door and stood waiting for his brother Stanley to wake up and open the door. Paul knocked again, a little louder, and Stanley appeared at the door.

"Don't make so much noise. The baby's sleeping," said Stanley as he opened the door.

"Hurry up and dress. Everyone's waiting for you downstairs," mentioned Paul as he turned around, ready to go back downstairs for another game of pool.

"I'll be out in a couple of minutes," replied Stanley as he closed the door and started getting ready for the trip.

Stanley was married now for almost four years and was living quite an enjoyable life. He tried to please his wife, even though at times it was difficult. Women seem to be very demanding, and Stanley's wife was no different. He was a little taller than his two brothers and built a little heavier. He had the blue eyes and blonde hair of his younger brother. In fact, some people thought that both look very much alike. Stanley never was too close with his brothers, probably because he got married at such an early age and was too much concerned about his wife. But after all, that is married life, and Stanley wasn't much different.

Five o'clock came and everyone was ready and impatient to get started. The skis were securely tied to the roof of Stanley's station wagon and the rest of the equipment was stored in the back of the automobile. Everyone was wide awake at the commencement of the trip. Before Stanley drove on to the highway, Boris prayed a short prayer for God's protection and for His permission in allowing an enjoyable trip. It was still dark. Paul and Boris chatted in the back seat while Reuben was beginning to doze off. Adolf and Arnie entertained Stanley in the front seat. The radio softly played classical music in the background. The group was planning to stop at Sacramento for a snappy breakfast before they continued on their trip up to the snowy mountains. Before they approached Sacramento, Boris woke up Paul so that he wouldn't miss the action overhead. Directly above the speeding car flew ranks and files of thousands of ducks. They were all migrating south for warmer weather. It was quite a spectacle. The ducks were in perfect formations, some in V-shapes, others in direct straight lines, and still others in curve formations. It was quite impressing to observe that ducks had such well organized lives.

By seven-thirty o'clock the boys were already seated around a restaurant table eating their eggs and toast. They received a report that Heavenly Valley, the desired destination, was jammed with traffic. So they decided that it was best to avoid the traffic and head out toward Squaw Valley instead. Boris took the chore of driving and it was not too long before they drove into snow

country. Being a very precautious driver, Boris smoothly and slowly guided the car over the snowy road. It would be quite a while before they would reach their destination at the speed they were traveling. But it was best to be careful. At the present, everyone was indulged in observing the beauty of the snow covered landscape. For Paul it was more than twelve years since he last saw snow. Reuben had never seen bushels of snow like he was seeing now. The rest of the group were frequent visitors to the snow country, mainly for the purpose of spending a day or two on skis.

The soft white crystals of snow covered the entire countryside. Higher in the mountains the trees were decorated with large pieces of snow. In areas where the virgin snow sloped down a slight inclinement there was the remarkable pattern of a perfect geometric curve. The snow was about four to five feet deep, and it was so delicate that if a person stepped into it he would undoubtedly sink to the bottom without difficulty. The biting coldness of the snow when placed to the finger tips almost paralyzed and froze the naked hand. But the smell of the snowy atmosphere refreshed the senses of a person. The freshness and newness of the air was so invigorating and healthy. It almost made a person feel like a different person.

Everybody loves snow when it's for enjoyment, and the boys were no exception. They were very anxious to stand in the wet snow and feel their feet get cold. Arriving at Squaw Valley, they didn't give any consideration to anybody else. Each departed in his own company to join in the excitement of the day. Arnie and Boris were first to try out the snow runs. They took a ride high up into the mountains. From the top they slowly maneuvered their way around precarious trees and uneven slopes. Arnie was quite a professional on skis. He twisted his body and bent his knees in every direction with a steady rythm so that it almost seemed as if he was keeping time to a beat of some familiar song. Boris was not quite as skillful, nevertheless, his style was developing into a very smooth glide. Adolf caught up later with the pro's, after losing them for a while. He had a style all of his own. His small body moved with the speed of lightning. He was so confident in his turns that it almost seemed as if he didn't make any turns. He just sort of twisted to the left and right every other second. Stanley was still not too familiar with the sport, so he stayed near the smaller slopes. A couple of times he lost control of his turns and started speeding downhill. Of course, the only alternative was to fall sideways, slide, and stop all covered with snow. When he came to a stop finally, he had almost already started a snowstorm. It was a dangerous way of skiing, but what mattered was that he didn't break a leg. With Paul and Reuben it could have been a different story. They were skiing on the beginner's slopes with very little luck. But after all, not much could be expected from beginners. It took Paul three trips before he even learned how to stay on a chair lift without falling. When he finally did get to the top, he didn't know how to get down.

He tried to ski sideways first. That didn't work too good. Next he attempted to try turning. That was a complete failure. So what does he do next? He skis straight down the hill. Flop! Better luck next time. Reuben wasn't so courageous. He took his time and slowly braced himself from one position to another until he reached bottom, then he tried again. By the end of the day, no one really wanted to leave. But the place closed down and it was time to seek a refuge for the night.

The next idea was to go to Heavenly Valley for the night. But bad fortune disappointed the boys. After traveling for fifteen miles, they stumbled into a detour. The road was closed. So the next best bet was to sleep overnight in a hotel near the borderline and then leave early in the morning for Heavenly Valley. That night, new year's night, the boys strolled into a Nevada Casino Restaurant. They hadn't eaten all day and were starved. Adolf and Stanley were starved for some luck. Their natural instinct compelled them to try their luck at some slot machines and a couple of dozen bingo games. The odds weren't in their favor, but the loss wasn't too great. After dinner they all fell sound asleep within a matter of minutes in their little hotel.

Next morning, the boys woke up a little late. It was ten o'clock by the time they crossed the border into Nevada and started driving around Lake Tahoe toward the day's skiing arena. The sore muscles had recuperated since yesterday, and no one dared miss another chance at skiing. Heavenly Valley wasn't as congested with ski fans as Squaw Valley, and once again everybody chose his specific slope according to his ability. Everyone improved just enough to enjoy skiing just a little better. But all good things also have their end. By five o'clock the boys were ready to bid farewell to skiing and snow, some for only a few weeks, others for another year.

Once again, the boys hadn't eaten all day, and their stomachs ached from hunger pangs. They could hardly wait to get to Sacramento where they would each order his steak dinner and enjoy the last moments of a most enjoyable trip. But it was still a long trip before they would finally arrive there. They had to travel through slippery snow country and the night was already beginning to show its dark side.

Stanley preferred to drive back home, sensing that the road wasn't in best of conditions and felt more secure in bearing the responsibility. Snow chains were only an obstruction and a nuisance, and in fact, the highways were safe for driving without chains, even though the road was icy and slippery in a few places. Stanley was a gambler when it came to driving. He would run the car faster than required in hazardous areas. Around curves he frequently was discourteous and forgetful in lowering his high beams. At long stretches, when too many slow-moving vehicles crowded the road in front of him, he would step on the gas and would pass sometimes three or more cars at a time. This dangerous driving kept all the boys awake. They didn't want to miss the heroic gestures of such a risky driver. Within another hour, snow country was far back in the distance, and now the car began to pick up speed on the dry highway. Occasional curves kept the driver alert and awake. It was only twenty miles before they

would reach Sacramento and food.

Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, there appeared a faint dividing line on the highway. This line guided the driver for about twenty feet to a road-dividing island. The island, which was about six inches in height, was formed out of concrete in a narrow and long V-shape. Instead of following the line on the right, Stanley became hypnotized by the mysterious intrusion of the line on the left.

Being aware that the car was moving in the wrong direction, Reuben quickly warned, "Where are you going?"

Having noticed the mistake, Stanley tried to veer the car so as to avoid the concrete island.

Boris, sitting next to Stanley, having also observed the illusion into which Stanley stumbled, tried to deviate the car to a safe position by quickly grabbing the closest part of the steering-wheel and jerking it to the right.

The car did not swerve far enough to avoid the almost inevitable collision with the concrete island.

Before Stanley could end his exclamatory statement, "What the...", the car had already climbed on top of the concrete, simultaneously causing such an impact with the back left tire so as to produce an instant blow-out. The car was traveling at such a helpless speed, about sixty-five miles per hour, that such a contact exposed one's life to an unprecedented peril.

Stanley was paralyzed at the wheel upon impact and everything went "black." He held firmly to the wheel out of an instinctive struggle for survival. His feet grasped the floor without touching either the gas or the brake pedals.

The other passengers slightly ducked into a tucked position, with the bodies inclined downward. This reaction was not of fear or shock, but for the sake of self-protection.

The car rolled on top of the island for about twenty feet before it skidded jaggedly back on the highway. The flat tire in back produced friction with the road which caused the rim to rip out half-an-inch of asphalt on the traversed part of the highway.

The car slid off the road and was heading toward a telephone pole. But five feet off the road was a muddy ditch which was about about fifteen feet deep. The car had almost succumbed to a stop before it reached the slanted forty-five degree ditch. At the moment, enough inertia and momentum prevented the car from coming to a stationery stop.

Everyone in the car was silent. Everyone's attention and conscious thinking was focused on the final outcome of this accidental experience.

Reuben noticed the advancing pole and ducked, clinging to Adolf's arm. Up till this point he thought that everything would turn out fine, but now his heart began a rapid thump and his mind almost audibly stated, "Oh no!" It was as if his instinctive

emotions felt an impossibility of escape from death.

Things were moving too fast for Adolf to keep track of them. Before he could recover from the impact with the concrete, he noticed the car swerving off the road. He caught a rapid glimpse of the pole before his eyes caught full sight of the unexpected ditch. There was no need to panic, for within his optimistic mind he already felt that things wouldn't be too bad. But he did fear that someone might eventually get hurt or badly injured unless the car stopped. And that was what he expected before he saw the unwelcome ditch.

Paul was thrown upwards in his seat when the car thumped into the concrete and landed only in time to see the black sky silhouetted in the background. He was stunned and wondered why in the world everything was moving so fast. He wanted to see what was happening, but somehow the commotion inside the car obstructed his view. He saw only the moonless sky as he was thrown violently against the door.

Annie's reactions were calm and disciplined. He firmly clung to the seat during the beginning of the wretched ordeal. Having already experienced a similar affair several years back, he remembered that the most important step in such an accident was to be unemotional. He grasped the side of one seat and braced himself for an impact, if such occurred. But as he noticed the faint pole in the distance, he crouched down in his seat so that his face would be covered if glass happened to fly into the car. He was sitting next to the door in the front seat opposite the driver. If anything happened, he evaluated, it would happen either on the driver's side or on his own side. He wished for the best.

Stanley's senses were dazed by the impact with the concrete, and as he tried in vain to regain control of the car, he desperately breathed for air, as if he visualized a ghastly end and tried to escape it. He hoped for some kind of luck as he effortlessly watched the car head toward the pole, the ditch, and destruction. He greatly valued his car and at that moment he couldn't believe that something drastic could happen to it. He furiously gripped the wheel, hoping to protect the car to the end.

Boris was an observer throughout the entire episode. He had trained himself to notice minute details in everything in life. He sat and watched the car glide off the concrete back on the highway. He noticed a field in the foreground and hoped that the car would safely find a solace there. Upon sight of the pole, he calculated automatically that at the speed of the car, the pole would be missed by several feet and comfortably confided in his observation. But the unforeseen ditch shattered Boris' conclusive result for the speedy flight. He saw the car turning over.

After sliding helplessly into the ditch, the car turned over and softly scraped the driver's side. It then continued to roll onto the roof of the car. The force of the impact forced the

the front window to fold outwards so that the entire window shattered into several large pieces. But not a piece of glass flew inside the car. With the car turned upside down, the boys inside were being jolted into an upside down position also. Their legs sprawled out in the air as their heads solidly collided with the roof of the car and the ground. The skis, which were secured to a ramp on top of the roof, were crushed into the muddy ground, and, at the same time, were unloosed with part of the ramp as the car slightly slid on its roof. With the skis stuck in the ground, the car proceeded to roll on to the other side. Force was still in operation as the side opposite the driver was squashed into the ground. The front door window shattered into hundreds of tiny, sharp pieces, all of which remained in the mud. The rest of the door was dent inward about six inches in depth. The car kept on rolling. It almost began on its second time around when it fortunately was hurled into a farmer's steel fence. The strength and weight of the car ripped an opening in the fence, but the fence was solid enough to bring the car to a complete stop, flat on its four wheels.

While rolling downhill, everyone in the car remained silent. There was too much upheaval of bodies, clothes, boots, and other articles. The crushing car frame and glass was the only sound heard. Everyone was waiting for the climactic moment.

Stanley remembered his adorable wife and his cute two-year-old girl. He could have cried if there was time to do it. Within his mind he heard the bands of heavenly angels marching in step to the Song of the Lamb. For a moment he pictured himself falling into step with that eternal army of martyred saints. That's how Stanley felt if by chance death would overpower his desire to live. He sensed guilt wrapping its snares around his mind as he felt the car tumble as if endlessly. Somehow he wanted to blame himself by confessing his fault before God, namely, that he hadn't dedicated his life in an honorable service unto the desire of God as he wanted to. He wanted to breathe a prayer, 'God, I'll serve you with all my heart if you deliver me whole from this mess,' but the words stuck to his tongue, as if out of fear of God's unacceptability. He hoped for a chance to remain alive.

Arnie felt uncomfortable. He didn't like the idea of having the door slam itself against his innocent shoulder. But he couldn't do much about it so he just accepted the fact that gravity had taken control of the situation. Reminiscences of a similar experience swirled through his mind like a whirlwind. He remembered how, while serving in the Air Force, he accidentally killed a dog while trying to avoid hitting him. He smiled as he pictured himself turning over in the military pick-up and then he almost laughed to himself as he remembered stepping out of the truck in his clean white military uniform without a speck of dirt on it and without a scratch on any part of his body. Arnie supposed that this chaos would end the same way. He wasn't betting on it, but he sensed that nobody would be hurt.

Boris continued observing every twist and twirl of the car and noticing also the landscape that surrounded the flying car. There was one thing that he didn't fear, and that was death. He

believed that his time had not come yet. He had plans in mind, plans that had to be accomplished. Death could wait. One time before he had narrowly escaped the outstretched hands of death in a scooter accident in which he was thrown several feet into the air. He thought of that incident as his body was heaved against the hard roof. He felt a comfort in his invincible belief in the destiny of his life. He was striving for a perfect rendezvous with life, and that meant the exclusion of death from the picture. The closeness of the bodies, especially with him in the middle, gave Boris a sense of warmth, the kind of warmth that only human friendship can give.

Adolf almost felt like getting out and stopping the car with his bare hands. He didn't like what was going on. First of all, he didn't think this should have happened. Second of all, he didn't think it should be happening the way it was. But he felt his human incapability as he was swept under the seat by a power greater than his own. He couldn't help but think of the many times in life that he was literally swept off his feet against his will by forces greater than himself. He thought of his childhood, his unpleasant life in the snowy winters of Soviet Russia, his rough times in Nazi Germany. Life was pretty rough for him. He had to ride it through thick and thin. In comparison to other moments of jeopardy, this incident was of minor significance. Whatever happened, it wouldn't mean much anyway. He had escaped death too many times before to even think about it. Adolf had become so used to dangerous situations that he had become quite accustomed to them. In fact they were very exciting and challenging. It was times like these that kept him from being bored with life.

To Paul, the whole world seemed to be collapsing. He had never experienced anything like this. He felt his body being pushed in every direction, up, down, sideways, and backwards. Why he didn't struggle against the sinister threat of death he didn't understand. What he did understand was that such accidents often resulted in severe injuries or even death. Paul closed his eyes and prepared himself for death. He imagined the dark, mysterious death ripping his soul apart. The agony of spirit almost roused him into convulsion. But Paul kept still all the time. He didn't want to pray nor think of God or anything. All he wanted to do was to imagine the future state of existence. He only visualized darkness and more darkness with an unconscious state of mind as the prime essence of life after death. He wanted to see light, heaven, hell, something. But he only saw darkness. Paul almost shed a tear as he faintly hoped for life and death simultaneously. He didn't know which was better.

After the car roughly stopped in the fence, everything was placid. Everyone was so quiet that it seemed as if death had gained its victory once again. The low wind silently circled

the battered car. An observing car, having noticed the tragedy, stopped on the road above the deep ditch. The low roar of passing motors hummed above the seemingly dead scene. There was no nightingale to sing an epitaph to the young men. There was no moonlight to brighten up the dark, dismal ditch. There was beauty in this silence, the kind of beauty that there is when a body is laid to rest in peace for ever. The scene was as peaceful as a tranquil sea after a boisterous storm. It was as if the voice of nature had spoken, 'Peace, be still.'

After the long silence, Adolf spoke up: "Is everybody all right?"

No one answered for several seconds.

Then Arnie answered, "Yes," as he tried to kick open the door next to him. The door wouldn't budge. Everybody began to slowly stir alive, shifting to a comfortable position. Adolf shoved the door open and crawled out. Stanley had recovered from the unbelievable accident. His door opened and he drowsily stepped into the muddy ground. Adolf helped Arnie open the door next to him, while Paul and Reuben carefully stepped out of the back seat, hoping that they weren't stepping into space. Boris sat still.

"Are you all right, Boris?" asked Paul as he poked his head into the empty window of the front seat.

"I think I've torn a ligament in my leg," answered Boris, uncertain of his words.

Adolf came over. "You hurt, Boris?"

"I'm not sure. I think I'm all right."

Boris wasn't wearing any shoes during the episode, so he now began wrapping the shoe-strings around his ski boots. Finally he stepped out of the car, balancing himself by holding on to the door, in case of any injury.

"How's your leg?" asked Arnie, coming over to Boris as he saw him coming out of the car.

"It's perfect. Nothing hurt at all."

"That's good. It looks like none of us got hurt at all."

Stanley had already scrambled up the small inclination to meet the car that had stopped, thinking that perhaps there might be an emergency of some kind. He approached the car.

"Howdy!" he cheerfully stated.

"Need any help?" asked a young man with curly black hair.

"Yeh. Could you call the police for us? I'll appreciate it very much."

"Sure. The town's only a couple of miles back. We'll get the fuzz for you right away."

The young man closed the window and he and his friend rode back on the highway.

"Boy, that sure was a close call. I thought we were goners," said Reuben to Paul as they stomped their way up the hill. "That telephone pole sure scared me. When I saw it, I thought that that

was it for us."

"That's funny. I didn't even see the pole," said Paul.

"How could you? You were probably praying with your eyes closed." Reuben laughed.

"You're nuts. I wasn't praying at all. I didn't even think about praying."

Stanley walked back to the car and tried to start the motor. It worked. The engine was in perfect condition.

"Motor's running good?" asked Adolf, standing next to the car, running his hand over dented parts of the body of the car.

"Like new. Maybe we could ride it back," hopefully stated Stanley.

"You kidding? This car's a total loss. Your rear axle is probably shot out of balance. No front window. No rear wheel. You're out of your mind to even think about trying to make it with this wreck."

"It was only a suggestion," apologized Stanley as he turned off the motor and looked over his prized treasure, which still stood like a proud horse, even though it was banged up on all sides.

"What do you make of that?" asked Arnie, while Boris stared blankly at the highway, trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

"Well," thought Boris. "That line in the road threw me off too. It was like an illusion. It was there and then it wasn't. For Stanley, it just wasn't there. That's the same way I felt."

"But there was a sign saying 'Keep Right.'"

"I suppose he just didn't see it."

The young man, who had gone for help, had returned. He stopped a little off the highway. "The fuzz will be along any minute," he said.

"Thanks a lot," replied Stanley.

"You guys must have had a nice trip down."

"Sure did. Lucky no one got hurt."

"Not a scratch?" unbelievably asked the young man.

"Not a scratch."

"You sure were lucky. Well, we'll be going."

"Thanks again," said Stanley as the car zoomed out of sight.

Boris went over to the skis and inspected for any damage. He was astonished at what he saw.

"Come and take a look at this," called Boris.

"Anything wrong with the skis?" asked Paul, stooping down and handling the skis.

"Just a few scratches."

"You didn't expect to have such strong material break, did you?" commented Arnie.

"Not really. But that car flipped right on top of these skis. Think of the weight," argued Boris.

"That soft ground kept them from breaking," said Adolf as he joined the group.

"Yeh," said Reuben, who left Stanley's side to see what was going on. "That ramp must have been made of bamboo to have torn off so easy."

"The car probably slid on the roof for a foot or so," added Paul. "That's why the ramp got torn off and left stranded in the mud."

"That's too much," reiterated Boris. "Just a few scratches."

Stanley stood alone on the highway. He looked toward the cursed concrete island. Just a few inches, he thought, and there wouldn't have been such a mess. He shivered a little as he watched the cars passing by, hoping that the cop would come soon. He glanced toward the approaching traffic and noticed a blinking red light about a mile away. He waited for the police car to stop before he walked up to it. The cop opened his car door and flashed his flashlight down the hill toward the wrecked car.

"Who's the driver of the car?" abruptly stated the cop.

"I'm the driver," said Stanley, walking toward the cop.

"Let's see your driver's license."

Stanley pulled out his wallet without a word. Meanwhile, the rest of the group had climbed up the hill to join the action there. They silently stood around the police car, not wanting to miss a word of what the cop had to say about the crash.

"How fast were you going?" continued the cop, after writing down all the information from Stanley's driver's license.

"About 60 miles per hour."

"How is it that you ended up in this ditch?"

"Well, I kind of lost sight of the road before that concrete island," said Stanley pointing his finger toward the starting point. "I thought I saw two lines divide in two separate directions. I guess I followed the wrong line."

"I don't understand. There must have passed by this same spot about a hundred cars or more this night. How come you're the only one that got caught on that island?"

"That line threw me off."

"Well, let's see what the car looks like." After looking at all sides of the station wagon, the cop laconically said, "We'll call it a total wreck, right?"

"I suppose that's what it is," said Stanley without enthusiasm.

"You the owner?"

"Yes."

"Insured?"

"Yes."

After the small details were taken care of, the cop went to look over the place where the car first went off the road. Stanley went along with him.

"I think he got a little careless," said Adolf, after the cop crossed the highway.

"Could be. But that line fooled me too," replied Paul.

"I mentioned to him that he should take it easy. We had all the time in the world to get home."

"I think his left light is crooked. It doesn't shine enough on the left side of the car. That's maybe the reason why he missed the road."

"We should have had someone else drive. There was another place back up the road where he slightly went off the road. I think he was getting drowsy."

The cop had called a tow truck soon after he arrived and the tow truck now pulled up in front of the police car. Everybody stopped their personal conversation and shifted their attention to the ~~to~~ scene at the tow truck. Stanley and the cop stopped what they were doing and came to the newly arrived vehicle.

"Could you tow the car to Sacramento?" said Stanley, after greetings had been extended.

"It'll cost you about thirty dollars," said the driver of the tow truck.

"How come so much."

"Well, first of all, it's for a round trip, and second of all, we get paid over-time rates on Sunday."

The business details continued while Boris and Paul chatted on the side.

"Did you say your last prayers while rolling down the hill?" asked Paul.

"Not at all," answered Boris. "I don't look at life that way. I believe that God lives within me, and because he does, I have nothing to fear at any time. Anyway, I couldn't see myself crushed to death."

"Didn't you even feel that somehow you could be killed?"

"No. There was some kind of mysterious cloud that protected that car. I felt it right from the time when the car hit that concrete island."

"You guys still blabbing about the accident," interrupted Arnie, as he sought to join good conversation.

"What else is there to talk about at a time like this?" said Paul.

"I wonder what people are going to say about this," said Arnie.

"They're going to say: 'Aha, didn't we tell you not to go. This is God's punishment to show you that you must not miss church.' They're going to even think that we were going contrary to God's will by spending a week-end at the snow instead of staying at home, safe from traffic." Boris laughed to himself as he said it. He had learned and experienced such stereotype reactions by people in the church.

"Nobody should know anything about this," commented Adolf, who heard what Boris said.

"Yeh. But we all got pride," remarked Arnie. "We probably will all get on our bandwagon and shout out to everybody how we escaped death, how we tumbled down a twenty-foot hill, and all that trash."

"You want to be looked upon as a hero, don't you?" said Paul.

"There's nothing heroic in this. It's just a foolish accident," replied Arnie.

"It's just an inconvenience, a big nuisance," added Boris.

"As our good old Russian proverb says," cheerfully said Adolf, "The slower you go, the further you'll get."

Paul John Wajowsky

