

"The Cop Down the Street"

This is Cst. Dale Martel of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. I'm replying to some of the questions you ask me daily, and I'm not just one police officer, I represent every officer in every city and town in Canada.

You may know me as the cop who gave you the ticket last summer, but I'm also the guy who lives down the street from you. I'm the parent of two children, and I share with you the same hopes, ambitions, and dreams you have for *your* children.

I face the same problems you do. I share those moments of agony and ecstasy. I share with you the feelings of shame, guilt and disappointment when my boy or girl gets into trouble. I'm angry and sick at heart, trying to do my job and being tagged the bad guy, when all I want is to avert tragedies like the one I'm about to share.

The scene was a long stretch of highway with a sharp curve at one end. It had been raining and the roads were slick. A car traveling in excess of 130 km/h missed the curve and plowed into an embankment, where it became airborne and struck a tree. At this point, two young passengers were hurled from the vehicle; one into a tree, the other onto the roadway- where the car landed on him, snuffing out his life like a discarded cigarette. He was killed instantly.

He was the lucky one. The girl thrown into the tree had her neck broken, and though she'd been voted queen of the senior prom, and most likely to succeed, she'll spend the rest of her days in a wheelchair.

By the time I arrived, the car had come to rest on its top. Its wheels, broken, had stopped spinning. Smoke and steam poured from the engine, ripped from its mountings.

An eerie calm had fallen over the scene, and it appeared deserted- except for one lonely traveler who had called it in. He was sick to his stomach, and leaning against his car for support.

The driver was conscious, but in shock, and unable to free himself from beneath a bent and twisted steering column. His face will be forever scarred, from deep cuts inflicted by broken glass and jagged metal. Those cuts may heal but the ones inside cannot be touched by the surgeon's scalpel.

A third youth had almost finished bleeding. The seat and his clothing were covered in blood, from an artery, cut by a broken bone-end protruding from his forearm. He gasped, trying desperately to suck air past his blood filled airway.

He was unable to speak. His eyes bulged and fixed on me pleadingly, the only communication that he was terrified and wanted help. I felt a pang of guilt, and recognized him as a boy I'd let off with a warning the other night, for having an open container of alcohol in his car.

Maybe if I'd charged him, he would still be alive. Who knows? He died soundlessly in my arms- his pale blue eyes staring vacantly, as if trying to see into the future he would never have. I remembered watching him play basketball, and wondered what would happen to the scholarship he would never use.

My mind was drawn to loud screams, which I identified as a girl who had been thrown from the vehicle. I raced to her with a blanket but was afraid to move her. Her head was tilted at an exaggerated angle. She seemed unaware of my presence and whimpered, like a child, for her mother.

In the distance I heard the mournful wail of the ambulance, winding its way through the rain. I was filled with incredible grief at the waste of so valuable a resource, our youth.

The ambulance crew began the job of scraping up and removing the dead and injured. I stood by, watching, tears mingling with the rain and dripping from my cheeks.

You ask me why this happened?

It happened because a young person, stoned out of his mind, thought he could handle two tons of hurtling death at 130 km/h. It happened because an adult, trying to be a good guy, bought for, or sold to some minor, a case of beer.

It happened because parents aren't concerned enough for their children to know where they are, or what they're doing. They're unconcerned about minors and alcohol abuse, and would rather blame me for harassing them- when I was only trying to prevent this kind of tragedy.

It happened because, as people say- you believe this sort of thing only happens to someone else.

I become sick with anger and frustration, when I think of parents and leaders who believe a little alcohol won't hurt anything. I am filled with contempt for people who propose lowering the drinking age because kids will get alcohol anyway. I'm frustrated with laws, court rulings, and other legal maneuvers that restrict my ability to prevent this kind of tragedy.

I'd give anything to know who furnished these young people with the alcohol. I spent hours on reports, and now will take months trying to erase from memory the details of that night. I will not be alone. The driver will recover and spend the rest of his life trying to forget.

Yes- I *am* angry. I pray to God I never have to face another parent in the middle of the night, to say your daughter, Susan, or your son, Bill, has been killed in a car accident.

For your sake, I hope it doesn't happen, but if you continue to regard alcohol abuse as part of growing up, then keep your porch light on. Some cold, rainy night you'll find me at your doorstep, staring at my feet with a message of death for *you*.