

*Sunstone Award Winner*  
*1997 Brookie and D. K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest*

# WRECK

*By Jason Lindquist*

MICK STARED AT THE CEILING, SPLAYED HER skinny legs out across her bed, and sighed into the phone at what Connell was saying to her. She jammed the phone deeper between her shoulder and ear. Why couldn't she gain weight where she needed it? She was tired of picking clothes to make her look thicker. Mom used to say that getting thicker would come along just fine by itself.

"I'm sorry if I made you mad," Con said.

Mick didn't acknowledge. She thought she saw a cockroach moving along the wire hanging down from the spider-crack in the ceiling. Her father had run a phone cord over from the kitchen.

"What's wrong, Mick?" Con said.

Mick didn't like that question. She groaned. Like she couldn't take care of herself.

"You're a church boy, Con," she said.

"Huh?" he said. Con was too sensitive, always acted like it was his fault. It never was. He would have known, of course—and right away—if he had done her dirt.

"If it was something I did, I'm sorry," Con said.

Mick hung up on him. "Sorry" made her crazy. She could almost see his soft, brown eyes misting up at her click. He needed to toughen up.

Mick's dad was in the next room: a big, cracked man without a shirt, hunched over a stove, splitting brown eggs over oily, rumped sausage. The eggs smoked, kicking hot oil out onto the counter. Her dad's name was Carry, but it should have been something different. He had big, hunched shoulders

that rolled when he walked. Fat sat thick on his haunches, but you couldn't tell it when he was dressed.

Mom had left two years ago, but Mick stayed in Utah with her dad so she could finish school. They lived in the small old place her dad had bought when Mom had wanted to come in out of the Utah wilderness. "Time to cross over into the promised land," Mom had said. Mom had never liked living in rural Utah. Dad did, and he and his small-time crew drove all over the state doing road work nobody else would drive that far to do. Now they lived here, in the forgotten part of a growing Utah Valley town which was piling nice suburbs up against the mountain. But it still had this part: Half-block from the trailer park, half-block from the tracks, and a block from the oldest church in town. On nice Sundays, Mick had walked up there with her Mom.

From the kitchen, Dad said, "Get off the phone, Mick. I have to call my crew."

"You can call your crew later," Mick said. She sat the cordless on the bed. He'd find out soon enough she wasn't even on the phone. Dad had partnered up with an old friend, and they'd started working near the valley. They were almost over the hump: two crews, looking for a big contract. Mick knew the only reason they hadn't moved into a nice house up on a hill somewhere was that Dad was too lazy to sell the place. "I don't like paper work," he'd say.

Dad stumped around the kitchen and shut a cupboard door; its hinges squawked like a kicked chicken. Five minutes later, he swung her door open, one-handing his plate, pinning his fork to the old, chipped ceramic with his thumb. He smelled like road tar, sweat, and orange juice. On his way in, he banged the plate against the door—damn near tossed egg and oil all over Mick's bed. He looked at the phone.

"Thought you were in here gushing at your boyfriend," Carry said.

"Nah," Mick said.

---

*JASON LINDQUIST is a first-year student in the MA/Ph.D. program in literature at Indiana University. Jason misses the Wasatch mountains, but finds some solace in the forests of southern Indiana and in the company of his wife, Danille. The author welcomes comments and criticism and can be reached at <jhlindqu@indiana.edu>.*

He walked out with the phone. Mick looked at the fake-woodgrain electronic clock. 9:15 P.M. Dad didn't like graveyard. Tonight he wanted to get down to the site and double-up with the end of swing shift so he could get home earlier. Dad said he couldn't sleep with sunlight streaming through his window—it made him think he was having a vision. He'd get up in the middle of the day, looking for angels.

Outside Mick's door he said: "Well, wake up, drive over there, drag idiot-brain out of bed, and be at the site in twenty minutes. I'll pick up Hansen."

That night, it snowed in Mick's big valley.

**I**N a wrecking yard out by the lake, Connell tore the souls out of dead cars. He'd walk through the wrecking yard, looking thin in his faded overalls—looking like he had room to move. It wasn't a bad job in the summer: the heat came off the cars, and Con walked between them tenderly, as through a rose garden, bending and twisting to avoid the blunt, ominous bumpers and metal tendrils that launched themselves across the winding, narrow paths between cars. But it was December, and the cold would come in off the lake and hunker down over the yard. The mud turned gray—something about oil and antifreeze soaking into the dirt.

He and Jeb worked the same shifts, and Jeb was good company. Sometimes in the winter, Con and Jeb would find stray dogs or coyotes dead among the wrecks, candied anti-freeze still dripping from their tongues.

"Poor lap-dog," Jeb would always say.

"Yeah," Con would say, "They can't stay away." Con and Jeb would chip away at the frozen ground behind the utility vehicles until they dug deep enough to bury the dogs.

"Con, you think those dogs go to heaven?" Jeb would ask.

"I don't know that one."

"It ain't in the book?"

"Nah," Con would say.

"I wouldn't give a damn for a religion that don't care for its dogs," Jeb would say.

This time of year, it got dark two hours before his shift ended, and no one came to a wrecking yard after dark. So sometimes, unless Phil had an engine for them to break down or some die-hard came looking for a headlamp assembly for an '83 Buick Regal, Con would sit on the concrete just inside the split-plywood door where the heat came off the old radiator. Other times, he would patrol the lot with a black flashlight, straightening up a little, locating cars, or just flashing the beam down rows of late '80s Ford Tempos with their hunkered-down hoods and cramped torsos. He'd look up the pile of long-snouted Monte Carlos and down where the truck cabs popped up against the sky, round and dented like heads in a whack-a-mole booth.

Con didn't mind the swing shift—it meant that before graduation he could earn some money for his mission. Phil owned the place, and he was Con's priests' quorum advisor and scoutmaster. Phil had taught him how to break down a lawnmower when Con was eight, so it hadn't been a question of getting hired.

**T**HE next night Con was back on the phone with Mick. "Didn't see you today," he told her. "Yeah, I was in hiding," Mick said. "I'm being stalked."

"You've been watching too much TV," Con said. His own brother's TV growled through the drywall. Con lived up on the hill overlooking the high school, two miles from Mick's house. Sometimes it was a long walk home.

"You saying no one would want to stalk me?" Mick said.

"No ma'am," Con said. He stared at the spackle up on the ceiling, wondering how they did that. Mick's dad could probably tell him. His brother was watching some kind of police drama. "I think you're worth stalking," Con said.

"Don't joke about stalking me," Mick said, "my dad would shoot you. He packs a shotgun in that truck." Con knew that Mick's dad would probably shoot him, if provoked. Mick spoke again, "Could you meet me?"

**M**ICK and Con sat on the cold front steps of the old chapel, tangled in blankets. Con had his arm around her, and she curled up to his skinniness. It was a clear night.

They were talking about the church behind them. "I don't want to come up here Sunday. It makes me nervous," Mick said.

"You used to go all the time," Con said.

"Yeah, with Mom."

"And sometimes your dad," Con said. "You look good in a dress."

"I hate dresses."

"You look good in a dress," Con said. He tightened his hands into the blanket wool and pulled against her.

**A**T work, Phil said, "Con, go check on my babies," like he always did, rubbing his bald head, worrying that someone might be prowling around the yard. Some days, Phil would walk around all day with long, black oil smears running from forehead to hair line, way-back where the baldness met his black hair.

Sometimes, when Con was checking the yard alone, and if the wind was right, or when there was just a cold, bright moon casting gargoyle shadows, the cars would sway and creak and cry faintly, like tearing metal. He'd poke around for the sound but would lose himself in the tangle of iron.

Jeb always said that unless you had time, know-how and equipment, you couldn't steal anything from this place anyway, and guys with equipment and know-how had real jobs. Even if Jeb was right, the place still scared Con. Besides, the stuff out there wasn't worth stealing, not worth a thing. On this night, Jeb came with him.

"How's the girl?" Jeb said.

"Who?"

"You know who," Jeb said. "Doctor said you in love yet?"

"You know it's not like that," Con said; he shone his flashlight down between two Impalas and grunted like he saw something.

"Only way I can get you to say anything," Jeb said. They



*Dad would stand there like a mountain, staring at Mom, saying, "Come on, I know you can forgive me." Mom kept on forgiving him until one day she was gone.*

sidestepped a hole where a torn-out muffler stuck out from thin, milky-white ice.

"She says I'm too apologetic," Con said.

"I'm sorry about that," Jeb said.

"She won't go to church with me."

"Neither will I, but I still wuv you," Jeb said, scrunching his face up into an obscene pucker.

"I'm not going to kiss you, Jeb."

"Then you'll never see me in white."

A late-model suburban loomed ahead, right side jammed in as if somebody had tried to put the passenger door through the opposite side. There was still blood in that one, and most of the good parts were already stripped. You didn't see an untouched front-end like that too often, though.

"Guy come in here yesterday looking for a hood for a '69 Camaro," Jeb said. "Like he's going to find any of those that haven't been stripped to the wiper blades. Said he was restoring it."

"He should have known better," Con said.

"He come *down* here. That's what I don't understand. Then he asked if he could come out and look around the lot himself."

"Guess he's desperate."

"Yeah, I guess," Jeb said.

**T**WO weekends before Christmas, Mick's dad brought home another woman. She was pretty and wide with long, black hair, not a day over twenty-five.

"This is MaryAnn," Carry said. "That's Mick."

MaryAnn squealed.

"Nice to meet you," Mick said. "You work asphalt with Dad?" MaryAnn was digging around in her purse and pretty soon started combing out her black hair, thinking about Mick's question.

"She doesn't work for me, Mick," her dad said.

"I cut Carry's hair," MaryAnn said. "I could give you a make over."

Carry said, "We're going out to Wendover. I don't think we'll be back tonight."

"We're going to gamble."

"You won't be at church, then?" Mick asked. He just looked back at her.

Carry and MaryAnn left in his truck. Carry left ten bucks for her dinner. After they walked out, Mick lay down on the frayed sofa, wedged her head up against the arm and back and grabbed the remote. She sat back up and looked around.

"What this place needs a Christmas tree."

**A** week later, on the last morning of school before Christmas, Mick waited for Con in the slush outside the shuttered trailers behind the main building. She hadn't spoken to him all week, and he was moping around. Picking him out of the stream of kids, she pulled him between two trailers and pushed him up against the wall. She was strong and almost put him through the thin, flaking plyboard. She pressed her nose against his cheek and breathed on his face, looking like a blue-eyed hawk.

"I'm sorry I wouldn't talk to you last night. My dad was

being an idiot," she said.

"Yeah?" Con said.

"He was walking around swearing at the TV," Mick said, "yelling at his crew on the phone."

"Could be worse," Con said.

Mick smiled, pushed her mouth up against his, and walked away.

**B**Y the end of school that day, Mick was throwing Con out of her locker. "I don't care who she was, and I don't care what you were studying," she said. "Is she in your ward, Con? Do you love her, Con? Does your mom love her? Is she a Laurel?"

"Come on. I don't even know her last name," Con said.

"It's even worse that way." She launched his American history across the locker hall. It hit the wall right above some bug-eyed freshman and dropped onto the carpet.

"I have never been so humiliated," she said. She wrenched open the metal loops of his three-ring binder, opened it above her head like an A-frame house or an umbrella, and took three wobbling hops around, shaking all of his papers loose.

Con pursed his lips. "I didn't do anything."

"That's what my dad used to say," Mick said.

"I didn't do anything," Con said. A crowd was gathering.

Con kept looking at Mick, but he saw all their faces, Carson, Maxfield, Whitman. Moore. A slug-nosed junior said, "She's on fire, Con." Mick was sobbing, throwing things around.

**A**FTER the last day of school, Mick didn't see Con. It was hard to get up the hill to his house without stealing Carry's truck, and she refused to go to church that Sunday. Besides, Con kept sending her lame notes about forgiveness, which just made her angry. Of course he hadn't done anything with that girl she'd seen him with.

So she kept busy. She bought a tree and decorated it. Carry grunted at it when he came home in the morning and the tiny, colored lights were blinking off and on. Mick made dinners for him.

On the twenty-third, Dad got on the horn: "We've got work to do tomorrow, gentlemen. A little overtime." "Dad, don't ask them to work on Christmas Eve," Mick said. "Their wives will kill them."

"It's up to them," Dad said.

"They'll do whatever they think you want them to." She was on the couch, stringing popcorn together, the way her mom used to do every Christmas. She had already made two wreaths. "Don't do that," Carry said.

"The popcorn?"

"Yeah," Carry said. "What happened to Con anyway?"

"I don't know," Mick said.

"If you don't kiss and make up soon, you're going to bury this house in Christmas."

"Yeah. So?" They hadn't had this much Christmas in five years. Dad sat with his back to the tree. The lights blinked softly.

"It might break my heart," he said.

**C**HRISTMAS had come and gone, and Phil had taken down the string of Christmas lights hanging in the office, had taken the bows off the two gutted Oldsmobiles that watched the yard like rusty sentinels, flanking the wide gate where Phil dragged wrecked cars into the yard.

"Oldsmobile station wagon, 1968. Best car I ever seen," Phil said about one. "Wish I had ten of 'em."

"Yeah, Phil," Jeb said, "real flashy."

That day, Con and Jeb found a body at the wrecking yard. It was all over the news pretty quick—how Con and Jeb had been out among the sedans, looking for a passenger door on a Chevy Caprice, and had seen it. Three-day old corpse, shot through the chest a dozen times, still dressed for Wall Street with hundred-dollar shoes; he was set up like a joke in the driver's seat of a Lincoln, hand up on the steering wheel as if he were going on a road trip, only slumped forward a little.

"Apparently fell asleep at the wheel," Jeb had said to Con, only that didn't make the papers. Con had just stood there and stared wild-eyed at it, flashing his beam around in the cold, twilight air. The news just said two unnamed workers found the body, so as to protect their anonymity, prevent them from coming to harm.

"Anonymity, hell," said Jeb. "Only two guys are ever here evenings. Everybody knows that."

**I**T was late afternoon in early January when Mick ran away. She ran down the street past the Christmas trees piled neatly on the sidewalk, out through the trailer park and the scattered trees behind it, over a fence and south through the vacant lots until she came to the railroad bridge. It was a bright, winter afternoon, and Mick looked down at the cars passing through the dugway beneath her, and out towards the west.

She'd never been here, so she stopped. She stood on the railroad causeway, watching the windshields catching the sun and casting it up at her. Every time mom had been ready to leave, Mick had heard her father saying the same thing. "I'm sorry." She still wondered why Mom took it.

Now, whenever Con said he was sorry, all she saw was her father, leaning over the kitchen table, arms splayed and gripping the Formica, forearm muscles tensing and flexing. Dad's arms never went completely pale, even in the long winter. A lot of women thought those strong arms were beautiful. Mom thought they were beautiful. And he'd stand there like a mountain, staring at mom, saying, "Come on, I know you can forgive me." Mom kept on forgiving him—until one day she was gone.

Mick looked down at the cars. She could have perched on the edge of the causeway, dangling her legs over the traffic; she could have tossed pebbles off and cracked windshields like a wayward deacon. But she started running again, out over the bridge, above the traffic, onto the other side.

As she ran south, a warm wind blustered up out of the west,

sweeping the haze out of the valley. It pushed clouds up over the mountains, and they spilled down towards the valley floor. It was a storm-bringer—she'd seen it on the news. But for now, it was just a sweet wind clearing the sky and breaking the clouds over the lake so the sun could shine through and light it up. If you didn't look at the steel mill out by the lake, the mountains and the clouds looked like a picture. But the railroad tracks always led her eyes toward the mill.

Mick stayed with the tracks. Sometimes she ran, sometimes she skipped from railroad tie to railroad tie, or balanced on the rails, arms waving like a scarecrow in the wind. No trains ever seemed to come through here any more, and she kept running—past the warehouses, the small-time manufacturing, the slag piles, and the grey heaps of gravel—out past scrap-iron dealers and wrecking yards.

THE police had cordoned off the Lincoln and were walking around with tape measures, cameras, and walkie-talkies. The important ones carried cell phones. Jeb and Phil stood next to the yellow tape, leaning over it and staring at the officers like kids at the zoo. Con was off looking for a side mirror for one of the police Broncos.

The cop had his story. "Broke the thing off on a telephone

pole in Heber. Suspect proceeded to turn off the main road and out into an alfalfa field. I proceeded to pursue the suspect. Misjudged the angle. Forty-mile chase with no scratches," he said, "then that happens. It'd be nice if my office could replace it real cheap."

"Probably knocked it off proceeding out of his own damn garage," Jeb later said.

Con wasn't sure why the police were here. They weren't going to find anything; they'd taken the body away days ago. A couple of old-timers were poking around the sedans near the yellow tape, pretending to check an old Chevy Malibu for windshield wipers. Soon they stopped pretending and just stood there, hands in their pockets at the edge of the tape, talking about the storm moving in from the Pacific.

"I seen it on TV," one old farmer said, "Two feet of snow tonight."

Con was cutting through the trucks towards the utility vehicles when the wind came up, blowing the car stink off the wrecking yard like a picnic blanket. The afternoon sun glinted off the shattered glass under his boots. Off to the west, out where the sun was brightest, against the iron towers of the steel mill, Con thought he saw someone running south along the railroad tracks. 




---

## PORT CALL

Ravens rasp the leading edge of day.  
 Gulls curette the sleeper out of sleep,  
 curling out of fir tops to a bay  
 face bearded in sine and countersweep  
 of tides the water, salt and air play  
 as long as aeons allow. We come to keep  
 connected. New neighbor boys spray  
 each other on their tethered float, then leap—  
 screeching dares—into the wet. Geese  
 honk north for Canada. Grand niece  
 shies from strangers. Greying gossip gives  
 the list of schooled, married, jobs, who lives  
 where, who's ill, retired, or soon to wed—  
 all under portraits of the distant and the dead.

—R. S. CARLSON