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Under the Influence

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Under the Influence

In modern times, the media has placed much emphasis on the dangers of drunk driving. Stories splash across the headlines of newspapers and television broadcasts of yet another innocent killed by someone under the influence of alcohol or of a celebrity incarcerated for repeated offences. While the media focuses on intoxication and its influence drivers of cars, the misuse of alcohol can have dire consequences when combined with other forms of transportation as well. Intoxication while traveling endangers oneself and all those nearby. I personally had an encounter with a drunkard which I certainly will never forget.

The air outside was cool and crisp, hinting at fall approaching. The trees, no longer infused with vibrant foliage, had leaves just beginning to crinkle, foretelling the soon to come blaze of New England autumn color. I, however, was blissfully unaware of all these things. Instead, I was curled comfortably on the loveseat, a battered Nintendo Gamecube controller in my hands, fully absorbed in the epic struggle unfolding before my eyes on the buzzing television screen. Enthralled by my game—*Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance*—I was paying little attention to the outside world. But this tranquility would soon be shattered.

The loveseat I was seated upon was placed parallel to the wall, and behind it were two large windows about six feet by five feet total. They looked out toward the road where every so often a car would laze by most likely driven by either a citizen of rural West Stephentown, New

York, or someone who was very, very lost. It was around nine o'clock on a Saturday morning, and I was wholly and entirely unprepared for the events about to transpire.

A crashing explosion of sound that shocked me out of my video game-induced trance. At first I thought it must have been a gunshot. In a locale where my pastor announces the beginning of deer hunting season from the pulpit, gunshots are neither uncommon nor shocking. However, the fact that half of the window behind me was now gone and that the cool pre-autumn breeze now wafted in to our living room was rather uncommon *and* shocking. One of the panes of glass had shattered in a fraction of a second, and if not for the wire screen behind it, both the couch and my entire body would have been covered in shards of broken glass. The controller dropped to the floor as I stood up and stepped back, bewildered by what had just taken place.

At this point, I must pause the scene and provide some critical information. In the wonderfully wooded land of upstate New York, the forests boast a wide array of wildlife. Birds, fish, felines, and canines populate the expanse of trees, interrupted only by the occasional road or house. One of the larger bird species which inhabits the area is the ruffed grouse. Measuring up to twenty inches in length and twenty-six ounces in weight, ruffed grouse bear some resemblance to a cross between a chicken and a pheasant. Unlike either bird, though, ruffed grouse have a reckless and dangerous behavioral tendency. As winter approaches, grouse consume large amounts of berries and seeds in preparation for the months of scarcity ahead. When eating these berries and seeds, grouse often fail to display wisdom in judgment. Frequently, the birds will consume large quantities of berries from the American mountain-ash plant. These berries fall from the plant to the ground, where the grouse eat them. However, oftentimes the berries will have sat on the ground for an extended period of time, slowly fermenting. When the grouse eat

these fermented berries, they run the risk of becoming intoxicated and then suffer from impaired intelligence and motor skills.

One such drunk grouse was the perpetrator in the events of that autumn day. No doubt the bird in question had just enjoyed a sumptuous feast of berries beneath the gently drooping branches of a *Sorbus Americana*, and was tragically unaware of the effects upon its mental capacities. This grouse had unfortunately flown full-tilt into the window directly behind me. Able to travel at speeds close to 50 miles per hour in the air, the ruffed grouse had completely destroyed the pane of glass and its neck as well. Still trying to mentally process the fact that the window had essentially exploded, I shook myself out of my confusion and somewhat cautiously made my way toward the front door, determined to investigate.

As I opened the door, I looked out upon a scene of tragedy. Glass littered the grass. The grouse lay framed by cracked pieces of crystal. Head tilted at an odd angle, it lay there on the ground, entirely and unequivocally dead. I can only conjecture that the bird had snapped its neck upon impact. I stood there for a few seconds, trying to connect the dead fowl with the shattered window before putting the logical pieces together and realizing what events had transpired. Slowly my composure regained, I turned, went back inside, and returned to my game. Outside, the world went on. The crisp breeze continued to tug at the leaves, sure that one day soon they would fall. The birds sang, and a car droned by. Beneath the window, the grouse lay, suffering the fatal consequence of its indiscretion.

While the grouse may not have been operating a vehicle or vessel, the corollary remains. The bird lost its life as a direct result of FUI, or flying under the influence. One might expect humans to show better judgment than the equivalent of a feral chicken might, but humanity possesses a seemingly incredible level of stupidity. We foolishly choose to fly—or drive—under

the influence of alcohol, thinking we can defy danger and escape the consequences. However, such is not always the case, and these actions often lead to death and destruction. For this reason, one would do well to remember the grouse and its fate.