

RONALD F. CURRIE, JR.

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## GRACE

I'M RIDING WITH MY FATHER IN HIS TRUCK when I see the kid, lying motionless in the grass, his head resting below a window of the house he's crawled up against. There's a backpack there, and a crappy old ten-speed that's been half-propped, half-crashed against a tree.

"There's a kid hurt over there," I say to my father. We've been mowing lawns, so he doesn't have his hearing aids in, and I have to repeat myself. By the time he understands what I'm saying we're already past and down the hill. My father makes a wide turn, swinging the trailer around, and heads back.

We pull up in front of the house and get out. As we cross the lawn I see that the figure lying there is not a kid, but a grown man. He looks a little younger than my father, late forties maybe. He's lying on his side; the seat of his jeans is soiled with either dirt or shit, I can't tell. There's a Bud Ice bottle on the ground near his head, empty except for a bit of yellowish foam in the bottom. His eyes are half-open and staring. He might be dead.

I'm always thinking the worst.

But to be on the safe side I let my father take the lead. He just retired from thirty years as a paramedic, so he knows better than I do how to deal with this.

We stand over the man, and my father says, "Hey." He takes the man's arm at the elbow. "Hey," he says, shaking him. "Wake up, buddy."

"His name's Lou," someone says.

A woman's face appears behind the window screen. My father looks at me; he thinks I said something. I point to the woman.

"His name's Lou," she says again, to my father.

"What's that?" my father asks.

"Lou," she half-yells.

"Hey Lou," my father says. He takes Lou's wrist between his fingers, counting the pulse against the second hand on his watch. "You know him?" he asks the woman.

She gives a bitter smile. "That's one way to put it," she says. "I wouldn't let him in."

"Does he have any medical problems? He diabetic?"

"He's drunk," the woman says.

My father places Lou's hand back on the ground, then loosens the shirt around Lou's neck, to let him breathe. Lou starts to snore. He sounds like an angry rattlesnake.

I stand there, rubbing the grit on the back of my neck, staring down at Lou, thinking.

"You should call the police," my father says to the woman.

"He's just drunk," she says.

"What?"

She repeats herself, louder.

"Call the police," my father says. "Tell them to send an ambulance. It's better that he go to the hospital. He can't be left out here in this heat."

The woman stands at the window a moment longer, then disappears into the darkness of the house. After a while she comes back.

"They're on their way," she says.

My father is looking down at Lou and doesn't hear her.

"Okay," I tell the woman.

"I'm going to shut the window."

"We'll stay out here until they come," I say. She closes the window, glances once more at Lou, then disappears again.

**M**Y FATHER AND I STAND with our hands on our hips, squinting in the sunlight. I kick at the grass, shifting my gaze around, trying not to look at Lou. My father bends over to check his pulse again.

Then my father says, "Kind of reminds you why you quit, huh?" He doesn't look at me when he says it.

For a minute I don't respond. Then I say, "I started drinking again a year ago."

He looks up. "Hm?" he says.

"I said, That's no way to live." I form the words carefully so he can understand.

Eventually the cop shows up. He's short and thick and has a crewcut. He knows Lou, but calls him Spoony.

"One of your regulars?" my father asks.

"Oh yeah," the cop says. "We've been looking for him today." He and my father laugh knowingly. I don't laugh. Instead, I set my lips in a straight line against the front of my teeth. The two of them crouch on either side of Lou, colleagues now.

"I don't like his breathing," the cop says.

"Yeah, his breathing's good," my father says. "His pulse is a little weak."

The cop looks at my father for a minute, then reaches in and squeezes Lou's nipple through his shirt. "Come on, Spoony. Wake up, buddy." But Lou doesn't move.

“You got an ambulance coming?” my father says.

“Yeah. I can take it from here.”

“Okay,” my father says. He straightens up, stretches a bit. “We’ve got more work to do anyway.”

We start back toward the truck, and the cop says, “Thanks for your help, guys.” I’ve got my back to him, and I jump when he says it. It sounds funny: *guys*, addressing both of us, though I haven’t said a word, haven’t been a help to anyone.

My father turns at the waist and raises his hand. I keep walking, and don’t look back.

I haven’t thought of you in what seems like a long time, but for some reason I do now. I see you knocking bottles off the coffee table with an angry sweep of your arm. I picture you crying so hard and so long your eyes swelled shut. I wonder where you are, who you’re with, if you flinch every time he moves his hands, like you did with me.