

The Man Lying in the Grass

Henry L. Miles

Capturing a Conscience in Writing

We're in Ogden, Utah, on the second day of May, heading home to Orem after a Sunday afternoon with grandchildren. Carol is driving south on Washington Boulevard passing low business buildings whose shadows are covering the lawns and reaching out into the street. Up ahead, I spot a man lying in the grass maybe twenty feet back from the curb. A drunk sleeping himself sober? I wonder. Probably drunk . . . But what if he's a diabetic whose sugar is low and he can't get up?

Nearby on the sidewalk, an older man in cap and long overcoat ambles along, his hands locked together against his spine and his head down, as if he is looking for ants in the cracks. As we drive by, the man in the grass seems to stir. I look back, eye on the ambler, hoping he will walk over to the man. But he ambles right on by the black heap in the grass. I say to myself, "The man is just drunk."

But saying, "just drunk," does not ease my angst as I recall our son when he was two years into his diabetes and a student at Utah Valley State College in need of money. Joey let himself be rushed off campus to fill in for a friend before eating lunch. On reaching the cinder-block warehouse, he took a place on the assembly line. As each cardboard box rolled in front of him on the conveyor, Joey handed in two books and three cas-

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settes and pushed the box to the next person on the line. In two hours, he was falling behind and realized his reactions were slowing. Noting candy in the vending machine, Joey searched his pockets for money and found only his meal ticket for the college cafeteria. He tried to borrow money from his co-workers on the line. None of them knew Joey and none lent him money. Joey began to sweat and told them he was diabetic and needed sugar in a hurry to remain conscious. They just looked at him askance. Maybe these minimum-wage workers had no money to lend or knew nothing of diabetes. The boxes were jamming up and the last thing Joey recalls is the boss saying something like, "Hey, you need to keep the line moving along or leave."

Meanwhile, Carol was driving her sewing machine to the repair shop for the second time that day. Along the University Mall, she glimpsed a familiar figure walking toward her on the sidewalk. It was Joey. She pulled into the right lane and called to him through the window; he walked on. She turned into the mall parking lot, drove up along side, and asked him to get in. Joey stopped and looked at Carol; he didn't know her. Carol, 110 pounds, got out and cajoled her 200-pound son into the car. She sped home and left Joey sweating in the car while she ran into the house and stirred up orange juice from concentrate. She returned and coaxed the juice down Joey while he could still swallow. In minutes his eyes came into focus and later he was able to talk. He had left his backpack at work and felt too embarrassed to go back for it. Carol went for the backpack and had a talk with Joey's boss, who had thought Joey was on drugs.

I say to Carol, "Did you see the man back there in the grass?"

"No."

We talk and she says, "Should we go back?"

"Yes."

Carol turns around, and soon I am pointing to the dark heap in the grass two blocks ahead. We pass the man and return on his side of the street. I open my window and say, "Are you all right?" He doesn't move. I shout, "Hey, you over there!"

He lifts his head and I see the black collar of his overcoat, his black beard, his black stocking cap down over an eye. One hand is grasping the yellow, eighteen pack of Miller's High Life on the lawn beside him.

"Everything okay?" I wave. He blinks and mutters. He is only drunk.

Relieved, I begin to close my window and turn my thoughts to the

eighty miles we want to cover before dark. I've got no time to get involved with a drunk, nor am I inclined to do so.

What Would Jesus Do?

A voice? A thought? . . . At Sunday School the question doesn't bother me like this. The question is not fleeting. It clings, screwed in my mind to the sticking point, liminal and unwanted. I do not know this drunk, and I am not the Good Samaritan; sometimes I help relatives; sometimes I help friends—but a drunken stranger. . . ? I find myself out of the car and walking over the grass to the man, resisting the prompting to take him to his home. "Where do you live?" I say.

He looks up at me, struggles to his knees, one hand pushing down on the carton of beer. He says, "You'll take me home?"

I evade his question, say, "Do you know where you live?" He mumbles "2210 Jefferson" as he labors up to his feet and stands in front of me, holding the carton of beer.

"Can you guide us there?" No answer. He stumbles toward the car carrying the beer. I hesitate, but he doesn't need an invitation. He opens the door and then he's in the back seat with his beer, entangling himself in the seat belt behind Carol. Awareness strikes; he's in the car. We don't know him nor where he lives, and what if we can't find his home? What if we find it and he won't get out of the car? He is helpless but in control. I feel uneasy and imprudent, especially for seating him behind us; then I ask myself where else I could seat him?

This man unlocks memories. Are they ruling my response? I was about eight when Dad drank beer on Saturday nights to get courage to dance. He'd pour a glass and leave it on the table, and I'd watch the foam dissipate from the golden liquid. Dad would stand in front of the washbasin with his yellow straight razor, looking into the only mirror in our three-room house with no bathroom, while he cut swaths down his foamy face and trimmed his black mustache. I'd sip from Dad's glass and he'd see me in the mirror and smile and say to Mother, "Look at that little devil," and I'd smile, too. Driving home from the dance one night, the front wheels of the Model A Ford began to shimmy crossing the railroad tracks at the edge of Blackfoot and Dad and Mother ended upside down in the barrow pit. Next morning I overheard Dad say, "What'd happen to the kids if we got killed?" He quit drinking and dancing.

My awareness of alcohol grew. Mother's parents lived eighteen miles

from us. During one visit, Grandpa and Uncle Al went to town a mile away to buy something and left Grandma to visit. In two days they returned. Mother was angry and said Grandpa was a poor excuse for a husband and Grandma cried, glad to have him back.

Drinking made Uncle Pete thirst for a fight. Drinking made Bert, a high school buddy, prefer sinks to urinals. And my friend Al insisted I drive him around all night, until he sobered up. I have been uneasy around liquor since my teens, but I drank anyway—until almost age twenty when I became a practicing Mormon.

I sit sideways to watch the man in the seat behind Carol. The stocking cap droops down the side of his head as he clutches a dollar bill in his right hand. We are driving south again on Washington Boulevard and the man's disjointed phrases and unsteady arms tell us Jefferson Street is just two blocks east. I doubt the message and watch the man grasp two bottles from the carton cuddled between his ankles. He holds up one for each of us. We say we don't drink.

"More power to you," he says. His tongue is thick and difficult to control. I wonder if he'll vomit. The man offers us beer again and we say we don't drink and he says, "More power to you." Before he can repeat his offer a third time, Carol distracts him, asking if he works.

"Sure I work."

"Why were you away from your house?" Carol says.

"I bet a friend I could buy beer and get back to the house." He adds, "Why did you stop for me?"

We mention our diabetic son and his comas, which can bring death in hours unless he gets sugar into his system. The man says something about diabetics having identification tags but ends the thought in mid-sentence. At 21st Street we stop for the light; it changes, and we turn left. The second street is Jefferson, and we turn right. I feel relief fused with growing concern; will the man get out of the car, or will he be like my high school chum and insist on driving around until he is sober?

In the middle of the 2100 block of Jefferson, the man yells, "Stop!"

Carol brakes. We are in front of a church. "Do you live by a church?" I say.

"Yes."

"This is not 2210," Carol says and drives on and turns around and pulls up in front of 2210 Jefferson, which we had passed. It is a large blue apartment house, or maybe a large house, which has been converted into

apartment units. The man muddles out of the seat belt and out of the car, clutching the pack of beer. I'm relieved, almost grateful. The man gives Carol the wrinkled dollar bill he has been clutching since he left the lawn. She tries to give back the dollar, but he rejects her effort saying, "It's all I have." Our task is over, but I'm so thankful I climb out of the car to steady the man on his walk across the lawn to the house. He keeps thanking me and asking me why we stopped.

Someone shouts, "Hey, there." We look around. Across the street a shaven man is faltering our way and mumbling, and the bearded man responds. The two unsteady men are sidekicks, and the shaven man is walking our way, asking his bearded friend how he got a ride home in a car. And he keeps repeating the question. The two get together and talk. I walk back to the car unnoticed and get in, ready to head home. Carol hands me the wrinkled dollar bill and says, "He'll need this; give it to him."

I'm out of the car and over the lawn to the two men, who are leaning against one another in slurred conversation. I extend the bill to the bearded man and he refuses it. I stuff the bill into his chest pocket and turn toward the car. He stumbles after me, holding out the bill and saying something about getting back into the car.

Carol is watching us and shouts, "Okay, we'll keep the bill. We'll keep it."

I grab the bill from the man's hand; he stops before stumbling forward again. I run the few steps and jump into the car, hitting the electric lock before he can reach the door. Carol stomps the gas, the car lurches forward, and the bearded man—hands reaching out—stands transfixed, watching us drive away.

Soon, Carol is entering the on-ramp to Interstate 15, and seconds later, she is pushing past seventy-five on the speedometer. I am not believing we did what we just did. Why did we stop for a drunk? Why did we take him to his home? I ruminate and write.

Carol is watching three lanes of traffic, and I am looking out my window at the Great Salt Lake in the distance. On the lake's far side, the sun is behind a mountain, shafting light around its mass—through a canyon to the lake, and upward to each cloud—like God beholding from afar but connecting with the earth, the lake, and each plant and animal, and a man lying in the grass, and Carol and me, and tutoring me to take His son home when I would not.