

THE OUTSTRETCHED ARM

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The hand was curled, but open to the over story of branches, the dappled light coming in and touching his fingers. This is what I first saw when I pulled into the campsite. I left my truck and drew closer. I called out several times – no response. I knew something was wrong. My heartbeat accelerated as I peered around the tree that obscured the rest of the body. A step closer and I could see the chest and other arm of a motionless man. Both arms were outstretched in a supplicant position. He wasn't moving. He wasn't breathing. There was a gun was on his chest.

Earlier, I'd cruised by the campsite en-route to a trailhead down stream. I had glanced over as I drove by and saw a small white car, passenger door open, facing the road. I stopped, backed up and pulled into the mouth of the camping area. I could hear music coming from the car so I figured someone was about, probably off in the brush relieving himself. I didn't push it, not wanting to invade someone's privacy. I decided I would stop back by on my inbound trip to make sure everything was okay.

Thirty minutes later, after having checked the Goat Lake trailhead nearby, I was back at the campsite. This time I pulled in far enough to make my discovery. I don't think I was breathing as I moved even closer to the body. I had to make sure this person was not alive. I forced myself to look at his face. There wasn't much remaining as the obvious trajectory of a bullet had found its way out with his life.

I backed off, feeling sick. I now knew for sure that this was a fatality, and that I was close to a violent death. It filled the atmosphere with its absoluteness. It was real and unconditional and I knew that someone else with more experience, more professionalism

needed to deal with this. I was able to catch my breath as I slipped into the cab of the truck to call the Ranger Station.

“Verlot, this is Hanbey”.

“This is Verlot, go ahead.” I was relieved that it was Marissa at the other end. She is experienced, intellectually organized and unflappable.

“Marissa, you’ll need to call the Sheriff’s Office. I’m at a possible crime scene with a fatality.” I tried to select my words carefully, since I was upset and also because many ears in the area would pick up this broadcast on the radio. Of most concern was the radio at the Ranger Station next to the public information desk- anybody at the desk would overhear our conversation.

Marissa asked me several relevant questions, as I knew she would. She wanted to gently confirm if there was a death, my location, the license number on the car, and several other items I can’t rightly remember her asking. She told me she would call 911 and activate a response.

Then I was alone with a deceased human being not 20 feet away. I decided to not touch anything since it was a potential crime scene. The music blaring from the car was disconcerting and added an overtone of otherworldliness to the situation.

While I waited for more information from Marissa, I kept checking the outstretched arm. Had it moved? Was this person going to stand up and face me. Was I in danger? Was anyone else nearby?

Then I remembered something. Just before I had gone by this campsite the first time, I had a close encounter with an oncoming truck. The small red truck had swerved out of

the way to miss me. It was driven by an older man and a passenger, both of their faces obscured by baseball hats. I remembered some sort of mining insignia on the door of their old truck. I was also struck by the freshly created swerve marks on the road as I drove on. These guys seemed too old and serious to be duck tailing it up the road for the fun of it. . For what it was worth, I relayed this information on to the Ranger Station to be passed on to whatever Deputy Sheriff might be driving up the same way these guys were driving out.

Marissa checked back and said that it would be a long while before the police or the local EMTs would show up. Such was life working in back country. Everything was an hour and a half away.

Now it would be me and the 'outstretched arm' sharing this space. I had nothing to do but bide my time, try to distract myself and wait for this incident to play out. I wasn't sure what to do with myself. Proximity to death is an odd sensation. It made me restless, unsettled and emotionally on edge.

I began checking every car as it approached around the corner from my enclave. I knew it was too early for the Deputy Sheriff to find his way up to this site, but I kept a hopeful eye on the road. As people in their cars and trucks passed by, it seemed odd that they had no clue as to the gravity of the situation. Along the freeway, we all glance over at accidents with morbid curiosity. Out here, nothing was out of balance for these folks beyond the sight of a parked Forest Service truck with an oddly distracted driver.

As time dragged on, I tried to piece together what I thought might have happened. I wasn't trained to draw conclusions from the obvious, much less the obscure. For one

thing, with the radio going, I really couldn't tell how long the scenario had been playing out. How long can a radio play before the battery dies? I could also see a few beer cans lying about, so they may have played into the story. The car was in rough shape and loaded with throwaways. Was the owner on the down and out?

The gun on the chest spoke for itself, even though it seemed almost as if it had been placed there. The handgun looked like a Luger or target shooting model, not like the small handguns that litter shows on primetime television. .

Beyond some garbage in the fire ring, the campsite was essentially unused. There was no tent, cooler, folding chairs, clothesline and all the other things that accompany people camping out. My motionless companion had not occupied this site for its intended purpose. He had come here to die.

Eventually, the Deputy Sheriff showed up and began doing what I had done informally for the last hour. After confirming that my 'outstretched arm' belonged to a deceased person, he began gathering information. He didn't hesitate to begin the pro forma task of documenting the details of the crime scene. His job was to accumulate factual information, but more than that he was objectifying the scene. He was separating himself, it seemed to me, from the gruesome reality of the situation so that he could function effectively. Unlike me, he didn't choose or allow himself to react emotionally. He needed professional detachment to do his job.

Soon, he asked to use the radio in my truck to call in his initial findings to his superiors. He was too far out for his radio to work, so he would have to use one of the Forest Service channels we all use to communicate in remote locations.

‘Verlot, this is Deputy Johnson. Would you please call my office and relay the following information. We have a deceased white male, name of He is driving a White Geo, license # Please contact the Medical Examiner and request that she arrange for a confirmation of this incident.’”

I was relieved that others were taking over. As it turned out I needed to stay close so that the Deputy Sheriff could continue to use my truck for communication. He proceeded to analyze the scene, gather evidence and make notes. I made out a detailed accounting of what I had seen on a form he provided.

He determined that our victim had most likely consumed 12 cans of beer prior to his demise. We found 11 cans in his car and a twelfth over the bank with a bullet hole in it. He also found his gun case with a stash of bullets in a plastic container. When he studied the 22 pistol he noticed that two bullets had been engaged but that the second one had jammed in the barrel. This could mean that the first bullet did not kill immediately, and that he was cognizant enough to fire off a second round. Did he look back on his life at that moment? Did he regret his decision?.

We also looked for the spent bullet casing which the Deputy eventually found five feet away and to the left of the corpse.

It had been three hours since I first arrived on the scene and I was ready to go. The medical examiner was due soon, so I backed out and started up the road. I wasn't a quarter mile away when she passed me. I waved her down and directed her to the obscure campsite. She was lost, this not being part of her usual rounds through the cities and suburbs of Snohomish County.

As I separated myself from the mayhem, I still felt my stomach tied in a knot and my mind wandering. The vision of the 'outstretched arm' had planted itself firmly in my consciousness - everything else seemed peripheral.

I stopped by the station on the way home and thanked Marissa for her rational calmness. I moved on down the road, but my mind stayed planted in that oppressive campsite along the unpaved road to Goat Lake.