

SECONDS

JAMES CONLEY SLAMMED on his brakes, felt the car slide on the slick surface, and watched in disbelief as the body bounced off the hood. Just as quickly as the figure had appeared, it was gone.

He was always running late. There just weren't enough hours in the day. He was behind on appointments, work, social engagements. Hell, even laundry. He was wearing yesterday's dirty jeans, blue sweatshirt, and jacket.

But everything now felt very still. His grip on the steering wheel was turning his knuckles white and his arms were extended and locked at the elbows.

It couldn't have happened.

He stared through the windshield. The fat droplets of rain plopped against the glass, distorting his view of the repetitious housing of suburbia that lined both sides of the street. The wipers swished back and forth, turning the blur into clarity. He fumbled for the ignition, turned the key back, but left the headlights on. The pounding in his chest was so strong it ached. Even though he knew only seconds had passed, it felt like an hour. All this in seconds.

James Conley reached for the handle and paused. He wasn't really sure he wanted to get out of the vehicle. He wasn't sure if he wanted to make this real.

He opened the door and stepped out into the street. The rain was heavy, and he was soaked in no time. He turned toward the front of his car. One step...two...three, each bringing him closer to the front. His heart still trying to beat its way to freedom.

It had to have been a dog. Some large dog...something with yellowish fur. A collie of some kind. Possibly a deer. There was still time for it to be a dog. *Please, please God, let it be a dog.*

But he knew it wasn't a dog. And it wasn't a deer.

It had been a blond ponytail.

He stopped now, and leaned reluctantly forward, each inch exposing the truth beyond the hood.



And there the girl lay, just beyond the bumper, framed in the headlights like they were searchlights.

A shudder rippled through James' muscles like a convulsion. He extended his arms, palms out, as if he could block the image from his mind. His paralysis died away quickly, and he ran to her, feet sloshing through the half-inch of rainwater standing in the street. She was laying on her side, her arms stretched out and her knees pulled up. It was a contorted, fetal position. Her blond hair was pulled into a ponytail with a few strands matted to the side of her face by the heavy rain. He knelt and reached out to touch her...and hesitated, like she was too fragile. You weren't suppose to move an injured person. But he had to check. He laid a two-fingered touch on her neck. *Please, please God, still be breathing!*

James moved his fingers lightly across her neck, chanting, "Please...be alive...just have a pulse...please...please God, don't do this to me."

Nothing. It wasn't there. *Are you sure you're doing it right?*

"No," he answered his thoughts out loud.

A porch light came to life, lighting up the small suburban yard across the street.

Damn it! He looked down at the lifeless girl. *It's midnight*, he thought. *What were you doing out in the street?*

A flashlight, that had obviously been hers, lay only a few feet away. Its bulb still burned.

The porch-lit house yielded an old man in a blue robe. He leaned out from the doorway and hollered, "Car trouble?"

James stood up on traitorous legs. "Call an ambulance," he finally shouted in a voice shrill and crackling.

The man walked a couple of steps out onto his porch to get a better look. "What happened?" he asked.

James Conley, motioning violently at the man, shouted again, his voice cracking at the height of hysteria and frustration, "Call 911, will ya! Just...call an ambulance! I hit some—" his voice wavered as he looked down at the child. "I hit someone," he muttered. *You killed someone!*

The man waived a confirmation and quickly went back inside. Now, there were other lights that were coming on, both inside and out of the houses lined along the street. The sounds and commotion of an awakened neighborhood began to steadily grow.

Soon, everyone will see what you've done.

But it was an accident, he countered.

Doesn't matter...a child is a child. Even if you do not go to jail, your wife will leave you. You can't expect her to live with what you've done. She'll say you were rushing, speeding, because you were going to be late again.

Had he been speeding? He wasn't sure. He didn't think so.

Can't remember? Doesn't matter...everyone will assume you were. Doesn't matter what you say to the cops...to her parents...to your wife...to yourself. This will always be the moment that defines your existence. You killed that little girl. It is the first and only thing anyone is going to remember about you.

He bent back down by her side and carefully lifted her face away from the water standing on the pavement. He was oddly afraid that she would drown. As he gently lifted her head, a red coloration spread out through the water.

Blood.

Her blood.

He hadn't wanted there to be blood, but there it was. The brightest red spreading out from under her temple. The rain was diluting it fast, but in the headlights it flared like a red flag of urgency.

Whereas before he'd been unaware of how much time was passing, now he was very aware of it. Where was that ambulance! People had been saved and lost in a matter of a few minutes...life was measured in seconds.

The neighborhood was coming towards him now. He wasn't sure what he should do. He felt a reflex to back away, as if his presence was an offense, but he couldn't break his focus. He couldn't stop looking at her face, so peaceful and still. It was unnerving how wrong that looked. He wondered how old

she was. He guessed maybe...twelve. Twelve, with a whole life ahead of her—boys, prom, a day of motherhood—but not anymore. Now she would experience nothing. He had seen to that.

A blur of neighbors, all with raincoats or umbrellas, surrounded them. Some knelt down beside her...beside him. Others were standing. The sounds of rain droplets pelted the hard surfaces of the coats and umbrellas.

He could hear the questions passed among the crowd, “What happened?” and “Is she breathing?”

He could hear the pain in the answers, “No!” and “Oh God!”

All these voices slipped by with little or no effect on James. That is, until the grief-stricken cry of “Sarah!” It sounded exactly like what James had expected.

His focus broke from Sarah’s face, from her life, and he stood and stepped back from the growing huddle. Many of them stood with their hands pressed to their mouths in horror or cupped to their

foreheads as if the reality of it all was giving them a headache.

He turned away from Sarah’s body (*he really hadn’t wanted a name put to the face*) and stared off into the night’s sky. He could hear the sirens in the distance. He wasn’t ignoring the scene behind him. He was waiting for the violence of words and actions from the parents. And deservedly so. He had taken the most important thing they had.

A hand fell on his shoulder.

He turned around and faced the old man who had called the ambulance.

“What happened, son?” the man asked in a gentle voice.

James Conley gave a sharp sigh. “She came from between those two cars. I...,” James let his head fall and stare at the man’s chest. Was this her father? “—I didn’t see her until it was too late. I’m so very sorry.”

The man left James and walked back to Sarah’s motionless body. James stood there a moment when a woman’s hand touched his face. She raised his

head to look into her eyes. The tears were there, but nothing else. A dead soul, and a moment of silent recognition.

Sarah's mother swallowed once, and looked down from his gaze. "We had told her a thousand times not to sneak out at night..." She let the words hang.

James could taste them in the air. They tasted of sorrow and regret.

And then she hugged him.

She wrapped her arms around him and squeezed.

He just stood there, arms hanging motionless at his side, confused. But it didn't take him long to understand. They were connected by guilt. She did not blame him. Of course, it had been *her* fault. He had just been the instrument of her failure.

She finally let go and turned back toward her daughter's body. James couldn't move. Of all things he thought the mother might do...this was the worst. Why couldn't she have thrown fists and words of hate?

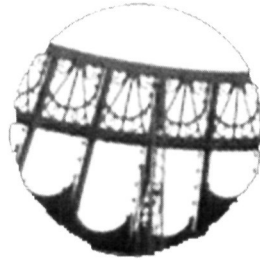
Everyday that he ran late, it was because of some outside force. Every time he fell short in his life, it was not his fault. Blame was key to survival. If he was

her, he would only be able to see the person who had taken his child from him. "What kind of mother would not know where her child was?" was the only real weapon he had to survive this. More powerful than "She came out of nowhere" and "the road was too slick for me to stop in time." None of these moved enough responsibility off of him. She had taken that away from him, with her unbelievable understanding in the face of this tragedy. She didn't blame him, and that made it harder to see her as a contributor. How would he ever be able to live with himself without hating her? He was not equipped to carry this much weight.

James needed some distance, so he splashed across the street and leaned on the hood of the closest vehicle. Spasms in his abdomen forced him to double over between the cars, and his stomach erupted in pain and vomit. Each purge brought with it tears and strangled moans. He reached up and placed a steady-hand on the hood of the car and lifted himself back up to his shaky position. Several members of the crowd were staring at him. *Get used to that look!* The old man had his arm around Sarah's mother as she wept against his chest. The sirens were close now.

He walked away from the scene (*your mess!*) toward the ambulance's approach. He couldn't wait for it to be over. He would never be able to make this right, to make amends, to anyone whose life was now damaged or destroyed. It was done. The newspapers would relay the story, heads would be shaken in judgment, and he would always be remembered as the bringer of pain and suffering.

The siren was loud now, a wailing accusation, calling for all to come and see what he had done. He could see the ambulance coming down the street. The red lights cast shadows on the houses they passed. He looked away, back toward the scene, where he would now live. Many in the gathered crowd were still staring at him. He knew some were watching him to make sure he didn't disappear. Others stared with sympathy, as they tried to imagine what they would do if this had happened to them.



The ambulance was slowing to the scene. He saw several of the red illuminated faces that peeked out from drawn curtains as it neared. He could see the faces of paramedics inside. He could still feel the eyes from the crowd.

Stares. Always staring, and never understanding. They couldn't.

James began to rock on his heels against the car. He could make them understand how sorry he was.

The ambulance was slowing, but it had enough speed to accomplish what he needed it for. The driver's attention on the scene, the rain, and the sincerity of the action was all on his side.

James Conley stepped out from in between the parked cars, his strides quick and sure, straight into the ambulance's path.

The driver's focus had been on the crowd in the street and he had no more than a second to react. The ambulance collided with James Conley dead on, and launched him down the street, where his body landed at the end of a twisted dance...and remained still.

James Conley's eyes were open and staring at the grill of the stopped ambulance that had been *his* instrument. He saw two paramedics burst from the vehicle. One of them went to the little girl, and the other was fast approaching him.

He had been oddly aware of a few screams when he was struck, and wondered how bad it had been?

Just as long as it was bad enough.

The paramedic knelt down and leaned over James' twisted heap examining his injuries. James' eyes remained open and focused on the dimming bulb of Sarah's flashlight.

The paramedic was talking, saying things like, "You came out of nowhere" and "Please God, don't let him die!"

Hey buddy, been there.

He hoped he was going to die. The fact was...killing a child could never truly be completely forgiven. Even when it was an accident. Probably not by the rest of Sarah's family. Not by his wife. Not by anyone who knew. It would always be there behind their eyes, the knowledge of it all.

Those who read the story tomorrow would nod their approval. He was too overcome with grief after what he had done. It was understandable. There could be no greater expression of his regret.

The flashlight, and the headlights of the ambulance, dimmed even darker.

He was fading.

I'm sorry, Sarah.

James Conley heard the other paramedic, Sarah's paramedic, call out, "How you doing over there?" The voice sounded much farther away to James than it should have.

"I'm losing him, Alan!" shouted his paramedic.

And Alan's reply was the last thing James Conley heard in this world.

"She's got a pulse here. It's weak, but it's getting stronger by the second. We're going to have to get moving!"

The paramedic sighed, reached out and closed James Conley's eyes, and stared at the odd little smile on his face.

—William Friend