

Hope

By Michael Fine

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When she parked the car that night, Julie Stevens was thinking only about her bed. She was a little tipsy, truth be told, and she probably shouldn't have been driving. It was raining and starting to get cold. Most of the leaves had come off the trees. The roads were slick. The fallen yellow and brown leaves were stuck to the slick pavement and stuck to the grill and the headlights of the car and got caught under the windshield wipers. Julie drove anyway, carefully when the road was dark and she couldn't see that well, but perhaps a little too fast on the straight sections of the road because she was starting to fall asleep and she wanted to get home while she could still function. She wasn't falling over drunk --nothing like that. But it had been a difficult night, most of which she wanted to forget. The wind had taken a few branches down which still lay on the road. She was able to avoid most of them. But she was relieved that it was only six miles, relieved that there weren't any police cars on the road, relieved she didn't get pulled over and relieved when she pulled through the gate of her condo and was able to find her house, in a development of houses that all looked alike, relieved when the garage door went up as she pulled toward it, relieved that the light in the garage came on and relieved that she was able to pull into the garage without crashing into the blue bicycle that was leaning on the wall in the back.

The garage door lowered itself, the motor of the garage door opener growling until the door banged on the floor. Julie sat for a few minutes. Then she fell asleep in her seat, her head flexed back, and snored, the keys to the car still in her hands. The overhead light, which was on a timer, flicked off. The garage was cold and soon the car became cold. Julie slept for an hour and then awoke with a start, not clear about where she was, until she moved and found the keys in her hand. Jack was a bastard. That was the whole story. He'd come to the party late and ignored her, more or less. This ethical non-monogamy stuff might work for him. But it didn't work for her. She was willing to be with him when she was with him. He was always on

the prowl. She drank wine and he drank whiskey and there was just no there there, regardless of what she felt, thought, or wanted. He let her leave alone and drive drunk. The hell with him.

Julie put her keys in her pocketbook and opened the car door, her cell phone in one hand. The car light when on. It went off when she closed the door. She stumbled in the dark for a moment. Then she found a button on her cellphone. "Siri, flashlight on," she said. The flashlight on her phone came on, and it lit the ground in front of her feet. She climbed the stairs from the garage to her condo, doing her best to put one foot in front of the next. So she didn't see the fender of the car in the darkness.

Nothing made Charles Mbogo angrier than wanton disregard for the value of human life. Twelve-hour shifts didn't make the moral injury any easier to bear. The old woman must have wandered away. She was cold by the time they got her to the ED, so they warmed her. Cold and dead is not dead, exactly. There was a depressed skull fracture, a fractured femur, a radial and ulnar fracture on the right and a pelvic fracture – the woman's pelvis swam, the bones drifting in a pool of water -- with the traction of both Charles' arms. It didn't rock. The woman's clothing was wet. Wet brown leaves were stuck to her coat and trousers and were woven in her hair, and there was mud all over her, so she must have been dragged – how far it was impossible to tell.

It looked like the woman had been struck on her right side, as she was facing the car, and her head must have hit the headlight or the bumper as she fell. And then was dragged. Probably until the car turned. Hard to believe that the driver didn't see her or feel any of this. Hard to believe that the driver didn't come screeching to a halt and call for help. But that's not who we are, anymore. The driver didn't stop. The driver didn't help. The driver just kept right on driving and left the old woman in the dirt and the leaves, crumpled in the street. Hit and run. One more hit and run. One more disposable human being, in a world that no longer values life or the miracle of being.

What kind of human being does this? Animals don't behave that way. Animals don't kill wantonly and don't kill using machines. They kill their prey and eat their prey. Otherwise they leave one another alone. We have descended to the lower depths. De-evolution. Lower than the other orders in nature. Just rocks that kill people when they roll down hills, as if the deaths we cause were inevitable. Trees that kill people when they fall over. Just one more accident, just a numbers game. That's what we've become. Rocks and trees, not people. Trees have feelings, they say now. And are connected to one another underground. Not us. Not anymore.

They warmed her. They got a faint agonal ventricular rhythm when her core temperature came up to 90 degrees from 78 degrees, and Charles shocked her three times, hoping against hope that the rhythm would catch, and her heart might start again. But it was like trying to light a fire with wet wood. Nothing. Nada. Just a glowing ember, which went out. There was nothing to work with. It was over. The woman was gone. Hit and run. Call the code. Call the family. Call the Medical Examiner. The nurses would call the morgue. His job was done.

Once upon a time, we investigated hit and run deaths, back in the day when human life mattered. We'd knock on doors in the surrounding neighborhood, to see if any of the neighbors saw or heard anything. We'd run down paint chips – sometimes, more often than you think, we could get the make and sometimes even the model of a car from a chip of paint that might show up under a victim's fingernail or in a wound. We'd make the rounds of local body shops. Anybody bring in a car with the passenger side fender dented or the headlight on that side smashed? Sometimes we'd even put a notice in the city and local newspapers, asking for any person who might have witnessed an accident on such and such a day at such and such a time, please come forward. Back in the day, it was surprising how many times we'd find the guilty party. And how often it would turn out to be some smart-ass, some politician or businessman or one of their wives or teenage kids, and how often they'd get off with a slap on the wrist, if

that. Money buys honey. That's just the way it is. Honest people don't leave the scene. They call for help and are heartbroken. But not many people are honest like that, not anymore.

But now, it's rare we find the perpetrator of a hit-and-run, death resulting. No one sees anything anymore, unless it is in broad daylight in a populated place. No one hears anything. People don't leave their houses. They sit at home, watching the big screen TV. Or they're out back in the swimming pool, the piped in music obscuring all sound.

Paint doesn't flake off space age materials. And the old body shops, they aren't what they used to be either. All corporate or all chop-shops, and no one in them wants to talk to a cop. They send their PR people out to talk to us, not the grease monkeys, like in the old days. The old grease monkeys who worked with their hands, the guys with thick forearms and hands that were made black by the grease and the carbon of old cars, they saw plenty, and they and we were cut from the same cloth, so they'd say what was on their minds, eventually. Bring a man a cup of coffee and a donut and many doors open, particularly if they know you and you know them and you are respectful. We all need favors once in a while. That was how it used to work. You do for them. They do for you. Thus the world turns.

But it's not like that now.

The ME called. It was a suspicious death, a hit-and-run. The woman was in her eighties. Lived alone. Husband died years ago. Once worked as an aide in the local school, part-time, after the husband died. Kids far away. Barely knew her neighbors. Kept to herself. Probably should have been in assisted living. Nobody was going to make a fuss. It was late at night so no one saw anything.

No one came forward, that's for sure. I went and knocked on a couple of doors, just for old times' sake. Only one of the neighbors even came to the door, guy in his fifties with a buzz cut who looked like an ex-marine. Wasn't even home that night. Didn't see or hear anything.

So I let it drop. There was a file. You could call it an investigation if anyone ever asked. But there are no newspapers anymore and thus no nosy reporters and thus no one cares if this stuff gets investigated or not. The TV people aren't interested in anything like this. There were

no gory pictures to show, no rooms packed full of aggrieved citizens at a city council meeting. Their attention span is only about thirty seconds, and they don't even come with a cameraman or camera person anymore. The TV reporters show up themselves with a little camera and a tripod when they show up at all.

I just had to let it go. Life goes on. I slow-walked it to the open investigations file, and forgot about it, to tell the truth. It was going no place fast. In six months it would get filed away, and no one would care or remember, because that's who we are now. No one knows, cares, or remembers. We aren't those people anymore. We are our cellphones and our Twitter, Our Instagram, our TikTok and our Facebook. Not people with passion or love, deeply committed to life, the beauty of the world as it is, or to one another.

It wasn't the next day or the day after, but it was the day after that when Julie Stevens saw the dent in her front fender, on the passenger side. She was parked in the parking lot in Garden City. The sun had come out, a brief respite from the rain and fog of November. That sun was low in the sky but bright and reflected off her beautiful new car. The fender, just at the corner, where the front fender and the side fender meet, was caved in and the headlight and the sidelight above it were smashed, as if someone had hit it with a club.

Damn, Julie thought, and then she got mad. Some idiot backed into my car and left the scene. Didn't even have the decency to leave me a note. This is a leased car. So I'm going to have to get that damned dent fixed. Now I have to take it to a body shop, and you know body shops – they see women coming a mile away, so I bet it costs three thousand bucks. Or four. And that will make my insurance go up, all through no fault of my own. It isn't fair. It's all on me. And I didn't do anything. Other than park my car.

She looked around for evidence, for shards of glass and plastic scattered on the ground, hoping there would be some trace that the car that had smashed into hers while backing up had left behind. But there was nothing. She looked up at the flood light stations that stood at the

end of each row of parked cars. They must have cameras, Julie thought. There is good security now. There must be video footage of the last hour.

And then she looked at her watch to note the time.

It was later than she thought. She had dinner in about an hour and a half. She needed to go home to shower and change. Business dinner, but you never know. I clean up well. No harm in not looking your best. But no time now to bother about the car. I can call mall security in the morning. I need to file a police report for the insurance.

And she looked at her watch again. They don't send actual police cars to respond to fender benders anymore, she thought. They take the information you give them, write up the report and then you can pick it up five business days later. So you can say you filed a police report, which is just an insurance company check and balance to protect themselves against fraud. A little. I'll call from the car, Julie thought.

When the woman called from California five days later, Charles Mbogo didn't remember a thing about calling her after that hit-and-run death. He didn't even pick up the call, which came when he was in his car, because he didn't recognize the number. When the same call came an hour later, he was at home, sitting in front of his TV set, watching Nigerian football, munching on salsa and chips.

"Hello," he said. "Are you real or a bot?"

"Hello Dr. Mbogo. This is Grace Atkinson, returning your call. Sorry it took me so long."

"Grace Atkinson?" Charles Mbogo said. "I'm sorry, I don't remember calling you. When did I call?"

"About five days ago. I think you were calling about my mother..."

“I’m so sorry. I speak to lots of people. Your mother...” Charles Mbogo said.

“My mother Sally Rothman, who was killed in a hit-and-run accident in Providence five days ago...” the voice on the other end of the line said.

“I’m so sorry about your loss. I remember now. I was calling from the emergency department... to tell you about that sad news,” Charles Mbogo said.

“You reached my brother in San Diego. Thank you for letting us know. “

There was an awkward pause.

“Can I help in any way? Is there anything else you would like to know?” Charles Mbogo said.

“No, I was just returning the call. To thank you for taking care of her. My mother lived a long life. I’m just sorry she had to die, like that, and alone.”

They said good-bye. And hung up.

The woman had no questions. She didn’t want to know anything about her mother’s last moments, about her injuries or about what they had tried to do to resuscitate her in the ED. She was polite. But not upset. How strange life had become. People disconnected, die alone in distant cities. Or run one another down in the dark.

Charles Mbogo remembered now. The hypothermic woman with a crushed pelvis and an open skull fracture. No one seemed to care that she had been mowed down. No one seemed to care whether she lived or died. The calls to her family went unanswered at first. It took two days for the hospital social workers to track down her next of kin. Life had become disposable, like tissues or TV dinners. He was here, in front of his big screen TV, eating salsa and chips, alone, having studied and worked and achieved what no one else in his family had ever achieved – university for medical school, then residency and the practice of medicine in the US. Today was better than yesterday. But is this what human beings are for?

Julie called the Cranston Police to check on when she could come in to file a report, but got the automated attendant, which said, to her amazement, do you know you can file a police report on-line? Just go to CranstonPoliceRI.com. Which she did the next morning when she was at her desk. She answered 'yes' to four questions: Is this not an emergency? Did the incident occur within Cranston City limits? Are there no known suspects? Did the incident not occur on a state highway? She answered the questions without even a twinge of guilt, the form reminding her that filing a false police report is a crime. True, she didn't know exactly where her car was when it had been hit. But Garden City was where she saw the damage, so Garden City, in Cranston, was where the accident must have happened.

She filled out the form, hit "save", saved the PDF to her hard drive, and printed it out. Then she called her insurance company and learned she didn't need to print it out after all – she could just fill out a form there and send the police report as an attachment. It was all a bit amazing. There was no need to talk to a human being, and no thought or judgement went into the process. It's all a numbers game now. Just a calculation of risks and benefits, all life predictable with upper and lower limits of risk, all trends to be massaged, no actual human intervention necessary and no praise or blame, good or evil, choice or the consequences of that choice involved. God doesn't play dice with the universe, Einstein said, Julie remembered reading. But that isn't how life is today. Now, there is no God and there is no man, just technology, just calculations and projections. Touchless. Zipless. Without meaning or passion.

But none of that mattered. She got the police report done and the insurance report filed. Now all she needed was for the insurance company adjuster to call, look, and send her to a body shop, where she expected to be ripped off but that didn't matter either, because it was the insurance company that was paying, now, anyway, until they raised her rates, when she'd be paying, sort of, in a process that was impersonal and inevitable and appeared beyond any human control.

So Julie ignored her phone when it rang two days later with a 401 number she didn't recognize. She ignored most calls like that. The caller called again fifteen minutes later, and she ignored that call as well. When she got a text a few minutes later that said *please call me*. Detective Shandy-McCoy, Providence Police. She ignored it too. They are always calling from the Police Benevolent Association or the Protect Our Police organization or something like that, robocalls that Julie knew were a scam.

Then she remembered the police report. But that was Cranston, not Providence. Still likely a scam. I'll call when I'm in the car, later, she thought, when I have some privacy. It will be late, and those guys all go home at four. But that way I've done my civic duty and called. A total waste of time regardless.

It was May before they met, the longest winter of Julie Steven's life. It was impossible. Unimaginable. She didn't remember hitting anything. She didn't remember ever being on that street. She barely remembered that night. But here she was, in a court of law, on trial for vehicular homicide, reckless endangerment, death resulting, and leaving the scene of an accident resulting in personal injury. She didn't remember being in Providence on the night in question. The detective, when he knocked on her door, didn't sound like he'd pursue any investigation beyond his simple rote questions. Please check with friends and colleagues, he said. Just check. Make sure you know where you were and that someone can vouch for you being in that place and on that night, just in case. But you sound like a solid citizen. I'll call you if we need anything more, he said.

But then Julie began to wonder. For a day or so. And then she dismissed it from her mind. If they don't think there's anything to it, there must not be -- I don't have to worry. I didn't hit anything. A car backed into my car in a parking lot in Cranston.

But her mind didn't quiet. Maybe I *was* on the East Side that night. *Maybe* I got my days mixed up. That wasn't the night when Jack dissed me again. That was another night.

Then she looked at her calendar.

But I didn't hit anything, she told herself. I would have known. I would have felt something.

Then she thought of how quiet her car is, how she had chosen that car because it was among the quietest cars you can buy.

In Cranston. My car got hit in Cranston, by a car backing up in the parking lot of the Garden City Mall. Some bastard hit her and left the scene. She'd done the right thing, filing a police report so she could report the accident to her insurance company. She taken the car to the body shop the insurance company told her to take it to, and they got her a loaner, an old Toyota Camry which seemed solid enough but nowhere near as nice as her car.

Then she remembered falling asleep in her car that night, passed out after having a little too much to drink, the light in the garage going off and she remembered how she had to pull her cellphone out to turn on its flashlight so she could climb the stairs into the house. In the dark.

The next thing she knew, there were police cars in front of her house. The body shop found hair and tissue inside the broken headlight and side light. And they called the police.

It was the winter of her shattered denial. It couldn't be, she told herself, as she was arraigned and then released on her own recognizance. Just a little article on page six of the

paper. Thank God that newspapers have pretty much gone away and there are no more reporters now. Once, this would have been front page news.

The short cold days became too much for her. There are no real newspapers and there is no snow anymore, not in January and February, anyway, not until March and that's mostly slush. The short days had no sun and no light. The cold ate into her soul. She couldn't believe that anyone had run over an old woman and left the scene. She couldn't believe that she had. That that anyone was her.

Her very good lawyer got the charges reduced to just vehicular manslaughter and leaving the scene of an accident, death resulting. She wanted to plead guilty and get the whole thing over with, but then her lawyer said that latter charge was a felony, that she might have to serve five years in prison, and that he thought he could get her off, if she pled not guilty and was able to stand a trial, and so here she was. She didn't feel guilty because she didn't remember doing this. But she knew she was guilty. And was pleading not guilty none-the-less.

But her soul suffered. It didn't really matter what the court found. It didn't really matter whether they found her guilty or not or sent her off to the ACI or not. She had done this thing. She had killed an old woman. She was so ashamed. It was hard to think about going on, hard to think about living, knowing what she now knew about herself.

They met at the water fountain. He had just testified. He was tall and dark-skinned, and he seemed angry on the stand. They brought him in just for his testimony. He looked at the state's attorney who led him through his testimony, just as the state's attorney had led the medical examiner through her testimony. He didn't look at Julie at all during his testimony.

Julie wasn't sure he knew that she, Julie, was the person on trial. She was just another face in a line of faces sitting at the two tables in the front of the court, listening.

There were no spectators in the court gallery that day. The judge listened, though the judge's eyes roamed the courtroom as the good doctor, which was what they called him, talked. The jury listened.

Charles Mbogo spoke clearly and concisely, but you could hear the anger in his voice, the sense of injury, as if the old woman belonged to him, as if he was part of the family that should have been in the courtroom that day but wasn't, as if he were one of the neighbors or friends who also should have been there, as if he were one of the reporters who also would have been there, once upon a time.

"Thank you for your testimony," Julie said. They were on a fifteen-minute bio break, which started right after his testimony concluded.

"My job," Charles Mbogo said. "Emergency care of the injured, discarded and dismissed. Then the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help me God. Please help me God. Or something like that."

Julie was tired out from a winter in mourning, from a winter not sleeping and from months without any appetite, any joy, or any kind of pleasure. Without even the thought of any pleasure, which she understood now she no longer deserved, to the extent she deserved to continue living at all.

Even so, Julie was still an attractive woman, just past forty, a slim but filled out blond woman with steely blue eyes that looked sad but smoldering, with straight hair who looked well put together, and that was what Charles Mbogo saw, despite his anger and disgust at the injury he had been required to describe, and the moral injury he felt about living in a world in which

an old woman could be mowed down by a rich woman in a sleek black car and left, dying in the gutter, in the mud and wet leaves. But somehow, he also saw that Julie was suffering.

“It was a terrible thing,” Julie said. “I’m so sorry you had to see what you saw.”

“Thank-you for that,” Charles Mbogo said. “At least there is a trial. At least someone is being held to account and we are going through the motions, at least we are pretending that life is precious and human lives matter.”

“You were a great witness,” Julie said. “So clear, so matter of fact, so knowledgeable.”

“I don’t know,” Charles Mbogo said, holding his hands out, palms up, a way of indicating his humility and disappointment with the world as it is. “I have an accent. And I suspect the jury will discount my testimony to a certain degree: I am a man of color from another country. So perhaps less than really a doctor, in the jury’s eyes.”

“Absolutely not,” Julie said, and she put a hand on one of his outstretched arms. “You sounded quite distinguished, to my ear. And we all felt your sense of quiet outrage, which gave weight to your testimony. Your testimony was compelling. It moved me, as difficult as it was for me to hear it.”

“If my testimony moved one person, perhaps my time here has at least some value. Regardless of the outcome of the trial,” Charles Mbogo said. “But you look like someone I’d like to know better. My name is Charles.”

He extended his hand.

Julie took his hand in hers as she shook it. Charles had a strong unconflicted handshake. His hand was warm and meaty, the palm a little moist, and his strong grip felt more like an embrace than like a greeting. Unconsciously, because her heart was suddenly open, Julie brought her other hand up and caught the outside of Charles’ hand, a certain kind of embrace of its own.

"I doubt that," Julie said, certain that this man would back away from her as soon as he found out who she was and what she had done, and she looked down and away in her shame and disappointment.

"Please don't look away," Charles Mbogo said. "I do want to know you better. Life is complicated. We all make mistakes. We have only one turn on this earth, just a brief moment. I want to make the most of my time here."

Julie raised her eyes again and met Charles's eyes for the first time.

"You know?" Julie said.

"I know," Charles said.

"Oh," Julie said. "How can you stand to speak to me, to forgive me enough to be in the same room with me?"

"The more important question is, how can you forgive yourself?" Charles said.

"I can't" Julie said.

"You shouldn't" Charles said. "But wounds do heal, given time and attention. They scar over sometimes but they heal. And sometimes the scar or the healed bone is stronger than the wounded tissue was to start."

"Nice words," Julie said. "Thank you for saying that. But I am still the perpetrator, still the woman who did this thing."

"Indeed," Charles said. "I have been warned. I see what I see and saw what I saw. I'm a consenting adult, forewarned and forearmed. This is no way to meet, but what good is life if we don't seize every opportunity to live it. I told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I know what I know. I remember. You still look like someone I want to know better."

"That makes no sense," Julie said. "But thank you for telling the truth. Both times. You also look like someone I'd to know better. For what that's worth. If anything. "

They took out their cellphones and used them to exchange contact information.

“I’ll call you,” Charles said.

“Please do. I’d like that,” Julie said, and for a moment, life and hope returned, and Julie could see a pathway to her own recovery, a narrow, dimly lit dark tunnel. She could imagine seeing the world as a place of beauty again, and for a moment, could even imagine finding her place in the world, living honorably and doing good for others. Even so.

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