

# WE NEVER

*by* Carl Wooton

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No news spreads faster than news of a death. Word of the death of a child can be heard simultaneously in a thousand places. Within moments after Sheriff Kyle Broussard had radioed that he and I had found the body of sixteen-year old Gerard Trahan, the word spread by telephone, in back yards from clothesline to clothesline, with whispers in grocery stores, in the looks of faces stunned into silence in the River Café. The circumstances—dead three days, half in, half out of the water, in August heat—of rapid decomposition made it impossible to have an ordinary funeral. I had to bury the remains as quickly as I could. It had to be the next morning.

My wife, Alice, and I drove to Matthew's place. Cars lined both sides of the narrow street in front of the house. A sheriff's deputy with a flashlight directed traffic and tried to help people walking to the house avoid the largest puddles. The rain from the late afternoon thunderstorm had stopped completely, but the sky still hung heavy and dark over us. I hoped it wouldn't rain anymore, at least not until I got the boy's rotting corpse well buried.

Maybe twenty or thirty teenagers stood in clusters of three or four on the wet lawn in front of the house. Some cried, some just stood around looking baffled by the presence of all the adults up on the porch and in the house. A dozen adults occupied the front porch that extended across the full width of the house. Three women sat in the swing at one end of the porch and the several men sat on the porch railing or stood on the steps. Ends of their cigarettes glowed and dimmed like fireflies. They talked softly among themselves, but

when they saw Alice and me coming up the walk, they fell silent and moved to let us pass.

Milton Lattier, the town barber, said, "It's bad business, Jules," and one of the women in the swing said, "Death of a child. It's the worst," and one of the others added, "It's unnatural."

Loud, angry voices came from inside the house. I recognized the loudest voice as Matthew's. The woman's voice had to belong to Matthew's sister, Gertrude.

Milton said, "They've been going at each other since I got here. Matthew's telling Gertrude he won't allow any kind of services for the boy. She accused him of being a partner with Satan and of having abandoned the other boy Kyle brought back from the river."

One of the women said, "He hadn't ought to be yelling at her like that. She's been a mother to those boys ever since Angelle died."

That was true. Angelle, Matthew's wife and mother of his sons, died nearly five years before. Most people here openly called Gertrude truly saintly for how she took charge of the boys, especially in the first year or so of Matthew's grieving. I was about to ask Milton what he meant by the other boy brought back from the river when Kyle opened the front screen door and motioned us in.

Neighbors, friends, and the curious alike crowded into the smallish living-dining room, and their voices swirled around like they were stirred by the slow motions of the ceiling fan. Matthew had not yet put in central air-conditioning, and in the muggy August night and all those people—well, everyone was sweating and their voices rose and fell as they tried to talk over each other. The angry voices coming from the other side of the closed swinging door that led to

the kitchen got louder. I asked Kyle about what Milton had said about the other boy.

He explained, "I was about to get in my car when I saw something move in the dark up against the seawall. Damned if it wasn't Matthew's youngest one, Louis. He's a skinny kid. Someone said he's twelve, but he looks younger. Matthew had told Gertrude to keep the boy here when he came down to the wharf to wait for us. The boy snuck out when she was talking on he phone and rode his bike over there in the rain to see his big brother's body brought back. I guess we were too busy, what with getting the body bag in your vehicle and with the commotion between Matthew and the priest. When I saw him he was standing on the end of the wharf staring down the river like he was still expecting Gerard's boat to come out of the dark under the railroad bridge. Damned if he didn't look like a half-drowned puppy. I brought him back here. Gertrude's been screaming at Matthew ever since."

And just then, from the kitchen, Matthew yelled, "Goddamnit, Gertrude, I'm telling you again, I didn't see him. I didn't see him."

"God will punish you, Matthew. God will."

"Louis was supposed to stay here. Why didn't you watch him?"

Kyle stopped at the kitchen door long enough to tell us, "Gertrude wants a wake with a group rosary and all, and she wants the boy's body passed through the church—"

I said, "You know we can't do that."

I know it sounds crass, but Kyle understood bag-it-and-bury-it is the only way to deal with a body in as advanced a state of decomposition as Gerard's body was when we found him.

"I know, and I think I've made Gertrude understand why that can't be done, but she's still insisting on Father Verret being at the graveside, and Matthew keeps saying, no church, no rosary, and no priest."

Alice edged her way between us and said, "I never."

Kyle said, "I suspect that's what a lot of people think."

The yelling stopped when Kyle pushed open the swinging door and led the way into the kitchen. Matthew stood near the back screened door, while Gertrude stood across the room between two other women who worked at a counter preparing food on platters to place on the dining room table. Alice hugged Gertrude and joined the women preparing the food. Kyle and I squeezed past them to get closer to Matthew. Gertrude looked at me and I thought sure she wanted to say something, but Matthew cut her off before she got it out.

"Gertrude. Don't even ask. I told you there's not going to be any waking. I'm not having it."

The force and sharpness of his voice turned every head in the room. Gertrude's chin trembled and her eyes teared up.

"It's wrong, Matthew. It's wrong. Your own son, and he didn't get to go to confession before . . . and you won't . . ."

"Gertrude, tell me what in hell did that boy have to confess? Tell that God you get on your knees and light all those candles for He's the one who needs to confess, but tell Him not to expect absolution from me."

Matthew wheeled around and went out the screened door onto a small back porch.

Gertrude shouted at his back, "It's wrong," and the other women, including Alice, nodded their heads and murmured agreement. I felt sure Alice wanted to encourage Gertrude to follow Matthew outside. Alice looked at me in a way I had often seen before, a way that without a word told me she expected me to do something. Kyle and I both thought that left together in that small kitchen full of angry women, discretion was the better part of valor, and we followed Matthew outside.

When Alice saw us going, she put a hand on Gertrude's arm and said, "Go with them. Go on," and the other women joined in a discreet litany of urging.

Matthew stood with his back to us on the bottom step of the porch. Kyle and I maneuvered toward the left in order to give Gertrude room on the other side, but still it was crowded. Matthew didn't turn and look at Gertrude or say anything, but he had to know she was there. That porch wasn't much more than an extra-wide step leading out into the back yard, and four of us standing on it felt like a throng.

With his back still to us, Matthew said, "How fast do you have to get him buried, Jules?"

His voice sounded dry and brittle. His shoulders moved with a slight shudder.

"Tomorrow," I said. "Early as possible."

Matthew still did not turn around.

"I want everything simple. A plain casket—you pick it; I trust you—and don't announce when it's going to be done. Don't tell anyone who doesn't have to know. I don't want a crowd."

"Matthew, you've got half the grown-ups from town inside your house, and nearly all the kids from Gerard's school on your front lawn just waiting to hear what's going to be done. No way can I keep it a secret."

"You don't have to invite them."

"I'm not inviting anybody, Matthew, but I'm afraid I can't keep everyone away."

Matthew said, "'All right, but no services, you understand?"

Gertrude said, "Matthew, you can't . . . ."

Matthew whirled around, raised his hand and pointed at Gertrude. His motion was so harsh it stopped her.

With thrusting gestures that marked each word, Matthew said, "I mean what I said: no priest, no prayers."

He used his voice like a hammer, and Gertrude rocked with each blow, until she let out a sharp, high-pitched cry like an animal in sudden pain. The sound hung heavy in the dark and wet space on the small porch. I thought I felt a narrow shaft of chilled air strike the back of my neck as Gertrude fled into the house.

Matthew's manner disturbed me. If he'd asked for my opinion, I would have said I couldn't see any harm in Gertrude saying a rosary with her friends at the funeral home chapel. She needed to mourn Gerard's death, too.

Matthew said, "Do I need to do anything tonight?"

"Not if you're serious about me choosing the coffin."

"Fine. You do it." He took a step toward the porch and added, "Something plain. I trust you."

Kyle volunteered to recruit pallbearers. Matthew nodded agreement, pointed at his kitchen screen door and said, "If that's all, I'd rather not go back in there right yet."

Inside the house the women had stopped slicing and peeling and gathered themselves around Gertrude to console her. I had to wait a few moments before I caught Alice's attention and pointed toward the swinging door that let into the front of the house. I waited a few more moments while she exchanged hugs with Gertrude.

As she broke away from the hug, I heard her say, "If you need me, you call. And whatever you decide to do, you let me know."

As we left, I thought even more people had crowded into the small house and at least every other one wanted to know what had gone on in the kitchen. I kept moving and felt Alice following me. Several times she grabbed at my arm to get me to stop to talk to someone. I didn't stop. There were too many people, too many voices asking me questions. I wanted out of the house.

Milton Lattier and others were still on the front porch. I think the same ladies were sitting in the swing. I hesitated long enough for Milton to ask, "Is it true he still won't let the Father pray over the boy?"

"That's what he's saying. I doubt he'll change his mind."

Somebody in the back of the group said, "Everybody feels sorry for Matthew, but a lot of people in town are going to be mad at him for the way he's acting. You'd think he'd want to do better than that for his own son."

If pressed I would have had to admit I felt at least a little bit that way myself, but I didn't linger over the point.

Alice had walked ahead to the car and when I caught up with her, she asked, "What kept you?"

"Milton stopped me. He thinks a lot of people are going to get real upset with Matthew"

Alice shook her head and said, "There's no going to about it."

2

I lay in the bed and watched Alice slip her nightgown over her head and pull it down. I loved to watch her dress or undress. I loved the smoothness of her skin, the way she shook her hair and made it fall past her shoulders. I watched the nightgown fall past her breasts, and I imagined her stiffened nipples pressed into the center of my palms. When she got into the bed, I turned toward her and lifted my arm to put it around her. She stopped it and laid it back on my chest. It wasn't a harsh movement, just a definite one. A moment later she reached for my hand and held it. I heard two or three loud sighs, and I waited for the questions.

"Why did he treat Gertrude that way? You know she practically raised that poor child. What's going to hurt him if someone says a few prayers? The way he acted, I'd say he needs them more than anyone."

She made a fist and pushed it hard into my ribs.

I said, "He's grieving. He's in pain."



"So is Gertrude. Why does Matthew have to . . . ?" and she couldn't finish her question. After a moment, she whispered so softly I barely heard her, "I never. Really, I never,"

It was her expression sometimes of confusion, sometimes of frustration, sometimes of indignation. I wasn't always sure. When I first knew her, I would ask her,

"Never what?"

She'd say, "It's not never anything. It's just 'I never.'"

She let me slip my arm under her neck and pull her head onto my chest. I breathed the scent of her hair and felt her relax into sleep.

I had almost gone under when I remembered what she said to Gertrude about whatever you decide. I wanted to ask her what she meant. What was going to be decided? That same cold edge I felt as I stood on Matthew's back porch drew a line on the back of my neck and made me shudder.

The next morning broke bright and hot. I took my first coffee outside into my backyard. At seven-thirty, the thermometer outside our back door read eighty-two, and I didn't need any instruments to tell me the humidity was even higher. The oak trees dripped moisture, and steam rose off the asphalt and pavement on the parking lot of the funeral home. Thin layers of ground fog, looking like ragged strips of gauze, floated five or six feet off the ground and slowly dissipated as the sun rose higher.

I had already talked this morning with Norbert Prejean, the caretaker of the cemetery. He said he could have the gravesite ready by ten o'clock. Kyle called right after to say he was worried. He had thought about what I had said about people wanting to be at the burial. He assured me he would have traffic under control.

When I finished my coffee and went inside, Alice was on the phone. She pointed at her cup on the table and at the coffee pot on the stove. I filled both our cups and took them to the table.

She said, "He's here. I'll call you when I find out." She hung up the phone and sat across from me. "That was Gertrude."

I remembered the cold line on the back of my neck and chose not to ask for more information.

I said, "Kyle and Norbert say everything will be ready by ten."

She said, "Is there anything I can do?"

"No, unless you can convince Gertrude not to cause a fuss."

"Maybe you should work on getting Matthew to act more decent."

"Alice, I don't like the way Matthew's acting. I know Gertrude helped raise that boy, but he wasn't her child. He was Matthew's. Matthew has all the rights to have whatever kind of service or non-service he wants. I'm going to do what he wants as best I can."

I drank my coffee and stared at the dark stains in the bottom of my cup like they were signs to be read. I didn't need coffee stains, tea leaves, or a crystal ball to tell me the morning had set up to be trouble.

3

Norbert called while I was putting on my suit to ask about how many chairs I wanted him to put out under the canopy.

I said, "I didn't say anything about putting up a canopy and setting out chairs."

"Well," he said, "there's some folks already been here since early and looks like more coming. I already put up the canopy and I figure I ought to put out chairs for some of them. It's awful hot. Those ladies in black dresses are likely to have heat stroke."

I didn't want to be the one who made Gertrude and her lady friends faint from the heat.

"Put out the chairs."

Matthew, Kyle and the pallbearers met me in the mortuary parking lot. Matthew held a wadded up handkerchief in one hand and wiped at the heavy runs of sweat on his face. I thought if I had had to depend on eye recognition I might not have known him. He seemed to be looking at the world with no energy. His shoulders sagged so that his suit looked too large on him.

I had to tell him about the gathering going on at the cemetery. I didn't want him to arrive out there and believe I had deliberately disrespected his wishes, even though I had warned him last night on his back porch.

"Matthew, some people are gathering already at the cemetery. . ."

He snapped his head up and around to look straight at me. Anger suddenly brought strength—life—into the color of his face.

"Goddamnit, Jules, I said . . ."

I stopped him.

"I know, but like I told you last night. I can't just turn them away. We'll do our best to keep them at a distance."

"Gertrude's doing this, isn't she? And she's got her Jesus crowd there clicking their beads. . . all right. All right. Just keep me away from them."

There was a small crowd. They came out of compassion, custom, or curiosity, and they stood in the sun. Though they were soaked in sweat within minutes, they left the shade under the canopy to Gertrude, Alice and a dozen or so other women, most of them members of the Altar Society. As I approached with Matthew, ahead of the pallbearers, the women rose out of their chairs. For a moment I thought they meant to come and meet us in a show of mutual indignation toward Mathew. Alice stepped in front of them and they stopped. They stood with their rosary beads dangling from their fingers and waited.

The boy, Louis, stood next to his aunt looking miserable in a brown suit that was too big for him. No one had had time since yesterday afternoon to take the boy shopping for a new suit. I realized the suit coat that hung loosely on his shoulders had been handed down. He had come to the burial in a hand-me-down suit from his dead brother.

I led Matthew to the canopy. I stayed between him and the women and Kyle walked on the other side of him. I watched Matthew, then Alice, then Gertrude. Matthew glared at Gertrude and reached for Louis's arm and pulled him away from the women. The boy pulled back once, but he didn't say anything. He let his father lead him to the front of the chairs under the canopy.

Matthew ignored the single chair Norbert had set out for him and stood with Louis as close to the grave as he could get. He held Louis

close while the pallbearers set the casket on the belts that would lower it into the empty grave. The light clacks of rosary beads swinging against one another in the women's hands sounded like drums in the still, heavy air. I know Matthew heard them, but he chose to ignore the sound. After the previous night's outbursts, his restraint surprised me.

The pallbearers set the casket in place over the grave and stepped aside.

Mathew asked, "Where's Norbert?"

I said, "He won't come out to finish until after everyone's left."

"I want you to do it now." Matthew looked at Gertrude and added, "The women can go if they wish."

Two of the ladies stood and made motions as though they would leave. Gertrude gave them a hard look, and they stayed.

I told Kyle, "I don't need to bother Norbert if you'll help."

He nodded, and we stepped up on opposite sides of the grave and began to lower the casket. Matthew, Louis, and Gertrude stood still as Kyle and I worked. Alice told me Louis didn't watch. The boy shut his eyes and tried to pull his hand out of Matthew's grip, but Matthew held him. When the casket touched the bottom of the grave, Kyle and I pulled out the belts and stepped aside. I looked at Matthew. Neither iron nor stone could have been stiffer. I believe, had he been able, Matthew Trahan at that moment would have destroyed the universe and Whoever made it.

Gertrude stepped forward, away from the other women, and came nearer to the grave. I watched her pull from the folds of her dress a small black book with a bookmark of a bright red ribbon hanging

from it. I looked at Matthew. He hadn't noticed the book. Later, Alice said she hadn't seen it until right then. She swore she didn't know what Gertrude had decided to do.

Gertrude opened the book to the pages marked by the red ribbon and began to read in a loud voice: Incline Thy ear, O Lord, to our prayers, with which we humbly entreat Thy . . ." Matthew spun and reached to grab the book . . ." Gertrude pulled away from him . . ."the soul of Thy servant, Gerard Trahan, which Thou has summoned---"

Matthew shouted, "Damn you Gertrude, give me that goddamned book."

"to go forth from this world—"

Matthew lunged over the boy between them. Gertrude jerked the book back and it fell out of her hand. Both she and Matthew moved to pick it up. Which one bumped Louis, if either of them actually did, no one could tell, but we all saw the blur of something small and brown fall away from them, followed by the sound of dirt falling on the casket and a heavy thud.

Alice shouted, "Oh, God, the boy. Jules, the boy."

Louis lay on top of his dead brother's casket in the grave. Matthew and Gertrude turned and stared at the small figure in the ill fitting suit trying to stand on the slick and muddied top of his brother's coffin.

Matthew shouted, "Damn you, Gertrude."

Gertrude could only answer, "You! You!"

I knelt in the mud beside the grave and reached down for the boy. He struggled to stand but took my hand. I lifted him up, surprised by how light he seemed. Alice came and took him from me. By the time I stood, Alice had pulled Louis, muddy suit and all, into the folds of her dress like a brood hen protecting her young. When Matthew reached out to take Louis, the boy clung even more tightly to Alice. Matthew pulled back his hand, cursed Gertrude again, and walked away.

Kyle said, "I'll get Matthew home," and followed Matthew to the car.

Gertrude took hold of Louis and started to lead him away. As she walked past the end of the grave, she noticed her Prayer Book on the ground. Until then she had forgotten she had dropped it. She pointed at the book and said, "Louis, be a good boy and get the book for me."

Louis didn't hesitate. He stepped over to the book and kicked it into the grave.

Gertrude cried out, "Louis, Louis. . . Matthew, what have you done? God will punish you. He will. Oh, Louis."

She grabbed the boy with both hands on his shoulders, pulled him to herself and sobbed. The boy submitted without saying a word. Several of the other women wrapped themselves around the pair. The group seemed to move as one away from the gravesite and towards their cars.

I said, "Gertrude, wait. I'll get your prayer book for you," and lowered myself into the grave to pick up the book. Mud on my shoes and the polished wood of the casket made me almost fall. I climbed out intending to give the book to Gertrude, but she had taken Louis and clearly meant not to turn back.

I did not think about what I was going to do. It was one of those moments when, some might say, the energy of the universe took over. The red bookmark lay still in the place where Gertrude had placed it.

Alice said, "What are you going to do?"

I said, "It seems wrong not to finish the prayer."

I stood at the edge of the grave and began to read right from where Gertrude had left off: and command him to be numbered with Thy saints. Absolve, O Lord, we beseech Thee, the soul of Thy servant, Gerard Trahan, from every bond of sin, that he may be raised up in the glory of the resurrection and live among Thy saints and elect. Through our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Alice made the sign of the cross. I handed the book to her and said, "You can give the book to Gertrude later and tell her we finished the prayer."

On the way home, I tried to sort out the confusion that was rattling around in my head. A couple of times I looked over and saw Alice's lips moving. Praying, I thought. I tried to imagine how terrible it would be for Gertrude and Matthew and Matthew's younger son, Louis, that night. Alice told me later she was thinking about how desperate Gertrude looked when Louis kicked the prayer book into the grave. She could not imagine what it was going to be like for all of them, and not just that night, but likely for a long, long time.

Back at the mortuary, we sat in the car for a moment, with no one else near, with no sound except our own breathing and the whir of the air conditioner fan, until I heard myself say, "I never!"

Alice said, "Neither me. Really."



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