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Candle Holder

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Randy searched his mind quickly for whatever remnants of the life-saving techniques he had learned years earlier while in the Scouts. Back pressure, arm lift, back pressure, arm lift. Over and over Randy repeated the words as he frantically worked on his cousin's still body.

"Oh God, please save him!"

Randy had pulled Jeffrey from the water by his feet and his head was still facing down the bank partially in the quagmire surrounding the pond. Slowly Jeffrey's body slipped closer and closer to the water with each push Randy made on his back, realizing the possibility of his cousin slipping back into the water, Randy scrambled back to pull him further up the bank.

Back pressure, arm lift, over and over again.

"Jesus, he has to come to! Mom's going to really be pissed. Jesus, God help me! What more can I do?" The words tumbled one on top of another from Randy.

Time seemed to drag on forever to Randy. His arms ached agonizingly. His lungs were on fire from gasping for air, hoping that a gulp of air would strengthen his physical being.

"Oh God! Oh God Damn! Please save him God." Prayer and profanity mingled incongruously with one another.

Exhaustion had nearly overwhelmed Randy. He was barely able to lift his own arms to apply even one more stroke of artificial respiration when bubbles began popping on Jeffrey's mud-caked lips. Slowly responses began to come from Jeffrey's body. A bizarre combination of quivering and belching shook Jeffrey's body. Barbaric gutteral sounds emitted from the colorless gaping mouth. Randy was delighted, amazed, and appalled at the mannerless utterances attempting to form words on his cousin's lips.

The quivering movement caused Jeffrey to once again edge toward the water. Randy quickly grabbed for Jeffrey's ankles and pulled him up the bank. Further this time from the danger of the water.

Finally, Jeffrey opened his eyes and sputtered water and mud from his mouth. Coughing, sneezing, and belching to clear the clogged passages essential to his life, Jeffrey only gazed up at the sky, staring blankly as if hypnotized by the closeness of death.

"Randy? Randy?" he mewed softly as if the words themselves were an excruciating effort.

"I'm right here Jeff. Hang on guy, you're going to be okay. I've got to get help." Randy squeezed both in delight and panic.

"I'm so tired Randy. I want to sleep. Let me sleep, okay?" Randy's concept, that at this point sleep and death were synonymous, drove him as if he were obsessed. "Hey, Jeff, you can't sleep. Don't shut your eyes Jeff. Jeff!"

With every word, Randy vigorously shook Jeffrey, hoping to make the sleep from him and the life back into him.

"Just let me sleep. Sleep." The words trailed off as Jeffrey began to doze.

The only way Randy could think to keep Jeffrey from sleeping was to keep him talking. But how could he keep him talking and go for help at the same time?

"Jeff, you've got to stay awake. Jeff, keep talking about something."

"Why? Leave me alone. Let me sleep."

"Talking will keep you awake. I got it, do you know the Preamble to the Constitution?" Randy quizzed.

"Sure, sure, but I want to sleep."

"Jeff you start reciting the Preamble, and I want to hear you keep on reciting. Got that Jeff? Keep reciting over and over until help comes. Jeff? Get with it Jeff. Start reciting now."

Randy shook Jeffrey violently to revive him from his stupor. Jeffrey slowly began the recitation.

"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice..."

No sooner had Jeffrey gotten past the first few words than Randy was streaking toward the house. His lanky, bare legs not pausing or breaking stride once. As if he were a quarter horse, he wildly galloped toward the house, toward help, toward protection.

The volunteer firemen were summoned and were met by Randy's mother and older brother at the cow pond. They had found Jeffrey lying at the edge of the pond, his body mumified in a casement of mud hardened and cracking under the sun's rays. Jeffrey was still reciting the Preamble just as Randy had intended he do.

How long ago that all seemed now. Randy sighed with relief of the memory's end and with the sadness of the present time. He forced himself to pick up the letter, re-reading it word for word. Then, as if he was overcome by some unknown power, he wildly shredded the letter over and over until minute pieces of words were all that remained, telling him of Jeffrey's death in Viet Nam. With a futile ferocity, he flung the scraps onto the cow pond and watched them float aimlessly, a duck occasionally pecking at a scrap here and there. It was a hot humid day as Randy galloped quickly back to the house, never breaking stride, never looking back, never wiping the tears from his cheeks.