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Reality Contusion

I had started my shift as a Grady paramedic early on a Saturday morning. It was during the Christmas holidays, so everyone was festive. Crews had on Santa hats, some of the ambulances were decorated with big red bows or wreaths on the front of them. Some of my coworkers wore slightly happy expressions on their faces instead of the usual grumpy or indifferent ones that I normally saw. A few people even said Merry Christmas to me as I walked in to start my shift. I was happy, but then again, I was always happy to be at work. I loved being a Grady medic. To me, every day was an exciting opportunity to see something or learn something I hadn’t seen before. I was the rookie, the brand spanking new baby medic that hadn’t had the chance to become worn down and weathered by the realities of this job. I still thought I could make a difference. I was going to save people’s lives.

The shift started out like the previous ones I had so far. Someone’s got a belly ache, someone else has had a toothache for a week and just had to call 911 because they couldn’t take it anymore. Sonny, one of our regular homeless customers, was faking a seizure so we’d get him out of the cold and take him to the nice warm emergency room where they would feed him. Then finally, it happened. We were dispatched to a motor vehicle accident that sounded like it could be a legitimate emergency. The details we got from the dispatcher were things like multiple cars involved, bodies on the street. My adrenaline spiked, and I couldn’t wait to get there. I thought, finally people who really needed my services.

The thing about emergency calls, the real ones anyway, is as soon as you pull up on scene you are completely submerged into an information overload. It’s noisy, there are often multiple people and radios talking to you. Sometimes both bystanders and patients are screaming and physically pulling at you. In the first few moments, it’s our job to prioritize who needs what where. Immediately, almost subconsciously, triage begins. Sort the demands, fix what you can. The first thing I notice is wrapped up presents, complete with bows and ribbons, strewn about the road. The first guy I see laying in the road is awake and talking, other first responders are walking over him so I do too. As I approach a car that is completely mangled, I see a female driver that is unconscious and trapped by the steering wheel. I see a small boy with another crew sitting up and crying with blood all over him. I am directed to my patient by a police officer. I find her on the other side of the car. Lying on the ground, not breathing, a small child who appears to be about 9. I quickly check for a pulse, and she still has one.

It’s that very second that everything because very deliberate and focused. All the time in class, the days I spent studying, the hours I spent daydreaming about being a hero, now was my chance. I quickly secured the child’s airway, so I could breathe for her. We immobilized her spine, placed her on the stretcher, and connected her to a cardiac monitor. As we left for the hospital, we started IV’s, and gave her fluids. When she lost her pulse, we started CPR. I gave her medicines to re start her heart. Everything I was taught to do was being done. Finally, as we were about to pull into the hospital, her heart started beating on its own. We did it. We saved her.

I gave my report to the hospital staff and they took over her care. I went outside to write my report. I had never seen a dead child before. I certainly had never made a dead child’s heart start beating again. I felt amazing. I thought to myself, this is why I chose to be a paramedic. I saved a child.

When I went back inside to give the nurse my report, I asked how this little girl was doing. The nurse quickly told me that my patient was brain dead. She would never wake up, she will only live on a ventilator. She will never get any better. In that single instant, everything I thought about pre- hospital medicine and being a paramedic changed. I felt like I had been hit in the head with a wrecking ball named reality. Everything I thought I had accomplished with my patient was meaningless. All I did was make a vent dependent body of a child. The brain was gone, it felt like nothing was saved. Later on that day, I found out the man we all walked over on scene was the drunk driver who hit the mom and her two children. The mother was critical and flown to one hospital, the boy was taken to another hospital, and then my brain-dead child patient at a third hospital. All I could think about was the phone call that father/husband got. Where did he go first? How did he choose? How will that man ever enjoy Christmas the same?

I never did look at my job the same way after that. I had a good dose of reality early on. I did continue to work as a medic and I did get to do some amazing things, but the wonderful ideas I had about being a hero were gone early. I did feel a little better about that little girl call two weeks later. I was at the hospital with another patient and the same nurse told me the family had donated all the child’s organs. So, maybe in a way I did get to help save someone that day after all.