



Statistic

By Richard Miller

For Linda

My first thought is... I don't know where I am.

And beyond that, I have no recollection. I don't remember anything.

I can see, a little, but not much. I'm limited to looking at the inside of my helmet visor, which is still snapped shut, but I can't see through it. What I do see are red smears. So thick in some places, it's almost black. In other places, it simply looks like crumpled red cellophane, but nowhere can I see out.

Neither can I move my arms to open my visor. I try...try to move my arms, but they don't move. I don't know why. I can't even feel them, my arms, but I know they are there.

Somehow, I know.

I just want to see something – ANYTHING!. Anything but red! The only thing I *can* see is differences in the light shining through the visor, like shadows moving. Like, maybe someone - or some *thing* - blocking the light at times.

Ordinarily, I would be scared - not being able to see, not knowing, but right now, at this moment, I'm more concerned than anything. I'm concerned because I don't know what I've gotten myself into. Not this time, but maybe if I could see, I would know more. I could figure it all out. But as it stands, I don't remember anything.

And I don't know where I am.

And I can't see.

So, I'm concerned.

And maybe a little worried.

OK, maybe more than a little. I'm very worried.

And I hear things. Voices, maybe. And noises. Noises like things being moved or torn, dropped or opened, but I don't know what any of it means.

And, yes. It's voices. I know that now. But they're low and muffled, and I can't make out what they're saying. Not the exact words, anyway. The helmet is heavy and thick, and designed to be quiet even at high speeds, so it's like wearing earplugs, in a way, making it almost impossible to tell what the voices are saying.

And maybe that's a good thing.

Maybe I don't want to know what the voices have to say.

Not right now, because frankly, I'm worried enough as it is without adding to that problem, so maybe I'm better off not knowing. Not now, anyway. So, without being able to listen to what's being said and finding out where I am, and what's happened to me, I do the only thing I can do: lie here still and unmoving.

...and not knowing.

And in a way, not wanting to know.

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I don't know where I am, not for sure, and I don't know where I've been, or how I got here, even, wherever 'here' is. And even though there is much I don't know, there is one thing I am certain of: I'm not alone. There are people around me, and I get the sense that they are here *because* of me. I know they are here because I can hear them.

And I can feel them.

I feel someone tugging on my pants, while at the same time, someone is doing something with my arm, my right arm, but I'm not sure what.

And through all of this, something—something deep inside—keeps telling me just to lie still; to let them do whatever it is they are doing, because they are doing it with authority. Like, maybe they've done this before. A lot. Like maybe it's their job, and I'm their latest task; their latest chore, assignment...something. The next thing on their 'to-do' list, maybe.

And that worries me even more.

And now I'm more worried than I am concerned.

Mainly because I think I know where I am now.

...I think

I hope I'm wrong, but probably not. And if I'm right about where I am, I know why, the reason I'm here - or there, or wherever. And it's not good. It's bad. How bad, I don't know. All I know is that it's not good.

But if I'm right about where I'm at, what I can say is this: I've been here before, a few times, but never like this.

Never.

And that's what worries me. To the point that the worry has now turned into fear, so on top of everything else, I'm scared.

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I hear a new noise. Maybe mechanical, maybe something else, I'm not sure. And the voices... They never stop. They're continuous. Two people, at least, talking to one another. And while I can't make out the individual words, I *can* make out the tones and inflections, and from that, I understand that the communication is urgent. Urgent, but not panicked. Just calm and precise. Almost practiced, in a way. It's easy to tell that whoever it is has done this before, and now they are doing it to me - because of me.

And I see them, these people, pass between the visor and the light source. It's the moving shadows I noticed earlier, the obscured blurs constantly moving around me. Moving their arms, their heads... Moving this way and that, from one side of me to the other... Never stopping or pausing. Just one continuous motion. Motion that is hurried and deliberate, but at the same time, never clumsy or panicked.

All very precise.

All very practiced.

And I know - somehow, I know - that I'm in good hands; that these people - these EMTs, ambulance attendants, nurses...whoever, are here to help me. Helping me because I'm their current task, the next action item on their to-do list.

And I want to thank them, but I can't.

Not yet.

So instead, I lie here and let them do whatever it is they are doing, because it's a given that whatever they're doing is necessary. Otherwise, why would they be doing it?

I try to find a spot in the visor, even a small one, to peer through so I can see, but I don't find any. Not even one. Just smears and crumpled red cellophane. And then something occurs to me: at least my eyes are working. I can see, so certainly that's a good sign.

Yeah. A good sign. One that lets me know everything's going to be alright, that I'm going to be OK.

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At this point, I feel nothing. Well, no pain, that is, and I'm grateful for at least that much. What I do feel is wetness. Maybe warm, maybe cold, maybe both. I don't know. I can't really tell. And it's sticky, whatever it is, and thick, and my body's covered in it head to toe. No doubt blood. A lot of it.

I feel something around my arm now, and it's squeezing. Someone's taking my blood pressure. I know this because it's what they did the last time, only then, I could see them do it. Still, I remember how it felt.

After a short while, the squeezing stops and the pressure band is removed. Once the band is gone, I begin to feel something else, like a different kind of pressure on the inside of my arm near the elbow joint. Whatever it is, it's hard, and it's pressing against my skin, but only for a moment, and then I suddenly feel it inside, inside my arm, like an intrusion of some sort.

The person tending to my arm then lifts it and begins wrapping something around it at the point of the intrusion. It's tape. I know because I hear it, sort of, as it's peeled from the roll. And now I know what the intrusion is. It's an IV needle, and the tape is there to hold it in place, just like last time.

Whoever it is finishes with the right arm and then moves to the other arm, my left, and repeats the process, leaving me with two IVs, one in each arm. Once the attendant - or whoever it is - finishes taping the current arm, they lay it back on the table, and do so in an ever so careful and gentle way. The way a woman would do.

The way my mother would do.

But I don't feel my arm, either one, just dull sensations at best, just like the rest of me. I can feel my pants being removed, but I can't feel my legs.

About this time, someone begins tugging on my riding jacket. I hear a faint noise as they slowly remove it from my body one piece at a time. First one sleeve and then the other, and then the front, followed by the back. I can only imagine that the faint noise I'm hearing is a pair of scissors cutting the jacket apart. The sound has the same

rhythm. After a while, the sound stops, and I feel the last of the jacket, the backside, being pulled out from under me. After that, my shirt's removed in pretty much the same manner, leaving me, as best as I can tell, naked except for my underwear. I think I still have my underwear on, but I could be wrong.

Once the jacket and shirt are removed, a pair of hands begins wiping spots clean on my torso as if to make big polka dots, and once they're complete, the dots, I feel something being applied to each one. EKG sensors, probably, but I'm not sure.

But I *am* pretty sure I know where I'm at now. I'm in a hospital. It could be an ambulance, but I doubt it. The light's too bright, and there's no movement or siren. There's no traffic noise, at least that I can make out, but maybe I just don't hear it. Still, I would feel some type of movement, even if only the shifting of weight by the people attending me. I would feel them moving about, but I don't.

No.

I'm in a hospital.

I'm sure of it.

And that's a good thing, in a sad way. Because obviously I'm hurt, and if that's the case, then this is where I need to be, the hospital. I wish to God that I wasn't hurt at all, to begin with, but it's a little too late now for wishful thinking because it's all too apparent that I'm injured, injured bad enough to be brought here, a hospital.

And now I'm even more scared.

I know it's bad, but I don't know how bad, and I can't stop thinking the same thing over and over...

...if only I could see.

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I feel tired, sleepy. I want to close my eyes, but I can't. I'm too alert, so I lie here, instead, tired, sleepy, and alert all at the same time.

And I'm worried. Very worried. I'm worried because maybe this time it's *really* bad. But maybe not. Maybe it's not as bad as what I'm fearing. I remind myself that people tend to assume the worst, so I keep telling myself that it's

OK, that it's not that bad. I don't know this for a fact, but it's what I keep telling myself - that everything will be OK. You'll see.

And all the attention I'm getting makes me feel better about things. Mainly because I'm in a hospital and there are people here helping me. I'm not alone. And I know that whoever it is helping me knows what they are doing, that I'm in good hands.

This I'm sure of: that I'm in good hands.

And hearing their muffled voices makes me feel better, as well, even though I still don't know what they are saying. They are here with me, doing what they are trained to do, and that's what matters. There's no panic. There's no yelling, no barking orders, just deliberate, dutiful communication. Business as usual. Another task on their to-do list: something that needs to be done and finished so that they can move on to the next thing, the next important task.

And all of this lets me know that I'm going to be OK. A mess, but OK. I know because I've been through it all before. It's not the first time, and probably won't be the last. I'll get through this OK, I will. I always do. But even still, I know there will be a cost to it all, a cost beyond the road rash; a cost beyond the broken bones, the scars, the doctor bills...a more personal cost. Namely, the hell I will catch later from my dad and Cindy, my girlfriend. Because make no mistake, they'll have plenty to say.

They always do.

My mom? Well (sigh), she's mom. She'll just hug me and tell me how much she loves me. My brother and sister? They won't say a word. They'll just be glad that I'm OK. But even though they won't say anything, this will still be very upsetting to them. It will upset them because they love me. They all do. They all love me, but really, enough is enough, and I understand this, I do. I know I'm in the wrong here, so I'll simply take whatever it is I have coming to me; take whatever they - dad, and Cindy - dump on me. I deserve it, I know. Just like I know that I only have myself to blame.

They know it, and I know it.

But no, none of them needed this to happen, and I'm sorry. I fully understand that I'm not the only one paying the price for this. They pay it too, just in a different way. Whereas I will eventually heal, and then afterwards, live with the reminders, the scars, they too will live with their own reminders, their own permanent scars, namely, the bad memories. Memories they never asked for or ever wanted, but ones they now have to live with thanks to me. So yeah, we *all* pay the price.

But we'll get through this.

We will.

We always do.

We'll get through this, all of us, and in time, all will be forgiven. Dad and Cindy will be angry with me, the way they always are, but they won't say anything until later, once I've healed, and that's when the windy speeches and lectures will come, once I'm well again.

But I'll worry about that later when the time comes. Right now, more than anything, I just wish I could see. I wish I could hear what the voices are saying, but I can't. I can't see, and I can't hear what's being said, so for now I just lie here, like a puppet whose strings have been cut, motionless and devoid of movement. Because that's what my body is telling me to do. It's telling me that things are bad, and I believe it, but I'm already worried and scared enough to lie still on my own without it telling me to.

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I hear a noise.

Something new, a new noise, one I haven't heard before. It sounds mechanical and close. Very close, and near my head. And I hear it distinctly. A whirring sound. Spinning, maybe. And then it changes, like maybe it's speeding up or slowing down, but always changing.

And it's close, real close, and it's moving slowly and with purpose. It started above my head and is slowly making its way down the right side.

They're cutting my helmet off, the one that took me three years to buy, my most prized possession.

But I guess that doesn't matter now, my helmet, because if they are cutting it off, it means that it was ruined anyway. And that's OK. It's OK because I'm still alive, which means that it did its job. It saved my life.

The good news is, is that once the helmet is off, I will finally be able to see again. See what, I don't know, but for sure, more than I can see now. In the meantime, I simply lie here and listen to this...this...thing. This machine. This cutter, or saw...whatever it is. I listen to it whirl and spin as it cuts, and I wait.

I wait.

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As I lie here waiting for the helmet to be removed, my mind drifts. I think about my mom, the one person I know will always love me no matter what, unconditionally and forever. Always has, always will.

She's my mom.

I think about how much this will upset her, how much it will hurt her to see me this way. And I think about how I'd give anything to prevent that. Because, as much as it hurts me, it will hurt her more. Much more. *She* is the one who will feel the real pain of it all. Much deeper and more profound than anything I will feel. Physical pain is temporary. Eventually, you heal, and then it's gone. The pain, as bad as it may have been, becomes a memory. A bad one, but a memory just the same.

And I would know.

But the bruises this will inflict on my mother's heart, to see her firstborn this way, will last forever. The images will be ingrained in her memory for all the rest of her days, and on the rare occasions she will recall them, the images, they will cause her brows to furrow. Her lips will quiver, and her heart will hurt. She will relive that dark chapter all over again. I know she will, because I know her.

She's my mom.

And what I wouldn't do to save her from that pain and grief. Jesus.

But it's a little late for that now. Too late to consider the consequences of the things I do, of the choices I make, and the hurt I inflict on others as a result.

And it's so unfair that my mother has to pay for any of it. All because she loves me the way she does.

It's so unfair.

So very unfair.

On the other hand, my dad is tough. He's strong. I guess the way all dads have to be. Because that is what his family needs from him, his strength, to be strong for the times they aren't. The tough times. That's when they turn to him, the dad, and in my dad's case, he has never once let us down, ever.

Whereas I will trip and fall as I make my way through life, as I have done now, Dad never falters. Never. And at those times I do fall and trip, he is always there to pick me up. And no matter how many times I fail him, and there have been many, he always manages to love me just the same. I don't know how he does it, but he does. And I love him for it.

He's my dad.

This will hurt him, my dad, but not like my mom. Not the way it will hurt her. The difference between the two being that Dad will be angry with me, and rightly so. I can't blame him for that, not in the least. But mom...Well, I can't recall a time in my life when she's ever been angry with me. For sure, I've given her enough opportunities, but she's never taken advantage of any of them. Not even once.

But dad...I've known his anger plenty of times. Too many times, in fact, and this will simply be the latest installment. Again, my fault.

Jesus, my poor dad.

I've apologized and said I'm sorry to this man far too many times. But be that as it may, he always finds it in his heart to forgive me, somehow, someday. Even when I can't forgive myself, he does. He forgives me.

He forgives me because, well, he's my dad.

And I'm his oldest son, one of two, but he's had me the longest. I'm the one who taught him how to be a dad. He learned through me, for five long years, until the next son would come along, my brother. But until then, it was just the two of us. Just he and I.

And we learned about life together. About parenthood, about childhood, and, about what it means to be a family.

He taught me how to pitch a ball and how to hit a home run. He taught me how to ride a bike, then later, how to fix it when it broke. He taught me how to fish, how to set up a tent, how to make and fly a kite, and then, later, when the time came, he taught me how to be a man.

But Dad is tough. Besides, we've been through this before. He'll be angry, alright. But not at first. He'll wait until I'm well again. But for sure, he'll be angry with me. And then, in time, when the anger fades, he'll remind me why it is he gets angry with me to begin with: because he loves me. Because he cares. Because... Well, because that's what dads do.

And that's what I'll do, one day when I'm a dad.

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The machine has cut through the right side of the helmet and has since moved to the left. Soon, I will be able to see again. It's just a matter of time now.

And when that happens, the helmet comes off, the people helping me will, for the first time, know what I look like. I will no longer be just a bloody helmet to them, a thing, a task. I will be a person.

And likewise, they will no longer be just muffled voices. I will know what they look like as well. And when that happens, we finally see each other for the first time, things will change, I think. Because in some odd sense, we will get to know one another. It will become personal. I will no longer be the next item on a to-do list.

But right now, I don't know them - the people helping me. I've never met them. I don't know anything about them, even, but still, I trust them. In the short time that our lives have crossed paths, I have come to trust them. With my life, even.

I trust them with my life.

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After a while, they cut through the left side of the helmet as well, and the noise stops. The noise stops, but the talking continues, only not as much as before. They're still close by, the voices, in front of me and in back of me, but I still can't make out what they're saying. Not the exact words, anyway, just the tones. That's what I hear, the tones. Still deliberate, still dutiful. And, they don't stop. The communication between the two attendants remains continuous.

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My head begins moving again, but in a different way. This time it's a slight side-to-side rocking motion, as if they're trying to get the helmet off but can't. They give it another try but have no more success the second time than they did the first, so I guess they abandon the effort. They must have, because I can hear the voices move away

from me. They become distant, and I begin to hear a new sound. Something metallic, but not like a pan or tray or something. It's something much heavier, like a tool, maybe, and I'm thinking it must have something to do with my helmet. Because the helmet's been cut, yet it's still on my head.

And if I'm right about the new sound, it being a tool that will get my helmet off, it means that soon...very soon...I will be able to see again. Hopefully, something more than the blood splatters I see now.

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My brother and sister are younger than I am. Five and six years, respectively. And, we are close, but not as close as we used to be. Not our faults, really. That's just the way life is. It seems that the older I got, the further I drifted away from them. Not intentionally, it's just that I started spending more time with friends, starting when I was about fourteen or so, the age you begin to become more exposed to life, your mid to late teens. That's when life starts to change and your interests begin to shift. It's a time when friends become more important in your life. Well, not more important than your family, but their role in your life becomes bigger - more significant, I guess you could say.

It's not that you're deliberately distancing yourself from them, your family; it's simply that you're following the natural progression of life. We begin maturing, growing up on our way to becoming adults. We become busier and more engaged with things outside the family.

And it's a shame, in a way. Because I stay so busy now that it seems I hardly have any interaction with them these days, my brother and sister. Between work, friends, and a girlfriend, life seems to be pulling me further and further away.

But the same is true for them as well. Life is pulling them in their own individual directions. It's as if we're an explosion of some sort, one that happens in slow motion, and we're the fragments that are slowly moving away from the thing we were all once part of.

It's just the cycle of life, for us as well as any family.

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The voices return, and once again, my head begins to move in small, gentle increments, while at the same time, something begins to tap on the helmet's outer shell. Something heavy, like maybe the thing I heard earlier, the tool.

Whatever it is, the tapping causes the two halves of the helmet to begin separating. They separate slowly at first, and then more and more until suddenly, I begin seeing light spill in. Not a lot, but enough, and the longer the tapping continues, the more light that finds its way into the helmet. This continues for a while until eventually, the entire front of the helmet comes off, and I'm almost instantly overwhelmed by all the brilliant white light shining in my face. It takes a moment or two for my eyes to adjust, but once they do, everything quickly comes into focus, and after what seems like an eternity, I can finally see again.

Finally.

In the meantime, the two attendants shift their effort to the rear half of the helmet and remove it as well. The only thing remaining is the Styrofoam dome that fits on top of my head, the helmet liner, and now it's gone, too, meaning that the entire helmet has now been removed, and I'm finally free.

I can see.

And what I see now that the helmet is gone is that everything is bathed in a bright, white light. It's the ceiling. That's what I see. It's not much, but it's a lot more than what it was, and if nothing else, the blood splatters are gone. So yeah, I can see again.

And then a face appears, looking down at me. A nice face. A woman's face, in her 30s. Maybe early 30s, with soft, brown hair pulled back into a ponytail. And soft eyes. Brown and soft, and caring. She smiles at me. I try to smile back, but I can't, not yet, but hopefully, she can see it in my eyes, the smile that is, the one that tells her 'Thank You'.

And then another face. This time a male, also in his 30s. A friendly face, like the face of a big brother. He smiles at me as well, but only slightly, and I can tell that it's forced. I can tell because he looks concerned, too concerned to be smiling, and probably only does so for my benefit. And I appreciate that, his kind gesture, because really, at the moment, there's not a whole lot to smile about. For either of us.

And I hope that he, too, can see the smile, the one in my eyes, my immensely grateful eyes.

Both attendants are wearing the same thing, traditional green surgical scrubs, but they themselves are not doctors, I don't think. They don't have that 'doctor' sound about them. More than likely, they're EMTs or nurses, but I could be wrong, as I often am.

The two are working around my head now and talking softly as they do. They have a brace of some kind, a neck brace, maybe. It's in halves, a right half and a left.

The male places his hand under my head and slightly lifts it. At the same time, the female attendant positions the brace halves on either side of my neck and then fastens them together with the Velcro straps. The male gently lowers my head and removes his hand. He takes a small penlight from his shirt pocket, clicks it on, and then shines it in my eyes, first one and then the other. Once done, he clicks the light off and returns it to his pocket. He looks satisfied with whatever it is he saw. He turns to the female and tells her something, and then the two disappear from view.

The girl - the woman, rather- returns with warm, wet towels and begins gently cleaning my face. Cleaning it very gently, as if she's afraid of breaking something. Meanwhile, the male is doing something with my legs, to both of them, in turn. First the left and then the right. I hear him say the word 'tourniquets'.

I try to talk, but I can't. I want to ask them to put a pillow under my head to elevate it so I can see more, but I can't get the words out. The jaw doesn't work, and the mouth doesn't move.

And the towels the female attendant is using to clean my face? Solid red, now. Crimson, as if it were a dye.

The two attendants continue their routine, and I can hear their words clearly now. I can hear them, but I still don't understand anything they are saying. Medical jargon and terminology. All foreign to me, like they're speaking another language. Also, I suspect that they are careful with their dialogue so as not to upset me, which may be why, on occasion, they step away from the table and talk quietly amongst themselves, almost as if they don't want me to hear what they are saying.

And maybe I don't.

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I'm sleepy now, tired. It's becoming increasingly more difficult to keep my eyes open, and I can't recall ever having felt this tired before. I just want to sleep. A part of me wants to fight it, while at the same time, a part of me simply wants to give in, to close my eyes and rest, to sleep. And the idea sounds so peaceful and comforting - the idea that I could just fall asleep and not have to deal with all of this, that I could wake up later when the worst part is over, then simply deal with whatever comes next, whatever that may be.

But I can feel it coming as my eyelids begin to fail. I can feel myself start to drift away, and I am helpless to stop it. I'm giving in to it whether I want to or not.

And eventually, I do. I give in, and my eyes close. They close, and as they do, I feel a warmth wash over me, and I become instantly comfortable.

I'm warm and comfortable now.

I'm at peace.

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A tone sounds, long and continuous. A relentless monotone. An alarm.

She says: We're losing him.

He says: Call OR. Find Dr. Ingram. FAST!

The female rushes to the wall intercom and pushes a white, rectangular button labeled 'OR 3'.

She says: His heart's stopped. Do you want us to start here?

The intercom says: No. I'll be ready in two. Give me two.

She returns to the male's side and helps him strap my arms and legs down. There is no more talking, and the pace is urgent now. More than urgent, it has become frantic.

And I'm asleep.

Asleep and at peace.

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My eyes suddenly open, and I wake. I look around and I see that I'm no longer on the table. I'm standing, instead, somewhere behind the attendants who are still feverishly working and moving around the gurney at more than a frantic pace. Much more. I think to look down at myself, and when I do, I see that I'm wearing the same clothes as before, minus the riding jacket. The jacket is gone, but aside from that, it's the same clothes: the same blue jeans, same T-shirt, same sneakers, socks... And all of it in the same condition as when I put it on this morning. No rips, no tears, no abrasions, AND, no blood. None. In fact, I am completely uninjured. I can probably even talk now, but I don't because, really, I see no reason to. Instead, I simply stand where I am and watch the attendants,

the two nice people who want to help me, do whatever it is they are doing. They want to help me because, for whatever reason, they seem to care.

They care about me, and they don't even know me.

So, I stand behind them, the attendants, and I watch on as they work on me. Well, not me, not exactly. They work on who I used to be, or was, I don't know. All I *do* know is that I can see myself, or, rather, an injured version of me. I'm lying on a large, metallic table, shiny and cold, and there is a sheet over me, starting from my chest and extending downward beyond my feet. It was probably white at one time, but is now red, blood red, with very little white left. And I notice that the table has wheels so it can be moved or wheeled away or whatever. And there is an alarm sounding, a long continuous tone, and the tone seems to be driving the pace of the attendant's activity.

I can't see all of me from where I'm standing, mainly because I'm covered with a sheet, but also because my view is somewhat blocked by the two attendants - the two EMTs who now work and move at a very frantic pace. Manic, even - almost panic, but not quite. Their foreheads are bathed in sweat, and their calm demeanors have since been replaced with expressions of intense concern.

And there's no talking. Just a tone. A tone that seems to have no end.

And then I sense something, something behind me, maybe, so I turn and look, and what I see is an observation window. One that runs the length of the wall. It begins about four feet above the floor and continues all the way to the ceiling.

This means that I'm in a trauma unit, or, as the sign on the wall calls it, 'Emergency Room 1'. And, as is true of most hospitals, it is just down the hall from the actual operating rooms.

I turn and look at the observation window, and that's when I see them.

They're here.

All of them.

On the other side of the glass.

It's my family. My family and Cindy, my girlfriend. And I somehow know that they've been here the entire time, standing side-by-side and watching. My mom, my dad, my brother and sister, and Cindy, all wearing the same expression - a grim mixture of disbelief, pain, horror, and fear.

And it hurts me to see this.

Deeply.

I see my mom, her right arm folded across her midsection, holding the elbow of her left arm, which is holding a hand over her mouth. And while her hand may hide her mouth, it does nothing to hide the deep creases across her forehead or her harshly furrowed brows.

Nor does it hide her tear-soaked cheeks.

But the fog on her glasses does obscure her eyes somewhat, and I'm grateful for that - that I don't have to see the intense hurt that surely must fill them.

But I don't need to see it.

I know it's there.

I know it.

I look at her, and as I do, I can feel the tears begin to stream down my own cheeks. I walk up to the window in front of her and place my hand flat on the glass, wishing that I could somehow reach through and touch her. The agony of looking at her is almost more than I can endure. It's more than anyone can, or should have to endure, to see your own mother hurt that way, in so much pain, and the pool of tears in my eyes only serves to confirm this feeling.

I look at her, but she doesn't look at me. Well, not exactly. She's looking at me, but at the same time, she isn't. It's as if she's looking *through* me, as if she can't see me at all, and I don't think she can.

I tell her...

"I'm sorry, Mom. I'm so very sorry. I'd give anything to prevent you from having to go through this, I would, but there is nothing I can do except promise that I will never put you through this again. Just please, please forgive me."

I put my hands to my eyes to stem the flood, but the effort is futile. The tears simply can't be stopped.

I move slightly to my left and look at my dad. He looks as if he's aged ten years. His hands are in his pockets, and he, too, is staring past me, through me, as if he doesn't see me.

And he doesn't.

I see the worry in his face, and I see the hurt, the terrible hurt, and I realize that I have never seen him this way. The worry, yes, plenty of times, but never the hurt, and looking at him now, through the glass, I suddenly realize that he doesn't look so strong right now, that whatever strength he may have had tonight has been drained away, taken from him by the sight of his oldest son lying in a mangled, bloody mess.

I know he can't hear me, but I tell him anyway...

"I'm sorry, Dad. I've let you down again, I know, and I am so very sorry for having put you through this. Please believe me when I say that I never meant to. Just know that I love you. I love you, and I'm proud of you, Dad. I'm so proud to be your son.

I look at him again, and I see the pain I've caused him. Pain I can inflict but can't take away, and it makes me hate myself even more, knowing just how undeserving I am of this man's love.

I move to my brother and sister. Again, they look past me, staring out, instead, to something they wish they had never had to see. Their arms are crossed, and when I look into their faces, what I see is disbelief, or, rather, simply not wanting to believe what they are seeing. They both look like they're doing their best to try and absorb it all, but I don't think they are having much luck. I don't think the impact of it all has fully hit them yet.

But it will.

I tell them that I love them, too, and I thank them for loving me, even though I may not deserve it. But I will. One day, I will.

I move over to Cindy.

Poor Cindy. Jesus, the things I have put this girl through. Why she stays with me, I'll never know. I'm such an idiot.

Like my mom, she has a soft, delicate hand covering her mouth, but her eyes and the tears falling from them say it all. The tears alone say more than her words ever could.

I notice the ring on her finger, the one I gave her two years ago on Valentine's Day, the one she loves so much. Nothing extravagant, just a simple gold band with a heart on it. It isn't much, but was all I could afford at the time. I later offered to replace it with something better, something more expensive and elegant, but she wouldn't hear of it. Said she'd never take it off until I replace it with a wedding band, which I was about to do, maybe in a month or so. I'd finally saved enough money to buy her something nice. Really nice. Something worthy of the wonderful woman who would wear it, and hopefully, wear it forever.

And then we'd marry, making her my wife, and with a wife, a new beginning. A new life for the two of us, her and I.

I so want to wrap my arms around her and comfort her, but I can't. I want to hold her and let her know that everything is going to be alright, but I can't do that either. I want to ask her - ask them all - to please find it in their hearts to forgive me, but again, I cannot. All I *can* do, it seems, is to just stand here and look at what I've done to these people, the people I love. The people that love me.

* * * * *

And then I hear it, the panic.

I turn to look.

The male attendant is performing chest compressions on me, while at the same time, the female squeezes a rubber bladder that feeds air to a clear plastic mask covering my nose and mouth.

But none of this seems to be helping much.

The continuous tone, the one that keeps telling them what they don't want to hear, can't be stopped. It simply refuses to go away.

He stops. He looks at her, and then she stops. They both look at each other. No one has to say it.

...it's time to go.

She moves to the rear of the gurney while he mans the front. They crash through double swinging doors and race down the hallway.

I follow them.

There's a white, rectangular sign standing out from the wall, big black letters reading 'OR 3'. Another set of doors, and we crash through them as well.

We enter a room where a medical team is waiting, with everyone seemingly wearing the same thing: green scrubs, surgical masks, caps, latex gloves, and disposable shoe covers. They partially surround the table I will be transferred to, leaving one side open. The attendants wheel the gurney to the open side, and everyone assists in transferring me from one table to the other. Once done, the gurney is wheeled away, and the attendants depart, leaving me in the hands of yet a new set of strangers, more people I don't know. People I don't know, but people who now have my life in their hands.

A flurry of panicked activity erupts with one individual, apparently the surgeon, barking an endless stream of orders. He instructs one nurse to inject me with 100ccs of adrenaline and then turns to another and tells them to stand by with the defibrillator. All this while, two other members of the team race to connect me to what seems like an endless array of machines, the electronics.

Another barked order, and one of the machines I'm connected to, one with a ghostly green screen, comes alive, and with it, the same flat, lifeless tone returns. The tone is coming from a smallish monitor mounted on a mobile stand and is positioned near the table within easy view of the surgeon.

Along with the tone, the monitor features three green, horizontal lines, one for each vital body function, and all three lines as flat and lifeless as the tone itself. The purpose of the machine, I gather, is to monitor my vital signs; only, there are none. Nothing's registering. There is nothing for the machine to report.

Next to each flat line, slightly to the left, are small, red blinking lights. LEDs. They are there to serve as visual confirmation of the bad news the three flat lines have already delivered - that I have no vital signs.

I'm not breathing.

I have no pulse.

No blood pressure.

No beating heart.

In other words, no hope.

Someone yells...

“C'MON PEOPLE! WE'RE LOSING HIM, GODDAMMIT!!”

The surgeon clasps his hands together and begins pumping on my chest, while at the same time, a nurse or somebody places an oxygen mask on my face.

The surgeon is performing chest compressions and quickly falls into a rhythm...

Pump, pump, pump...a glance at the unchanging monitor. Pump, pump, pump...another fruitless glance.

Repeat as needed.

The effort is in earnest, but nothing seems to change. Nothing. The ghostly green lines remain flat.

But maybe that's because the monitor doesn't work. Maybe that's it. Or maybe it's just lazy. Maybe it's just too much effort to make the three flat lines jump and bounce.

Or, maybe...just maybe...I'm a lost cause.

The surgeon continues with the compressions, but again, the effort is not having the desired effect. It's simply not working. Still, he tries. He continues with the compressions because he's not ready to try and shock me back to life. His concern is that the blasts of electricity could possibly do more harm than good, making an already bad situation even worse, so for now, he sticks with the compressions.

Eventually, however, the good doctor's effort exacts a toll on him. He pauses briefly to catch his breath and give his exhausted arms a much needed break. He turns his head slightly so that a nurse can mop the pool of sweat from his forehead.

The operating table is almost completely encircled by the OR team, but I see a small gap that I may be able to peer through, so I move toward it in hopes of a better view.

I twist and lean to the left, and then to the right, craning my head this way and that, trying to get an unobstructed view when suddenly...and regretfully... I see it. Lying on the operating table. The thing that used to be me but no longer is. I've been replaced by a stomach turning mass of physical destruction, a horrifying carnage that, if not devoid of life, should be. Because whatever living thing it once was - a son, grandson, brother, friend, boyfriend - ceased to be a life worth living at some point, a point located somewhere on a lonely, cold, and indifferent stretch of concrete. Not here, the hospital. This is not where it ended. This is just a formality. My life ended somewhere out there, somewhere in the night.

I look at myself lying there, lying on the shiny metal operating table, and all I can think of is that this must be what the field doctors in Vietnam must have seen on a daily basis: the victim of a booby trap, a land mine, grenade...something. That's what I look like, except in my case, the arms and legs are still attached. The limbs are still there, but are only identifiable because of their location - raw meat, bones, veins, tendons, and other things where arms and legs would normally be located. *My* arms and legs, or what's left of them. I can't even identify hands and feet. Maybe they're still there, I don't know. If they are, I certainly can't make them out.

And then there's the matter of my head, which was somewhat protected by the helmet. My blonde hair is gone, and in its place is a thickish black cap of drying blood and gore. My eyes are open, but they don't move. They just stare a chilling distant stare. And their whiteness stands in stark contrast to all of the red that surrounds them. And what was hidden under the various lumps and cakes of dark red on my face is anybody's guess. The oxygen mask covers a portion of my face, but I can imagine that whatever it hid underneath it looked like the rest, or worse.

Looking at it, I can only imagine that the front of my head took the brunt of the impact, and I can't even imagine at what speed that occurred. The last time I glanced at the speedometer, it read 120, and I was accelerating, fast. The bike was good for 180, and I was no stranger to that number. In fact, I knew it well.

The doctor pauses for a moment to catch his breath. He's exhausted, but exhaustion is not an option.

Not now.

Not tonight.

He wipes his brow with a forearm and lets out an exasperated sigh...

"Christ. How old is this kid?"

The boy's gone. He knows it, but he also believes in miracles. He has to, he's a doctor.

Someone responds...

"He's 21."

Too young. Way too young. Same age as his son, Jason, who also rides a crotch rocket, a fear he lives with daily, never knowing from one minute to another when the next mangled mess they wheel into the OR will be his son.

He remembers the conversation...

"Look, son, I'm not trying or tell you how to live your life. That's not what I'm doing here. You're smart enough to figure that out on your own. I'm just voicing my two cents, is all, giving you the benefit of my experience. Nothing more."

And his experience? Twenty-two years as an emergency room surgeon. ER, and only ER. Never wanted to be anything else. Not a private practitioner, a specialist... Just ER.

He had interned in the ER exclusively and then continued in ER for his residency. It's all he knows or wants to know, trauma medicine.

And all his experience having been acquired in a large metropolitan area, an area teeming with motorcycles, which meant motorcycle accidents, and with motorcycle accidents, all too often, fatalities.

And the sad thing is, as horrible as it may sound, sometimes they don't die. They survive.

And by his own admission, some of those who did survive, who lived through it, would have been better off as a different statistic.

A fatality.

For the duration of his career, Dr. Ingram has been a long-time subscriber to the idea that the value of a life is directly related and proportionate to its quality, which, simply stated, means that where there is no quality, there is no value. You are simply living for the sake of being alive. Enduring life. Suffering life, even. Nothing more.

And too many times in his life, he lies awake at night, in bed, staring at the ceiling, and wondering what kind of life he had imposed on some of the people he had saved, people he had clutched from death's grip.

But isn't that part of the beauty of being an ER surgeon? That you never have to see the results of your work? Or the long-term effect of the decisions you made in the operating room, the OR?

For him, Dr. Ingram, the OR is simply an introduction, never a relationship. Once the patient is wheeled out of the operating room, the acquaintance ends, and he never sees them again. He would never know, one way or the other, what the eventual outcome is, but then, that's not his concern.

And that's the way he prefers it, the reason he has only ever been an ER surgeon. Because all too often, 'quality' was not an attribute that applied to the life he saved.

"I've seen it too many times, son, and I'm so tired of it. Every time they bring yet another potential statistic into the OR, I cringe. My stomach ties itself in knots, and is the only time it ever does that.

Look, I'm not lecturing you, and I'm not trying to dissuade you from enjoying the things that make life worth living, but I am your dad, and it's pretty much my job to love you and try to protect you the best I can. And part of that means giving you the benefit of my experience and advice. It's not that I'm smarter than you, I'm not. But I *have* lived a lot longer.

Besides, what kind of dad would I be if I didn't grate your nerves from time to time? Huh?"

He gives his boy a smile, and then a wink...

"I hope you understand."

Jason looks at his father - love in his eyes, pride in his smile. He admires his dad, but more than that, he loves him.

And how lucky is he? To have a father who's also his best friend.

"I understand, Dad, I do. And I love you for that. Thank you. But I'll be OK, I will. I promise. Have a little faith in me here, pop."

They hug.

And then they cast their baits out into the lake and wait for a bite. The same way they do every Saturday morning.

* * * * *

Again, the doctor mops the sweat from his brow with a forearm and takes a deep breath. He looks down at the destruction lying on the table, unable to push the singular thought from his mind...Jesus. This could be Jason.

He turns and barks...

“ANOTHER 100ccs OF ADRENALINE! PREPARE THE CHEST CUTTER! DEFIBULATOR - NOW!!!”

A nurse wipes the chest clean of blood so that the defibrillator pads make optimum contact. She finishes, and the doctor rubs the pads together. He places them on the boy's chest...

“CLEAR!!!”

The body leaps from the table.

The continuous tone stops and is replaced by a single, repetitive beep. First one, then two, three... And with the third beep, the flatness of the lines is suddenly interrupted by green spikes, and the red LEDs quit blinking.

The doctor resumes the chest compressions and does his best to keep the pulse going.

I look at myself lying there, the dead thing that used to be me.

My god, I don't even have a face anymore. I don't understand. Why is he doing this? Why, for god's sake, is he trying to keep me alive? For what? To live this way? Why? Why would he do that to me? Jesus! Can't he see what I see?

The continuous tone is back, as are the lifeless lines of the monitor. Also, the red lights are blinking once more.

Dr. Ingram literally deflates at the sound, causing his heart to sink. He honestly thought he did it. Thought he had the kid back, but obviously not. Should have known it wasn't going to be *that* easy. Death doesn't seem to want to loosen its grip on this boy.

But he's not done trying.

Not yet.

He talks out loud, but only to himself...

“Don't you do this to me. Don't you let go. You fight it, damn, you. Don't you give up. Help me out here, son.”

The doctor rubs the pads again and places them on the boy's chest...

“CLEAR!”

Again, the body leaps from the table. The beep returns, and the vital signs are registering again. The red lights are dark and silent, now, no longer serving as death's messenger.

This is wrong.

I try to stop him. I try to stop all of this.

I walk up to the doctor and try to grab his arm, but that doesn't work. My hand passes right through. So instead, I plead with him...

"Please, doctor, please. Don't do this. Don't make me live this way, I'm begging you. I can't do that. I don't *want* to do that. My life is over. My fault, not yours. Please, just let me go. It's alright. It really is."

But I don't think he hears me. Or *can* hear me. Or *wants* to hear me, even.

So much blood. Everywhere. My blood.

And so many tears. On my face as well as the doctor's.

This has got to stop, so I try again...

"Please, this is my own fault, my own doing. You don't have to bear the guilt. Just let me go. It's OK, it really is. I've had a good life, but it's over now. I know that. Don't you see? I can't live like that. I can't do that to my family, to be a daily reminder that way."

But he's not hearing me. That, or he's not listening, I don't know which.

"Please, just let me be a good memory to them. Let them remember me the way I was. Don't do that to them, and don't do it to me. Please, I'm begging you."

But again, the words have no effect. And in the meantime, the continuous tone is back. The red lights are blinking, and likewise, the ghostly green lines are once again flat and lifeless.

I stand back and watch.

...and I hope.

I hope for the worst - the worst as seen by the doctor, through his eyes, not mine.

"ANOTHER 100ccs ADRENALINE! STAT!"

The nurse turns to Dr. Ingram, concerned...

"But, doctor, we've already..."

He cuts her off, sharply...

"For god's sake, Natalie, I know what we've done! But let me be the doctor here. At this point, he's dead. THE KID IS DEAD! It's not like we're going to make the condition any worse! SO, PLEASE! JUST DO AS I ASK!"

An ER operating room is, without a doubt, one of the most intense environments a person can experience, whether they are a doctor, a nurse, or a technician. It's a brutally gruesome education in what can happen to a life in the briefest moment of time, the time it takes two bumpers to meet in a head-on collision, or the amount of time it takes a piece of machinery's gears to grab a shirt sleeve and pull an arm into them, forever changing the owner's life.

One moment you are whole and healthy, and the next moment you are torn, twisted, and broken, and desperately fighting for your life, everything having changed in the briefest moment of time. A moment that cannot be taken back, cannot be rewound and replayed in hopes of a different outcome.

And for the OR team, of course, the saving of a life is never a problem. It's the life you lose on the table. That's the one that stays with you, sometimes for the rest of your life.

The faces you never forget.

And then there are the questions. Always the questions. The ones that begin to haunt you the instant a sheet is pulled over the patient's head.

Questions that don't go away...

'Was there something I could have done but didn't?'

'Was there something I could have done differently?'

Or the worst question of all...

'Was there something I did that I shouldn't have? And had I not done it, would they have lived?'

Always the questions, and never any answers. But then, if there were answers, maybe you wouldn't want to know what they are.

So, you find some solace in the not knowing, and you leave it at that.

* * * * *

Natalie, the head surgical nurse. In the OR, she is the doctor's right hand.

She herself has never seen it, but she's heard *of* it. She's heard the stories, stories of doctors losing it in the OR, suddenly cracking under the immense pressure, the pressure of being responsible for whether a person lives or dies.

But it's a situation more commonly associated with EMTs and first responders than anything else, the people who arrive at one grizzly car accident too many, who suddenly, and without warning, succumb to the horror of it all and snap.

And then they find a new profession.

But she doesn't think that's what's happening here. She sees it in his eyes, Dr. Ingram's eyes. She sees the dedication and determination, the sincerity.

No. It's something else. Something emotional, maybe. Something personal, even. But what? No one in the OR knows this kid.

And everyone - the entire team - knows the boy is gone. Just like they know that it was probably for the best - *was* for the best. For the boy, dying would be the easy part, the easy way out. The surviving, on the other hand, would be unimaginable.

And they've seen it too many times before, all of them, and that includes the doctor.

Especially the doctor.

But tonight, for some reason, Dr. Ingram is unwilling to let the boy go. He simply refuses - almost to the point of obsession - to surrender the boy to what everyone else sees as the inevitable.

'But *they* are not the doctor. *They* don't understand.'

For Dr. Ingram, it's a personal commitment, an ethical obligation, if not a moral one - that, if he has any say in the matter, this boy will *not* be deprived of a future, regardless of what that future may be like.

What the boy's future would entail is not his concern at the moment. It would be up to him, the boy himself, to find, or even create, if he has to, a life he would later be grateful to have. But for now, for the doctor, it is his job, his sworn oath, to give the kid that opportunity. The same as he would do for his own son, no different. He would continue to love Jason, his son, no matter what the outcome, just so long as he still had him. The two of them would somehow get through it, they would, and they would do so together, father and son. And having gotten through something like that would only make the love they share and the bond between them that much stronger. And in that strength, the two, together, would overcome whatever they had to. Life would be different, for sure, but it would still be worth living. There is always a reason to want to live. It may be a challenge at times to find that reason, but it's there. Rest assured, it's there, and he and Jason, together, would find it.

And in his heart, he has to believe that the same would be true of this boy's father, that he would feel the same way, and likewise, would do the same for him if the shoe were on the other foot - that he would do his utmost for Jason as if it were his own son.

He wipes his brow again and takes in another deep breath. What is needed here is a miracle. He's produced them before, and God willing, he'll do it again.

He turns to Natalie. He looks at her and gives her a slight nod, his eyes silently pleading with her, asking for her help and trust. He doesn't understand why she doesn't see it the way he does: what's another fifteen minutes of their time, time they are all being paid for anyway, to be where they are, doing what they are doing.

But do they realize, any of them, that the same fifteen minutes they see no value in could mean everything to this boy should he somehow manage to save the kid's life? And yeah, it's a long shot, and certainly the odds are against him; still, medical journals are full of OR miracle stories, and this could be one more...God willing.

Fifteen minutes.

The point at which the boy's brain will be irrevocably damaged from oxygen deprivation, and the effort truly a lost cause.

Fifteen minutes.

Not a lot to ask for. Does anyone here really have someplace more important to be?

* * * * *

It's there in his eyes, and she sees it. She doesn't understand it, and at the same time, she does, in a way. Either way, she's in the game. She will be at the doctor's side come what may, come hell or high water.

Natalie smiles at him, but of course, he doesn't see it under the surgical mask. Then again, he doesn't need to. Her eyes tell him everything he needs to know.

He returns his attention to the boy while Natalie prepares another syringe and administers the injection as requested. He grabs a scalpel from the surgical tray and runs it down the length of the boy's chest, hitting bone as he does. He barks...

“CHEST CUTTERS! NOW!!”

And with that, he's instantly handed a heavy, metallic instrument that resembles a kind of short-bladed, long-handle pair of scissors. He separates the skin along the incision, then, with the heavy cutters, begins to snip his way through the boy's breastplate, eventually cutting it in two.

He hands the cutters off to a nurse, who, in turn, hands him another heavy instrument, a pair of rib spreaders. He positions the spreaders and separates the two halves of the rib cage to expose the area of the boy's chest he needs access to.

He's handed another scalpel and with it, cuts through the remaining tissue until finally, the lifeless heart is exposed. Natalie wipes the immense pool of sweat from his brow and forehead.

He reaches down and ever so gently cradles the beatless heart in his hands and begins massaging it. Almost immediately, the effort registers on the monitor, but does so on only one of the flat green lines, the blood pressure, and just barely.

He continues the massaging for another five minutes, but to no avail. Nothing about the boy's status changes, or, for that matter, is going to change, leaving Dr. Ingram with no other choice but to admit that the effort to revive the boy is now in vain; that the boy's heart, the one he now holds in his hand, has known its last beat, its job in life over now.

The boy is gone.

Reluctantly, the good doctor concedes and gently, almost lovingly, lowers the heart back into the chest. He peels the latex gloves off and lowers the blood-splattered surgical mask. He removes his cap and runs a tired, defeated hand through his hair as he looks down at a blood-soaked surgical apron that just a short while ago was green.

Everyone follows Dr. Ingram's lead and begins removing their own masks and gloves, but they do so in silence. No one says a word, not one. It's over, and there's simply nothing left to say. They have done their best, all of them, and nothing more could have been done. There was simply no miracle to be had here tonight, for tonight, God was merely an observer, a spectator. He watched on, the way he always does, but chose not to intervene this time.

Not this time.

But then, maybe a miracle wasn't the answer tonight, not for the boy lying on the table, and everyone knows it. Deep inside, everyone there, including Dr. Ingram himself, knows that it ended the best way possible. Still, there is a mother somewhere that will go to her grave believing otherwise; a mother who, for the rest of her life, will never be able to reconcile the loss of her firstborn child.

And it is this woman, and this woman alone, that Dr. Ingram stands accountable to. No one else.

And tonight, he can tell this woman...this grieving mother...that there was not one thing more he could have done to save her boy's life; that he could not have made any better effort had it been his own son lying on the table.

And he can tell her this with a clear conscience.

And that's what separates him, the doctor, from the rest of an OR team. A team that, at times, may not understand his motivation. But then *they* are not the ones who have to deliver the news to a mother, ever. *They* are not the ones who have to shoulder the responsibility of her loss. That burden is his and his alone and is a fact of life he feels neither compelled nor inclined to explain to anyone. Not even to Natalie.

But none of this matters to the woman sitting in the ER waiting room tonight, the one a young boy once called 'mom', but never will again. She only knows one thing. Only one thing matters to her, that her son is gone.

And all too soon.

Twenty-one years was simply not enough time to give her boy all the love she held in her heart for him.

A mother's love.

And with it, a mother's pain.

The pain of not being able to protect her child more than what she did; unable, in her limited capacity, to keep him safe from all the dangers life would expose him to, dangers every mother's son or daughter faces the day they go out into the world and begin their own journey through life.

There can be no greater burden a mother bears than the day she realizes the time has come to let her child go, that she must set him free to find his own path in life; free to go forward in the world and learn all the things a mother cannot teach; things you must come to know for yourself. Things like falling in love and the heartache that sometimes comes with it; to know tears of joy as well as tears of sorrow; to feel the agony of failure and the sadness that regret brings; to know defeat, even, as well as victory. And then, finally, to one day know the overwhelming happiness and pride you feel the first time you hold your own newborn in your arms, your own child. The one you will love and protect, and then one day let go, as well.

And hopefully - God willing - he will never know the permanent hurt and pain that comes from having to lay his own child in an early grave.

Children should bury their parents, not the other way around.

And it causes me to wonder, wonder if there is a gift God has given the world more precious than a mother, the giver of life to us all.

Maybe one day God may find it in his heart to forgive me, but I could never forgive myself for the pain I have given my mother to live with. It is simply not a thing that is forgivable.

* * * * *

There is a chair against the wall next to a bank of medical equipment. Dr. Ingram makes his way to it and sits. He needs a moment to collect his thoughts and somewhat reconcile the night's failed effort to himself.

He leans forward, propping his elbows on his knees, and just stares at the floor for a moment. He buries his face in his hands and rubs it as if in doing so, it will somehow erase the reality of the evening. But, of course, it doesn't. Nor does it change the fact that there's a mother in the waiting room waiting for him to say the words "he's going to be fine".

He heaves a deep sigh and thinks...I'm tired. I'm so tired of this.

Natalie approaches him...

“Doctor, would you like me to speak to the family? They're in the waiting room.”

How incredibly thoughtful of her, he thinks.

He looks up at her with drained, defeated eyes and tells her...

“No. Thank you, but no. I'll do it. I should be the one. Just give me a minute here.”

She nods and walks away.

Most everyone else, the rest of the OR team, has since left to shower and clean up, and so will she, but first, there are a few things she needs to tend to.

She makes her way to the metal operating table so she can cover the boy with a fresh sheet. She grabs the new sheet, but just as she's about to spread it, she stops, instead, and looks down at the lifeless body lying in front of her; looks down at yet another life cut short at too early an age. And not for any good reason. It's not as if the boy had contracted cancer or some other terminal illness. No. This was, instead, an ending of his own design. An unintentional ending, maybe, but in the end, does it really matter? Dead is dead. And in this case, it didn't have to end this way.

But it happens. Far too often, it happens.

It's a reality of her occupation she's never quite come to terms with in spite of the number of times she has stood witness to it, and the young boy lying on the OR table tonight will simply be the latest unwanted memory.

She reaches up to her neck to a silver chain she wears and unclasps it. It's a delicate, somewhat simple chain with a small, equally simple silver cross hanging from it. She removes it from her neck, places it in the boy's hand, and folds it closed. She then closes his still open eyes, but before she does, she looks into them.

Something about them, the boy's blue eyes, catches her attention, but she isn't sure why. Could be the fact that they are the most expressive eyes she can ever remember seeing. Beautiful eyes, but sad. So very sad, and so expressive that they almost seem to be trying to say something, something to her, maybe. Almost as if they are saying 'Thank You'.

Silly. Silly notion, she knows, but she says the words anyway and then folds the eyelids closed...

“You're welcome.”

And then something occurs to her: she could swear the boy's eyes closed after she put the oxygen mask on his face. She knows because she watched them. She watched them closely. Certainly, she would remember them opening again, wouldn't she?

Wouldn't she?

It's late, and like Dr. Ingram, she is tired and drained as well. Surely, she is mistaken, about the eyes, that is. The sad, but incredibly grateful eyes.

She covers the boy with the fresh sheet, and then she herself leaves.

The door swings closed behind her.

The room, which only moments ago was alive with activity, is now quiet.

It's been a long night.

For everyone.

* * * * *

A few minutes later...

I'm looking down now, at my family. Everyone is sitting in a chair in the ER waiting room. And it's a nice room. One tastefully appointed with pleasant surroundings - cheerful prints and paintings on the wall, professionally maintained parlor palms and corn plants here and there, current magazines scattered on a coffee table... There's even a large, wall-mounted flat-screen TV with a picture but no sound.

And there's a door, a single, solid panel door leading to the corridor outside, a corridor that leads to the operating rooms just down the hall.

No one is talking. They just sit, sit in the type of quiet you never want to hear.

And they wait.

And wait.

Then, suddenly, the single-panel door opens and the doctor walks in, the ER surgeon, Dr. Ingram. Everyone springs to their feet and gathers around him. He's holding a patient chart in one hand and using the other hand to gesture with as he delivers the grim news.

I see his lips move, but I can't hear what he's saying.

But then, I don't need to.

Not anymore.

I watch as my mother collapses into my father's arms. He lowers her into a chair and then takes the seat next to hers. He cradles her in his arms and gently rocks her, stroking the back of her head as she buries her face in his shoulder. Tears stream down his own cheeks, but there is no one to hold him. Fathers don't have that luxury.

I've never seen my father cry.

The doctor is still there talking to my brother and sister and Cindy, all of whom are also crying uncontrollably; the doctor, no doubt, giving them a blow-by-blow account of my last moments.

I don't know.

What I *do* know is that they are growing distant. Smaller, now. But it's not them, it's me. I'm moving away from them. Upward and away. Away to whatever awaits me now.

I watch as they grow further, and further, and yet further away. Distant.

I tell them all one last time that I love them, but they're so far away now that I can barely make them out.

So small and getting smaller.

And then they're gone.

And then I'm gone.

Dead.

A statistic.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wrote this story from first-hand experience, but obviously with a different outcome. And, of course, it has been 'fictionalized' somewhat, which is to say I didn't have an 'out of body' experience. Also, there was no OR. I was too destroyed. It was almost 2 months before doctors could work on me because of all the severe swelling. For example, my head. It literally swelled shoulder to shoulder. My hair was a spot on the back of my head. And it was about a month and a half before I could see. That's how long my eyes were swollen shut.

It was bad. The only reason I lived was because of the Bell Star helmet I wore, the same helmet Evil Knievel wore.

The story is dedicated to the memories of all the friends I, as well as all of you reading this, fellow bikers, my brothers, have lost over the years to the road.

But just as I know it, so do all of you. On any given day, on any given road, death awaits us all. The question is - will we meet him today? But make no mistake about it, he is always there. Always waiting for the introduction.

And we accept this. We accept the risk every time we throw a leg over our beloved machine, knowing full well it could be the last time that we do. The last ride.

You know it, and I know it.

The story, for me, took place 41years ago when I was 21. I'm now 63. I have since added some 300,000 bike miles to my credit, and I'm still around to write about it.

And that may change tomorrow. And if that's the case, then so be it. I'm never NOT going to ride. That's all there is to it. I haven't owned a car in a long, long time and probably never will again. A bike is ALL I ride, and all I will ever ride.

And if I do go out that way, on the road, I'm OK with that. It'd be my preferred way. Because frankly, it beats lying in some hospital bed somewhere dying of ass cancer or something.

In the meantime...

Drive it like you stole it, but ride to live.

And long may you run.