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Lucky

“I can’t feel my body,” he said, his voice rising faint over the sound of the helicopter rotors pulsing in the darkness as our litter team carried him down a path illuminated on either side by Chem-Lites. We moved slowly, careful not to lose our footing on the loose gravel which covered the hill leading down to the clinic.

Once through the flight-line gate we were met by doctors from the forward surgical team, backlit like shadow puppets by light rushing from the open clinic doors. They leaned over the patient, tracing his body with a flashlight while I watched. The light fell on the neck brace he wore, and the blood trickling from his ears and bubbling from his mouth, and the alarming whiteness of his skull, out of place amidst the blood, matted hair and sand. “Urgent,” a doctor said, and moved past us to the litter team emerging from the night behind.

We carried our patient into the clinic and laid him on the second of three beds. The distinct hospital smell, one of unapologetic sterility, reminded me of my mother and the times I would visit her in the basement pharmacy of Our Lady of Fatima. “He said he can’t feel his body,” I told the medic.

“How you doing, buddy? Can you hear me? We are going to take care of you, ok?” As Doc Johnson spoke, he removed the straps and heat blankets the patient was packaged in.

“I want you to know I swallowed a lot of blood.”

“That’s alright, buddy; we will get that fixed. Try to relax for me.” He began to cut off the patient’s uniform. “What’s your name?”

“Jeremy.”

“Ok, Jeremy, you’re doing really well.”

“I can’t feel...I can’t feel my body.”

The beds on either side had patients now. Clear tubes ran from pale arms to IV bags. Heart-rate monitors displayed sinus rhythms and elevated pulses. Discarded needle caps and opened dressings collected on the floor beside bright spatters of blood which looked like dollops of strawberry syrup in a glass of milk on the clean white tile. I exited through the side door with the rest of my litter team and we circled back to the flight-line gate to await more patients.

“Ok,” I said. “Where are my guys...one, two, where’s the third guy?”

“Constanza went to get another guy off the bird.”

“The big guy?”

“Yeah.”

“I need another guy for my team,” I said.

“I think the other bird landed already.”

“Lieutenant Goble said we would get the second bird in six mikes,” I said.

“There are two birds up there, sir. I think we got everybody.”

“Ok, let’s just stand by.”

“Heads up.” We moved to the side as two more soldiers came through, buddy-carrying a third between them, his arms draped over their shoulders.

“LT Goble said we are done; head to the PRT building.” I clicked on my red light and followed the group down the gravel road. We huddled in a quiet circle, waiting in the dark and dust and heat seeping up from the ground.

“Alright guys, can everyone hear me?” Goble said as he approached. “Y’all did an exceptional job tonight. It went much more smoothly than last time and we are going to continue to improve. Next time we are going to number the guys on the litter teams—odd will go left and even will go right so we can avoid some of the confusion.” As he spoke he rotated slowly, looking at everyone while they searched the ground at their feet. I knew they were thinking that their bodies were just as fragile, that any number of times it could have easily been them all fucked up on a litter, staring up into strange faces and wondering if they were dying.

“Guys, we need to kill the red lights up there. I know it’s dark and it sucks, but they are flying with IR so we can’t have any lights. Litter teams three and four, y’all almost lost your lives tonight.” They looked up. “Never, ever approach from the rear. The pilot can lift the main rotors, but he can’t control the tail rotor, and if I hadn’t

grabbed this kid he would have taken it in the face, alright? However, excellent job overall, I thank y'all, have a good night."

"Scottie," I called after Goble.

"Yeah, Merc, you're with me, I gotta take some X-rays."

I followed him back up to the clinic. "This is for you," he said, passing me a full-length lead apron. "Ok, we need to get a lateral c-spine of this guy," he said as we walked to the patient I had carried in. He handed me a black x-ray cassette and I moved to the far side of the bed while he wheeled up the x-ray machine. He punched in the correct exposure settings and positioned the machine level with the patient's neck. "Hey buddy, we have to take a picture of your neck, ok? The doc is gonna pull on your arms and I need you to relax and lie real still for me. Merc, when I tell you, I need you to push the cassette down into the bed and make sure your fingers aren't in the way. Ok, here we go."

I pushed down as hard as I could on the sides of the cassette, stiffening against the tremors of adrenaline rolling through my forearms. There was a soft beep. "Ok, got it."

I followed Scottie to the x-ray kiosk and he snapped the cassette down into the reader. The image slowly formed on the screen, top down, like a sheet sliding off a statue. Skull then vertebrae; one, two, three, four, five, six, "Fuck." The sixth and seventh vertebrae were not neatly in line like the rest; one had slid past the other, a car overtaking a slower vehicle on the highway. White, displaced bone fragments formed an archipelago floating in a black sea on the screen. Scottie called the doctor over.

"Shit, ok, we've got T6 and T7 displaced, and T7 appears to be crushed. Yeah, he has to go to BAF." He moved back to the bed. "Ok people, we need to stabilize him, he needs to get out of here. Cynthia, I need you to tube him now, please, he's going into spinal shock. Let's get a chest x-ray, then prep him."

I watched as Scottie x-rayed the patient's chest and then he hurried past me to the kiosk, attempting to shield the cassette from me. He wiped off a streak of something deep red that stained the cloth with a ring around it, like cranberry sauce mixed with olive oil. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yeah, man, that's that kid's brains. I didn't want you to see it."

"From the head wound? I saw his head was split open."

"His ears. His brain is swole up, hemorrhaging out his ears."

"Fuck, dude."

We x-rayed the remaining patients, each time hoping the screen would tell a different story than it did. Shattered ribs, a humerus snapped cleanly and suspended in the upper arm like the packages of broken candy canes we had distributed at the Christmas party a week ago. The last patient was awake and talking. “How’s he doing sergeant major?” I asked as I came around the bed.

“Well he’s doing ok, aren’t you, Robert? We are just trying to figure some things out—looks like he whacked his head pretty good. We found a ring on him, just trying to figure out if he’s married.”

“Wait, am I married?”

“Well you’ve got a ring, Robert, but it’s ok if you can’t remember.”

“How are my guys?”

“Everyone is being taken care of, don’t worry.”

There was a long pause as he tried to blink away the confusion.

“I’m married?”

“It’s gonna be ok.”

I took off the lead apron and stood in the hallway that connected the BAS to the FST, looking past the medics as they treated the wounded, the scene unfolding before me and fueling a burgeoning existential crisis. The blood was too red, impossibly red, not the comfortable deep crimson hue I had come to know through years of television and movie violence. It looked fake, a high-fructose fraud cooked up for some low-budget production, which, in turn, explained the bad acting. The A-listers who I was accustomed to watching had to delve deep into the well of their memories to tap into the faint echo of past trauma. Their pain was deep and searching and delivered confidently. The war-wounded in this scene portrayed pain that was too immediate, their delivery too diffident, to be believed. I started worrying that I might be fucked up. Then I started hating myself for selfishly wondering if I was fucked up while people around me were legitimately fucked up.

I was rescued from my self-hating spiral as my roommate came into the clinic. He had been in the TOC and started speaking as he came up alongside me.

“It was a rollover. The TC said they were turning onto a bridge and hit something, a pothole, maybe a rock, and fell like 60 feet down into the water. Luckily it was only three feet deep. How are the guys in there? He leaned in. “Careful by the way, that’s the driver behind you.”

“That’s the driver?” A muscular kid, maybe 20, sat in a black waiting-room chair, holding an ice-pack to the back of his neck and staring straight ahead while the chaplain spoke to him.

“Yeah, he walked away.”

“Holy shit. Lucky.”

“I don’t know man. He’s gotta live with this.”

I looked at the driver again. Tears had started to form in the corners of his eyes. He would probably have hidden them if he’d noticed.

The events that inspired this story occurred between October 2010 and July 2011 when the author, then a first lieutenant, was deployed to Afghanistan as a member of Provincial Reconstruction Team Kunar. During this deployment, Nicholas Mercurio participated in more than 200 combat missions and was awarded the Bronze Star, Air Force Achievement Medal with Valor, Army Achievement Medal, two Navy Achievement Medals, Army Combat Action Badge, and Air Force Combat Action Medal.