

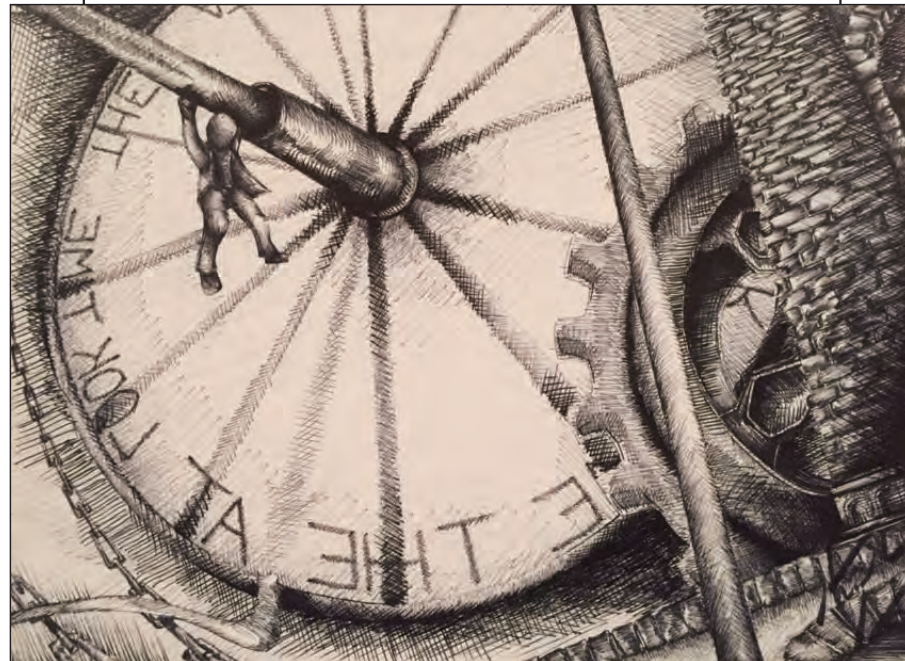
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REFLECTIONS ON CARING

HOFSTRA NORTHWELL
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

ART & LITERARY REVIEW



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First Night

The ambulance turned the corner, pulled down the driveway and parked in front of the entrance to the hospital. The medics in the front got out and closed their doors.

“Whatever,” said the medic who was the driver, whose name was Pat. “I give up.”

He was continuing a conversation they were having about his nephew, who could not keep a job. The kid had been working for a fast-food restaurant, and his sister had called him that morning to tell him that the fast-food restaurant had fired him. He was depressed and sleeping all day. Now he wanted to join the Marines.

“I try to tell the kid, you know, don’t join the Marines. He’s an idiot.”

“Maybe he wants to see the world,” said the other medic, whose name was Marc.

“He’s an idiot,” Pat said. He was walking around to the other side of the ambulance. “She says he’s got no leadership skills and he can’t deal with stress.”

Marc laughed. “He can’t deal with stress? Then why does he wanna join the Marines?”

“He’s an idiot. He thinks the Marines can make him a different person.”

Pat continued to talk as he pulled on the latch to the side door. “I says to her, if the kid can’t deal with stress he can’t deal with stress.”

Peter, who had been riding in the back of the ambulance, unbuckled his seatbelt. It was dark. They had turned off the interior lights when they parked. Now he was going with them into the hospital to rest. They passed through a first set of sliding doors and then stopped at a second set. One of the medics held a small badge in front of a sensor and the three of them entered.

Inside, the hospital was clean and bright. Nurses and doctors passed by them in a hurry, some of them pushing wheelchairs. Down the hallway to the left a custodian was replacing the large plastic bag in a trashcan.

It was a chilly autumn night, and Peter had borrowed a jacket

at the ambulance base. It was blue, like the medics' jackets, and it carried their insignia on the front. Peter was grateful to have a jacket like the others' as they headed down the hallway to the break room; it helped him feel less out of place.

It had been a slow night so far. Earlier, there had been a "man down" call that turned out to be a man named Bob. Drunk from two bottles of mouthwash, he had passed out on a sidewalk and woke complaining of stomach pains. "Freshest smelling case we pick up," the medics had said. Bob was a regular.

The hospital break room was spare, white and modestly equipped. There was a refrigerator with an old, small TV sitting on top of it, and in the center of the room were a round table and chairs. The room faced the street and the driveway. Through a window on the far side they could keep an eye on the ambulance.

The three of them sat on the hard chairs around the table and took out the food they had brought with them. "Pretty slow for your first night, right?" Pat asked Peter. "What do you think?"

"It's cool," Peter said.

"So what are you?" Marc asked. "Are you a premed student?" He had short, trimmed hair and a small, neat beard. He was opening a container of carrots and another, smaller container of hummus.

"No," said Peter. "I'm an English major."

"Okay, an English major. You're just doing this to watch?"

"I think I might like to be a paramedic some day," Peter said.

"Okay, I respect that," Pat said as he unwrapped a sandwich. "You'll get a lot of stories from this."

Marc took out a container of grapes, and Peter took out his own sandwich. They had all bought drinks at a convenience store.

"Is that a salad?" Pat asked. Marc had taken out yet another container and was pouring on dressing.

"Yeah," he said. "So what?"

"So you brought a salad and hummus and carrots and grapes?" Pat asked.

"Yeah. Do you have a problem with that?" Marc asked lightly.

“I don’t have a problem with that,” Pat said. “But what the hell is that?” Pat pointed.

“Tofu,” Marc said.

Pat laughed. “Does your wife wrap up all your food for you?”

“Yeah. She likes me to eat healthy and she likes to cook for me.”

Marc looked at Peter. Pat looked at Peter. “Jesus, give a guy a break, will ya?” Marc said. They all laughed.

Peter took a big bite out of his sandwich and then swallowed some of his drink to wash it down. He felt more comfortable now, eating and laughing with them, like a regular paramedic.

“Do you see a lot?” Peter asked.

“Yeah,” Marc said. He was eating his salad. “But I’ve only been doing this for a few months, though. Ask Pat.”

Peter looked at Pat. “Yeah, you know, I guess I’ve seen a lot,” Pat said. “I’ve had almost thirty different jobs in fifteen years. That’s a lot, right? Yeah, I’ve had almost thirty different jobs in fifteen years and I’ve never seen more craziness than this.

“Three weeks ago we picked up a guy who fell from a roof.” Marc nodded in confirmation. “A hundred feet in the air and he crashed through some boards and a canopy or whatever that broke his fall. I’ll never forget that, that was a mess. The guy survived, though. But mostly, you know, it’s just a man down call.”

Every now and then, as they ate, their radios would squawk and they would listen as the dispatcher would send other ambulances on emergency calls. Marc slid a container over to Peter. “Like some grapes?”

“Thank you.” He took a handful, eating them one by one along with the last of his sandwich.

As Pat and Marc cleared the table, a call for them came in. “All right, kid. You’ll get to see some action now,” Pat said.

Pat talked to the dispatcher on his radio as they hurried down the hallway, through the doors and into the ambulance. Marc opened the side door for Peter, who climbed in and buckled his seatbelt. From the passenger seat in front, Marc craned his neck around to look back at Peter through the little window that separated them. “You all set?”

“Yeah,” Peter said. He was holding onto the bottom of the seat. Pat was talking into the radio again as he rolled the ambulance to the top of the driveway and turned on the siren and the flashing lights. Peter held on tighter.

The ambulance was weaving in and out of traffic, traveling fast. When cars wouldn’t move out of the way, Pat laid on the siren, and when Peter turned his head to look through the windshield he could see the traffic parting before them. Turning back in his seat he saw it merge again as they passed.

The truck was clunky, and it rocked and bumped over potholes. Riding backwards, Peter was starting to feel dizzy when the ambulance slowed and turned off the main road and onto a side street. Through the slits that passed for windows in back he could see parked cars along the curbs. Then the red flashing lights shone on the buildings, illuminated bushes and reflected off windows.

The medics jumped out and opened the door. Peter started to climb down. “Can you grab that bag for me, Peter?” Pat asked. He was calm, focused.

“This one?” asked Peter.

“Yeah, that blue one there. Why don’t you grab the red one, too, and follow me.” Peter handed over the blue bag, slung the red one over his shoulder and shut the door.

In the middle of the street, between the rows of parked vehicles, were two wrecked cars, and two bloodied bodies were laid out on the asphalt. Another ambulance had already arrived and EMTs were working on one of the victims. It looked bad. There were two police cars at the scene and police officers stood by talking with the crowd.

Pat and Marc walked up to one of the EMTs and asked what was going on. It was a drunk-driving accident, they were told. The drivers of both cars — both boys — were drunk. One car had swerved and slammed into parked cars. The other had hit it from behind and spun it sideways, throwing the driver from the car and onto the street. Neither driver had been wearing a seatbelt. Both were badly hurt. The medic delivered this report calmly.

From where Peter was standing, he could not see the face of

the victim closest to him. There were head injuries and fractures, the EMT said, possibly a spine injury. They were about to transport the most seriously injured boy to the hospital.

Pat and Marc were putting on nitrile gloves, and they gave a pair to Peter. They moved quickly, but they seemed calm. Stepping over broken glass, they walked around the medics and placed their bags down next to the other boy. Another ambulance had arrived. “How you doin’?” Pat asked the boy, who was lying motionless.

“Fine,” he said.

“Can you move your toes for me?” Pat asked. The kid moved his toes. “Can you move your fingers for me? Huh?” He moved his fingers. “Do you know where you are?” The boy muttered something. He lay still and would look at their eyes only for a second before gazing off above their heads.

“Do you know where you are?” Pat repeated.

The boy said something like “the street,” but he was hard to understand. He was missing some of his teeth and there were dirt and asphalt on his face and broken glass in his clothes. The boy was about Peter’s age.

“How about we take you to the hospital?” Pat asked.

“Okay,” the boy said.

“Help me get the stretcher,” Marc said. Peter went with Marc to the ambulance to get it. They brought it over and put the boy on it. They rolled him to the ambulance, lifted him in and closed the door. Peter and Marc got in the back. Pat drove.

“Have you ever been in an ambulance before?” Marc asked the boy. He was taking out the blood pressure pump.

“No.”

“Are you on any medication?”

“No.”

“Were you drinking tonight?”

“Yes.”

“You know drinking leads to accidents, right?”

“Yes.” The boy seemed resigned. Marc began taking his blood pressure.

“Were you out with your friends?” He was asking questions casually, but in a loud voice so the boy could hear him over the

ambulance and the siren. He was trying to keep the boy calm, and to keep him talking, but the boy appeared very calm already. He was looking at the ceiling above their heads, though not really looking.

Peter watched. He was curious, though he thought that maybe he shouldn't be. Learning, though, would be his excuse. He had never been so close to someone so badly injured.

Blood flowed from the boy's arm and leaked onto the stretcher. The white sheets grew wet and dark. Marc noticed it, too.

"We're going to take you to the hospital now, and they're going to put some bandages on you, okay? Okay? I'm not going to lie to you but I think you might need a cast on your arm, okay?" Marc was unwrapping bandages as he spoke.

The boy stared at the ceiling as the blood continued to flow from his wound. Then suddenly the pain seemed to intensify and the boy started to yell.

"Oh, Jesus! Oh, Jesus! Oh, Jesus!"

"Where does it hurt?" Marc asked.

"Oh, Jesus!" he screamed.

"Tell me where it hurts."

"Oh, Jesus. My arm! Oh, Jesus!"

He was shaking now, but Marc remained composed, asking him where it hurt, telling him it would be okay. Peter looked down at the ambulance padding, away from the boy and away from the blood. It would be about three minutes until they got to the hospital.

When they arrived the medics jumped out quickly and carried the stretcher into the hospital. Pat spoke casually to the nurses, telling them about the boy, and then he talked again into the radio. A few nurses quickly took the boy into a room with curtains. Peter waited outside.

Marc placed a clipboard on the counter in the lobby and began filling out forms.

"This the car accident?" the nurse at the station asked.

"Yeah," Marc said.

"Is it bad?" she asked.

"It's not that bad," he said.

“The first one was bad,” she said. “Unconscious. His face was totally disfigured.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah, they’re working on him now.”

A man in a jacket and jeans was sitting outside one of the rooms, holding his head in his hands. His elbows were resting on his knees and his head was bobbing up and down in his hands. He was sobbing uncontrollably. “Oh, Jesus. Oh, Jesus,” he was saying. “Please, God.” He was rocking back and forth in his seat.

“That’s the father,” the nurse said. “You know there was a girl in one of the cars, too, a sister. She was killed.”

Marc looked up from his form. “Really? Jesus.”

Peter went to the bathroom. When he returned Marc walked over to him. “Are you okay, kid?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Did you get sick?” Marc asked.

“No,” he lied.

“That was a rough one.” He patted Peter on the back and looked closely at his face. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

The father was still sitting in the chair, rocking back and forth, weeping into his hands.

“Yeah,” Peter said. “I’m fine.”

“Oh, Jesus, Jesus,” the father repeated.

“You’ll be all right,” Marc said. “Just don’t think about it.”

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