

Empathetic Grief

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“Priority 1 trigger patient arriving for Critical Care 3,” the announcement over the emergency room speakers mixes with the sound of thick wet coughs, and the ringing sound of a crying child. Taking a deep breath, the scent of rubbing alcohol fills my nose, and my mind races with the possibilities that could be bringing in a priority 1 patient by life-flight. Volunteering in the emergency room has allowed me to see a wide variety of injuries and illnesses, but nothing can stop that crushing feeling I get when I hear a severe case being admitted.

Curiosity and fear at the previous announcement take over, I scroll through the list of Emergency Department patients, until I reach what I am looking for. Critical Care room 3, patient Baker, Jayden, age 17, in for a car crash. My eyes slide over to the notes left in the charting system by both EMTs and nurses. Even though I was expecting nothing great, considering she is a priority 1 patient, my breath still hitches as I read; intubated, still unstable, requesting neuro eval.

Whenever I see notes of an unstable patient, I can’t stop the physical reaction from thinking of what they and their family must be feeling. The feeling as though I drank an ice cold liquid rushes through me, settling inside my stomach like a cool ball of anxiety. A girl, the same age as me, was in a car crash. Doctors are now treating her, doing everything they can in attempts to save her life. Having to meet her parents, knowing the horror and fear they must be experiencing, as I bring them to meet their severely injured daughter, I know that will be the hardest part of my day.

Returning from bringing only one family back, I look up, and I know the time has come. A man rushes in, looking to be the same age as my dad. He has a frantic look in his eyes. His

movements are chaotic and sporadic. He looks between me, and the patient access desk, as if unsure where to go.

“Hi sir, are you checking in to be seen, or visiting?” my voice rings out, breaking the anxious silence. I ask the question, but I already know the answer. His fidgeting body, terrified expression, and shaking hands match the announcement made earlier, match Baker, Jayden, and match the unstable condition of that 17 year old girl. He tells me he’s visiting his daughter. I ask him for her name, but I already know the answer. Opening his mouth to respond, he becomes distracted by the door opening behind him. Capturing his attention, a woman enters, followed by 2 teenagers. They make eye contact and both break down into tears, hugging each other tightly, as if their lives depend on that embrace. My eyes shift, observing the teenagers behind them, neither of them appear as distraught as who I’m assuming are their parents. However, their faces hold a subtle look of worry, a look that only self-conscious teenagers try this hard to hide.

The adults break apart, and the man wipes his eyes before turning back to me. Confirming my fears, he tells me his daughter's name. I already had her pulled up in the system. Baker, Jayden, 17 years old, in for a car crash, intubated, stable but nuero-eval shows brain unresponsive, BAC: 0.1. Forcing myself to meet the man's eyes, while putting a sympathetic smile onto my face, as I’ve had to do many times before. I tell him that since his daughter is in a critical care room, I will bring him and his family members to a family room, until the nurse is available to bring them back to see her. The woman yells at me, telling me she’s her mother, and she should not need to wait to see her own daughter. Her voice was loud enough that it normally would have offended me, but I understand her tone comes from a place of fear rather than anger. I say that I am sorry, and I’ll check in with the nurse to see what we can do. Following hospital protocol is sometimes the last thing I want to do.

With shaking hands, I write up 4 visitor passes with a small “CC3” on the corner of each of them, then instruct the family to follow me. I bring them back to family room 1, then walk alone into the Critical Care area. Sonya, the nurse for CC3, is still in the room. The same look of empathetic pain on her face, I’m sure is plastered on my own. Once I’m farther into CC3, my eyes are drawn to the stretcher in the middle of the room. A young girl is lying on the bed, a tube breathing for her down her throat, a bandage wrapped tightly around her forehead, and several medical professionals surrounding her. I turn to Sonya, telling her that I have the patient’s family in room 1. Her face drops from her forced smile and she tells me she’ll grab them now.

My position is returned to the waiting room, but my mind keeps wandering back to the girl, and her family. With only 30 minutes left of my shift I decide to check her charting one more time, looking for peace of mind. Instead, my stomach sinks, I feel my heart race while I read the updated notes: BAC: 0.1, stable, awaiting harvesters. This girl, the same age as me, came in after a car accident while I was here. Now she is waiting for her organs to be harvested, while I will drive home safely. It feels as though the world has stopped, my heart breaks for this girl, and her family that I don’t even know. I can’t help thinking that this wouldn’t have happened if she hadn’t driven drunk, she could have arrived alive.