

Hospital

When we get to the hospital, I find a phone and call Ana.

“Ana?”

“Yes?”

“It’s Tom. Sit down.”

I can feel the air go out of her lungs and her body wilt, going limp. All this over the phone. It’s just electrons going back and forth over a wire but in my current state, sensory perception is magnified infinitely. I hear every little sound, every little nuance. My brain builds whole scenarios from just the faintest sound of her breath.

“What’s wrong?” she says. I can tell she’s fallen back into a chair. Her legs had gone limp and wouldn’t support her.

“It’s Michael,” I tell her what she already knows. “He’s hurt and they’ve taken him to Ben Taub. Get down here now.”

“Okay. I’m coming,” she replies, no dithering, no hesitancy. She’s gathered herself after just that instant of weakness. She’s strong. And confident. I can feel her resolve. She will weather this.

“What happened?” she asks.

“The scrum went down. I don’t know what happened. We were fine. We were driving forward and winning it.

“Then it just buckled. Someone slipped, I guess. I couldn’t tell. I couldn’t hold it up. I was right next to him and I couldn’t keep it up.”

Now I am needing her strength. It is hitting me, hard.

“Just get down here. Hurry.”

“I’m on my way.”

I hang up the phone and stand there awhile, my head hanging. It hadn’t really hit me until I had to voice it, to actually say it to Ana. Up to that point, I was in shock, just going through the motions. Acting, not thinking or feeling. It washes over me. I shudder. The blood runs out of my head. I hold the phone for support, to stay upright. Otherwise, I would crumple straight to the floor.

Resolve comes back to me. I have to go on. I go find Genie. She has gone on to the ER. She’s in the waiting room.

“They haven’t told me anything yet,” she relates. “They just said to wait in here.”

I sit down next to her. The guilt floods over me now. It is my fault. I should have done something. I should have held the scrum up. If I could have, we wouldn’t be here now.

Over and over, I play it back in my head. There was nothing I could have done. We just slipped. There was too much pressure, too much desire and we were right on the breaking point – pushing the envelope. In this case we pushed past it. All of us, everyone in the scrum, including Michael, pushed right past our limit and this is the result. The only thing we could have done was to have been somewhere else, or to have not cared and not tried so hard. Both cop outs. I know it is not my fault, but that doesn’t assuage the guilt. I had to blame someone or something. And what better scapegoat than myself?

Well, this isn’t going to work for long. I have to do something to get my mind off beating myself up. I get up and went over to the triage nurse.

“Michael Kelly? Any word? How’s he doing?”

She obviously knows something about his status. She doesn’t even have to say she will check. It is mid-afternoon and the Houston crazies haven’t started to inundate the ER yet.

“They’re doing everything they can,” she says, obviously feeling that clichés are better than communication in this case. “He’s got the best doctors in Houston working for him. If anyone can help him, they can.”

“Can you tell me anything? What’s his condition? What’s his injury? Will he be all right?”

“I really don’t know. The doctors will come out and talk to you when they get a chance. I just don’t have any details now.”

I leave it at that. There is no sense in trying to pry more out of her. If she knows anything, she obviously isn’t ready to share it.

That is too bad, because I know I have to call his parents in New Mexico. I was hoping to have something to tell them. I desperately want to wait, to not have to make the call, but something inside tells me there isn’t time. It has to be done now.

I don’t have their number, nor cash, nor a phone card. I call information and make it a collect call. What a way to share this news. The guilt washes over again, hot on my face and cold inside. I wouldn’t have to do this now if I’d

been stronger, when it counted. Some things you can't change.

His mother answers and I give her the news. I thought telling Ana was hard. This is near impossible. It is actually a good thing that I don't have too many details. There is nothing definite. The doctors will be back with us soon. They'll give us details when they have something definite.

She takes it hard but will wait for more news. His dad is out and she will tell him when he gets back. I am to call when we get the doctors' report. Is there a number I can be reached? I give her the hospital number and we hang up.

Back in the waiting room, the Gents start to arrive. The game is over and they are coming to support Michael. Darryl is here, and Dopey and Cy. As I sit down, Geoff and Derrick come in the door.

Not only us, but the other denizens of Ben Taub are gathering: a child who has fallen at play that Saturday, with a splint on his leg, tears and fear in his eyes; an old woman who is too frail to weather a simple illness, in a wheelchair with eyes closed and moaning softly; a man writhing in pain, rushed on a gurney through the double ER doors.

Along with the patients, come the families and friends. Wives and children; mothers, aunts and uncles; all gathering in the large waiting room. Concern hovers in the air, concern for those dear and near to heart. Apprehension is in the room, palpable, laid on each individual in waiting – dealing with their own fears.

Then, there is also acceptance. There is no wailing in the large room, no outbursts. Stoicism is the order of the day. This is the way of the world. Things happen and you come to Ben Taub to fix them. The doctors do their job and you are back on your way. Simple, if not easy.

Ana comes in and I stand up.

"Where is he?" she asks.

I see her eyes puffy and wet, her lips taut, her jaw set. I pull her into an embrace and hold her closely, tightly. Ana stiffly hugs me back. I hold until I feel her relax, even though it is just a little, then I let go.

"He's still in the ER. They haven't given us anything yet."

She goes straight to the desk, "Michael Kelly? Can I see him?"

The desk clerk answers, "Are you family?"

"No, I'm his girlfriend."

"We can only let family back now."

“Oh, Jesus! His family are in New Mexico. I’m the only one here. Can’t I see him?”

“I’m sorry. It’s our policy,” the clerk replies. Obviously feeling some compassion, she goes on, “I’ll talk to the doctor, though.”

“Can you tell me his condition? How’s he doing? What’s the diagnosis?”

“I’ll talk to the doctor,” she answers again. “He’ll come out when he has a chance.”

And that was it. No information. Nothing. Just wait. That’s the way it is in the ER. It’s in the hands of the professionals. Trust in them. And God.

We go back and sit down. The mood is not lively. No banter. We sit and wait. The TV is on in the background, only a peripheral distraction. Other than that, it is wait and worry.

Geoff goes out to get something to eat. He comes back with Carrie, and hamburgers for everyone. At least we won’t starve. Ana and I aren’t going anywhere, for food or anything else. We will stay until there is some news.

It comes right after dinner.

A doctor comes out from the back and goes to the clerk. She points him to us and he walks over.

“Hello, you’re here for Michael Kelly?”

“Yes,” Ana answers immediately.

He faces her, shoulders square, “I’m Dr. Stanley.”

He is wearing green scrubs and has a surgical mask, untied, hanging from his neck. I can see that he is tired.

“We’ve been doing everything we can for him. I’m afraid he hasn’t regained consciousness.

“We did x-rays and there is a dislocation between the C1 and C2 vertebrae. There was some spinal cord damage. Right now, we’re not sure how much. There must have been a ton of force on his neck. He’s very strong. We’re doing everything we can to stabilize him.”

“Oh, my God!” Ana says. She wobbles and I put my arm around her, to keep her up. She catches herself and doesn’t really need the support, but I leave my arm around her waist, in case.

“How bad is it? Is he going to be okay?” she asks.

“It’s too early to tell. We’re doing some more tests. Right now were trying to keep him immobile and keep from doing any more damage.”

ONLY A GAME

“Can I see him?”

“One of you can come back. We’re waiting to take him for an MRI. Come with me now.”

And Ana goes back.

We all have the news. It is bad, but we still have hope. They can’t tell, yet. We still believe he will be all right. He will be out of here shortly, and ready for the next game. It’s Michael. He’s always there.