

Embrace

by Russell Miles



It was one of those calls that I'd never forget. The call was dispatched as an "unknown emergency." In our line of work, that's a catch all phrase for, "be prepared for anything." As I drove the paramedic unit to the scene, with our fire engine responding right behind us for manpower, we received an update from our communications center: "Possible D.O.A. (Dead On Arrival)" Ninety-nine percent of the time, all the D.O.A.'s that we respond to are elderly people who quietly passed away in their sleep. This one, however, fell into that other one percent.

Images of the next several minutes are burned into my memory: A hysterical crying mother holding a limp infant...a paramedic performing CPR on the lifeless baby...my partner running to our medic unit with the child in his arms...four firefighters and myself crowded around the child, doing all we could to get her to breathe again...me driving to the hospital with lights and sirens screaming... the baby's mom sitting in the passenger seat, crying so hard that she almost started choking...us passing the baby off to the hospital staff...doctors and nurses frantically working to revive her.

Eventually the decision was made...she was gone. The image that stayed with me the longest though was of the baby's mother, sitting in a chair next to the hospital bed, embracing her daughter's tiny body, rocking back and forth, and expressing a pain that no one in the room could, or wanted to, relate to. Witnessing death is a part

of my profession, but the death of a child never fails to make even the most hardened firefighter teary-eyed. While I was driving the medic unit to the hospital, I silently prayed that God would intervene...that he would once again breathe the breath of life into this child's lungs. When the doctors pulled the sheet over the baby's body, I stepped outside and prayed again...this time my prayer was a single word: "Why?"

A few days later, I was able to follow up with the hospital to obtain the mother's contact info. I called her, introduced myself as one of the firefighters that responded for her daughter, and told her that, with her permission, I'd like to attend her daughter's funeral. She was touched and gave me the location and time.

The morning of the funeral, I arrived at the funeral home in my dress uniform. The place was packed with the woman's friends and family. The mother was in the front of the parlor, receiving all the guests. Next to her, on a beautifully decorated stand, laid the smallest coffin I'd ever seen. A framed picture of a smiling baby girl sat atop the coffin, and as I took it all in, all of the memories of that night came rushing to the forefront of my mind. The closer I got to the mother, the more tears flowed freely down my face. I noticed she was wearing a small cross around her neck and a bible by her side, and in between greeting people, she would either hold the cross in her hand or hug the bible tight to her chest.

When it was my turn to greet her, I offered to shake her hand and offer my condolences. Instead, she embraced me with a hug that was so gentle, my heart was almost crushed under the weight of her tenderness.

"I'm sorry we couldn't save her," I whispered in her ear, swallowing hard as I said it.

She released me from her hug and held my face in her hands. Tears were also flowing from her eyes, yet somehow she managed to smile. Her eyes met mine and she replied,

"You did all that you knew how to do. My baby is in the Lord's hands now. I don't know why He decided to take her from me, and I may never know in this lifetime. But the one thing that comforts me most is that God also knows what it's like to lose a child."

As I came home, my two-year old son and my wife greeted me at the door. I would tell them all about the funeral and the words the grieving mother spoke to me later. The only thing I could do as I walked through the door was hold them both close to my heart, and vow never to let them go.