

Accumulations

By Justin Millan

The territory that our ambulance company covered was rural, a spread of farms and woods slit in half by the interstate. I didn't live there. I just showed up to volunteer for the rescue squad, Mondays, 5pm to 5am; as such, I knew this place as a land of night and crisis. It was a darkened theater, the stage forty square miles, and only during 9-1-1 calls did the curtains part, the stagelights burn. In this way, I saw what the calls showed me; nothing more - yet even then, in that fraction of reality, there were times when I had the choice to see, or to not see.

One night, dispatch woke us for a "possible suicide". Half-asleep, half-nerved, my partner and I put on our boots and coats, got into the rig, and took off across town.

My partner spotted the house number - two mylar cards nailed to a tree - and I swung the ambulance into the driveway. My attention immediately locked onto a large two-bay garage. The doors were closed, but bright light beamed through the square glass windows. Something about the garage, beyond being the source of light, pulled at me. The house, by comparison, had a few lights on inside, but struck me as empty and unimportant.

We weren't the first to get there. Others from the squad, hearing the call over the radio, had responded from home - maybe out of a sense of duty, maybe out of boredom. I saw them milling at the edge of the light, a flock of silhouettes, and one gave me a little wave as I spun the steering wheel and reversed in.

Sometimes I'd arrive at a call and be inundated with information and stimuli, and my decision-making was tested. That wasn't the case here. I learned within the first few minutes that the patient was in the garage and probably dead, that it was a suspected suicide, and that we couldn't go in due to the threat of carbon monoxide. In other words, we had missed the emergency. By a large margin. And now we had nothing better to do than to hang out and see how the fire department handled it. They were on their way.

Or did I in fact have something better to do? This would prove to be the true test. Sitting in the ambulance with the window rolled down, I talked with the first responders. The discovery had been made by a neighbor. He had entered the garage through the house and stayed long enough to gather some information - but short enough to hold his breath. He had seen the deceased, lying on the floor of the garage. The wood chipper and lawn mower had been on, idling away, dumping fumes into the room. He'd turned them off. The neighbor also claimed he'd seen a note, but he hadn't read it. The note was still in there.

Since then, the neighbor had been evaluated: stable, bereaved. And the garage doors had been

kept closed, for safety.

"The amount of carbon monoxide in there, that will come pouring out when these doors open, could kill us all before we knew it was happening," my partner said.

My mind jumped to the technical. Such a cavernous space, how long would it take to fill with gas? Yet carbon monoxide, well-known for being invisible and inodorous, is also a threat for its potential to accumulate rapidly. I recalled stories of far greater spaces - ice skating rinks, high rises, auditoriums - going toxic with carbon monoxide.

Perhaps even more sinister is what happens at the molecular level. After all, we wade through toxins and poisons every day, yet seem to prevail (at least in the short term). With carbon monoxide, it is a matter of chemical affinity. We don't stand a chance. The hemoglobin in our blood prefers carbon monoxide over oxygen. As if you were dying of thirst and, given the choice, rejected water and drank a cup of sand instead.

"Gonna take a look," my partner said.

I thought I'd go take a look, too. I wanted to see it. Yet as he exited, I stayed behind, pressed into the driver's seat. I couldn't move. I felt captivated - and captured - by an unexpected dilemma: *Why* should I look? Under what justification? Was it necessary? No matter what I saw, I couldn't intervene, couldn't react. I could label it a "scene assessment", but come on. It was peeking. It felt wrong.

Then came the counterpoint: What exactly was wrong with looking? No doubt, everyone else had, and more soon would, possibly dozens more. If it was a suicide, then the deceased had forsaken his body... had left it to rot and to be found by the community...where did privacy fit into that? Couldn't I look and still be respectful?

Always in this kind of forum, I floundered. Not the stress, not the heartbreak, not the gruesomeness of EMS. These cerebral dilemmas got me. To look, or to not look. Satisfy my interest and violate this man's privacy - or resist on principle, remain in the ambulance, await further orders, but never see *it*?

I had, after all, gotten this license, taken this volunteer gig, to do good. Yet I'd chosen 9-1-1 over a soup kitchen: I wanted action. If I couldn't get action, then perhaps extremes of experience, even if only observed, would scratch that itch.

I stared at the garage doors. The whole area in front of the garage, maybe fifty by fifty feet, was bathed in white light. Each pebble of gravel had a little corona; each cast a small shadow on the next.

The silhouette of my partner entered the scene. The rumble of the ambulance muted his footsteps across the stones. He put his face to one of the windows. Panned. Side-stepped to the next window, panned. Then: a slight change in posture, as if prodded by a ghost. He'd

seen it. He pivoted and glanced at me before crossing the gravel to reach the other guys, and I could hear their voices through the open window. They were talking about the deceased.

Who was apparently vaguely known to some of them. Nobody openly grieved him, although there were some remarks along the lines of, What a waste, and What a tragedy, and so on. Rumors about his life - fact or fiction, who knew - were exchanged: He had worked for the town. A bachelor. A good guy. Never saw this coming. Didn't have no troubles.

But, I reflected, if this was a suicide, then troubles had in fact invaded this man's life. Had accumulated. Had reached lethal levels.

Minutes passed. I was the only one who hadn't looked. The longer I didn't look, the greater the need felt to look. It was building up inside me. Colors blossomed on the horizon: the fire squad, approaching down the county road, the halogen signal throwing out reds, whites. They'd be on the scene in a minute or two, and they'd take over.

I elbowed the door while cranking the lever. I got out. The night air was cool and stunk of diesel. I approached the garage. I was in that white light now. At the bottom of my vision I saw the navy blue of my work pants turn gray, while the fluorescent stripes on my coat flashed like wet steel. The voices of my colleagues were a murmur, and the sound of the ambulance engine shrank, becoming remote: I seemed to slip into a dome of silence and whispers, an unvolumed place. I selected a window, the same window that had seemingly done the trick for my partner, and I pushed up onto my toes and I looked inward, straight at the light.

The garage was barn-style, with a tall ceiling. The poured concrete floor was pristine. I looked, searching. Tools, boxes, a car. A rank of shop lights, suspended from chains. Finally, I saw it.

After I had looked, I turned away. The darkness of the night was a relief; for once, the absence of light possessed vitality. I walked to the others. Joining their circle, I said nothing, and they did not acknowledge me. They were talking about the physics of all those molecules in space, about parts per million.

What did I see in the garage, when I looked through the window? Later that night, in the quiet of the rescue station, I described what I had seen, in terse language, in my run report. A copy of the report would go to the state, while a carbon copy would remain on file in the office.

Beyond that, I never wrote about it again. Nor did I speak about it in great detail. I have omitted it from this piece. It's the least I can do. For it was a failure of will that put my face up to that square of glass and light. When I did, I took something that I was not entitled to. And so, I have kept it to myself - not that it was ever mine to keep.

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