

## The Quiet Place

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It was late on a weeknight, well past my six-year-old's bedtime. She had taken forever to brush her teeth and change into pajamas, intentionally cracking jokes to distract me from the task at hand. (She's [her father's](#)<sup>1</sup> child, after all.) I was doing my best to keep my patience while my mind whirred with all the nightly chores that stood between me and my own bed. My phone lulled her with calming music while I rubbed her back, trying to entice sleep to come faster.

Out of the darkness, I heard her sweet little voice say, "Mama?"

"Yes, baby?" I responded.

"I know what controls the body parts."

"You do?"

"Yeah. The brain."

"That's right, baby."

"And the heart is the helper," she stated, proud of herself.

"Yes, I suppose that's true. Now it's time to go to sleep."

"Okay. But Mama?"

I sighed. "What, baby?"

"I don't know why Daddy's heart stopped beating."

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One dark morning last May, I wrecked my body giving 10 minutes of CPR. My 34-year-old husband, Will, had been lying peacefully next to me, both of us fast asleep. I woke up suddenly to a loud noise I will never forget.

At first, I thought he was snoring. I groggily nudged him, but he just continued making the horrible sound. I shook his shoulder, but he didn't respond. As reality set in, I realized that the sound had an urgent, panicked quality to it. It wasn't rhythmic or soft. His torso didn't gently rise and fall as I had watched it move so many times before. I had never heard of agonal breathing.

I said my husband's name. No response. I *shouted* his name. Nothing. I put my ear on his chest and couldn't hear his heartbeat or feel him breathing. I picked up his arm and let it go. It dropped like a rock.

That was the first time I've ever experienced an out-of-body sensation. One part of my brain understood these

observations as facts. Another part couldn't make any sense of it. The objective piece watched with detachment and allowed me to stay calm, dial 9-1-1, and follow the dispatcher's T-CPR instructions. The other part watched in dismay and couldn't accept what was happening. It was as if one part was watching the other, and they would periodically switch roles in a forbidding dance on death's stage.

I laced one hand on top of the other in the center of Will's chest and pushed hard and fast for ten long minutes. The dispatcher counted out loud to help me keep the correct rhythm. I watched my husband turn blue and then purple under my hands. I felt his ribs sink into his chest cavity and then spring back again to the rhythm of my compressions.

Memories of our college years, when we met and fell in love, floated through my mind. We had shared so many dreams and ambitions. Our whole adult lives had been in front of us, and they held such promise. We were finally starting to live those dreams after years of graduate school, medical school, and residency. I thought of our younger selves with a crushing sadness. It wasn't supposed to end here, like this.

I thought of our kids, ages eight and five, asleep in the next room. I knew I would have to face them in two short hours. The words I might have to say would shatter their childhood. I thought of them growing up without their dad, of holidays being grim reminders of loss and grief, and the void that would be left in their hearts.

I realized later that I had just watched our life flash before my eyes.

When the paramedics arrived and laid Will's gray body on our living room floor, I couldn't bear to watch. I heard all six feet and four inches of him slam on the hard wood as electricity ripped into his heart. The paramedics delivered five shocks, three rounds of epinephrine, and a dose of amiodarone before eventually achieving ROSC. They whisked him away in an ambulance before I could see him again or say goodbye.

One of the paramedics, a man named Lt. Gregg, had been giving me updates. He told me that my husband had ventricular fibrillation resulting in sudden cardiac arrest. Lt. Gregg had kind eyes. They were all I could see beneath the hazmat suit and hood he was wearing due to COVID precautions. He explained what those terms meant and asked if I had any questions.

"Yes," I replied. "What do I tell our children?"

He did his best to answer.

It was early in the COVID pandemic, and visitors were generally not allowed in hospitals. Lt. Gregg told me I would be allowed to go to the emergency department and gave me information to show at the door. The remaining

crew members packed up their equipment and left just as my children's alarm clock went off. I had just accomplished the hardest thing I had ever had to do, but that record was about to be broken again.

I opened the door to the bedroom my daughters share. I gathered all my maternal strength to use a normal facial expression and tone of voice while I gave them the news to the best of my ability. I didn't know yet whether he would survive. Even if he did, I didn't know if he would remember anything or be able to function. I tried not to lead the kids toward those questions.

My parents arrived for reinforcement, and my dad dropped me off at the hospital, like some first day of school gone horribly wrong. I presented the information Lt. Gregg had given me and was allowed inside as an end-of-life case.

COVID had disrupted standard protocols, and the hospital staff didn't quite know where to put me. They escorted me to a waiting area in the radiology department, where the lead-lined walls cut off my cell phone signal, effectively isolating me from everyone I could have turned to for support. Doctors I had never met came in periodically to give me updates, but I could barely take in what they were saying.

I was in shock and traumatized. That was the state I was in as the consulting cardiologist gave me the grim statistics around OHCA survival rates and waited for me to make decisions for my husband as his life hung in the balance. Those statistics were not helpful, and the decisions seemed impossible.

Eventually, the hospital staff returned and told me I had to leave the building. We didn't know whether my husband or I had COVID, and they told me that my presence was "making people nervous." I sat on a bench on the hospital campus waiting for a ride home. Staring into thin air, dripping in the trauma of that morning, I shut down in self-preservation. My husband was fighting for his life inside that hospital, and I was being sent away. He would have to fight alone. I would have to face the tremendous guilt and pain that so many family members experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was excruciating to be separated.

Thankfully, my husband survived neurologically intact. He came home and started to regain his short-term memory capability. His cardiologist implanted a subcutaneous ICD and ordered genetic testing.

But in the days and weeks that followed, something odd happened. My mind went somewhere it had never been before. Words were just...gone. I could manage a few one-word answers, but I couldn't hold a conversation. I couldn't

keep the other person's words in my mind long enough to make sense of them. I couldn't think of words for simple concepts or objects. And I certainly couldn't make full sentences come out of my mouth. My eyes and face were devoid of any expression. A close friend described it like the eyes of the "Afghan Girl" photo featured on that infamous *National Geographic* magazine cover.

I didn't know how to explain to my family and friends what I was experiencing, so I used a name for the place I had gone. I called it the Quiet Place. It was a dark and empty chamber where no words were spoken or understood. If they were there, they flowed in and back out like a silent River Styx running through my brain. It was a place of grief and distress.

Those of us who have survived trauma need our health-care providers to meet us in our Quiet Place. We need them to find their way into that dark chamber, light a candle, and fill it with the words that build a bridge for us to walk out. I found mine in the work of Rana Awdish,<sup>2</sup> Paul Snobelen,<sup>3,4</sup> and Kirstie Haywood and Katie Dainty.<sup>5</sup> They sounded like angel songs.

### Supplementary material

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:[10.1016/j.cardfail.2021.10.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cardfail.2021.10.002). supplemental material is the 911 call.

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