

Dead on Arrival

Synopsis: An ambulance paramedic helps the spirit of a young man find peace, but perhaps he also had a message of his own.

From the front of the cab came the tri-tone warble of the walkie-talkie.

Despatch to A24. Status update on your code 2? Come in A24.

He wanted to answer it, but knew he couldn't.

"Shouldn't you reply Doc?" Asked the figure, almost as pale as the crisp white sheets he lay upon, in the back of the vehicle.

"Right now I need to focus on helping you."

"I'm scared Doc."

"I know."

"I'm not going to die am I?"

"There's nothing to be afraid of."

"You didn't answer the question, Doc. Tell it to me straight. I'd prefer it that way."

"What's your name?"

"William. William Johnston, but my friends used to call me Will."

"Will, my name's Andy." The young paramedic started to hold out a hand then stopped, pausing thinking about how to phrase what he wanted to say next.

"Why are you here, Will?"

"What do you mean?"

"In my ambulance."

"I don't know."

"Are you scared of dying?"

"Everyone's scared of dying Doc. That's the thing about death. It happens to everyone eventually, but we're so in denial of it ever happening to us, when it does, it's always a surprise. Even a patient who's been told they're terminal doesn't believe they're going to die. Not really. It's always going to be in the next week or so. The next day even. Just so long as that day isn't today."

"Will, you're not...going to die."

"Something's wrong though, isn't it Doc? There's something you're not telling me isn't there? I'm in the back of an ambulance. What happened to me?"

"Do you remember anything that happened before you got here?"

The young man on the gurney shook his head.

"Did you ever get that feeling when you wake from a dream," Andy said. "Sometimes you forget the dream unless you write it down, or tell someone about it." He focussed on the pale patient in front of him. "What if life is a dream, and you're scared if don't tell anyone about it, it'll just disappear? Think Will. What don't you want to let go of?"

The young man on the stretcher closed his eyes and thought.

He opened his eyes again. "I remember."

"What is it?"

"Not what Doc, who. Her name was Sarah. She was my girl." The young man smiled savouring a memory, as if allowing himself a brief taste of happiness before spitting it back out again.

"I never meant to hurt her Doc."

"What happened to Sarah, Will?"

"I was working nights. She was asleep in the house. There was a fire."

"You blame yourself for the fire?"

"I left the gas heater on when I went to work. She never stood a chance. After that my life wasn't a dream I couldn't remember. It was more like a nightmare I could never forget. You ever seen a ghost Doc?"

"Once or twice," Andy smiled, "It kind of comes with the territory."

“I used to see her. At first she used to come to me in my sleep. Nightmares. The kind you knew were more than just your mind making stuff up. This was real. She was real. Standing there all blackened and burnt, screaming at me. That’s when I started taking the pills. I could sleep, for a while anyway. But eventually I needed more. I didn’t ever want to wake up. If I could just stay asleep, to rest in peace. Then I wouldn’t need to feel the pain anymore. I started taking drugs to escape. But it wasn’t enough. It’s never enough.”

“You don’t need the drugs anymore Will.”

“I don’t know Doc. Before my Grandma died she used to say she’d been talking with Grandpa, even though he died twenty years before. She used to say that’s how it works Doc. They only come to you when it’s your time. My Grandma wasn’t scared. But that’s not how it is with Sarah. She wants me to pay for what I’ve done. That’s why I don’t want to die Doc.”

“Do you miss her Will?”

“Everyday.”

“Will, I think what’s really haunting you isn’t Sarah.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s your grief of losing her. If we aren’t haunted by loss, what are we haunted by?”

“But it was my fault Doc, she didn’t deserve to die.”

“It was an accident Will, it wasn’t your fault. She would’ve forgiven you. The problem is you can’t forgive yourself.”

“You don’t know that!”

“If you don’t believe me, then why don’t you ask her for yourself?”

Another figure emerged from the front cab of the ambulance.

“Sarah?”

“The Doc’s right Will. It wasn’t your fault. I forgive you.” A glowing white light spilled from the front of the ambulance, filling the cab. “They’re waiting for us.” She took his hand in hers and the young man rose from the stretcher, following her in the direction of the light.

He turned as he reached the narrow doorway to the front cab.

“Thanks Doc,” he said before turning and disappearing into the light.

Moments later the ambulance again fell dark and silent.

The walkie-talkie warbled.

A24. Status update on your code 2? Come in 24.

Andy let out a long sigh, clambered back into the drivers’ seat and picked up the receiver.

“24 to base. Patient was DOA when I arrived at the scene. Caucasian male, mid-thirties unresponsive. Suspected overdose. On my way back now.”

He placed the receiver back in its cradle and started the engine for the return journey to the hospital.

As he negotiated the winding back country roads a memory echoed in his mind.

That’s how it works Doc. They only come to you when it’s your time.

As he rounded a long bend in the road a growing bright light shone from ahead.

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