

AMBULANCE MAN

A MEMOIR

BRIAN CASEY



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Lost Limb Lost

I had amassed a small collection of ambulance calls, yet I had not seen a dead person or had been pressed into any kind of emergency action. Leo, one of the old cab drivers, told me the story of the first dead body he saw when he “ran ambulance” as he put it. I welcomed Leo’s stories and listened carefully knowing that they represented early ambulance work when the patient care equation was likely, *the sicker the patient—the faster you drove*. The week previous he told me of a call near Lake Elmo where he and his partner collected a man and his legs. The poor fellow had them severed at bumper height while he stood between two cars on the side of the road. A third car struck the second and pushed it into the first. A good citizen provided the crew with a box in which to place the legs. When the nurse at the hospital inquired about the legs’ whereabouts, he responded, “Hold on, they’re in the ambulance.” He returned to find that inexplicitly the box only contained one leg. He said they never did find the other leg, but he thought of it every

time he passed by that road and half expected to see it in a dog's mouth.

Leo's dead man story involved arriving at a motorcycle crash in which the cyclist lay on the ground behind the truck that he had rear-ended. Pleased with his ability to stand close to the dead body, Leo straddled the corpse's feet and stood with arms folded as if posing for the crowd of on-lookers. For whatever reason, the dead man's leg suddenly gave way to gravity and flopped over. Like a skeletal claw reaching out of a cemetery grave, one dead foot grazed Leo's inner ankle; he found himself suddenly airborne while letting out a scream he didn't recognize as his own. Between the touch and the landing, he had not only urinated in his pants but also called the entire crowd's attention to it. I was grateful for this story and thought to myself, "Be sure to keep your bladder empty."

A Cooled Engine

One night at 3:41 A.M. I awoke to the sound of my father talking on the phone. He turned on the hall light and came to my bedside. He said, "Brian, the ambulance called and they are coming to pick you up." I jumped up fully awake. I put on my uniform, which I had strategically laid out the night before, and then went out to wait at the corner. I did not hear the sirens of police cars or fire trucks and surmised that the call must be a minor one or very far away.

I climbed inside when the ambulance arrived and

sat on my hands to control their shaking. I didn't say a word as the radio broadcast the sound of another crew talking. It was apparent that two calls had come in at the same time, and they had split the duty crew to get two rigs in service.

We were well out of town before I asked Jeff what the call was. Jeff Vandenberg was a local guy and the most experienced besides Cropp, but unlike Cropp, he was friendly and unassuming. He told me that we were going to a car wreck out past the state prison. This brought a new flush of anxiety as I imagined injured people entangled in a vehicle. The battle to suppress waves of trepidation might suggest I didn't want to be there, or that I was ill-suited for the work, or that I only preferred benign calls, but I accepted none of this as truth; I knew that I belonged in an ambulance. The discomfort I endured was the cost of going into the wild.

The ambulance was a heavy and powerful low-riding vehicle, well suited for speed. The empty county roads required only intermittent siren use. Red and white illuminated bugs sailed into and over the windshield. Only an inmate awake and already gazing out would see us pass. The dispatcher relayed the message that the sheriff's deputies wanted us to slow down but keep coming. I was relieved as this suggested that any injuries would likely be minor.

We only knew we had found the wreck when a deputy waved a flashlight beam at us as we approached. The emergency lights of the squad cars had been uncharacteristically turned off. The deputies stood on the road-

side where a red pickup truck had crashed into a solitary tree. This tree stood out as the only tree amongst farm fields. A grave-looking deputy advised Jeff to extinguish our lights and he pointed towards a farmhouse a quarter of a mile away saying that was the family's home. He said, "The kid is dead, but I thought you guys could just check him anyway."

Having no idea of how to behave in this situation, I followed Jeff's every move. As we approached the truck another deputy called out that the hood was cool. I thought it very clever that he used this as evidence that the collision had occurred some time ago. The lone occupant looked to be my age, and he was leaning against the passenger door with his blonde head partially out the open window. I would have thought he was asleep if he hadn't already been introduced as dead. A deputy held a driver's license and read the name. I recognized it but had to stare at the photo to place him in my high school graduating class.

I did whatever Jeff did: felt his torso for warmth, checked for a pulse, shined a light at his pupils, cool, absent, fixed. We all stood and looked toward the farmhouse. A rectangular light was now showing, and we watched for activity. I struggled to match the dead boy with the live one. My only memory of him was in ninth grade, apparently provoked only by my vulnerability, he struck me on the back of the head so hard my eyes watered. This night, I searched my chest and throat for grief but could find none. I could find no emotion, only the sensation of weakness in my limbs as I began

to imagine the dead boy's father, an older version of his only son, coming to the scene to confirm his dread and striking me in a rage.

The deputies murmured amongst themselves like sober relatives at a wake. I felt their anxiety, as they appeared to be stalling for time. They were preparing, though I didn't know how, to unhinge the young man's parents. I was glad to escape the scene as two of the deputies drove off to the house.

A behind-the-scenes ride that is sometimes funny, sometimes frightening, but always heartfelt.

Ride along with the calm and measured paramedics of 1980s ambulance work as they navigate speed and gore. Chronicled are the memories of a boy who followed the sirens' call into manhood utilizing grit and imagination to overcome hidden deficits. *Ambulance Man* is the sometimes funny, sometimes frightening, but always heartfelt story of a young man's entry into ambulance work.

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– Kyle Keller, psychotherapist



BRIAN CASEY grew up in Stillwater, Minnesota and earned a degree in Health Education from the University of Minnesota. He has spent his entire adult life working as an EMT, paramedic, EMS educator and police officer. Casey is also the author of *Good Cop, Good Cop: A Get Healthy, Stay Healthy Guide for Law Enforcement*.

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