I

In the Neuro/Trauma ICU, the patients were arranged like artwork. Statuesque figures projected their sculptured, angular images in a gallery of haloed subjects suspended in animation. Some were conscious, and some were elsewhere. On this particular dreary day in December, I noticed a group of family members—a mother and two daughters—walking past me, crying. Their faces were red with track marks from their tears. The youngest daughter, a teenager, had a decidedly sullen look in her eyes and clenched fists. She grimaced as I walked by her. The trio attracted pity, yet florid fear. What if whatever THAT is happens to me? A cold, icy stillness and panic settled inside my chest. Later, I learned these girls were saying goodbye to their father who had been in an accident and on ventilator support. Their mother, who had long ago divorced him, still cared for him in some way. She was here. The entire family was mourning. This was an average Tuesday in the unit.

As I walked further toward the back corner, I saw nurses joke with each other at the desk. The coffee pot was visible, whirring in a mini-kitchen behind their work area, and occasional smiles and laughter filled their faces. It was a different scene than what was inside each and every patient room, which surrounded the nursing desk. Those rooms had no smiles. They were instead filled with family and friends standing vigil. Identities had been stolen. Personalities robbed. Mothers, fathers and children had become memories of themselves trapped in a personal jail. Somewhere entombed in this museum of bodies were human beings medical teams were desperately trying to rescue. The air was full of frozen emergencies with live or die
moments. No purgatory existed—there was only this very second, and a time in the future where hope lived.

Tucked in the back left corner of the ICU was my grandmother’s room. It was the holiday season. In stark contrast to the rest of the bland, hospital decor, strands of tiny, colored lights saturated the walls above the rest of the hospital’s laissez-faire artwork. I had taped the lights there, as well as randomly tacked some plastic garland over the pictures on the walls in such a way that would have caused cardiac arrhythmias for any interior designer. The room emanated of color and moldy, fake Christmas trees. It was perfect. The archaic, dusty, decorations I had brought from my grandmother’s own boxed up collection had just enough “1980s flavor” in them to take some of the medicinal smell out of the air. The nurses I had become friendly with encouraged me not to quit my day job as a medical student at another institution. “You would never make it as a decorator,” they always said as they walked by. I continued to smile wryly at them. I had spent a about a week getting to know the staff here.

On December 4, my entire world changed. I went from being part of the trauma team, a medical student on my surgery clerkship in Macon, Georgia; to being a recipient of a trauma at a different hospital in the Atlanta area. My grandmother, the woman who anyone could easily describe as a mother to me, fell down a flight of stairs and suffered a subdural hematoma and a 2.5 cm midline shift. My maternal figure who just the previous month was throwing dinner parties and calling me to talk about her day was lying in a bed with a disfiguring, horror-movie-style, blood-covered bandage around her head, endotracheal tube in place, and eyes tightly shut since she became obtunded and was whisked emergently to a life-saving craniotomy. I had rushed to her side from my trauma surgery call at another hospital with the Godspeed blessing of the surgery on-call resident. The irony didn’t escape me. The decorations and the photos of our family that I had carefully arranged in her room did more to pacify my heart than hers. Nurses and other patients’ families dropped in and out as they came to see the ICU room that was decorated for Christmas. It was the only one. Her ICU room became somewhat of a spectacle. We had more family and friends in the room with my grandmother than was allowed every time we visited, which was graciously ignored by the staff. My family listened to her favorite Frank Sinatra songs in silence. Through the melodic choruses, the room was transformed to a time from long ago. A pained look swept across my grandfather’s face as I played “their” song, “Always” by Frank Sinatra. The verses toppled out of laptop computer into our ears with the words impacting each of our breaths. “Days may not be fair, always, that’s when I’ll be there, always. Not for just an hour, not just a day, not for just one year, but always.” My grandparents had danced to this song at my own wedding while all my guests toasted in tribute to their sixty-plus years together. We were torturing ourselves. And worse, we knew it.

My family left the decorations and absurdly-hung garland up until my grandmother was moved out of the ICU to a different hospital—a long-term acute care center. I came and went from her bedside that holiday season as often as I could essentially living in my scrubs coming off calls and moving from being the medical student to the family member—switching on and off like Dr. Jekyll and Mr.
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Hyde. I passed old and new families in various states of emotional disarray who had discovered, like I did, that their life never actually had any grey areas in it to begin with—only black and white. The end points of life were terribly cut and dry after all. We all knew what we wanted and what really mattered. I couldn't alter anyone’s hopes and dreams including my own that Christmas. However, I’d like to think I did the only thing anyone could actually do—play a little music, be a tad bit of ridiculous, offer a hint of determination, and celebrate hope with a few tiny, colored lights.

Epilogue

My 86-yr-old grandmother transitioned from the Neuro/Trauma ICU to a long-term acute care hospital. We were told she would never wean from her ventilator and survive breathing on her own. Through aggressive patient advocacy, a firm commitment to restoring her life, and the grace of God, she recovered. She transitioned to a nursing home then an assisted living home and finally, to her permanent home with my grandfather at my aunt and uncle’s house. My childhood home where I grew up was sold. The sadness of saying goodbye to the life they had and all my childhood memories was abated by the miraculous recovery of my grandmother who today is free from all tubes or breathing assistance, walks with a walker, and is cognitively recovered well enough to laugh, love, remember and encourage all of us. Her neurosurgeon pronounced her a miracle and said she was the first case he’s seen in his over 20 years of practice that had merely just survived such a severe injury. This October 2013, she and my grandfather celebrated 70 years of marriage.