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# The Angel in The Hallway

INDIA CARLSON

February 29th, 2016

I'm standing in a hallway right outside the first floor chapel in Washington Regional Hospital. My arms are folded across my chest with each hand tucked under an armpit securely, yet somehow also squirming – I'm not sure why this is reassuring, maybe because it feels somewhat like a hug? It feels secure? The hallway is cold, and this helps a little? I don't know. The fluorescent lighting overhead feels overwhelming, almost blinding, and everything is so...white. So sterile. There is no one in the hallway, but I can hear faint chatter from people in the emergency room waiting room down the hall and around the corner. There's a slight high pitched noise in my left ear that won't go away. At the end of the hall, there is a small end table in the corner with a large grey vase filled with plastic greenery inside, the only decoration and visible color.

My back is firmly planted against the wall. My heart is racing. I look down at myself and feel a little embarrassed. I am wearing my mom's red Smashing Pumpkin's t-shirt that she procured in the 90s, when she was about 17 years old. It has a green fortune teller lady on the front, surrounded by an oval-shaped blue backdrop. The logo is faded in all the right places, that perfect vintage concert tee look. She passed it onto me when I turned 17. It has that soft, worn-in-yet-thick, cozy feel to it that I love. It's one of my go-to shirts when I need something to throw on or something comforting to wear. I look down at my jeans, and they aren't clean. There's faded dirt marks on the knees. My shoes are essentially

house shoes, and they actually broke while running across the hospital parking lot. The sole on my left foot separated from the top of the shoe, and while my foot is still covered, the sole now awkwardly slaps the hospital tile when I walk, so that is embarrassing. My hair is tangled. I have smudged eyeliner under my eyes from the night before and from all the crying I had done that day. I was in such a rush; I wasn't even wearing a bra. It was mid-afternoon, but I hadn't had a chance to shower that day. We were deep cleaning the house, and I was in charge of bathrooms. I planned on showering after I was done handling bleach and cleaning toilets, and why shower twice? I had no idea that this would happen, that I would need to just grab whatever clothes I could, that I wouldn't have time to shower, that I would end up here, in the hospital hallway, fidgety and unsure with what to do with myself.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I jolt at the sensation. It was a text from one of my Aunts:

*Any updates?? Your mom isn't responding to me...hang in there...*

There weren't any updates. I hated to be the one to say it; I didn't want to believe it, but here we were. None of this felt real. It can't be; these things don't happen in my family. Certainly not to Eden. Not smiley, sweet, innocent little Eden. I must be dreaming, right?

Another text, this one from a different Aunt:

*Are you guys at the hospital now? Are all your*

*brothers there? Kristal just told me she's with Eden. Praying so hard for a miracle. Wish we could be there.*

I didn't want to answer questions. I didn't want to do anything. I just wanted to stand there and process what I had just been through, what I just had to do. I start looking around me as if I'm looking for someone with the answers to the questions I'm being asked. Can't anyone take this from me, at least for a little bit?

Though I know the answer, I've always known the answer. Being the oldest of five children, and the only girl until right before I turned 18, when Eden joined the family, it was expected that I help a lot with the house and with my three younger brothers. Especially after Eden, the baby sister was born. She was the perfect surprise, and we couldn't imagine our family without her, but due to the 11 year age gap between Eden and the next oldest sibling (my youngest brother) - my parents were essentially new parents all over again, and my mom was on bed rest for a little while after Eden's birth. I became baseball mom, chef, acquirer of groceries, chauffeur, and maid of the house overnight. All while attending my second year of college and, taking 12 credits (I started when I was 16), and working two jobs. I was used to the expectations, the extra grind, the extra weight. This might be too heavy for me to carry, though; I could already tell.

Hot tears stream down my face, and I angrily brush them away and start pacing. I don't know what to do with myself. I don't want to go back into the chapel, though I know I shouldn't stay in the hallway for much longer.

I stop pacing suddenly, and press my back against the wall. I am so beyond tired. I allow myself to slide down the wall until I am fully sitting on the cold, hard, sterile-white floor. Normally it would have grossed me out. Hospitals in general weird me out, but I don't care. My brain feels like what a television looks like when it goes static – all you can hear is that scratchy, deafening white noise, and all you can

see are scrambled pixels, sometimes just black and white, sometimes with color. I feel like I am crawling out of my skin. I am exhausted, yet also feel like I could run one hundred laps around the perimeter of the hospital and still have energy to burn.

"Hello, what was your name again?"

I snap back to reality. Standing above me was an older man, I would guess maybe in his late 60s or early 70s, wearing green scrubs with a short white jacket over it. Prominently embroidered on the left side pocket were the words "Emergency Department Volunteer" in dark purple lettering. He had curly gray and white hair, honestly a surprising amount of thick hair for a man his age, and a tanned face with kind eyes. His hands were clasped behind his back, and he was leaning forward slightly in an attempt to get down to my level. I hadn't even heard him walk down the hallway, the first sign of life I had seen in my short time out here. He was the one who escorted my brothers and I from the busy ER waiting room to the more secluded and private chapel a while ago; I'm not sure how long it's been. Time seems mostly irrelevant right now. He was nice. I'm not sure what his role actually is, but he seems more important, knowledgeable, and involved than a normal volunteer. He was acting as a messenger between us and any news that came about Eden or from my parents. For all I know, the "volunteer" label on his jacket could be an inaccurate description of what his role actually entails.

"Oh, hi. I'm India. I'm Eden's big sister. Sorry, I can go back into the chapel..." I said nervously, my voice shaking a little. He offered me a hand to stand up.

"Oh no, you are fine! I just wanted to ask, it's easier when I know names. I like to address people by their names. India is a very pretty name, I like it. You and your siblings have some great names."

I take his hand and stand up. I can tell he wants

to talk to me about something.

“Thank you. Have you seen my parents? Do you know anything?” I ask.

“No, nothing new. Though I was just with them. They’re doing everything they can to help her, the fervency and love in that room from the nurses and doctors is palpable, let me tell ya. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

This was comforting to hear, somewhat at least. I don’t know what to say to him. My mind is drawing a blank on any conversational points I could bring up. This wasn’t exactly the appropriate situation to ask chit-chatty things like “how’s the weather?”

“Eden is the youngest in your family, correct? And you are the oldest?” he asked, gently smiling. His voice was deep and soft, yet comforting.

“Yes, she was born a little under a month before I turned 18. She will be 2 next month at the end of March, I’ll be 20 on May 1st. She was a miracle baby, my parents didn’t think they could have any more kids, though they had always talked about wanting another. We were all so surprised when we found out my mom was pregnant.” I am surprised at how much answer I offered his simple question. He is still standing there, hands clasped behind his back, smiling, slowly nodding, and attentively listening. I just let myself keep talking, and before I knew it, I was rambling. My mind still felt blank and scrambled, but the words came so easily to me like they were just bursting to come out of my mouth.

I went on to recount what had happened that day. It was Leap Day. We were spring cleaning. I was in charge of my room and several bathrooms in the house. I had finished the bathrooms, and I was working on my room. Door closed, music on. My two youngest brothers, my mom, and Eden were downstairs. August, the sibling right under me in age, was at high school basketball practice at Fayetteville High School. It was his senior year, and he was a star player. My dad was

at work in Bentonville. I was just about to take a quick shower.

I wandered downstairs to get a glass of water. My mom ran into me in the kitchen, and frantically asked if I had seen Eden recently. I had not. Her eyes widened and she immediately shouted, “Okay, EDEN IS MISSING. EVERYONE START LOOKING. NOW.” My heart dropped.

“What do you mean she’s missing? What’s going on? Who was watching her?” I half asked, half shouted back. No answer; she was already running to the other end of the house. I see one little brother, Canyon, run one direction. I see the other, Roman, run the opposite direction, fervently searching. I looked to my right and saw the door leading to the garage, and through the window in the door, I could see the garage door was open. Could she be out there?

I ran outside, barefoot and still wearing my pajamas. I start shouting Eden’s name, searching the yard for her mint green shirt with dragonflies on it and the tiny pigtails she had in her hair the last time I saw her. Nothing.

I started to turn to go back inside when I heard a shriek pierce the air. The shriek of my mother, the sound no mother should ever have to make. The sound no child should ever have to hear. The sound that will forever be ingrained into my memory.

I look across the backyard to the opposite end of the house, where the indoor pool room stuck out a bit into the yard. The house was older, and it had an indoor pool, an unusual quirk for a Northwest Arkansas home, a quirk that convinced my parents to choose this home in the first place. It had floor-to-ceiling windows and sliding glass doors covering the majority of three of the walls to that room, and through those giant windows, I could make out the silhouette of my mom.

Reaching into the pool.  
Taking something out.  
*No.*

I immediately knew what had happened. No. No no no. I run inside and see my mom enter the main house with Eden limp in her arms, water dripping everywhere. “CALL 911!” She shouted, her face flushed and her voice cracking. My brothers were both screaming and panicking. I didn’t stop running; I ran straight upstairs to my room, where my iPhone 4 was charging on my nightstand. I dialed 911 so quickly that I don’t even remember pushing the buttons, and flew down the carpeted stairs so fast I slid across a few, but miraculously did not fall all the way.

“911, what is your emergency?”

“Hi, um, my...daughter?...drowned and she isn’t breathing. Wait, she’s not my daughter, she’s my sister, sorry I don’t know why I said that. I don’t have any kids. I’m only 19, I’m too young for that. She’s not even 2. We live at...” and I gave our address. She asked a few clarifying questions on location, then asked what Eden’s condition was. My mom had laid Eden down on the carpet in the den, which was straight down a short hallway from the front door. She was performing CPR. I told the 911 operator this. I transferred to speaker phone, and she began to coach my mom through the proper CPR steps. I slid down to my knees, right next to Eden’s head, held the phone with my right hand, and held her tiny legs steady with my left so she wouldn’t shift around so much during the chest compressions. She was so small, and so cold. How did this happen? Was this real? My brothers were at Eden’s feet, crying and pleading with her to wake up.

“We love you, Eden.”

“Please wake up baby. I love you. Please, please.”

Mom had tears streaming down her face. She was hysterical, understandably, as any mother would be in this situation. At one point, she paused CPR because she just couldn’t keep going. I threw down the phone and continued the CPR for about 20 seconds while mom com-

posed herself. I had no tears. My mind felt still, and sharp. It was clear. I felt eerily calm. I knew exactly what needed to happen. Mom continued the CPR again.

I looked at my brothers, and thought they should not be seeing this. I said Canyon’s name, but he was mentally checked out, obviously entrenched in absolute grief and shock. He was 15. He wouldn’t even make eye contact with me. I said Roman’s name, and his brown eyes immediately locked with mine. He was more present. He looked scared. He was barely 13. I instructed him to grab Eden’s diaper bag, make sure she had a few diapers and a change of clothes in there, and to set it by the front door. He immediately stood up and ran off to complete his tasks, his shaggy blond hair bouncing a little with each step. About a minute later, he came back. I then told him to grab mom’s shoes for her, and also put those next to the front door. After that, he needed to find her phone and bring it to us. He did both of those things in no time. Finally, I told him to get his own shoes on, keep the front door open, and wait on the porch for the ambulance; they should be here any second. Shout when you see it. He did so without question; I think he was happy for an excuse to step away and help in some way.

Apparently, it was only a few minutes between me calling 911 and paramedics arriving, but it felt like at least half an hour. When paramedics arrived, I told the 911 operator that they were there and hung up. At least three paramedics that I could remember at least rushed into the house, immediately took over from my mom, and instructed us all to take a step back and give them space. They pulled out a few small machines and started hooking them up to Eden. They ripped her dragonfly shirt off; she was just in her pool-soaked diaper now.

Everything after that was a blur. All the sudden, reality crashed into me. I was hyper-aware of every sound, every smell, every sensation. My heart was pounding, and my lips and hands felt numb. I was trembling. My mouth was dry. I could smell the pool chlorine mixed with the



citrus candle my mom had lit earlier that day. I remembered how cold, wet, and limp her body felt when I briefly gave her CPR. The carpet was soaked in pool water. The front of my shirt was soaked. My face was wet from tears, though I didn't remember when they started or realized that they had started at all. The beeping sounds from the paramedic's machines were overwhelming. The paramedics were shouting to one another and calling out each action they took. My legs gave out beneath me, and I found myself sitting sideways on the floor next to the dining table, with my legs tucked to my left side and my right elbow still on the table surface. I watched the paramedics buzz around Eden in almost slow motion. A blur of navy blue and black uniforms, latex gloves, and busy hands. One of the paramedics made eye contact with me briefly but just long enough for me to see the horror and absolute anguish in his eyes. I felt sorry for him, sorry that now he too would be traumatized from this event like the rest of us.

I looked at Eden's toys scattered throughout the den, and that is when I truly broke. The tears started falling, and they fell hard and fast. My mind started racing.

*Would she ever play with those toys again? What were we going to do? What even happened? How did she get to the pool room? Wasn't it deadbolted? It's February and the pool heater is broken; we haven't used it in months. There are two baby gates in between her and the pool room door. How did she manage that? She's barely tall enough to reach a doorknob; how did this even happen?*

They eventually loaded Eden into the back of the ambulance, still performing CPR. As soon as they were outside with Eden, I ran upstairs to the bathroom across from my room. I quickly splashed water on my face, wet my toothbrush with some toothpaste on it, and started brushing with my right hand while I undressed myself with my left. I grabbed the nearest clean underwear I could find, jeans that were crumpled on my bedroom floor, my Smashing Pumpkins

t-shirt, and house shoes simply because they were what was closest to me. I rinsed off my toothbrush and my mouth, then threw on the clothes I had gathered as quickly as my shaking hands would allow. I ran back downstairs; the boys already had their shoes on and were pacing in the living room, crying, scared, and unsure of what to do next.

I went out onto the front porch, where I was surprised to see an ambulance, two firetrucks, and several police cars littering the lawn and street in front of our house. I was told that they would be transporting Eden, accompanied by my mom, to the ER. I was told to follow them in a separate vehicle with my brothers. I really should not have been driving in the state I was in, but somehow I managed to get us there in one piece – sobbing the entire way.

When we arrived at the ER, the waiting room was surprisingly full for a Monday afternoon. I saw my dad waiting in line to check in at the front desk, and we rushed to meet him. My mom had called him to let him know what had happened, and he had left the office immediately. A nurse escorted my dad to where they had Eden and my mom, but my brothers and I were stopped. We were told we had to wait in the waiting room. We miraculously found three seats together and quietly sat there with tears streaming down our faces, hugging Eden's diaper bag and a few of her favorite stuffed animals. Everyone was staring at us. That is when the nice volunteer man found us and escorted us back to the small chapel.

And here we are.

I stopped talking, shocked that I had gone on for so long. The volunteer man was still standing there, hands clasped behind his back, patiently listening to me and slowly nodding his head. "I am so sorry; I shouldn't have gone on like that." I was embarrassed. I had never spoken so freely like that to anyone before, especially not to a stranger. My chest felt a little lighter, though, so maybe I needed it.

He placed his right hand on my left shoulder and gave a closed-mouth smile. His eyes were glistering. His hand felt comforting and reassuring.

“You are just fine. Eden has a good family. You sure love her lots. I can’t say for sure what will happen here today, but I know everyone is trying their best – you, me, the nurses, the doctors, your parents, God, and all of His angels combined. God bless you, India.” His deep voice cracked as he said this.

I return to the chapel, which was really just a small room with a pew and a few chairs lining the perimeter and several bibles scattered around the room. There was religious artwork on the walls, along with a small wooden cross. Someone had picked up August from the high school and brought him to the hospital, so all of my brothers were there, along with an uncle, aunt, a few cousins, and several leaders from our church. We all sat there in silence.

Eden would be okay. After two hours of CPR, which is unheard of, she would come back to us. Soon after, she would be transferred to Arkansas Children’s Hospital in Little Rock, where a few days later, she would get diagnosed with an anoxic brain injury. We would be told that she would be vegetative for the rest of her life. We would be given no hope. However, my dad would research any possible treatment that could help save his daughter’s brain. He would find it. About two months later, I would travel to New Orleans with my mom and Eden so she could receive hyperbaric oxygen therapy treatments. They would be wildly successful. By the end of that summer, Eden’s brain will have regrown what was lost, and she will be the first (known) person in medical history to have regrown white and gray matter in the brain. Her personality would come back in full force. They would remove her feeding tube. She would speak, eat on her own, and even remember things that happened before the accident, as well as the accident itself and being vegetative in the hospital. The following year, in the summer of 2017,

her medical study will be released to the public, and, by extension, the media. Her story will gain international recognition. Eden will help countless children around the globe receive the same treatments that saved her brain and will open the doors for a new wave of stem cell research. Eden will have some struggles with mobility and fine motor skills, but she is resilient and will have plenty of help overcoming challenges. Because of her accident happening on Leap Day, we would only have to experience the exact anniversary of her accident every four years.

But we didn’t know any of this yet. We were still waiting to hear if the CPR was even working.

I close my eyes tight, and I imagine Eden as a 10-year-old little girl playing on a playground with friends. As a 16-year-old, going on her first date. As a young adult in college. As an old woman surrounded by her posterity. I could see it. I could see her. She was beautiful. She was strong. She was smiling at me with a wise and knowing smile. She was right there in front of me, I could almost touch her. I want so much for her to be real, for her to live.

The door to the chapel swung open, and the volunteer walked in. He looked around the room until his eyes met mine. They were filled with tears. His voice cracked once again.

“They have a heartbeat. She is stable.”

Gasps and cries of joy burst throughout the room. Shortly after, my brothers and I were escorted by the volunteer to a different part of the hospital, where we waited for my dad to join us and decide our next steps. The volunteer wished us well and gently patted me on the shoulder before walking away, off to play the part of guardian angel for someone else in need. I will never forget that kind volunteer, and how he took the time to listen to a ragged young girl lost in a hospital hallway who just needed an anchor for a short while.