

## The Call in the Night



**T**he helicopter disappears into the night as an intense lightning show rips across the western sky. The flight is solemn, except for the steady, ominous drone of the helicopter blades cutting the air. Somewhere below, three impatient friends are hurtling down the highway to find Theo at the hospital. The beautiful mountain scenery retreats beyond the reach of their headlights. Scott Everhart is driving Theo's car, while Eric Sjoreen stares blankly out the passenger window. A cracked cycling helmet rolls around in the back seat, giving in to every curve. In the other car, only the sound of the engine straining against an uncertain, winding road and the bikes rattling against each other in the back of the jeep divert Dan Miller's faraway gaze.

Fewer than twenty-four hours have passed since the group of friends stopped their cars at the top of McClure Pass on the way

to Crested Butte to admire the spectacular sunset and to consider how fortunate they were to be living in such a beautiful place. Long gone, now, is the flush of anticipation on their faces. Plans have changed, and Dan must find the words to tell Theo's parents about what has happened. Dan is Theo's friend and also his work supervisor. Dan invited Theo on the trip and feels responsible.

He stares down at his cell phone and slowly punches in a number. I am sitting on the couch and watching TV when the house phone rings. Only solicitors, the alarm company, and my wife's relatives ever call that number, so I let it go to voice mail. When no one answers, Dan tries a second number, my wife's cell phone.

When Jorja answers, Dan introduces himself as one of the friends with whom Theo had gone riding in Crested Butte. In a quiet tone, he finally breaks the news.

Jorja grabs a notepad brightly decorated with a green-and-blue floral design. She scribbles as Dan speaks:

*Hurt neck -  
flew  
him to Hosp  
St. Mary's  
Grand Junction  
Concussion?  
Couldn't/didn't move feet @  
1st -now better.*

The next thing I hear is a terse "Tim, come here now! Ted is hurt!"

I scramble off the couch and stand in front of her, listening to one side of the conversation as Dan tells her as much as he knows. Jorja wants to know more. He does not have more but

will call again when he does. In the instant it takes to hear the simple “click” of a disconnected call, time hangs for us.

Jorja and I stare at each other. We have no clue what to do next. Do we wait? Do we call someone? Do we book plane tickets? My chest now feels as if I am pinned under a huge rock. My heart is pounding so hard it makes my shirt flutter with every beat. I feel as if I am jet lagged, out of breath from a hard sprint, and sick to my stomach from eating too much pizza.

We rationalize the news might be better than it sounds, maybe just a concussion and a couple of broken bones. Still, Jorja calls Theo’s younger sister, Mae, who is home from college but out with friends. She turns to a friend and says, “It’s my brother. I wonder what he’s done this time.” The tone in her mother’s voice is serious, so she decides to come home. We wait for hours. No news. For hours.

Jorja and I sit on the floor in my study and cry as night caves in on us.

Time is scarce, however, in Grand Junction at St. Mary’s Hospital. It is a short trip from the helipad down the elevator chute and directly into the emergency room on the main floor. Technicians, nurses, and doctors swarm. A scan is ordered, and Theo is whisked off to radiology. The on-call surgeon waits impatiently for the images to be processed. As the pictures tile across the computer screen, he winces. Theo’s neck looks like a derailed train. Joints are jammed together, and the vertebrae are twisted, pinching, but not breaking, the spinal artery. A shard of bone appears embedded in Theo’s spinal cord wall.

The surgeon scans the emergency room schedule. An operating room is open and ready. Coincidentally, his best spinal-surgery team is also on call tonight. His orders set off a flurry of activity. Oblivious to the way conversations pause and

hospital staffers steal glances as he and the attending physician pass by in the hallway, he discusses the complexity of the repair procedure with her and what they are about to tell their patient.

Pushing through the doors into the quiet but brightly lit pre-op room, they find Theo behind a half-closed curtain. A white blanket, fresh from the oven, is neatly draped across his hospital gown. An IV drip port is installed in his left hand, and a bundle of wires monitoring his vitals converge on a set of machines keeping sentinel near the headboard. His cycling clothes have been cut off his body and are in a plastic bag stuffed under the bed. The two doctors pull the curtain closed behind them. No family is there to hold Theo's hand or keep him company. His friends are still a half-hour away.

The surgeon glances at the monitors to check vitals and flips through the chart. Theo's low pulse rate sets off the monitor alarm, and the nurse reaches up to silence it. "I'm in pretty good shape right now," Theo explains. "I'm road biking a lot, and I'm lifting weights, getting myself ready for the snowboarding season. So something in the forties is normal for me." After a brief introductory conversation, the surgeon knows he is dealing with a no-nonsense personality. He gets right to the point. "You have broken your neck. Realistically, you are not going to walk again, but we are going to do our best to make it so that you can get use out of your arms."

Theo takes the news with a steely glare of defiance as the doctor delivers his prognosis. Theo nods his head in understanding, though, and sets his jaw tight to fight back tears. The doctor explains the procedure, asks if there are questions, and slips out to finalize his preparations for the surgery. The attending physician stays behind to keep Theo company. They decide it is time to call home with an update.