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an excerpt of

Asystole

While the fire department extricated our patient from a steaming pile of wreckage a few miles away, my partner Luke and I waited at a baseball diamond in a small-town park hard by the mountains, a grassy expanse scooped out of the peninsula's dense evergreen. The late spring afternoon was hot and dry, and a Little League game was in progress. The game had been suspended while we landed our red-and-white, twin-engine helicopter in a level area of the park; on our final approach the sight of the kids below me, eleven- and twelve-year-old boys from the look of them, made me a little nervous. You can never be sure how well the ground personnel will secure the landing zone, especially in an area like this one, where the fire department is largely volunteer. But the kids had all taken cover in the dugout a good distance away from where we landed, their backs to the dust kicked up by our rotor wash, their hands obediently shielding their eardrums from the roar.

After we shut down and hopped out, the players gawked across the field at the sight of us—royal-blue flight suits, steel-toed boots. We pulled off our helmets. Luke is tall and muscled, and he'd be as blond as a preschooler if he wasn't half-gray. I'm short and dark, with some ancient pregnancy flab straining the long zipper of my flight suit. We both gave the kids a parade queen wave. A couple of them waved back.

Eventually a volunteer with a radio informed us that it would be a while before our patient arrived. Nothing about the situation sounded good. Our pilot told the Little League coaches to continue the game until we had to take off again.

Our ground time was more than half an hour, I realized later when I wrote up the flight from the chicken scratch I'd scribbled on two-inch-wide white tape stuck to the Nomex covering my right thigh. A form of eternity,

that half hour; we aim for ten minutes tops from the time we touch down until we take off again, trying to take advantage of that golden hour after trauma. I kicked at the mown grass as we waited, shrugging my shoulders, watching baseball's small successes—the base hit, the one perfect pitch—and its small defeats—the big whiff, the muffed catch.



I've forgotten the boy's name, though I'm sure his dad called it out to him, over and over. Maybe that seems inhumane. But all of this was three years ago. Many patients ago. Quite a few flights with CPR in progress ago. He was my patient for perhaps forty-five minutes, all told.

What I can say is that I remember the solid muscular weight of him as I carried his stretcher, the long elegant lines of his body. He was a caribou, an elk, a gazelle. I remember his hanks of dark-blond hair, and I do or do not remember that blood was streaked and caked in it. I remember the resignation of knowing he wasn't going to survive; in its way, that felt as heavy as the stretcher. I thought of my own seventeen-year-old, Kieran, who is more of a pit bull: short, squat, and ferociously funny. But that was a dry thought, and it didn't prod me into feeling anything more.