

Fay Jensen

Resuscitation

At 7:05 AM it is cold in Delivery Room C. I'm half asleep at the scrub sink.

"Death Valley," Dennis said last night, "has stars like you have never seen." He wants me to go camping with him and Billy.

I tie the mask up over my cap and scrub quickly. Yellow foam pools in the drain when I rinse my arms. I shiver, and my breath is warm under the mask.

Dennis loves the offbeat. He brought me a meteorite once from somewhere near Lancaster. It is much heavier than it looks because there is iron in it. Meteorites are rare, I've heard.

"Are you the resuscitation nurse?" It is McDonald, the pediatric intern on-call.

"Yes."

"We have a crash C-section for fetal distress."

I know that and McDonald knows me. This is his way of greeting me. I keep rinsing. The soap runs off my fingers.

When I see the meteorite in my living room, I get a warm feeling. Photographed up close it looks like a big black mountain. I thought it was strange when Dennis gave it to me, but I like it now. About camping in Death Valley—"I'd rather," I said, "take a bath in thumbtacks."

I'm awake now. I dry my arms to the elbows and follow McDonald to the infant resuscitation bed. He works the laryngoscope blade up and down maybe three times, to check if the light comes on when he extends it from the handle, then he lays it on the bed. I check the equipment: suction gauge on, oxygen bag connected, catheters ready? We're ready.

The obstetrical team is talking quietly, concern visible above their masks. The obstetrician is between the mother's blue-draped legs. He speaks quickly to the anesthesiologist, who touches a dial and injects something into the mother's arm from a syringe connected there. The circulating nurse is moving fast and I move out of her way. McDonald checks the suction again. His face is red above his mask, and shiny. The baby, according to the fetal monitor, has late decelerations and prolonged bradycardia. We plan to resuscitate.

The mother groans, cries, and there is a gush of water like an upturned pail. And then out comes this dwarf. Of course I cannot see that it is a dwarf at first. At first, I cannot see anything because the drapes and everybody are in the way. I stand on tiptoe to see the obstetrician. His forehead gleams with sweat and everyone over there has stopped talking. I watch the expression in his eyes.

The baby is placed between McDonald and me on the resuscitation bed. Now I see it is a dwarf—small, and blue as the paper drapes. I see that, and something in me folds up like a tent.

McDonald has a little gold loop in one ear. He always wears rubber exam gloves in the nursery, and all the babies get examined by him like that. Once I asked him, "Why the gloves?" He said he wasn't taking any chances. I said I thought maybe he was getting ready to clean the toilet bowl, and everybody laughed—except McDonald. He gave me the blandest smile you could imagine. That smile irritates me.

I stare at his gold earring now, waiting. His eyes dart from the dwarf to the suction gauge to me. The OB team is busy with the mother, and he and I are alone with the baby. He opens the laryngoscope blade and fumbles with the endotracheal tube.

I stand there perfectly still, taking in the terribly small chest, the stunted extremities, the deepening blue color.

"It's a dwarf," I say slowly.

"I see that," he says, and I imagine a bland smile under his mask.

I haven't done anything yet. It's only been a few seconds but I sense he is waiting for me. I'm not frightened. I know how to resuscitate a cyanotic baby. This is—well—a dwarf.

He is already positioning the baby's head.

“Are you going to resuscitate?” I look at him steadily.

“We have to.”

“We do?” I’m staring at the baby now.

“Yes.” But he sounds less certain, and he gives me a long look.

“At least until Dr. Stone gets here.”

Something in me has to be forced, but once I begin I move as well as ever. I hold the head for him. He opens the mouth and inserts the metal blade of the laryngoscope. His hand shakes as he inserts the tube along the track of the blade and into the trachea. When he removes the laryngoscope, I attach the oxygen bag to the tube and squeeze it very fast, but nothing happens. The baby remains blue. McDonald listens to the chest with his stethoscope.

“Let me bag,” he says. I hand it to him, and I listen to the lungs while he squeezes the bag. Nothing.

The anesthesiologist has come over to us now, and he offers to try. He pulls out the endotracheal tube and puts it in again. There are no breath sounds this time, either. The baby’s color is a deep gray-blue.

“Well look at that chest,” the anesthesiologist says, shaking his head. It is abnormally small, bell-shaped, like something kept squeezing it and it never grew to a normal size.

By now I have the heart monitor connected. The heart rate is very low, less than fifty per minute. McDonald tells me to do chest compressions.

“Chest compressions won’t help if you can’t ventilate,” I say.

“Just do it,” he says, and I do.

I compress the chest with my thumb over the sternum, my fingers underneath the rib cage. The line jumps simultaneously on the monitor with each compression. The chest wall is thin and I feel each rib with my fingers. I begin to look at the baby instead of the monitor.

It is a boy. The head is too large and the forehead protrudes so that the eyes almost disappear under the large brow. The feet are malformed on the fat, short legs. I glance at the clock. The baby is more than ten minutes old.

The Chief Pediatric Resident arrives. Her name is Linda Chang. She also tries to insert the endotracheal tube, but the baby’s color remains blue. Several times she says she wishes Dr. Stone

would arrive. While we wait for him, I assist her and McDonald to insert a catheter into the baby's umbilical artery. The anesthesiologist compresses the chest.

Dr. Stone arrives, looking energetic and concerned. He again replaces the endotracheal tube. Again there is no improvement.

"Looks like he may have hypoplastic lungs," he says. Then he laughs—a high, nervous laugh. He always laughs at strange moments. I used to wonder how he could. I still notice it—the way the sound clashes with the efficiency of the delivery room, but I don't wonder any more. It's like McDonald's gloves; I'm used to it.

The x-ray machine arrives. After the films are taken Dr. Stone goes off to read them. The mother has been wheeled out and we have settled into our situation. McDonald gives oxygen, Linda compresses the chest, and I administer drugs through the umbilical catheter. In a while Dr. Stone returns.

"Stop the resuscitation," he says. "The baby has hypoplastic lungs." He is holding the x-ray.

It is as if God has spoken. We stop immediately. But then we stand there awhile looking confused at each other, at the baby. McDonald keeps holding the oxygen bag and rubbing it with his thumb.

"Come see the x-ray," Dr. Stone says, excited. He walks over to the view box and thrusts the x-ray up into it.

The others join him. I don't want to look at it just now. He points out the absence of lung tissue and various other abnormalities.

I touch the baby's forehead. Linda Chang takes a step forward and stands next to me. I realize she has been there and not with the others.

"I really tried," she says in a soft voice that is really a whisper. Her eyes are very shiny.

I watch her for a while and when she doesn't leave, I touch her shoulder. "It's not your fault," I say.

She nods and lowers her head even lower. Then she touches my arm and whispers something that sounds like gratitude, and she joins the others.

There is laughter over there and Dr. Stone's voice rises above

it. The room seems to darken. I can see them in the corner, silhouetted against the whiteness of the view box. They are caught there like an exposed negative—each expression, each turn of the head is frozen in discordant laughter.

I clear away the mess around the resuscitation bed. The mother will want to see him. I give him a bath. His forehead is greasy with white vernix from delivery. Washing his face, I see that the nose is delicate and fine. His chest is bruised from the compressions—ugly, thumb-sized marks. I wonder if I made them.

Beneath him, the drape is stained and wet. I change it for a printed baby blanket. The animals on it are faded. As I begin to peel the tape from his upper lip where the endotracheal tube is held in place, McDonald sees me from across the room.

“You should probably leave that in for autopsy,” he says.

I remind Dr. Stone that the mother hasn’t seen her baby. He tells me quietly that I can remove it along with the umbilical catheter. McDonald starts to argue, but Dr. Stone waves this away, and I can see McDonald watching me as I remove the tube.

I dress the baby for his mother in a shirt and blanket. Only his face shows with the perfect nose.

“I need blood for chromosome studies,” Stone says suddenly.

I ask him why he didn’t get it before I removed the catheter.

“I—forgot it.” Apologetic.

I tell him to get it himself and he does. I can see McDonald watching me again. When they unwrap the baby, I pick up a paper towel and start wiping a counter that doesn’t need it.

After they leave, I fix the baby again and take his picture three times with the Polaroid. One is overexposed and the second is blurred. After dimming a light I hold very still and shoot. That one is good. I set it next to him on the bed and give it to the delivery nurse to give to his mother.

“Thanks,” she says, and she finds it hard to look at me. “Shall I take him to his mother now?”

“Yes,” I say. “We’re finished here.”

At 1:00 PM I am teaching CPR.

“Tell me, nurse,” Mr. Trei interrupts, “If my baby stops breathing, and I do this cardio-pulmonary resuscitation, will I save her—if I am successful—for a longer time?”

He says the words “cardio-pulmonary resuscitation” rather awkwardly. Behind the thick glasses his eyes are red.

“Well,” I say, hesitating, “until the next time.”

“But how do you know there will be a next time? Maybe she will get over—?”

Here his voice breaks. He searches my face for something; then he puts his head on the table, over his arms, next to the plastic resuscitation doll I have been using to teach him.

His shiny black hair is so close to the table. I think about my own breathing and the dull ache up under my eyebrow. In the silence I tell myself that a dwarf was born today, and now I am teaching Mr. Trei how to resuscitate his baby. My eyes are dry, and I wish very much that I could leave. I wish his baby didn’t have Trisomy 18. I wish that I could see Dennis.

“Trisomy 18 is—” I stop, and he looks at me expectantly.

“It is—terminal.” The last word sticks in my throat. We have been over this—the same thing, over and over.

The silence is long, but I cannot think of anything to say. Finally I speak without knowing what I will tell him.

“Mr. Trei, there isn’t anything you or I can do.”

He looks at me, waiting.

“If—if only you could accept that,” I say, but more to myself than to him.

His eyes fill up again and he presses his palms over them and is quiet. I feel like touching him and when I do, he nods, and his eyes are still closed tightly.

“Do—do you want to continue?” He nods. “You don’t have to do this, Mr. Trei.”

“Yes,” he says, “I have to.” So we try it again.

At 3:00 I give report to the on-coming nurse.

“How was it with Mr. Trei?” she says.

I smile at her—the blandest smile I can imagine—and she looks at me strangely. I look at the clock—Dennis will be packing tonight. It is difficult to concentrate.

In Dennis’s apartment, Billy is playing with the camping gear spread all over the living room. I set the pizza box on the counter and offer him a slice.

“Sure,” he says, reaching for it. He is small for six and his jeans

need hemming. I wonder if Dennis will ever hem them.

“Sally, are you coming camping with Dad and me?” He holds the pizza in one hand and continues to rummage through a pile of string and utensils on the floor.

“No, Billy. I’m not coming.”

“Why not?”

Dennis lounges on the arm of the sofa with his legs stretched out. The white t-shirt is tight across his chest and when he folds his arms, with his shoulder muscles tensed, I get a warm feeling from watching him. He’s forty-three—fifteen years older than I am—and maybe he sees this Death Valley trip as a way—

“Dad? Why isn’t she coming?”

“I think she wants to stay home, Billy.”

“Oh. You’d rather stay home?” He rolls his eyes in exaggerated disbelief.

“I don’t like the desert, Billy.”

“But Dad says it’s really neat.” He shrugs and stammers a little, looking confused at me.

“How was work today, Sal?”

“A dwarf was born.” I take another bite, pulling cheese.

The muscles under his t-shirt are moving. I can see them while he packs a box on the dining room table.

“Want to tell me about it?”

He says it so nonchalantly, with such studied casualness, that I laugh.

“No,” I say, watching his shoulder muscles contract, then relax.

Billy tells me about his friend Jake who has a pool table in his house. Jake’s older brother is teaching him to play pool. We roll up his sleeping bag twice and then we play a game of chess, and Billy wins. He takes his queen, laughing, and rolls it in his hand, then he tosses it to the other hand and does the same thing.

After a while Dennis puts him to bed. I can hear voices arguing in the bathroom—one urgent and unhappy, the other firm, amused.

Out on the balcony there are only a few stars, like tiny chips. The trees rustle at the curb a story below. It feels so cool.

“I didn’t expect to see you tonight,” Dennis says, hugging me from behind.

“I was lonely.” His lips are against my neck.

“You didn’t have to let Billy win.”

"I didn't. I'm a lousy chess player."

"Tell me about the dwarf." His voice is close to my ear.

"It died."

"You want to tell me?"

I say nothing, and for awhile we watch the trees moving. I can feel his breathing against the back of my chest.

"Come with us this weekend," he says, sure of himself.

"Yes. I will." I say it so quickly that he laughs, surprised.

"I thought you'd rather take a b—" I put my hand over his mouth and he mumbles the rest under it.

We pack some clothes for me and he gets out another sleeping bag. I know he's wondering.

In bed, I feel him watching me, so I ask him, "Why Death Valley?"

"You'll see." He's so sure of himself.

"You," I tell him slowly, "are really not my type."

"Oh, really?" He bunches his pillow and turns away. Awhile later he turns back to me and his eyes are dark.

"Why did you say that?"

"Well, sometimes you aren't."

"And am I your type tonight?"

"I think so."

He pulls the blanket. "Great." Then he turns away from me and is silent.

I lie there awhile wishing I were in Tahiti, surrounded by lush fruit.

In the morning, Billy sits between us in the pick-up. His head snaps left and right under his blue Dodger cap. He is eating a sandwich and telling us jokes, waiting for us to shake our heads. Later, he falls asleep with his legs against my thigh, his cap still in place and his head on Dennis's lap.

The tan hills and the brush look burnt in the glaring sun, but the sky is very blue, clear. Insects splatter up the windshield, turning it pale brown. Dennis puts Janis Ian on the stereo and the sagebrush smells pungent and sweet and the dust seems everywhere; on the windshield, in my throat, my hair, and clinging to my skin that is alternately wet with perspiration and then dry and sticky from the wind that blows through the open windows. Once we pull off the

road to look at some white flowers that are blooming in patches. My tank top is stuck to my back. It is quiet, and a little frightening—the thought of being alone out here without a truck—in the heat.

Death Valley has sand dunes. When we reach them, I get my Nikon and start taking pictures. The wind is blowing and surely getting in the camera, but I don't care. I pull my cap down and shut my eyes while it blows. When it stops, I feel glad at the sight of the ripples in the dunes. I click the shutter over and over, running up and down the soft hills of sand, sitting in it, feeling my shoes fill up. After a while I stop taking pictures and sit there staring out over the dunes. The patterns near my feet are beautiful—intricate, soft waves of sand—but after a while, I see only the horizon and endless dunes stretching in front of me. I feel a tightness in my throat—something stabbing me. They are beautiful, enormous, an ever shifting scene. I imagine that if I stood still and the wind blew awhile, they would cover me with their lifelessness, effortlessly.

I take a few more pictures. Then Dennis takes some of Billy and me. Billy puts his arm around my hips and giggles nervously for the pictures. We empty our shoes before we get in the truck, but sand seems everywhere after that.

In the late afternoon we reach the salt formations. Their strange shapes and whiteness seem eerie in the glow of sunset. They seem to stretch forever—endless, petrified patterns left behind by some ancient world. Billy runs out far across them, calling to us. Dennis stays with me awhile, then he walks out to Billy.

I start taking pictures, but it is hard to tell the salt formations from the horizon in the deepening colors of the sunset. It is getting dark quickly, and I can barely see Dennis and Billy anymore. I put away my camera, and walk out to them.

When we reach our campsite it is dark. We haul things out of the truck and then we cook the best hamburgers in the world. The coldness of the desert night is a surprise to me. We pull on heavy sweaters and sit around the fire, and Billy asks Dennis a steady stream of questions about the desert.

Later, Dennis and I zip our sleeping bags together and Billy's is a few feet away. He is snoring softly. The cold air chills my cheeks and nose.

When I look up from the sleeping bag and see all those stars, so

huge and bright and quiet up there, I can't believe it. It is the unexpected peacefulness I feel in a church. I feel so small. But it is a good feeling. I'm a part of that velvet, white silence up there.

I feel my body relax next to Dennis, and I can smell him. He smells a little like sweat and dust and the musty smell of the sleeping bag, and there is that smell that is only him. These are comforting, durable smells. Something in me aches when I see those stars, and I feel lost. So I begin to cry, and I can't stop. Dennis holds me against his chest, very tightly, and though I want to feel embarrassed, I can't.

"Tell me about it now." His voice is low.

I talk about the dwarf, and McDonald, and Dr. Stone, and Mr. Trei. They are as one thought, intertwined, not easily unraveled.

"Your job must be very hard," he says at last.

I feel the resonance of his chest against my ear, and the up and down movement of his breathing. His voice fills up my body. I feel so warm, but he keeps holding me tightly, and finally, we fall asleep.

"First light."

Dennis is waking me up. He keeps nudging me until I climb out of the bag and grope for my camera.

"Aren't you getting up?" I ask, shivering in the dark.

"No."

I kick him, fall on him, clutch his hair. The sleeping bag is cold between us. I want to tell him something—something big that will make everything come into focus for us, like a turn of the lens. My throat tightens.

"Thanks, Dennis."

"For what?" He stops struggling.

"You would say that." I straighten and jerk my sweat shirt.

He puts his arms up behind his head. He is waiting.

"What is it, Sal?"

"It—it's everything—and the stars too." I feel breathless and then I kiss him—a long kiss. Meteorites, I've heard, are rare.

I climb the small hill at the edge of the campsite. Maybe ten minutes I wait there, shivering. Now the light comes steadily over the hill. Suddenly the dwarf is there, with Mr. Trei. I click my

shutter. The colors quickly become beautiful. Peach, yellow, orange. "Click," and the sun is higher now. Everything is smaller, reduced in Death Valley, in the shifting dunes, in the starry night, in the morning light. "Click," and again, faster, and the hills are a silhouette against the rising sun. "Click," and then it is over; the sun is above the hills and the desert heat will overtake us soon.