Let Burn

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Published by Michigan State University Press

Wentz, Rachel K.
Let Burn: The Making and Breaking of a Firefighter/Paramedic.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/20684.

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SUDDENLY

Some of the most disturbing calls are those in which the individual is killed instantly. To stand over a body that was, moments before, alive with thoughts, fears, and plans can truly fuck with your head. All that the person once was is now replaced by a vacant emptiness that settles in the pupils following death. These are the calls that burrow into my subconscious, peeking out at the most inopportune moments. Like when I am laughing with friends or trying to fall back to sleep at 3:00 a.m.

Each time I was called to these scenes, I knew what was to follow. We would discreetly cover the body to shield it from curious onlookers, and to escape the blank stares of the dead as we stood by, impotent and silent. We would mill around, kicking debris from the roadway, waiting for the arrival of the medical examiner’s technicians: those poor guys that gather the remains of the dead, neatly packaging them for transport to the cold, metallic tables of the city morgue.

Several of these calls stand out in my mind, ones that were particularly haunting. Like the boy we found several hours after his car had left the roadway and flipped into a ditch. He had been pinned under the vehicle, under the shallow, murky water of recent rains. The only visible sign of him had been a small pale foot protruding from beneath the surface.
Or the young girl who had sped into the night following a fight with her boyfriend, only to slam her car into the back end of a slow-moving street sweeper she hadn’t seen as she wiped the tears of frustration from her face. The boyfriend, concerned for her safety, had followed, only to come upon the wreck and find her crumpled against the steering wheel, her body broken and still.

Or the middle-aged man who was driving his van through a residential street, only to be struck broadside by another vehicle. As the top-heavy van turned onto its side, the unrestrained driver came out of his seat and through the open window, the van landing on his head with a muffled crunch. We found the remains of his brain and large pieces of skull several feet away in the gutter, as onlookers held one hand to their mouths and pointed with the other. But the most disturbing aspect was the unanswered ringing of his car phone. I still think about this scene when I try to reach a loved one and can’t.

These calls have a way of merging into one long, silent movie. They flash before my mind’s eye in grainy black and white, yet I see each scene in fine detail. I hear the sounds that accompanied each call: the splashing of boots in water, the ping of cooling metal. The smells return: those of spilled oil, battery acid, and blood. And as my mind rebuilds each scene, the healthier segment of my subconscious tears them down, replacing them with kinder memories of my years in EMS.