Fall 1987

Black Ice

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Black Ice

He was thrown through the back window of his new Honda when it skidded into an approach road and flipped—43 payments to go, the stereo playing Journey. That much is fact.

The rest I do not know. Maybe a girl he loved went as far as she could before words broke down and left him, alone, talking at a face that offered nothing. Left him to drive the midnight distance from anywhere to anywhere else.

Or maybe he found Jesus, a love so perfect he was unafraid, knowing all others were his fellows, temporarily estranged on a dark planet with a cooling sun, reeling towards an ecstasy of light.

I care but do not know. But I know the car he hit held a father, a mother, five children coming home from a wedding. I kill the siren, leave the lights flashing, move the ambulance to block the northbound lane where the family’s trip is scattered.

Carol is out with the jump kit running through litter of broken luggage, water, oil, glass and gravel before I stop. Initial triage:
First Driver: screaming, possible head injury, probably leg and spine fractures, multiple lacerations (needs to go soon);
Father: mortal wounds to head (forget him);
Mother: conscious, respirations rapid and shallow, probable chest trauma, pneumothorax likely (might go bad quickly);
Girl, about 12: unresponsive, no respirations (do something now!);
Girl, about 9: crying quietly, no apparent injuries (beautiful cheekbones, long blonde hair);
Boy, about 8: conscious with normal respirations, guarding left arm (okay for now);
Girl, about 5: unresponsive, respirations regular but gurgling, maybe blood in airway (needs suction);
Boy, about 2: unconscious and cyanotic, eviscerated bowels—
a bystander screams
and screams. If this is the world, she will not have it. Cannot escape it. So there she is, her throat vibrating like a frog’s leg under an electrode. She screams and screams making it hard to hear the partial quiet of all that can be done.

The oldest girl, between her parents, waits crushed from mid-thigh down beneath the dash. Carol pulls her father, still twitching, out of the way onto asphalt, twists the girl across the seat, cuts her blouse, her tiny bra, begins CPR.

In the back, I slide a pediatric airway into the five-year-old’s mouth, work it down her throat, roll her on her side.

Then lift the baby’s face to my mouth, blow—nothing goes in.

The useless bystander screams, “No! No! No!”

The baby’s intestines are soft and white, no bleeding. No injuries apparent to his chest. With two fingers between his nipples I jab hard four times and he chokes. In his mouth I find what looks like chewed-up hot dog. He breathes deep!

The bystander shifts to a higher key, begins to wail. I glance at her: all dressed up for an evening of make-believe, but standing on a road backlit by ambulance floodlights, trying to outscream the ordinary night.

Michael Umphrey