

What They Said Didn't Matter

Flashing lights. Rushed voices. Frantic beeping. If Scott wasn't still in hypovolemic shock from the cut on his forehead, he probably would be having a panic attack right now. Not for himself or his own condition, of course, but for Lucy. Scott merely had heavy gauze wrapped around his head but all the paramedics and machines in the ambulance were focused on his wife. She still hadn't opened her eyes since the accident.

As the ambulance continued to bump and speed and blare its way towards the hospital, Scott calmed down, though only a little. Scott had been around death before, so he knew what it sounded like. There was always a hectic cacophony as people tried to save the victim, and then there was a sudden silence, a silence that somehow always seemed louder than the ruckus preceding it. But now the chatter from the machines hushed a bit, and so did the paramedics. Scott didn't know what the machines (or the people) were saying, but as long as they were still saying something, *anything*, then that all-encompassing silence could never set in.

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Scott was sitting in the fake leather chair with hard plastic armrests that he had used as a bed for the past couple days. He hadn't left Lucy's side and he didn't plan on doing so anytime soon. Scott fell into a simple routine, simply holding Lucy's hand and staring at her closed eyelids, searching for the faintest flutter of movement. If he got tired of that, he prayed. He ate and went to the bathroom, as any human is wont to do, but he hustled back to resume his bedside post immediately, a diligent sentinel.

The first day or two, Scott was forced to entertain all sorts of visitors that he cared little about. Scott held no malice towards his work friends, his in-laws, or Lucy's book club buddies. They were lovely people that were just trying to check in on Lucy and cheer him up, and deep down, Scott really did appreciate it. But outwardly, he gave no indication of it. No matter who was in the room, Scott didn't speak. Generally, he didn't even glance over to see who had come in. His eyes were glued to Lucy, as if letting her out of his sight for a moment would be the opening through which death could seize her.

Some people tried to distract Scott with small talk about the weather, idle chatter about how the 76ers played last night, or with water cooler gossip. Others guaranteed that Lucy would be up and at 'em in no time, as if they had any clue. A brave few even tried to tell Scott that the accident wasn't his fault, that it surely must have been the other driver who veered across the center line for some unknown reason, especially considering that man managed to walk away nearly unscathed. No one suggested that perhaps the argument Scott and Lucy were having distracted *him*, and caused *him* to drift across those double yellow lines that separate life from death. Of course they didn't say such a thing, for how could they know? Only Scott knew why his wife's life hung in the balance, and if he wasn't ready to talk to anyone about a local basketball team, he sure wasn't ready to divulge what happened. Scott's friends were well-intentioned to be sure but unless they were doctors coming in with an update on Lucy's condition, Scott couldn't care less what they prattled on about.

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After about a week, Scott received a new visitor, and this one was worth looking up at. A medical actuary had come in to "explain the situation" to Scott. The odds of waking up from a coma after the first seven days were slim to none, he claimed, even *with* modern advances in medicine. Anything that could have brought her back had been tried by now and obviously it had no effect. All that was left was to hope for an act of God, which were few and far between these days. Better to pull the plug now and avoid bankrupting yourself.

The man seemed to wait for a response from Scott, and getting nothing but a blank stare, proceeded a little further. He explained that standard procedure nowadays was to raise the prices for IVs and feeding tubes now that this "possible recovery" period had passed. It was all about incentives, he said. The hospital needed to get new patients in and make some money so that they could afford to keep the lights on, he stated. There was nothing sinister about it, this was simply the utilitarian way to run a hospital and provide the most good for the most people. Hospice care might be a bit cheaper, but not in any meaningful way. Scott could keep her here, but only at a great expense to himself that he couldn't possibly sustain, especially since he only had so many PTO days left to use at work. The choice was entirely his.

Scott still said nothing. This cold man and his colder words had cut Scott to the core. They couldn't be right, could they? There had to still be hope. Scott looked at the two doctors accompanying the actuary, with obvious pleading in his eyes. To their credit, they tried to paint a nicer picture than the icy man with the fancy numbers and told Scott that she could still theoretically wake up any day. But Scott was no fool. He read their body language like a mortality table, and what he saw caused all but the faintest flame of optimism within him to die out. The uneasy glance that said "no, you tell him." The subtle shift from foot to foot. The hesitation between phrases. The lack of the previously omnipresent clipboard. Their words said that Lucy was a warrior and that she still had a fighting chance, but their actions showed that they had all but signed her death certificate.

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It had been a few more weeks since Scott had dismissed the actuary and the doctors. He had worked out the numbers, and he could keep her here at least another month. Longer if he mortgaged the house and sold the car. Scott didn't care though. Things were simply things. They could always be replaced, as the old saying goes, but even if they couldn't, they were still worth less to him than his wife. Every good spouse will claim that their love is priceless, but it is much easier to say that than to accept the real possibility of starving to death on the streets if it means a one in a billion chance of saving your other half.

On this particular day, Scott was particularly introspective. He was wondering what his guilt had to do with his recent decision making. If he hadn't been the one to cause all of this, would he feel such a strong urge to make it right? If she had simply fallen down the stairs and hit her head hard, would he go to such lengths to keep her alive? Or did he only need her back for his *own* selfish sake? To give him a chance to say that he was sorry, that he never should have put her in danger like that, that he'd be a better husband this time? How much of him really wanted Lucy back, and how much of him just didn't want to have to live with the fact that he killed his wife? What had they even been arguing over on that fateful night?

By this point, no one bothered to visit anymore. Scott's friends gave up trying to put a smile on his face. The doctors gave up trying to save her. The actuary visited once or twice more, but even he eventually gave up trying to get them out. The only ones who hadn't given up

hope were Scott and Lucy herself, although he was running on fumes and her perseverance wasn't even conscious. Everyone was telling Scott the same thing, that it was time to pack it up and call it a day and cut his losses. But on this day, this blessed day, those words were all rendered moot to Scott, because Lucy's left index finger twitched.

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A month and a half after the accident, Scott and Lucy were out of the hospital and in the park, having themselves a little picnic. It was a tad crowded, but Scott didn't mind; let other people enjoy this beautiful day too! This PB&J he was eating sure beat hospital food as well, so he couldn't be happier.

Lucy was rambling about the book she was reading for her book club, and relaying to Scott some of the drama surrounding how it was chosen in the first place (Sharon abused her power as president, *again*). The old Scott would have rolled his eyes and zoned out to think about basketball. The current Scott was still a little spaced out (he really did need to work on his listening skills), but for a much different reason. He was staring at his wife and just thinking about how much he loved her. He reached over to hold her hand and saw her move halfway to meet him. He brought her hand up to his face and placed it on his cheek, felt the warmth in it, and smelled a combination of coconut lotion and grass. He watched her mouth move, heard the sweet song of her voice come rolling out, and let it wash over him like a wave. Eventually, Scott couldn't contain himself anymore; he reached over and gave her a kiss. Lucy blushed a bit, surprised partially because she was mid-sentence and partially because Scott had never liked PDA before.

For the rest of the day, Scott and Lucy kept chatting. They didn't talk about the accident. They didn't talk about finances. They didn't talk about their friends and what they all had "recommended" to Scott when Lucy was still in the coma. Everything they said was frivolous and trivial but filled with love. If you asked them only an hour later what they talked about at the picnic, they probably wouldn't even remember. But most importantly, they were talking *together*, and that was the only thing Scott cared about.

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