

## **The Princess and the Pirate**

*John Becknell*

Tonight I am balanced over the broken and bleeding body of a young woman in the back of the ambulance. Lying on the stretcher, she does not respond to my voice nor does she flinch when I press a snow white bandage against a jagged gash in the smooth white skin of her upper arm. It is not the bleeding of the arm that worries but her unshakable silence. Something – perhaps a small cluster of burst blood vessels within the cranium – is crowding out consciousness and pushing her toward the other world.

The driver of the other vehicle sits at the head of the stretcher in a small cramped seat. The young woman's head is nearly in his lap but he will not look at her. He too is dying, but his death is of a darker sort. It was his huge fat-tire pick-up truck that roared through a dark country-road-intersection and slammed into her small Toyota, ripping it nearly in two. A band of gauze circles his long greasy hair and dips down over one eye like the patch of a pirate. His injuries are slight: a cut on the head, a few bumps and bruises, a bit of glass in the eye. Alcohol has dulled his pain. His good eye darts about the small space of the ambulance but he will not look down. With a growling voice he keeps repeating, "I didn't see her. I just fuckin' didn't see her."

She is but a girl, yet her ghostly white body, lying still with shirt torn open and chest exposed, blooms with womanly promise.

With stethoscope hooked in ears I listen carefully to her breathing. The ambulance is quiet and has not yet begun its journey to the hospital. The sound of her breath, a quick back and forth swipe of sandpaper, frames the rapid bumping of an uncountable heart beat. As I slide the stethoscope bell up the fields of the thorax to the neck I hear the ominous rattle of moisture. Quickly I push aside the oxygen mask, grasp her chin, and from a wall mounted suction machine snatch a clear tube, slide it into her mouth and past the small plastic airway that lifts her tongue. As the tube descends into her throat, it gurgles and jumps and a bright frothy jet of blood loops through the tubing and splatters into a clear plastic jar near the pirate's head.

"Jesus Christ," he mutters. "I gotta get out of here. I'm going to be sick." I free a hand and pull a small vomit pan from the cabinet beside him and set it on his knee. He knocks it away with a tattooed arm and tries to rise, but the seatbelt keeps him pinned.

"Look, I can't take this," he blurts out. "It's my fault. I was drinking – they tried to stop me from driving. But I just didn't see her." He strains to get up, clawing at the belt. "God damn-it! How do I get out of

this thing?" I continue suctioning until the gurgle clears into a fine tight hiss of clean air.

"Come on," he pleads as I replace the oxygen mask and hang up the tubing. "I'll go with the cops. I can't sit here and watch this girl-," his voice breaks off. He cannot sit there and what? Watch her die? He resists the image and the word.

The seat belt clatters to the floor and the pirate lurches to his feet ready to hoist sail and run. I do not stop him.

He lunges for the side door of the ambulance and then doubles over. He heaves and clutches his gut. His neck and chin stretch forward and mouth agape, he retches and vomits onto the floor just as the ambulance jerks into motion.

With one arm I push him spitting and wiping back into the seat where he buries his face in his hands. The ambulance pitches and rolls around a corner and picks up speed as the siren yelps to life. He grabs for something to hold and looks at me in one-eyed panic. Then another wave of nausea bends him over.

I wrap a blood pressure cuff around the girl's uninjured arm and pump the bulb until the Velcro crackles. As the air bleeds off I watch for the bounce in the gauge needle's slow descent. Lower and lower it dips until there is a slight flick of movement. I re-inflate the cuff – this time using it as a constricting band to look for a vein. She needs fluids. But as the cuff tightens I notice the arm stiffening and the hand contract into a fist. I glance at the other arm. It too is stiffening and contracting and like a swordsman beset on both sides I'm now fighting two killers – shock and a progressing head injury. One needs the hyper-ventilation of oxygen, the other needs fluids fast. I yell to the front of the ambulance for Sandy's help. She kills the siren and starts to brake. But as the ambulance slows, my perception of time's passing quickens. The only real hope for this girl is in an operating room 30 minutes away. So I yell again and ambulance leaps forward and the siren winds up.

In the mere two-handed management of multiple system injury there are no easy decisions. I lunge at the injured brain first by grabbing tools and tubes and dropping to my knees. I scoot around to the head of the stretcher shoving the pirate's legs to the side and against the wall. He does not protest and I try to ignore the sour smell and wet of his vomit sloshing against my knees. I focus on the tender life on the stretcher before me and in an odd dance with suction, masks and tubes, I begin to force oxygen into the girl's lungs – something the injured brain desperately needs. I place a black oxygen mask over the girl's nose and mouth. And then while holding the mask firmly in place with both hands – fingers hooked beneath her jaw – I bend down and use my chin to trigger a button on the top of fat green oxygen valve connected to the mask. Pressurized oxygen rushes through the girl's nose and mouth and into her lungs overpowering her own breathing. It's a simple procedure. An improvement

from mouth-to-mouth but it's a three handed job and I need two more hands to start the IVs and stop the shock.

I scoot back to the side of the stretcher keeping both hands on the mask, and while continuing the odd button pushing bow, I poke the pirate with my elbow. "I need your help," I say. He leans back as far as he can. But the ambulance is too small for separation. He makes no move to help, and when I glance at him between ventilations I see he is stiff with resistance and will not look my way.

"I need your help." I say louder and now more demanding knowing full well it is but a request.

"I can't," is his flat reply. He finds an inch and moves back further.

"Give it a try. It's not difficult," I say continuing to hold the mask and trigger the oxygen with my chin. "Just watch what I do."

"God damn-it, I can't do it," he yells, hiding his face in his hands. "You think I did it on purpose? I didn't see her."

And now I believe him. He is quite literally incapable of touching the girl because he did not see her then, and will not see her now. To wreck, maim and steal from another's treasure is easier when borne with eyes patched and closed. And yet here lies the paradox – the shattered bottle of our own breaking oft contains the elixir of life. We just don't see it.

But none of that matters. What matters is that I see the fleeting precious young life in the crucible before me: head crowned with the immobilizing strap from the spine board; long brown hair jeweled with tiny shards of broken glass; eyes, so recently shining, now mercifully curtained; tender lips waiting to laugh away mask and tubes – and I grow the needed hands and burst into action. As I pull needles and tape from a shelf and begin to tear strips of tape, I offer the pirate a suggestion – more benediction than absolution. "Before we get to the hospital, take a look at her," I say. "You might be glad you did."

I give three rapid ventilations and quickly jump to the girl's arm and pump the cuff. I jump back to the head and give three more ventilations and then to the cabinet for a bag of IV fluid and a tubing. I tear open the package with my teeth and with knees bent to sway with the turns and bumps I bleed the fluid through the IV tubing and jump back to the girl's head.

Three more breaths and back to the girl's arm. I go for an obvious vein just above the wrist on the medial side of the arm. The vein wilts before the needle and I hit nothing. I jump back to her head for more ventilations and then back to the arm. This time, rather than look, I feel my way around the arm to the antecubital fossa, the tight anterior hollow in the fold between upper and lower arm, the phlebotomist's veins. The stiffening and contracting of the arm from the head injury makes the maneuver difficult. It's clear the girl's time is moving faster than the ambulance. Suddenly, I feel the springy, tubular rope of the vein and with one thumb I pull down on the skin below that rope. With a long catheter

sheathed needle between thumb and index finger of the other hand, I pierce the skin. Again, the vein wilts and I pull back slightly and adjust my aim. And just as I start to advance the needle, I suddenly hear a whoosh of air and feel the girl's chest beside my hand rise. I cannot take my eyes off the needle but my heart skips a beat and a tingling chill runs down my sweaty back. Another whoosh, and then suddenly there is a flash of dark blood from the needle as I pierce the vein. I connect the tubing and twist open the clamp amid more whooshes of air. Then I look up and behold a transformation.

With both hands cradling the girl's face and holding the mask the Pirate is leaning over her head. His good eye is open wide, streaming tears as he looks down upon her, and every few seconds he bows toward the body he has broken and delivers a breath.