

Please read this fantastic piece by AV Paramedic "Emma".

SEVEN SHADES OF SAVING GRACE

One of life's most fundamental truths is that everybody wants to be understood. In the seven years I've spent working as one of Victoria's highly trained advanced life support paramedics, I've never felt as compelled to chronicle my experiences as I do now. Last night, myself and a colleague (who has over 25 years experience on his jacket) found ourselves in the familiar position of being forced to work incidental overtime for a service struggling to meet public demands. Both extraordinarily tired and missing our families, I was caught by the simple beauty of the conversation we had entered. Despite working for a service that consistently exploits our good will, we still acknowledge that we are blessed. This blessing falls squarely outside the parameters of being overworked and underpaid, of being denied any kind of work/life balance and being pushed to the point of dangerous fatigue. We acknowledge that we are blessed because we truthfully love what we do. We come to work, and we still feel thankful for the opportunity to bring a little light into the dark. So here is my offering, seven of my many fixed memories from my time in service; one for every year I have spent in uniform, hoping that one day things will change for Victoria's paramedics.

BACK OF THE BUS: We are called to an elderly man at a bus-stop who has taken a tumble trying to board a public bus. His injuries are superficial, but he's intoxicated and deeply embarrassed to have lost his footing in front of such a large audience. I take his hand and we move somewhere more private to talk. Jerry* is an alcoholic who lives pension to pension and after years of struggle, he has lost the support of his family. Despite much coaxing from myself and my partner, this patient refuses further assessment at hospital. Rather than bundle him back onto the bus, we drive Jerry home to his small commission flat and settle him inside. We check he has food in the fridge and then visit with his neighbours, who kindly agree to check in on him throughout the day and call us back at any time if they become concerned.

ICE AGE: At Melbourne's holding cells, the police department have requested paramedic support for a drug affected man who has been arrested for allegedly assaulting his girlfriend in the presence of their two young children. Once back in the cells, his rage continues and we are once again reminded that the 'ice epidemic' is alive and thriving. Incited by what we assume is a drug-induced psychosis; he has bitten off his own finger and written on the walls with the missing digit. Blood on the wall conveys his simple message; 'I'm sorry'. After all negotiations fail, he is subdued by the Critical Incident Response Team, and chemically sedated by my partner and myself. As somebody who abhors violence, I am deeply confronted by the ugliness of this situation and yet still, I treat my patient with the respect that many would profess he doesn't deserve. I leave work shattered, but somehow proud.

KARMA: Miles* is a sixty year old with Motor Neurone Disease. The nerve cells that enable him to move, speak, breathe and swallow are rapidly degenerating and dying. After falling out of his wheelchair, he crawls for a full hour to reach the phone and call 000. Because Miles has no priority symptoms and resources are stretched, he spends the next two hours lying alone in his own saliva. He is such a proud man and I know how humiliated he feels to be found on the ground in his soiled clothes. I clean and dress him while my partner prepares a wheelchair to transport him outside to the ambulance. What follows is the most incredible display of determination; Miles asks for his leg splints and we spend the next forty minutes helping him walk the six metres it takes to reach our stretcher. He tells me he thinks that his

suffering is some kind of karmic justice. I don't believe him; I can't believe that the world spins on such a cruel axis. But now, whenever I think of karma, I think of Miles.

LIFE CYCLE: It's an extraordinarily rare thing to bear witness to the finality of death and the miracle of life in a matter of hours. We respond to an elderly woman in complete cardiac failure, who is unable to speak due to the volume of fluid drowning her lung fields. A veteran paramedic, my partner Cole* is a kind and gentle spirit. We prepare to take our patient on what will be her final trip to hospital. As I'm driving, I listen to Cole ask the woman about her end of life wishes. He asks her to indicate that she understands she is dying, and is rejecting all resuscitation attempts. She understands, and is ready to pass. Cole holds her hand and comforts her, and by the time we arrive at hospital, she is gone. After completing our paperwork, our next dispatch is to the birth of a beautiful baby boy. We watch the new father hold his child for the first time. He is in deep love. We leave our fourteen hour night shift confronted and exhausted, having just witnessed the most private of all moments.

CHICKEN TERIYAKI: We save lives. In fairness, it doesn't happen often. But when it does, it's absolutely extraordinary. It's another night shift, and I'm working Melbourne city with a fairly junior paramedic. We're wolf-like hungry and trolling Swanston Street for a meal when we are dispatched to an unconscious fifty-year-old man. Dinner on hold, we pull up outside the location and as we cut the ignition, the job is upgraded to a cardiac arrest. With no time to prepare, we enter the restaurant and take over CPR from brilliant quick-thinking bystanders. While diners concentrate on their chicken teriyaki, we restart the patient's heart with a defibrillator and later assist MICA with advanced resuscitation practices. We visit the man two days later and are told by intensive care doctors that he is expected to make a full recovery. My partner and I congratulate each other on the win. And then we laugh - it appears that even in the face of absolute chaos hunger reigns. We remind ourselves to try their spring rolls some day.

BREAKING: Evil exists. I know that it does. Sara* is thirteen years old and fractured from years of childhood sexual abuse. Her family offenders in jail, she now lives in department housing and is cared for by a team of people who acknowledge that hers is one of the worst cases they have ever seen. What happened to her is private, and I could never in good conscience reveal the details. But I can say that it's one of the rare jobs that have twisted my sleep into a series of violent nightmares. We are called to care for her during a psychotic break - she is naked and has covered herself in her own excrement. She believes she is an animal, and cries out like a cat, scratching and biting to protect herself. When I leave work that night, I drive in circles and I cry. I feel pain in my chest and I feel lost. I still remember the song that was playing on my stereo. "So I keep watch, and you keep breaking, breaking formation to become someone else. And your eyes become corridors, where I wander, with a candle, calling out to you..."

DEATH BY INGROWN: There is joy and there is humour in every day. We are dispatched on a code one (highest priority, immediate life threat) to a woman having an anaphylactic reaction from what she thinks is a spider bite. Lights and sirens on, we negotiate peak hour traffic to get to our patient quickly and safely. En route, we calculate our drug dosages and revisit our anaphylaxis guidelines so that we can care for our patient efficiently and productively. Once arrived, a fit and healthy thirty-year-old woman greets us at the door. We ask her to lead us to our patient, and she looks confused. Oh, right, she IS the patient. She undoes her jeans, and promptly de-pants, only to reveal the tiniest of all ingrown hairs. I reassure her that she is in fact, not dying and we discuss the benefits of regular exfoliation

over a cup of tea. Yep, I save lives.

So there you have it, my own stream of consciousness. Just a small offering, but one that I hope provides a little insight into the climate we work in. The Victorian ambulance crisis is very real.

We are indeed underpaid and we are continuously overworked to the point of fatigue. I watch while my colleagues struggle daily, working in conditions that insult their incredible dedication to the job. Many are looking for a way out, knowing that if things continue as they are they'll be forced to leave this challenging, but incredible life of service behind.

This election, vote to fix the ambulance crisis.