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Writer/s: [Ross Murray](#)

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There are sayings that go around the ambulance depot periodically. Get hard. Get tough. Stay focused. I've been telling new recruits these things for years, and I'm not even a veteran. I can describe the job in one word—extremes.

My first week on the job was the quietest for years, Greg and Janey told me. We only had one call out for the whole week—a middle-aged woman who thought she was having a heart attack. Turns out she was what the others knew as a 'regular'.

The scene goes like this. She calls up and says she thinks she's having a heart attack. When we get to the house, there she is flat on her back on the lounge, full make-up on, one leg hanging off, a pale pink satin dressing gown falling open at the thigh revealing a distinct lack of underwear.

I go over to check her vitals and as soon as I touch her neck she immediately comes round with a jump and an 'Ohh!' Wrapping her arms around my shoulders, her fingers gripping harder than death, she stares around the room, astounded, and exclaims 'I'm alive! Ohh! I'm alive!!'

She puts her hands on both sides of my head, clamping me. 'Ohh, thank you!', she gasps, proceeds to plant a huge kiss on my lips then pushes my head right between her exposed aging breasts. 'Oh God. Thank you! You saved my life!' Instead of following me into the house, Greg and Janey had waited outside, looking through the window. When they finally came after subduing their giggling fit she was trying to push my hand between her thighs.

'Feeling better, Mrs. Hayden?' Greg innocently enquired.

Mrs Hayden quickly covered herself as best she could. 'Oh, yes, thank you, Greg.'

Greg and Janey checked Mrs. Hayden's vital signs while I checked my own.

For weeks after Greg and Janey kept telling and retelling the story. Janey would crack up every time. 'You can't buy something like that' was her favourite saying.

Another thing that gets said around the depot. Never say, 'Well, now I've seen everything.' You'll never see everything, no matter how many times you're called out. You've got to steel yourself as best you can. Stay tough. Get hard. The only way to do the job, is to be detached. Tell yourself they're not people, they're just patients. Everyone's got their own little ways to deal with it. Mine is to never look a patient in the eye. It's not hard. Just look at the injuries. There's always an injury to look at. There're things that get through your defences, and then there're things that break you. Even steel, under the right conditions, temperature, pressure, will buckle, split and break.

For Janey it was a thirteen year old boy's body hanging by the neck from a crossbeam in his family's garage. For Greg, it was an elderly mother whose fat son hadn't checked on her for two days even though she was only in the next room. Greg punched the guy in the jaw and broke two knuckles doing so.

For me...Greg and I, (Janey's night off) were called to this government housing commission place in a downtrodden suburb. Somewhere you wouldn't believe they'd let people live. The house colours in that suburb repeated in threes—light green, light blue, cream, for miles at a time.

In the house's kitchen was a woman with two black eyes swelled so bad she looked like one of those aliens the UFO freaks call 'the greys'. On the table before her was, going by the pink jump-suit, her unconscious baby girl. Her hands rested on the baby in a way that suggested she was making sure the child was still there. Greg knew we needed more equipment from the truck, and quickly exited. Broken glass and crockery crunched underfoot.

'What's your name?'

'Beth. I can hardly see...'

'What's your baby's name?'

'Carly.'

'Okay, Beth. Don't worry.'

Now, there are things you expect and things you don't. Through the open back door strode a man who I assumed was the boyfriend. Pinprick size pupils and a clenched jaw signalled he was completely wired. His gaze moved between me, Beth and Carly. To him we were an unholy trinity.

'Oh no', Beth said softly and started whimpering.

He picked up a chair like it was made of paper and hurled it at us. I had just enough time to cover Beth's head and Carly before the leg of the chair caught me just shy of my right eye socket. The guy was so quick across the room, and punched me a deadbolt in the cheek. I went straight to the floor, dazed. Beth just sat in her chair as he pushed his face right up to hers, pointing at me.

'WHO THE HELL IS THIS!!?'

I felt all I could do was get Carly out. He noticed my movement and grabbed Carly by the foot, holding her upside down, her other leg skewed at an awkward angle. Whether he knew it was a real baby or not, I don't know.

'YOU WANT THIS, DO YA?!?'

His muscles tensed, and as if Carly was just a doll, flung her into the window above the sink, cracking the glass. She rebounded into the basin, coming to rest half in and half out.

'HOW'D YOU LIKE THAT, FUCKER?!'

It was then he noticed the ambulance's flashing lights, and mistaking them for police lights, fled out the backdoor. The whole thing took maybe thirty seconds. I staggered to my feet and lurched to the sink. I cradled Carly's limp body for an hour. She may have been dead before he threw her, I'll never know.

It's true, you'll never see everything. There are some things you just don't want to see. Sometimes you don't have a choice.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ross Murray.