

The Abyss: A Tale

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Abstract

The author reflects on how place shapes pastoral formation within health care chaplaincy. The story explores the transformation of death's domain into a sacred place through presence, ritual, and compassion, revealing how meaning emerges where human connection converges with divine mystery.

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Save for a few scattered granite spires keeping silent watch over the land, the grassy plateau was empty. A gentle breeze ascended from the sapphire sea below and glided over the ground. Despite the objective beauty and relative peacefulness of this place, something was amiss. An eerie energy was emanating from an unseen source nearby. In most cases, such an ominous force would deter wanderers. But the Wayfarer knew that it was his duty to find its origin.

He wandered for several minutes until his unease grew suddenly more fierce when he noticed on the ground before him a black rectangle. As the Wayfarer drew near, he realized the rectangle was a hole cut deep into the granite. When he reached the edge of the hole, he stood at the top of a stone staircase that descended into an unnatural shadow. The darkness that pooled below was pulsing, alive. This was Death's domain.

Ice exploded from the Wayfarer's heart and engulfed his chest. His feet froze to the ground. He noticed that the air had become stale and heavy. Unmoving, the Wayfarer stared into the darkness. And it stared back at him. For a long moment, all his conscious thoughts were replaced by a sense of utter despair as he stood on the precipice of the Abyss.

And yet, an ember remained alight in his soul. Descending into the Abyss that lay before him was his task to face. He knew that if he ran away from it now, the darkness would always haunt him.

He took a deep breath and knelt on the ground. From his cloak, he took his striker and lit his lamp. He stood, took another breath, and stepped down toward the shadow.

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The energy presented itself as a pressure pressed upon his body as he entered the heart of the earth, but the shadow itself appeared to disperse, and he descended further down the tunnel. Fear, sharp and cold, coiled in his chest. Yet, he noticed that there was nothing inherently sinister about the tunnel itself. He paused for a moment and ran his hand over the granite wall illuminated by the lantern's flame. It was rock. Nothing more, nothing less. He let out a sigh of relief and continued into the unknown, comforted by the warm light of his lamp and the strong stone that surrounded him.

Eventually, at the edge of the lantern's reach, a landing and a metallic door came into view. The Wayfarer had reached the Gate of Hades. He was not sure of the duration of his descent, but it felt like an eternity. However, when he turned around to see if the light from the world above was visible, he was surprised that he could still see a small spot of light in the distance. It glowed like the Morning Star; alone, but resolute in the inky darkness.

When he reached the landing, a large gray metal door with a frame of stone stood before him. On top of the frame, unintelligible markings had been carved. He expected them to look evil, but like the staircase itself, there was nothing ominous about them. The Wayfarer carefully set his hand on the door. It was cold. He gently pushed, but the door did not move. He set his lantern down and pushed with both hands. But the door did not move. He picked up his lantern and examined the door and its frame.

On the right side of the frame, he noticed the outline of a hand. He set his lantern down once more and put his own hand upon the stone. A loud snapping sound came from the door, and it swung open. A blinding white light poured over the threshold. The Wayfarer was momentarily blinded, and as he squinted and regained his sight, he saw a room filled with bright white light.

As he crossed the threshold into the room, he no longer sensed the ominous energy. His fear was replaced by curiosity. The room was as bright as if it were lit by the sun itself. But the source of light was not the sun as there were no windows in the room. Rather, beams of pure white light streaked across the white ceiling of the room. The floor was made of white stone, perhaps marble, perfectly flat and smooth. All along the walls were mirrors. No, not mirrors. They were glass. Large glass doors with veils of white hanging behind them. Three massive glass doors were on each of the walls to his side, as well as on the back wall.

The Wayfarer walked to the second door on his left. He pulled the cold metal handle of the sliding glass door and entered behind the veil.

* * *

There, behind the veil, a CNA in gray scrubs is standing by a metallic-framed bed with a light blue mattress. She gently wraps an unmoving infant in a warm blanket. A mother

convulses as she cries, and a father sits next to her, unmoving, in silent shock. Their baby is dead.

This is their Hell.

I say, "My name is James . . ." They don't look at me. "I'm one of the chaplains here." Now they look, but only enough to confirm I'm actually there. For them, my presence further confirms the reality of their worst nightmare. In this moment, I am an angel of death. "I am so sorry, and my heart hurts for you. I wish there were words . . ." I look at the baby and let out a deep sigh. If there weren't a tube unceremoniously protruding from her open mouth, it would look as though she were asleep.

Unlike when a code blue is called for adults, the Pediatric Emergency Department team does an excellent job of cleaning up after the chaos of an attempted resuscitation. They make it seem as if there weren't just moments ago nearly fifteen people jammed into a room, with many others standing at the ready outside, doing compressions on a chest that is too small and fragile for such violence, injecting the tiny body with various chemicals in an effort to restart the heart, and finally, with a sense of deep sorrow, acknowledging that all life-saving efforts are to no avail. Time of death: 10:35.

The mother's crying shifts to sniffles. "Can I hold her?"

"Of course!" the CNA says in a tone of immense compassion, and she tenderly hands the bundled body to the mother.

The mother examines the face of her baby, strokes it, and weeps.

"She's beautiful. What is her name?" I ask after a moment.

"Thank you. Her name is Nova."

The father begins to weep. "Nova! My baby!" He puts his head in his hands. I pull up a chair next to him and place my hand on his shoulder.

"That's a lovely name. And what are your names?"

"Nova Ahava . . . I'm Mara, and my husband is Jabez," the mother says, looking down at her child. She begins to quietly weep again.

"My baby . . . I . . . I don't know what to do . . ." Jabez says between sobs.

"No one expects you to know what to do. The death of a child is something I wish no one ever had to experience. But I want to thank you, as a parent myself, and on behalf of Nova, that you are here with her right now," I say, recalling children who have been left alone in the hospital. He nods and sobs. I look to the CNA; she reads my expression and knows exactly what to do.

"Someone will come in soon and explain what happens next. For now, you'll be able to stay here for four hours." She says this as gently as possible.

"What happens after four hours?" Mara asks.

The CNA hesitates, almost imperceptibly. "We have to bring her to the morgue," she replies, anticipating what comes next.

Mara gasps, and Jabez looks up. "The morgue?" She looks woozy. "This is too much."

"I know. I promise that she will not be alone, though. We will accompany her there and treat her with all the dignity and respect she deserves," she says, and she means it.

Mara nods, closes her eyes, and lets out a resigned sigh. "Okay. Thank you." She quietly processes this revelation for a moment and then looks at me. "Can we pray for her?"

"Absolutely." I stand up. "Is it okay if I place my hand on her?"

"Yes."

"Let's pray . . ." and I do. Of course, it's too late to pray for a miracle, which, truthfully, I rarely do anyway. I pray that God will lovingly embrace this child who departed us too soon. I thank God for the love this child experienced while here on Earth. I pray for Mara and Jabez, that they will have the space to grieve the death of their beloved little girl. And I ask that, in this darkness, God's caring presence will be known among all of us.

As I pray, my eyes rest on Nova's still body, and inwardly I lament the chaos of Death. It is not supposed to be this way. Children are not supposed to die. And yet, I pray because I do have faith that Death will not have the final word. "Amen."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." I pause for a moment. "Would you like any water?" I ask, knowing that they have a long journey ahead of them. Mara nods her head, and I cross the veil into the relatively calm Peds ED.

I return with two cups of water. The father is now holding Nova's body. Tears and mucus run down his face. "My baby . . . my Nova . . . I love you." I hand one cup to Mara, who thanks me, and the CNA reaches for the other one to set on a nearby table, where it will remain untouched.

We sit in a heavy stillness for a long time until Mara's phone illuminates with a notification and she begins texting family and friends the devastating news. I silently sit and place my hand once again on the shoulder of the father. The CNA sits next to the mother, doing the same.

Soon, Mara receives a phone call. She answers the call on speaker in tears. The voice on the other end wails. Other voices come through the speaker, confirming what they heard. A cacophony of grief ensues.

Shortly after Mara hangs up the phone, a nurse comes in to explain the next steps in this dark journey. I watch the parents carefully as the word "autopsy" is uttered, and their eyes become wide with fear and disbelief. "They're going to cut her?" I'm hoping Mara doesn't faint. The nurse, a true professional, explains the reasons for everything

and does so with great respect for Nova, Mara, and Jabez. Mara puts her hand on Nova. "She's so cold."

"I'll get another warm blanket and wrap her again," the CNA offers and gracefully rewraps Nova.

"Can we take this tube out of her mouth?" asks Jabez.

The nurse explains why they can't. With exhaustion, they submit themselves to the reality of what must take place, despite the obvious pain that comes with it. The nurse ends by asking if there is anyone the parents would like the staff to contact for them.

"The church! We need to contact the church. . . . Oh my gosh! We didn't get her baptized!" Mara laments and begins breathing quickly.

"I can baptize Nova, if you would like," I offer.

"Please!" Relief floods Mara's face, and she takes a deep breath. Jabez looks at Nova and nods.

"I'll get the baptismal supplies. Is there any specific faith tradition you worship in?"

"We're Lutheran."

"So am I! I'm actually an ordained deacon in the Lutheran church."

Mara smiles, "Thank you, Jesus! If you could baptize her, we would be so grateful."

"It would be an honor. I'll be right back." It is an odd sensation for excitement to appear in the midst of devastation, but I welcome it.

Once again, I step out of the room. This time, a police detective is waiting and asks if the parents can talk with him. He explains that it's standard protocol for deaths like this.

Why must the mundane intrude upon the sacred now?

I tell him that I'm about to baptize the infant but will let the parents know he wishes to speak with them. Thankfully, the detective agrees to wait. As I continue preparing for the sacrament, I feel a twinge of guilt that I hadn't proactively asked whether Nova's parents wanted her baptized. But I offer myself grace. There is no standard protocol for such tragedy. And besides, the Holy Spirit provided the opportunity.

I find the box of emergency baptism supplies and carefully choose a pristine seashell. Taking the bowl for water, the liturgy binder, and the certificates from one of the cabinets in the ED, I return to the room.

I flip through the binder and find the Lutheran liturgy for baptism, fill the bowl with water from the trauma bay's sink, pull a vial of anointing oil from my pocket, and stand by Nova, who is being held in her father's arms.

The nurse stands behind me with Mara's phone and records.

"Are you ready?" I ask her parents.

"Yes."

I proceed with the sacrament, calling upon God to bless and accept this child as His through Holy Baptism. As we recite the Lord's Prayer aloud, I am surprised and comforted as I hear the CNA and nurse join us. My heart is warmed by their participation in this sacred moment. Then, I baptize Nova Ahava in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I make a cross with the chrism and proclaim her God's child.

In the midst of the overwhelming darkness, God offers us all a small but significant light.

I conclude by presenting them with the beautiful shell I used to pour the water over Nova, which surprises them. They are thankful to have something to take home with them. I also provide them with the certificate of baptism that I filled out.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the CNA sitting behind the parents, softly crying and wiping her tears with a tissue. This is not the first time I've encountered her in this ED. I wonder how much grief she carries with her.

"You have beautiful handwriting," Mara compliments me.

"Thank you." I smile. "And thank you for allowing me to baptize Nova."

"We are so thankful it worked out this way."

"Me, too. And when I go home tonight, please know that I will be praying for you. Whenever a child dies, I light a candle for them and say a prayer for their family after my shift. So, I mean it when I say that you will be in my prayers."

"Oh, that means so much to us." Tears well in her eyes, and she looks at her baby. Nova's parents gaze at her for a long moment.

"We need to let her go," Mara says. I look at the clock and notice that it has been almost four hours.

"I can't. I can't . . . I love her." Jabez replies.

"So do I, but we just have to do it."

"I love you, Nova. Daddy loves you. I love you so much . . ." He holds Nova tightly. "You can take her." The CNA, with eyes still damp from tears, carefully brings Nova into the adjoining trauma bay.

I explain that the detective would like to speak with the parents, and as one goes to talk to him, the other says their final goodbyes at Nova's bedside. I give them space as they do so.

When they both return, they ask if they need to do anything before they leave.

"No, you don't need to do anything else." The CNA says in a soft voice. "Just make sure you get home safely, okay? We can walk you out, if you'd like."

"Yes, please."

"I'm sorry we had to meet this way," I say. "But I want to thank you both for being here with Nova and for loving her while she was with you. Not all children have that gift, so I appreciate you giving it to her."

"She was a gift to us."

The CNA and I walk Mara and Jabez to the door. They look empty without Nova in their arms. They turn to us and look lost. And sorrow fills my heart as I know they will be lost for some time.

"Thank you for all you did for us and for being with us."

"It was our honor," I say. "Try to take care of yourselves, okay?"

"We'll try." And with that, they walk toward the parking lot.

I turn to the CNA. "I never got your name."

"Oh, I'm Hannah."

I'm never quite certain what kind of physical touch people are comfortable with, but she faithfully stood watch with me in the darkness from beginning to end. So, I briefly rest my hand on Hannah's shoulder. "I really appreciate your presence today, Hannah. You did a wonderful job and were very compassionate and kind. I can't imagine it's easy to be down here all the time." She smiles, but I see the grief behind her eyes. We turn and walk back toward the room to gather our things.

"Yeah, it never gets easier," she says in a sorrowful tone, "but the baptism today was beautiful. Thank you for doing that." She places her hand on my shoulder. "And I appreciated your presence, too."

I smile and nod, but inside, a part of me still wishes I could do more. Perhaps, though, it is enough to witness the suffering of others and to accompany them in the dark domain of Death.

We walk the short distance back to the room in reverent silence. The smell of antiseptic lingers in the air, mingling with the murmur of the ED team. Beneath it all, I feel we have shared something sacred.

My time in the hospital is coming to an end soon, so I know this might be one of my last significant moments here. I pause before crossing through the veil the last time. When my journey began, I never imagined I could descend into such darkness. Yet here I stand, in the heart of the Abyss.

And now, the time has come for me to ascend.

I navigate through the subterranean halls of the hospital and take the stairs from Sub-Basement 2 back up to the chaplain's office. I gather my belongings, say goodbye to my colleagues, and drive home.

When I arrive home, I go into the kitchen and pull out a small candle from the bottom drawer. I turn off the dining room light, strike a match, and light the candle.

In the darkness, the flame gives a slight flicker, then stands resolute.