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Under the red horn of the moon

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It was a beautiful late summer day. The serenity of the morning and a clear blue sky delighted my spirit, while a Mozart CD was playing quietly in the background. I was driving across a large area of sparsely populated fields. The country route was smooth and very few people were traveling that day. I was headed to a city 200 km from Montevideo, where I was summoned to analyze a severe sepsis patient in my capacity as a professor of critical care medicine and expert in critical care infections.

And then, as it so frequently happens in life, everything changed in a matter of seconds. After crossing a long white bridge, I sensed something strange at the shoulder of the road. It was a rather different colored spot between the green grasses, and then with increasing horror, I perceived the image of an overturned car and a couple of human shapes lying on the ground. I stopped on the side, stepped out, and ran towards the catastrophe. Metallic debris was scattered all over the place. A breathless young man lay with wide open eyes facing the sky. An elderly man lying on the other side of the car mumbled the words “I’m drowning, I’m drowning”, as in a litany. Another two middle-aged men tried to leave the car by the rear doors.

I had a short moment of indecision that seemed very long. In my career as an intensivist, I had practiced

cardiopulmonary resuscitation countless times, treated hundreds of polytrauma and dying patients, and had to make many tough decisions (right or wrong). But this was different. In all my previous experiences, I was part of a team of doctors and nurses. I could ask for immediate help and with just one word I was provided immediately with the required devices. Now, I was alone in a field 100 km away from the closest ICU; no monitors, no probes, no oxygen, and no partner, and it was I faced with four polytrauma patients.

With some feeling of despair and helplessness, I looked at the emptiness of the landscape finding not a soul to help me. Then I finally addressed triage decisions and started chest compressions on the young breathless man. A couple of minutes later he was still unresponsive and I abandoned cardiopulmonary resuscitation. My second goal was the already cyanotic older man who was not crying anymore. Pink edema just started flowing from his mouth. I started the same maneuver, but on the first massage my hands sank into a broken chest. I tried a few more times but wave after wave his life faded away.

I looked at the other two, but they did not seem to be seriously injured. Thereafter, my memories are blurred as in a nightmare. A country boy galloping away on an old horse to seek for help, cries of fear and pain from the survivors, the distant sound of ambulance sirens approaching the field, corpses and patients being taken care of, the heavy silence that follows tragedies.

I began my return to Montevideo many hours later after complying with my original task. I arrived at the crash site at dusk and stopped there. I could perceive the skeleton of the car and nothing else at twilight. A powerful inner impulse led me to walk along the path, the silence only broken by frogs croaking and crickets chirping. It was a strange feeling, a profound sadness of course but mixed with a very special emotion, the joy of being alive expressed in the echoes of my footsteps across the serene

moisture of the field. Suddenly, the sky was broken by the red horn of the moon emerging from a cloudy horizon in the middle of my solitude. A crescent moon announcing what poets and mystics have claimed for centuries: life goes on no matter how many tragedies you have to endure.

It was hard to rationalize the day's events under the red horn of the moon. I wanted to add thoughts to the feelings that raged through my mind but it was difficult. The vulnerability of the human condition had been unexpectedly revealed in the middle of nowhere and my own vulnerability as an expert intensivist outside of the ICU borders was clearly exposed. Sometimes we are so vain

and self-confident within the ICU setting, but my transitory feelings of despair and helplessness, and my initial doubts in this disaster scenario, taught me that we are almost nothing without a team. Nevertheless, I felt proud of myself because although my interventions did not change fate, at least I tried to do my best in a dramatic scenario, and this is probably the maximum commitment that we can offer not only as physicians but also as human beings. After this last thought, I left the field and drove back to my city with Mozart sounding more emotional than ever.

Conflicts of interest None.