

# Do You Have To Sleep?

She got the call late at night. The ringing started in a dream and slowly drifted into the real world, where it connected in her head so she could roll over to pick up the receiver. She couldn't recall if she answered with a proper hello or if she simply grunted into the receiver. She couldn't remember any of the details of the phone call, any of the words she heard that night. She just knew the cold hard facts:

Darin had been in an accident. A serious accident. It didn't look good.

Her heart was beating so hard that she could feel the blood pumping in her ears. She drove to the hospital as fast as she was able, swerving around corners and ignoring red lights. Who else would be on the streets at this time of night? And what police officer could pull her over? Who could deny that this was an emergency?

She thought she had experienced pain before. She thought she knew helplessness. But with every minute she spent at his side in the hospital room, learning more and more about the dire situation, watching the respirator inflate his lungs, waiting for doctors to announce the status, sobbing along with his mother and father, she felt despondence filling her chest. Nothing could prepare her to feel this way. At twenty-two

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years of age, still in college and working part-time as a sales clerk, how could she expect this?

She thought she had experienced love before. She thought she knew happiness. Then she met Darin, and all the rules changed. Their souls connected, and she could never be the same after that. He was the one.

How, then, could he be flat on his back, comatose, here in the intensive care unit? What could have caused an inattentive driver to run down a pedestrian at such a speed? Why now, when they had just learned how to love each other?

She had lost count of the specialists who paraded in and out of his room in the past few hours. Sometimes the doctors would arrive two at a time, drinking coffee and sharing anecdotes, and then launch into a brief examination of Darin's limp body and all the machines attached to him. They always nodded at her with compassion, and occasionally made encouraging grunts, but that couldn't change what she was hearing:

"As far as we can tell, there's no brain activity."

"Extensive nerve damage."

"The injury to his spine is irreparable."

"It's only a matter of time."

"He's already gone. His body just doesn't know it yet."

"His heart can't hold out much longer."

Darin had never been comfortable with the whole idea of organ donation, and she knew that. His parents were aware of it, too, but were wrestling with the possibility of donating his organs anyway. Good things out of bad things, right? In the end, Darin made the decision for himself. His heart failed, and

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the oxygen supply to his body could not be maintained. He let go. As she watched, as she cried, he slipped away. She could feel the room get colder, and thought she saw his skin flush blue. Darin was gone.

His parents treated her like one of the family, even when they had been dating less than a year. They asked for her to assist with the arrangements. She was listed in the newspaper obituary as his beloved, right there in black and white.

At the memorial service, she wept like the typical grieving widow and felt like an impostor for doing so. How could she have fallen into this world? One short year ago, she was tumbling through life without a care in the world, thinking that love was something you saw in movies and inside greeting cards, a myth perpetuated by poets and liars. And now she was dressed in black, standing over the failed body of the great love of her life as it lay motionless in a casket that she had helped choose. She kept going back to that night in her bed, when the phone was ringing. What if she had never answered the call? Would the world have transformed around her and prevented this string of events? She found no comfort in this fantasy.

Darin's father came up beside her and put his arm around her waist. "You're doing great."

"You, too," she said, trying to wipe her nose without looking sloppy.

"Have you decided what you want to bury with him?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I have an idea. But I'm afraid it might make you cry."

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"Maybe you haven't noticed," she said, trying to laugh, "but I think it's too late for that."

He led her into a vacant hallway at the rear of the chapel and closed the door behind him. "A few days ago, Darin came home looking like he had just flown around the moon. He couldn't wait to show this to me." Darin's father reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a tiny object.

"What is it?"

"A present. Something he wanted to give you." He opened his hand to reveal a small jewelry box.

"Oh my God."

"I think you can guess what this was meant to be."

She reached for it, trembling. The box opened with a perky little pop to reveal a gorgeous ring that sparkled even in the dim light of the hallway. She tried to speak but couldn't find words. The ring box fell to the ground. The tears came quickly now. Darin's father put his strong arms around her shaking body and rocked her back and forth, back and forth.

"He wanted you in his life forever. He loved you so much."

Her parents came to the memorial service and could see the anguish in her eyes. Darin's funeral would be held the next day. They insisted that she come home with them and sleep in her old room rather than go home alone. She agreed this was a good idea. The shock had worn off and now she was starting to realize the permanence of it all. It was hard enough to be awake and alive right now. She could not bear to be alone too.