

Shift Report Prize for Fiction

The Phone Call

by David Thomas Peacock

Part 1: Where Do You Put Your Sorrow?

I was about to discharge Teo, a homeless alcoholic, when I heard the charge nurse page, “P-Team notification to the trauma room, ETA 5 minutes.” I smiled. The overhead speakers couldn’t erase a lifetime of speaking Jamaican Patois. Even distorted, her voice was strong and beautiful.

I’ve still got time to get him out of here, I thought. After being a nurse in this ER for over ten years, we both knew the routine. Teo was a legend, a rock star of undomiciled substance abusers. Now in his early 60’s, he had been using emergency rooms as his home for over thirty-five years. After eating a stale tuna fish sandwich, he was now more or less sober, *ambulating with a steady gait*, as I would later write in his chart.

Eager to keep an appointment with a bottle of Thunderbird, Teo was itching to go. Calling him a frequent flyer would be an understatement; it wasn’t unusual to see him in my ER more than once a day. Whenever he wanted a sandwich and a nap, he’d call 911 and use EMS to chauffeur him in. On his triage note, the chief complaint would always be the same: ‘EtOH Intox,’ which is ER code for ‘Drunk.’

Although appearing oblivious to the suffering around him, at least he was a charming drunk. His presence seemed to be a litmus test for your humanity: *Will you respond with compassion or indifference?* I’d watched people fail that test for a decade.

After sobering up, Teo would make his bed and attempt to clean up whatever mess he’d made before being discharged or walking out, often thanking you for taking care of him. Finding his stretcher empty, he appeared to be gone before I could hand him the discharge papers. They would have ended up in the trash anyway.

Today I'm on the P-Team, so I head to the trauma room. Here's a dirty little secret: *I like notifications*. This isn't something I make a habit of saying for a couple of reasons. First, because these are critically ill patients, they often die — that aspect I don't like. But being part of a team attempting to save someone's life? For me, it doesn't get any better than that. Sometimes we succeed; usually, we don't.

The second reason I keep quiet is more pragmatic: *I don't want all the notifications*. I may enjoy the challenge, but there's a limit to how much stress each of us can handle before burning out. It's a fine line.

See, being an ER nurse is a peculiar job. There are many layers to this statement, but the one that hits you early on and never leaves is the relentless familiarity of death. No one, except hospice nurses and docs, sees people die as much as we do. Day in, day out, we usher an unrelenting procession of bodies to the morgue. Muerte is always lurking around the corner. One minute, your hands are on this person attempting to keep them alive; the next minute, they're gone.

Did I say they're gone? I'm sorry — *now they're back*. Then they're gone again. The whole thing is like a macabre dance with only two outcomes. One ends in the ICU, the other in a body bag.

This constant exposure to mortality has some unnerving aspects to it, not the least of which is the uncomfortable realization that at some point, without fanfare, *death has become routine*. When this penny drops, the epiphany is more than a little disturbing.

People aren't supposed to witness death so often it becomes ordinary. It seems somehow wrong to go from working full-tilt, trying to save someone's life, only to have them die — and then move on to your next patient as if this was the most normal thing in the world. And yet, that's what you do because, whether you were aware of it or not, *this is what you signed up for*.

Over time, you begin to wonder if you're losing some essential component of your humanity. I mean, only a sociopath could take part in so much death, year after year, without experiencing some kind of existential crisis, right? So what does that say about you? How are you

able to do this and go home, leaving your psychic trauma at work?

Like I said, it's a peculiar job.

Part 2: *Boo's Dilemma*

Boo's real name was Booker, but no one ever called him that except the judge who sentenced him. He was a legend in the projects, beating grown men in freestyle rap battles by the time he was twelve. Always a fat kid, he grew into an enormous man — imposing but quick with a smile that made you feel welcome. Life hadn't been kind to him, but at forty-two, his spirit remained unbroken. Boo still hosted block parties, working the sweaty crowds like a shaman, always bringing down the house with his skills.

It hadn't been easy growing up with no father in the poorest part of the Bronx, but he never complained. Boo and his sister were raised by their grandmother, a stern but fair woman. Her love and righteous strength protected them like a shield, and for Boo, her voice was never far away.

“Son, you bring home anything less than a B on your report card, and I'll whoop your behind.”

“Yes, Grandma.”

“And make sure your little sister's dressed and on the school bus before you.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Every Saturday after dinner, before serving her homemade banana pudding for dessert, she'd give him a severe look. “I better see you and your sister's shoes polished before we go to church tomorrow morning, or you won't be sitting for a week.”

“Don't worry, Grandma,” he'd say, doing a little dance in anticipation of his favorite treat.

She'd allow herself a tender smile, thinking, *That boy's special.*

Then one day, after coming home from work, Boo looked at her and said, “Grandma, I'm gonna be a famous rapper.” Spinning the words out of thin air, he explained how it was going to happen in rhyme.

“You just keep those grades up,” she said, turning away so he couldn't see her laughing.

She loved him more than anything.

“Hands on the car, boy, and spread your legs.”

Boo knew this day was coming. Now eighteen, he’d been slinging ten-dollar bags of crack on this corner for three years. Knowing better than to resist, he followed the cop’s orders, but it was still hard to cuff him. At 300 lbs., it wasn’t easy moving any part of the big man’s body, even if he was trying to cooperate.

The judge read his name off the court docket as if seeing it for the first time and hoping he never came across it again. “For the crime of possession of a schedule II drug with intent to distribute, I hereby sentence Mr. Booker Landry to ten years in the state penitentiary, with a possibility of parole after five.” Striking the gavel and looking bored, he intoned, “Next.”

And that was that.

Boo didn’t so much as flinch.

In the joint, he became known for his ability to throw down freestyle on demand, crushing all comers. He didn’t need a mic or any beats — just his facile mind and commanding voice. For cons with too much time on their hands, his skills never got old.

After a year in Rikers and a five-year stint in Fishkill, he was released at twenty-four with \$40.00 of gate money in his pocket, no prospects, and nowhere to go.

“Hey Boo, remember that girl you shackled up with right after you got out the Big House?”

It was a slow day at the car wash; he and Terrence worked the drying station. Sitting on plastic buckets in the humid July heat, they smoked cigarettes while waiting for the next car.

“You mean Nati?”

“Yeah, that’s her. Word is she’s pregnant.”

Three months had passed since Boo last saw her. Taking a long drag on his Kool, he didn’t say anything, thinking, *That kid could be anyone’s.*

“Whatchoo tellin’ me for?”

“I don’t know, man, just wonderin’ if you knew.”

“Well, thanks, motherfucker — I do now.”

“Sorry, Dawg, I didn’t mean no disrespect.”

“None taken, T,” Boo said as he raised his mass and stood, flipping the cigarette into a dirty pool of water.

Like the opening of a Broadway show, the dancing carwash brushes parted, revealing a still grimy taxi that was as clean as it would ever be.

Grabbing their towels, they got to work.

It was dusk, the temperature still in the high ‘80s as Boo walked down Willis Avenue, lost in his thoughts. Passing the Mott Haven projects, he heard someone call out his name.

“Yo Boo!”

“Wassup Nazz?”

“Man, you was killin’ it Tuesday night at Trixie’s.”

Nazz worked this corner slinging rock the same as he had done years before — in this neighborhood, some things never change.

The big man grinned as he walked by, pausing long enough to give dap before ambling on. Nazz tried to embrace him, but he was too massive.

“Where you headed, man?”

“Layin’ some beats down in the studio.”

Almost every night after working at the carwash, Boo would make demo tapes. Wherever he went, people in this neighborhood recognized him. After doing his time, it was common knowledge that he was out of ‘the life’ and trying to make it in the music business. Mention his name, and people would smile.

“The man’s got skills, gifted with words,” they’d say.

Meanwhile, he kept working, making tapes and DJ’ing parties, waiting for the break that never came. *Can’t give up on myself*, he’d think. *Besides, life ain’t worth livin’ without my music.*

Eighteen years later, Boo sat on the number four bus on his way to work at the clinic, thinking about life. He was proud of what he had become and still worked on his music, but not with the urgency of his youth. Over the years, he'd released a couple of independent records that were hits at the local house parties but never attracted much attention beyond that.

With the help of his parole officer, he'd eventually gotten a job for ex-offenders helping people in the community access government assistance. Counseling kids, he helped older folks set up Medicare and acted as a liaison between people in the neighborhood and the Morris Avenue clinic. Boo became a respected leader in this part of the Bronx — even in the toughest parts of the projects, he would be greeted warmly by the hustlers, dealers, church ladies, and community leaders. Always there to help, at forty-two, people looked up to him. *He was needed.*

But recently, something unexpected came up — Nati contacted him out of the blue. At first, he had to stop and think about who she was, but then the memories came flooding back like they'd been waiting to be summoned. Her voice sounded worried when she called.

“B, I need to talk to you — can I come by work tomorrow?”

Boo felt light-headed, his heart racing. Nati was sitting three feet away in his cramped office, and what she had to say stunned him.

“You have an eighteen-year-old son, and he wants to meet you. His name's Leviticus, but everyone calls him Levi.”

Dumbfounded, he realized his mouth was open; Boo closed it, but his tongue was so dry he couldn't swallow. He sat there silent, unsure how to respond — palms sweaty, his eyes wide, with a startled face that reminded Nati of Buckwheat.

“He doesn't want anything from you, and neither do I. I tried to keep it from him, but you know how people talk. Levi found out years ago — I made it clear the subject was off-limits at home, so we never discussed it. But he just turned eighteen, and now he's determined. He wants to meet his father.”

Boo didn't say anything. He *couldn't* say anything — his brain felt like it was short-circuiting. The words coming out of her mouth contained too much information to process; it had never occurred to him something like this might happen. While she was talking, Nati took out a school photo and handed it to him. The boy looked younger than his age; he had glasses and the kind of innocent smile kids have before life has kicked them while they're down.

"Thanks for telling me," was all he could muster before she left.

After the door shut, he sat there staring at the photo for the longest time. His mind was racing, thoughts ricocheting off each other like a ball randomly hitting the bumpers in a pinball machine. Finally, he put the picture in his wallet. *What do I do?* He tried to think, but nothing happened. *What do I do?*

It wasn't hard for Levi to obtain Boo's number, but the next step seemed a little fuzzy. The plan was to call him, but he didn't know when and wasn't exactly sure what to say. His eighteenth birthday had been two weeks ago — graduation was in a month. College applications were sent out, but all he could think about was his father.

For as long as he could remember, Levi had thought about who his Dad was and why he left. *Did he leave because he didn't want a son? Was he in prison? Was Levi somehow a disappointment to him?* Things got worse when he realized his father was alive and still lived in the Bronx, a few miles away. The boy wondered if he checked up on him, not making contact because he didn't like what he saw? Or maybe he didn't care, never bothering to find out he had a son?

The one time Levi brought it up to his mother, he immediately realized it was a mistake. She lashed out. Wasn't her love and devotion enough? Nati had built her life around trying to raise him right, but she never had a stable long-term relationship with a man. No one told her that all boys need a father figure, someone they can look up to. She underestimated how deeply this affected him.

"Momma, I love you," he pleaded through his tears.

“I just want to know who my father is.”

To Levi, Boo’s number felt like it was burning a hole in his brain; it was all he thought about. If he could only talk to him, tell him he wasn’t mad, then maybe his Dad would say, “I’m sorry, son — I made some mistakes in my life, but I always loved you.” That’s all. Levi thought he could move on with his life and put it all behind him if that happened.

He could forgive his father.

Part 3: *Missed Opportunities*

Just as I reached the trauma room, the ambulance bay doors opened with two medics pushing a gurney straining to hold a huge black man who looked like he weighed 400 lbs. One was attempting CPR while the other gave report in a rushed, loud voice to no one in particular.

“Man found down on Broadway in cardiac arrest, bystander called 911. Witness said he’d been down five minutes when we got there. We put an IO in his left tibia, gave two epi’s, and shocked him twice. ROSC after the second shock, then v-fib.”

I remember looking at him and thinking, *I’m going to work for this one*. A guy this massive is like trying to do CPR on a whale. As soon as we move him off the gurney and onto the stretcher, I take my position, gird myself with a deep breath, and get to it. Compressing his heart is so physically brutal that I try to go into a trance — anything to keep from thinking about getting tired. Someone’s life is at stake.

The doc calls out, “Do we know anything about his history?”

EMS answers, “No.”

My muscles are already starting to cramp, but I keep going.

“Push one epi and one bicarb,” the doc shouts out as the team coalesces.

Here’s one of the things I love about working in the ER — responding to cardiac arrests is like a well-rehearsed dance. The experienced docs, nurses, and techs effortlessly fall into whatever role needs to be filled. One person will be cutting clothes off, another obtaining IV access, someone else drawing up meds and pushing them. Hopefully, you have a recorder, a relief for

CPR, and a runner getting pumps along with anything else you might need.

At two minutes, we do a pulse check — *nothing*.

One of the techs takes the second round of CPR, and I grab the IO kit. He's so heavy no one can get an IV, so I drill the needle into his left humeral head. But now we have another problem — the line is good, but he has too much fat for the catheter to stay in. I have a med student press the device's flange to hold it in while we give another round of epinephrine. The needle EMS put in his tibia is good, but it takes too long for the meds to reach his heart.

The charge nurse locks eyes with me and says, "He's yours."

I nod.

While the tech is doing CPR, we somehow manage to roll his mass over and get the pads on when the attending calmly says, "Pulse check." Everyone stops and watches the monitor now showing a rhythm. The problem is, his heart's not beating. In ER-speak, this is called VTach, short for *ventricular tachycardia*. Not a good sign.

"Shock at 200," she calls out.

I keep doing compressions until the nurse manning the defibrillator shouts, "All clear!" and hits the button. His enormous body heaves as the jolt contracts his muscles, and I resume CPR. I'm already sweating, but we're just getting warmed up.

One of the PAs has been bagging him with oxygen while the team prepares to intubate. Respiratory is here setting up the ventilator. He's difficult to get an airway in, but somehow, even with me compressing as hard as I can, the doc gets the ET tube in on the first try. Now the machine is breathing for him. After two minutes, we stop to do another pulse check — still VTach. So we shock again, then back to CPR.

He's young, so we keep going long after it becomes clear that he's gone. We've all seen miraculous turnarounds, but this won't be one of them. After twenty-five grueling minutes, the doc looks around with a weary look on her face and asks if anyone has any other ideas. We all know what this means — no one says anything. She glances at the clock and says, "Time of death, 1648."

In less than a minute, everyone had filed out except me and the ER tech. I consider him a friend, always admiring his ability to balance professionalism with compassion. He's a good man.

The patient is under fifty, so it'll be a medical examiner case. The tech is already getting a bag for the body; we both silently wonder if it will hold him. His clothes are cut up and piled on a tray stand with his wallet and cell phone. I open the billfold, and the first thing I see is a picture of a smiling boy who looks like a young teenager. Riffing through the contents, I find a driver's license.

His name was Booker Landry.

These are the moments when your protective shield falls away, and you're gut-punched with the realization that this was someone's loved one — it could be you or anyone else you care about. The difference is this person's time is up.

Life is so fragile, isn't it? We never go to bed thinking, tomorrow will be the day I die. And yet, people die every day, often quite unexpectedly. No one knows this better than ER nurses and docs *because we see it all the time*. I suddenly feel old and beat, my heart heavy, the adrenaline rush of trying to save someone gone.

Attempting to collect myself, I notice Teo is standing at the trauma room door looking in, his expression sad, eyes radiating compassion. He must have been there the whole time, like a ghost, so familiar he was invisible to everyone else. For a split second, I wondered what it meant. Then, realizing other patients are waiting for me, I turn to leave, and the dead man's cell phone rings.

It's deafening.

Exhausted and feeling numb, I stare at it. Looking over, the tech and Teo are watching me. I take a deep breath and pick it up.

“Hello?”

After a short pause, I hear a young man's voice.

“Dad?”

About the author: **David Thomas Peacock** is a musician who became an ER nurse who survived cancer and somehow became a writer. Sometimes you don't discover what you were meant to do until your third act.