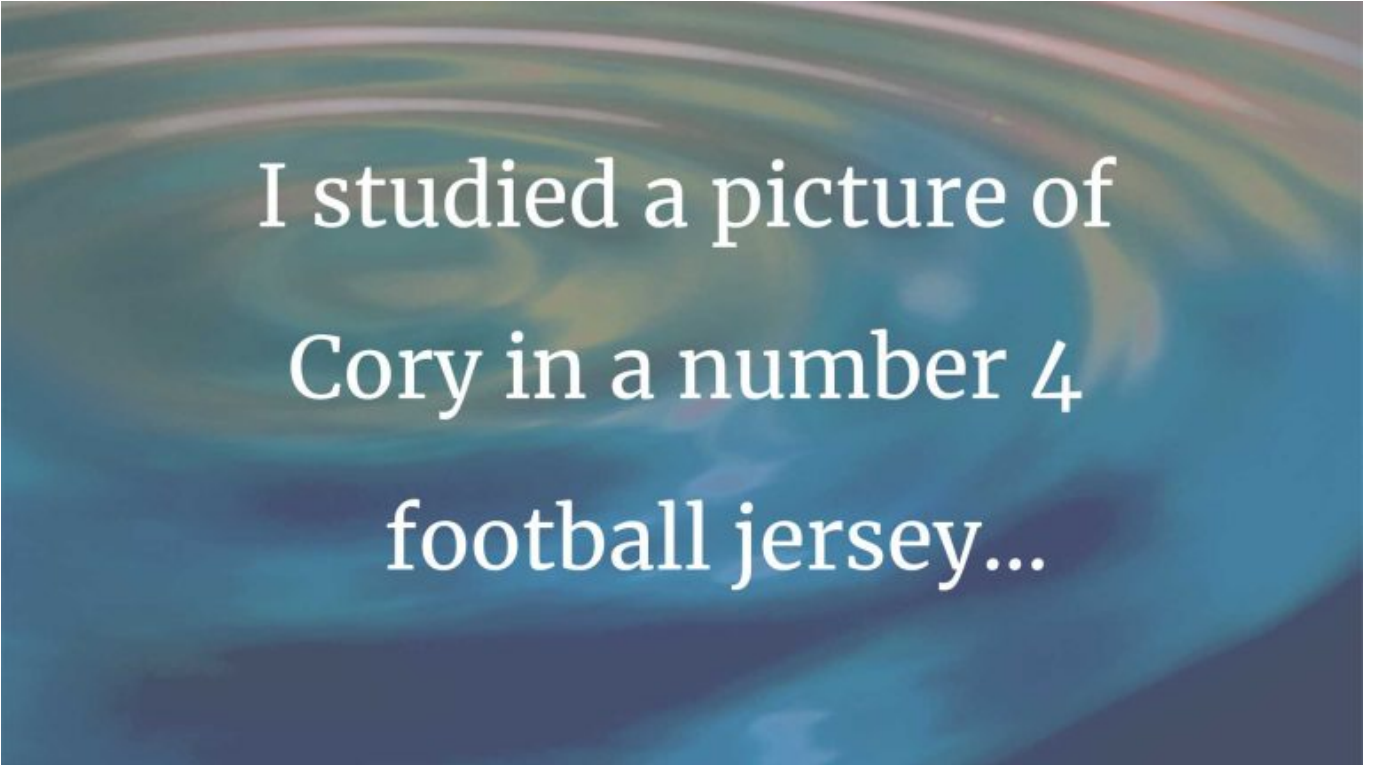


A Blink Between Love and Loss

Category: Stories

written by Aleks Radunovic | February 27, 2026



I studied a picture of
Cory in a number 4
football jersey...

Beep. Beep. Beep...

I stood in the operating room during Cory's organ-donation surgery, watching the monitor as his blood pressure dropped and his pulse faded. I was a second-year medical student, just beginning my trauma-surgery rotation in an urban hospital. I remember that day as a series of blinks, each one a snapshot of moments that still linger.

Here's how it began:

A blink—and I was standing in the trauma bay and staring at the blood-spattered ER floor, strewn with pieces of cut-up clothing and empty Betadine bottles. We'd spent hours stabilizing him—a thirty-four-year-old man hit by a truck while riding his black Harley. As he was wheeled away for a CT scan, I stood there, frozen.

Another blink—and I was rolling the cooler of blood products alongside him, as the nurses propelled his bed down the hallway to the trauma OR.

I was pulled from my trance by a frantic voice:

"I'm the mom! I'm the mom! Please let me touch him."

The woman reminded me of my own mom, and a raw ache washed over me, remembering the touch my mom didn't get to give. Cory's mom was running toward us and waving, but no one on the care team had heard her.

Before I could even wonder if I was allowed to speak up, I said: "The mom. The mom is here," echoing her desperate plea. We paused, and she rushed forward, placing a gentle hand on her son's face.

"We love you, and we are with you," she whispered, then murmured a prayer.

A blink—and my hands were covered in Betadine as I scrubbed into the OR.

He has so many injuries, I thought. *Where do we even start?* But before I knew it, hours had passed, and the surgery was over.

The orthopedic surgeon had placed multiple external rods and nails to stabilize his many broken bones. I was in awe of what the surgical team had accomplished behind the OR doors. But I also knew what it was like to be the family on the other side of those doors.

I knew Cory's mom would be waiting, so I began cleaning the blood off of his new titanium hardware—carefully scouring every nook and cranny.

He's going to make it, I told myself. *I want him to look as presentable as possible for his family.*

Another blink—and I found myself in the trauma ICU, watching the monitor. Cory was still unconscious, but in recovery. I wondered if he could sense that I was there.

A blink—and I was in the waiting room with his mother, who was showing me pictures on her phone. I felt her pain and knew the need she felt—the need to be heard, the need to express her love.

I thought about my own family, and how we'd clung to my older brother's photos and shared memories as we tried to piece together our lives after his accident. So I gave Cory's mother my time, and she talked and showed me pictures. She pointed to a photo of her son on his black bike.

"He was always a giver," she said.

I studied a picture of Cory in a number 4 football jersey, standing next to his sibling, who wore number 27. 4/27. The personal significance of those numbers caught me off-guard, and I stared at the picture disbelievingly. My brother was born on 4/27, the same year as Cory. And, like Cory, he rode a black motorcycle.

Another blink—and I was back in the ICU. But this time the room was empty. Cory's bed was gone; he'd been sent to neurosurgery, because his brain had swelled. The neurosurgeon told us that he was brain-dead.

A blink—and I was staring at a "Donate Life" flag, a symbol of his family's choice to give his organs to others.

"He was always a giver..." his mother's words echoed in my mind.

Nurses, doctors and staff had already signed the flag. I hovered the marker

over a blank space, waiting to write something meaningful—something to express my sorrow for their loss and my gratitude for their decision to donate his organs. I struggled to find the right words, my mind as blank as the spot in front of me.

With another blink I found myself in the hallway, lined with solemn faces. It was time for the honor walk—a ceremonial procession in which family and hospital take part as a donor is transported to the operating room where their organ will be harvested.

His mom spotted me, grabbed my hand and said, “You were with him from the start. Can you stay with him to the end?”

I nodded and followed him into the OR.

I blinked and was back, watching Cory’s monitor for the last time as his heart gave its final beats.

Beep. Beep. Beep...

Silence.

These memories are stitched together like a reel of film. I was a second-year medical student, still developing my skills. How could I help, when I didn’t know anything? I had simply hoped and prayed for a different outcome.

But when I said goodbye to his family, they thanked me.

“You were with him the whole time,” they said.

He had been barely conscious when he was first flown in, and he had been sedated throughout. *Did he even know I was there?*

I closed my eyes and was transported to Evergreen cemetery, staring at a glossy black tombstone. My own brother died in a motorcycle crash. He was alone.

I blinked again and found myself back in the present moment, standing in front of Cory’s parents, who asked me for a hug.

“Thank you for being with him,” they said.

That’s when it occurred to me that maybe it’s enough to know that our loved ones weren’t alone when they passed. Sometimes, being there is all that’s left to give. It wasn’t about medicine, but human connection. In that moment, it didn’t matter if I was a medical student or a doctor—it was about being a human being, simply standing beside another human at the end of their journey.

I realized that medicine isn’t just about saving a life; it’s also about honoring it. There is care even in silence, and although I didn’t know Cory personally, there was still love in its most basic form—the love of one human for another, and the quiet understanding that none of us are truly alone when

someone is there to witness our lives.

Although Cory's story didn't unfold the way I had hoped, he wasn't alone. I did stay with him until the very end.