

Miracles On Ice

Chapter 1: "Somebody is gonna have to explain that lipstick"

How did it all start? April 11th, 2022. It's a regular Monday night at the club. Third end, I'm sweeping a rock. It's on-line, weight's fine, looks good, and then out of nowhere, *wait, what's that noise?* I hear gasps from fellow curlers, followed by a long guttural moan. *Oh no. I know that sound.* Retired or not, nurses never forget it. It's permanently etched in our auditory memories. I look up, and sure enough as I turn to sheet three, I see my friend Kevin crumpled on the ice. Russell, the opposing vice, is kneeling beside him protecting his head. Immediately I know. Kevin is in serious trouble.

Kevin had been holding the broom for his skip when without warning, he stopped breathing and dropped to the ice. But with one of us in trouble, the rest of us spring into action. "Hurry hard" takes on a new meaning in what follows.

Organized chaos goes something like this. I shout: "Call 911, get the defib! No pulse! Roll him over! Open his airway! Starting CPR, keep his airway open, 1 and 2 and 3 ... and 29 and 30!" Next is mouth to mouth. Am I up for this? I look down at my friend and flashes of his wife Karen and two grandsons go through my mind, so needless to say, mouth to mouth begins. It's Kevin and I for the next 8 minutes, with 29 other curlers gathered around, simultaneously holding their breath, encouraging us on and trying to help however they can.

I can hear Jen commandeering in the background. She has made the 911 call and confirms that the ambulance is on its way. Steve has taken charge of the defibrillator, but for some reason it won't turn on – as if we need another problem! Steve keeps his head down and coaxes the machine, ignoring everyone's heartfelt but useless tips on how to fix it. Another curler who is firmly known as the silent type suddenly finds his voice and is clearing the parking lot for the ambulance. When it does arrive, he strongly and colourfully suggests that the ambulance attendants are not moving fast enough (where did this guy come from?!).

Back on sheet three, a stroke of luck! Steve finds a loose wire on the defibrillator, connects it, and we hear that wonderful automated voice say: "APPLY PADS TO PATIENT'S BARE CHEST... ANALYZING HEART RHYTHM, DO NOT TOUCH THE PATIENT... SHOCK ADVISED, CHARGING, STAND CLEAR." Next is a BAM! And then: "HEART BEAT DETECTED, STAND BY." We all hold our breath, and within seconds, Kevin takes a breath, too. To our incredible relief and amazement, he's back. Moments later the ambulance arrives, and the paramedics prepare Kevin for transport to the Ottawa Hospital Heart Institute.

There's still tons of adrenalin bouncing off the ice shed walls and we're all on shaky legs, mine shakiest of all. Suddenly it occurs to me, and I ask aloud, "Has anyone called Karen?" The answer is yes, and she's on her way to meet him at the hospital. Then out of the crowd, I hear a familiar deadpan voice say, "Somebody is gonna have to explain that lipstick..." Jamie never lets me down when it comes to one-liners. But, not to be outdone, Kevin's skip, Bruce, pipes up: "Jeez, I didn't know what was going on. I threw my rock and before it got to the house, they were doing CPR! Did I even make my shot?!" Leave it to curlers to send that humour home when it's most needed.

Chapter 2: “Take two aspirin and call me in the morning”

Fast forward 18 months to October 12th, 2023. Kevin has had a triple bypass. He's looking good and feels great. We're all still reeling and rejoicing from the drama of Kevin's on-ice event, when at a different club, I see Rosemary and Jill helping my friend Mike off the ice. Terrible colour, clutching his chest, severe chest pain, faint irregular pulse. Déjà vu. Very clearly another heart attack.

Here we go again. I call out: “Call 911! Get the defib! Help me get him on the floor!” Many hands jump in to help. The ever-diligent Val calls 911, and as the defibrillator is being snatched from the wall, Deb is out on the ice shouting: "Does anyone have any aspirin?!" She may be tiny, but thankfully Deb's voice is anything but. This time Lady Luck is on our side; the Burtons have aspirin! Mike, however, is looking worse and worse. His chest pain is crushing, and his pulse is no longer palpable, but with some prompting he manages to chew the two baby-aspirin. Then just as I'm about to slice his shirt and jacket to apply the pads, his colour starts to improve, and his breathing calms. His pain level starts dropping, and I can feel his pulse becoming stronger. The aspirin is working!

I look up to see many concerned faces eager to help – perfect. I call out: “Make sure the paramedics can get in!” Immediately the entrance doors are flung open, and tables are hefted aside. Moments later the ambulance arrives, and the stretcher rolls on through. The paramedics load Mike up and he's outta there with flashing lights and sirens, headed for the Heart Institute. By 1:00 am, he's the owner of a brand-new cardiac stent.

The next day, Mike and I connect by phone. It's incredible to hear his voice sounding so strong. We rehash his grand slam evening and sign off, agreeing that the age-old advice “Take two aspirin and call me in the morning” is right on the button!

So, in conclusion, what's a miracle on ice? Is it a triple take out when you're only expecting a single? Is it that perfect draw to the button that wins the game in the 8th? These small miracles do occasionally happen, but the real miracles, the big ones, are the warm, genuine, caring people we meet on the ice. Those who step up when stepping up is most needed. Sometimes miracles are just good people with big hearts.

Disclaimer: All names, characters, places, and events portrayed in this little story are true, and any implication that curlers are truly great people is not coincidental, but in fact, totally intentional.

Thanks for reading,

Gail Gray

(Retired nurse, evolving curler)