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PHOTO BY KATIE ROSTER

THE CASINO UP NORTH

By Jai Ahluwalia

I woke up in a hospital bed around 3AM. The TV was playing reruns of Everybody Loves Raymond, despite me having no recollection of ever turning it on. I wasn't hospitalized, although after a nonsensical day in labor and delivery I felt as if maybe I should have been. No, I was in a hospital bed because I was 19 hours deep into my very first 24 hour shift. When I was in my first few months of medical school, I used to wake up every morning with my heart pounding, eyes wide open with my head damp with sweat. This is what a combination of paranoia, anxiety, and pure adrenaline looks like. For the first time since those days, I awoke in a similar manner. Oddly enough, unlike my first year, the situation was extremely low-stakes. My attending was a young, hip woman from Brooklyn who seemed to understand what it was like to still have hope. She said she'd call me if anything was happening. So why was I waking up in such a dreadful way? I grabbed my phone from the old faux-wooden night stand beside my cot.

"Gonna deliver in room 4"
Sent: 2:25AM

Shit. My paranoid mind was on point, acting as arguably the worst alarm clock of all time. Everything was blurry - I'm severely nearsighted - especially the rocking chair in the corner of the room which appeared to be in motion with the mid-90s wallpaper that engulfed it.

Ignoring the horror story developing before my blind eyes, I jammed my glasses over the n95 I had started to put on, pulled on my unofficial school ID (quarter zip NYMC Patagonia), and ran full speed out of my bedroom. I imagined the ghosts of new-mothers past yelling at me to slow down as I ran down the hallway and laughed to myself a little. That's the one thing I really like about labor and delivery, it's usually the main source of life in a hospital. I'm sure the ghosts of mothers past were very few in number here. I got to the nurses station, disoriented and out of place, as per usual.

"She delivered 10 minutes ago, didn't want to wake you up," Maxine, the patron saint of the labor and delivery ward, said with a kind smile on her face.

Was she doing me a favor? I decided she was. Maxine knew best.

"Thanks Ma'am, that was really nice of you," I said, and sincerely meant. "Is there anything else going on?"

"No dear, you can get back to -" She was cut out by the robotic PA system.

"ATTENTION: CODE STROKE, EMERGENCY ROOM, CODE STROKE, EMERGENCY ROOM"

I looked back at Maxine. "Might as well check it out right?"

"I'll let the doctor know," she said again

I walked briskly down the hall, passing the black dog that often sits unattended in the various corners of the hospital. I wondered if there was a neurologist at this hospital 24/7? Does there have to be someone around to read CTs all the time? I pondered this question as I descended the 27th flight of stairs in the 7 story hospital.

"ATTENTION: WALK FASTER YOU GOOD FOR NOTHING WASTE OF RESOURCES"

Wait, what?

Hospitals are a lot like casinos in that there are very few accessible windows and very many cynical people. Anyone who has spent more than 3 minutes in a hospital could probably tell you the same thing. As I navigated the maze that was this particularly challenging ER, I came across a few familiar faces: the half awake physician who had supervised me a few weeks prior, an eager to please scribe whose work was severely underappreciated, Steven, who's job I didn't know, and a particularly strange duo of nurses who looked to be about my age.

This interaction started as every interaction does in this hospital - a quick glance at my badge to assess how exactly I should be treated. Quarter zip Patagonia? Bottom of the food chain.

"Going to the vegetable?" the female nurse asked me. She was a 20 something energetic woman who, based on her accent, spent a lot of her life in New Jersey.

"There are vegetables here?" I asked, hoping for something more than the plate of garbage I had eaten before crashing in L&D.

"No, the stroke!" shouted the slightly chubby and predictably sarcastic male nurse. He flashed me the "What is this guy, an idiot?" look.

As we scurried along the hallway I wondered if the massive volume of patients they had been seeing over the past year had anything to do with their perpetually nonchalant approach to serious situations.

Waiting outside the CT scan room was the patient, lying on his back on a stretcher. He stared into the ceiling like there was something worth finding in it. His white hair stood at its ends as if a bolt of lightning had narrowly missed him. I stared at his face, taking in each and every wrinkle, wondering to myself when my father or I would begin to look like this. He was beautiful, having gone through all of life and its experiences. Each and every one seemed to be displayed by his glorious wrinkles, like a ring on a tree. His eyes were vividly blue, so full of life despite his dilemma. For a second I swear they swung in my direction with a corresponding upward movement of the corners of his mouth. "We have to find a way to fix this," I thought to myself, shaking off what must have been another complication of my poor vision. I blinked and found him once again staring into the emptiness that was the ceiling above us.

"Ugh, he's covered in shit, dirty old man!" cried the energetic nurse.

"Disgusting, smells like it too. Take a shower or something!" echoed the other half.

I shook it off and helped wheel his gurney toward the bed under the CT scanner. He put up no fight as we moved him from one surface to another.

"So how long have you been here?" I asked the duo as we strolled into the control room. "He's been here for 5 years, me only 2," the energetic one responded.

"Seen millions like this," added the sarcastic one. "So you're the student? What are you doing here?" I had flashbacks to college frat parties.

"24 hour labor shift," I grunted back at him.

They went back to talking to one another about a coworker they had. Something about this individual's pet chicken, I think. Can't exactly remember. Speaking of animals, the black dog had found his way into the control room just to stare me down once again.

We sat in silence as the images slowly uploaded. I tried to focus, peering over the silent imaging tech and utilizing the technique the neuroradiologist had taught me just a few weeks earlier. The imaging tech turned around and beamed at me as the images flashed by. I didn't recognize her, but I could tell by the bags under her eyes that she spent her night hours here.

"Dog still following you around?" she asked.

Before I could respond my eyes were stolen by the images on the screen. It didn't look good. As I looked over the images, processing the intimate details of the molecular catastrophe occurring in this gentleman's brain, the energetic nurse struck up a conversation with me. Something about the Yankees? Or was it food? Maybe her Italian heritage? I can't remember.

"Can you move him over a little bit?" The tech asked the her.

"Sure, give me a second."

A voice came from the corner:

"You know we hang out all the time right?"
"What's that?" My divided brain wasn't expecting another voice.

"Her and I, we hang out after work." The sarcastic one stated with a hint of unnecessary defensiveness, as if I doubted it. He stared directly into my eyes with a focus I wish he had shown our friend in the scanner.

"Right on dude," I muttered, considering the next steps for the patient.

More time passed during which I'm not fully certain what happened. I just remember the room was very warm, and I really wanted to take off my fleece. But I didn't. Soon it was time to unload the patient back onto his bed. Once again there was no fight. We wheeled him out of the room and into the hall. The sarcastic one looked back at me smiling.

"Race you."

"What the hell -" I started, soon running after the duo as they sped off with the gurney, riding on it like children on a grocery cart.

Was there something we were rushing to? I thought there was nothing we could do? Had I misread the scans?

We ran by the main bay, full of doctors and nurses. I slowed down and jogged over to the half-awake one from earlier.

"The scans, did you see them?" I asked hopefully

"Oh yeah totally," he responded lethargically. "Goner."

Steven, who was standing in the corner overhearing our conversation, looked at me with a hint of sadness in his eyes before going back to whatever he normally does.

I turned around, back towards the duo, smirking at me as I looked on in confusion.

"ATTENTION: YOU ARE NOT CYNICAL YET, YOU POOR BABY"

What were we running to? Nothing? It appeared so. Perhaps we weren't running toward anything, but rather away from something. Maybe the past? Every day in the hospital we run a little farther away from our pasts - with the acquisition of medical knowledge we apparently must sacrifice a little piece of perspective. The patient goes from being our friend, to a he or a she, to an it. Just last week I saw a patient referred to as "it" in front of their family. It seems like every 10 minutes, a surgical resident somewhere in America throws their very first temper tantrum. Disposable staplers, marking pens, and insults fly across operating rooms, obscuring the humanity of the patients being treated behind clouds of competing egos. My grandma was in the hospital the other day; she told me the cardiologist cares more about her heart than her. I wonder what it took for the mischievous duo to see their patient as a bag of groceries in a cart. The offense I take to this is shrugged off as being naive, as I have yet to be broken by the various insults hurled at me by the medical profession. I've feared many of these are nothing more than friendly fire, meant to prepare me for nothing.

There was nothing left for me, so I French exited the craziest part of the casino in which I was confined for the night. The only person I wanted to bid adieu to was Steven, but I couldn't seem to find him. I trudged back up the 27 flights of stairs on autopilot, my brain too preoccupied with my goal to notice my heart begging me to stop before it's too late.

I wandered back into the labor and delivery bay. It was 6AM somehow.

"Doc, I'm so sorry I disappeared like that, I have no clue where the time went." I explained, preparing myself for the scolding. "No, no, don't apologize, it's okay! Sorry I wasn't around to teach you anything." She appeared as if nothing had happened all night, wearing a fleece that looked like it had been pressed at the cleaners just this morning. I could tell her remorse was real and that the look of regret in her eyes was genuine, for I was her very first student since graduating residency.

The scary room to which I knew I must return to rest had a blue aura filling the half open doorway. Perhaps it isn't the ghosts of mothers past that walk these halls, but the ghosts of innocence. I collapsed into bed fleece and all, feeling surprisingly proud of myself for the torment I felt while reminiscing about my night in the ER. Not tonight, one less ghost tonight. I pulled myself back up and started running full speed from the casino. The black dog walked away from his corner, tail tucked between his legs.

"ATTENTION: WE WILL GET YOU EVENTUALLY"

Unlikely.



"Effervescent" by Isidora Monteparo