

The Professor's Last Lesson

In the Coronary Care Unit

Rounds in the coronary care unit have become routine by the third week of my rotation as an intern. Stand around for hours. Try to guess answers to difficult questions. Learn from the misfortune of others.

The patient in room 13, a brilliant and hilarious professor, is having a rough time. He is sickly and is getting visits from clergy. Of course, we all think that he is doing a bit better. On morning rounds, he is jovial with a broad smile and piercing humor. He pokes fun at my unkempt hair and my two days of stubble. He asks me if I think I am fashionable.

As we wind down the last case of the morning, the monitors in room 13 shriek. Coarse V-fib. Methodical chaos surrounds me. We all know what to do. The professor is dying. I quickly begin chest compressions as my fellow intern slaps the paddles on. I sense the angel of death floating in. A murky coolness fills the room.

We animate the stillness with 200 joules of ferocious energy. The body jerks horribly. A life-affirming rhythm appears. Things get quiet. I hear my attending say "nicely done." I smugly grin as if he is speaking to me.

Suddenly, the patient bolts upright with an expression of pain and bewilderment. He stares intensely into my eyes and shouts "Hey you! Why did you wake me up from that beautiful dream?"

I am dismayed. Not knowing what to say, I fidget nervously. He shuts his eyes as if to shun me. He calmly puts his head down. As I watch him regain his peace, the monitors scream. V-fib. Turmoil. We hit him with enough electricity to light Yankee Stadium. He quickly slips from us. As we desperately work, I see the angel of death slither away, along with my smug grin.

—**Kenneth Christopher, MD**
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