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FICTION | FALL 2021

## Saturday Morning

By Patrick Connolly

The doctor's mask lapped to his mouth as he drew a breath, his shoulders and chest rising against a descending diaphragm. "Are you ready?" he asked the nurse.

"Yes, let's call." Her glasses had slid off the bridge of her nose, fogging and clearing as each breath escaped around her mask. No one was supposed to touch their face.

He tapped the digits on his phone and held it to his ear. "She was awake when they called me last night but deteriorated on the way," he said to her. "Didn't look too good when I saw her at midnight, but she had brain stem reflexes. It's ringing."

"I didn't see brain stem reflexes when I assessed her this morning," the nurse said, "and her blood pressure went from high to low 10 minutes ago. ICU just wrote for neosynephrine."

Second ring. "I didn't see them either. I think she's brain dead. The labile pressure goes along with that."

"What are you going to tell the husband?" the nurse asked.

"Just that. The scan this morning is a lot worse and I think she's brain dead."

They stood in her room at the window, the ventilator cycling behind them. It was a sunny, blustery spring day. The trees swayed and leaves convulsed in the wind, but mostly stayed attached to the branches. The glass was thick and there were no wind sounds inside. Luminous, billowy clouds moved quickly across the sky, as a child would draw them.

Third ring. "I don't know if he's ready to hear she's brain dead," she said.

"OK. I'll just introduce the idea. We should bring him in to see her."

"Oh, no. Nobody's allowed in now."

"I thought they were allowing visitors for births and deaths."

"Only births for the last week. The virus is spiking."

"That's brutal. It's so wrong."

"I know."

A cemetery was across the street, hospitals and cemeteries so commonly near one another. The

headstones were heavy to the ground, unyielding. Older cemeteries had roughly hewn stones and faded epitaphs, as if technology couldn't quite make them crisp and square. But even older ones didn't have headstones so much as low, rounded cairns. Time and nature.

Fourth ring. "He picked up on the first ring at midnight. I hope he's there," the doctor said.

"Maybe he fell asleep." She folded her hands on her belly.

A rattle in the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Hello? Mr. Smith?"

"Yeah?" sleepily.

"It's the doctor. We spoke last night."

"Oh yes, good morning, sir."

"I wanted to update you on your wife."

"Remember I told you she wasn't looking too good last night, but we would do some medical treatment to see if she'd get any better, and if she got a little better, I would take her for surgery?"

"Right... I remember."

"Unfortunately, she's worse – quite a bit worse." He was flat and professional. "Last night she was in a deep coma, but the brainstem was still working. The brain stem is not working anymore. The CT scan this morning looks a lot worse too. We think she might be brain dead."

The husband didn't say anything, only sighed. The white noise of the receiver filled what was otherwise silence.

The doctor drew another breath, after a pause of his own, "There's a very specific process that we do to determine this and it takes several hours."

"Can I talk to her?"

"Do you want to video chat?"

"I don't have that. I'm on a landline. Can I just talk to her?"

"Let me ask." He put the phone on mute. "I wouldn't wish this for anyone. He can't even see her."

“I know. This is goodbye for him. We have to work what we have,” the nurse said.

He nodded.

“Sure, sir. We’re going to put you on speaker so we’re sure she can hear you.” He set the phone next to her ear.

“Honey? Honey? Can you hear me? I love you, I love you.” He sniffled in the phone. Tears were better running inside the nose than outside. “I miss you so much. Won’t you come back please? Please? Oh, no, no.” he began sobbing. The doctor and the nurse stood side by side, looking at the phone next to her ear.

She lay motionless, except for her chest rising and falling. The ventilator shussed rhythmically, precisely one breath every five seconds.

The sniffing subsided in the phone. “Are you still there doctor? Nurse?”

“Yes, yes, we’re here.”

“What do I have to do next?” the husband asked.

The nurse answered. “You should contact a funeral home. That’s your next step, Mr. Smith. I’m really sorry. We both are.” She spoke for the doctor too. “Is there anything we can do for you right now?”

“No, no. Thank you both for what you do,” the husband said.

“Yes sir. Bye Mr. Smith.”

“I’ll call you in thirty minutes or so,” the nurse said.

The doctor picked up the phone from her bed and ended the call. He exhaled, billowing his mask. “Well, that was awesome,” he said. “I can’t believe they won’t let people in to say goodbye.”

“It’s just been in the past week. Hopefully, they’ll end it soon.”

“This guy’s going to remember this for the rest of his life. How he didn’t get to say goodbye to his wife in person. She didn’t even have coronavirus. People are still dying from the regular stuff too.”

She nodded.

He looked at her belly, her hands still folded on it. “Why are you here, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“No, it’s ok. I’m agency. I got laid off from an ophthalmology office, but I used to work ICU nights. My husband got furloughed.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks. This baby isn’t going to turn around and head back, so I figured I’d come and do this for as long as I could. Today’s my last day here. I’m supposed to stay closer to home, upstate. There’s some per diem stuff I’m going to do at our local hospital.”

“What about the baby and the coronavirus?”

“The charge nurses have mostly been assigning me patients without COVID, like this lady.”

“I guess that helps a little?”

“Some of the other nurses see it as preferential treatment and don’t like it. Like why shouldn’t the agency nurse get the crummy assignments? From my perspective, if I weren’t here, they’d be working even more, with even more exposure, so they just deal.”

Someone knocked on the doorframe. “You need neosynephrine?”

“Yeah that’s mine, thanks,” the nurse said. She took it and began connecting it to the tangle of tubes.

“Did you see how that man pined after his wife? He must really love her,” the doctor said.

“The phone goodbye made it more acute for sure. I’ve always thought that’s one way you can tell true love. The more distraught the partner is, the more love there was. Dying is for the living, right? All love ends badly. Didn’t Hemingway say that? The more love, the worse it ends.”

“In the rain,” he said. They laughed together. “So we don’t know if it was true love and how much until it’s all over? That’s heartening.”

“Well, of course there are other signs. As an ICU nurse, I only see the end.”

“I think my mom wishes for that. Someone to pine after her when she dies.”

“You will.”

“That’s expected of children. I mean that she wishes my dad would break down and sob like that when she passes. He’s just going to show up in the church again 60 years later or whatever, and pay his last respects, like it was a duty.”

“They’re not together, I guess?”

“No, not for forty years. He’s on his fourth wife. She never remarried. It’s ancient history, I know.”

“History is what you remember.”

She sighed heavily and bent forward a little.

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah, he gets pretty busy in there this time of morning. Must be getting near lunch.”

“It’s not a contraction?”

“No, doesn’t feel like. What time is it?”

“It’s 10:30.”

“I get lunch at 11.”

“Can I help you?”

“No I’m fine, it’s just a strong kick or a sharp elbow.” She leaned with her hip against the window. “It’s like when someone holds your feet and tickles them. You try to pull them away but you can’t. It’s a type of pain, but you still laugh and feel good.”

“Do you think love is like this too?”

“Well, love is the opposite. Sometimes it hurts and you cry, but you still enjoy it while you have it. You don’t want to pull away, but walk back in for more. That man is going to go on loving her, her memory, until he dies. Do you talk to your parents much?”

“My dad maybe once or twice a year. We’ll have a drink, maybe dinner. He’s a pleasant dining companion. My mom I try for twice a week. She’s a little demented.”

“Aw sorry to hear that. It must be really hard.”

“She forgets a lot and I have to remind her of stuff all the time. It’s a little frustrating.”

“Do your parents ever talk?”

“Maybe once every five years. It’s cordial. ‘All I ever wanted was a family, together with your father,’ she says.”

“She has you.”

“I guess, and my brothers, her sisters and some of her uncles. You know, come to think of it, she hasn’t really mentioned my dad in the last six months or so.”

The nurse nodded and looked at her watch. “What are you doing the rest of today?”

“I have to finish rounding, just four more patients, then going home. You?”

“I’m here until 7, then I’m going home. Right now I’m going to call organ procurement for her. We’ll see what her husband wants to do.”

They stood at the window, and the wind continued to blow outside, silent and fresh.

“Well, back to work,” she said. She turned to adjust the neosynephrine dose on the IV pump.

“Yes, right.” The doctor turned and walked out of the room, stepping over the threshold.

“Good luck with your mom,” she said.

He turned to her one last time. “Thank you. Good luck with your baby. You know something? I’m going to call my dad.”

She smiled gently under her mask and nodded, and he walked off into his Saturday morning.

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**Patrick Connolly has been a neurosurgeon for over 20 years, 15 of them in Philadelphia. He has published about 50 scientific articles, a portfolio of op-ed columns in the Philadelphia Inquirer and attended Iceland Writers Retreat twice. Medicine comes from story and story comes from conflict. Fiction allows him to explore these fundamental tensions. “Saturday Morning” is his first published story.**

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