

## The Oral

By Ron Ruskin

Card three. Atherosclerosis. It is past midnight in his attic bedroom and Ben Adler calls Ryan Callaghan, a med-student night-owl like himself, who has his pathology oral next morning at 8:30. Callaghan has it on good authority that atherosclerosis will be on the oral so Adler reviews the pathological process—predisposing factors, gross findings, and microscopic features. By one o'clock, at the third of six points he falls into a void, jerking awake to see twelve minutes have vanished from his universe. He re-checks his tiny study-card handwriting, highlighted yellow, underlined in red. Has he forgotten the last three points? He rouses himself, reads the card, places it face-down, and repeats all six points without error. On his desk beside volumes by de Beauvoir, Camus, Sartre, Plath, is a book of Neruda poems open at *Si tū me olvidas*:

If little by little you stop loving me,  
I shall stop loving you little by little.

The poem is more beautiful than anything he has studied in med school. He plans to memorize it and recite the words to Lisa but now he must study pathology. When Lisa calls earlier at eleven with a sure-fire hot tip—study cirrhosis—Adler dismisses it as rumor because he and Callaghan are betting on atherosclerosis. Now it is time for sleep. Adler pours milk into a small saucepan, heats it, drinks the warm milk, and swallows a banana. Somewhere he has read this will bring on a serotonin-high for sleep. He washes his face, brushes his teeth, undresses, stacks his study cards on the night-table clock setting the alarm-clock to ring at six, then creeps under the covers listening to the April rain dance on the attic roof. I will sleep five hours he tells himself, wake at six, have two hours to review Pathology, take my breakfast, dress, and walk to the hospital for my Pathology oral at 9:00 a.m.

Adler opens *Si tū me olvidas*. He reads the love-poem twice before his eyes close. Six a.m. Adler shudders awake in the obscurity of his attic bedroom. Outside it is raining. He is lost in a terrifying exam dream, walking with Lisa to the hospital on the wrong day at the wrong time, entering the wrong room, a dark lab stuffed with pathology specimens he has never seen before. In the dream, Lisa, who has her oral at 9:30 a.m. is distraught, tearful beside him. Now half-awake, half-dreaming, he is unsettled as his alarm sounds insistently and will not be quieted no matter what his fumbling fingers do. In retaliation he smacks the clock, launching it across the room, knocking his eighty-one-pathology study-cards off his night-table, scattering them to the floor. He turns his reading light on, bends down, and picks up the cards. Card number seventy-one lays face up on the floor. Sarcoidosis. It is soggy—a leak from his sloping attic ceiling pools on the floor. But what has he studied earlier? Whatever, it is gone. He strides to the bathroom with study cards, depositing them on top of the sink and urinates absent-minded, half his stream misses the toilet bowl and hits the ancient bathroom wallpaper. He showers hoping the cold water will revive him. His memory will come back, won't it? A strong coffee will fix him up. And yes, perhaps he should check cirrhosis, as Lisa suggested, but cirrhosis is a long-shot, isn't it? His luxuriant new beard, half-dark, half-red, clings outward from his jaws like rusted steel-wool while he ponders whether to call Lisa at this early hour to

ask if he should study cirrhosis and shave his discolored beard off. He has not seen her for two days, she is asleep—to shave a beard impulsively, to bet on cirrhosis this early morning is bad luck, isn't it?

Adler finds a fresh shirt, locates navy pants, and makes sure his underwear and jogging shoes are clean, then shuffles his 81 study cards, placing them face down on his desk, lifting them quickly, studying them, recalling key points as if he is playing poker against himself. At the end of two hours, he puts on his squall-jacket, takes his umbrella, study cards, and marches towards the grim outline of the hospital in the rainy distance. While he treks against the heavy downpour armed with his umbrella, Adler flashes study cards, one by one, speeding past flocks of children in yellow raincoats traipsing to school. Nearing the hospital two black dogs growl at him. Gazing up from his cards he sees a magnolia tree—the tree is swollen with unopened blossoms. What do these omens portend? Feeling a thready pulse of doubt, he checks his study cards.

The cirrhosis card is missing.

Seized by existential dread, he senses he will be asked the very question Lisa has warned him about, the question he has not studied and knows least. Cirrhosis. No. This is quite unlikely, he tells himself. He puts it out of mind and instead tries to recall Neruda's glorious love-poem.

By now, at the university hospital, it is exactly 9:00 a.m. Adler rushes down a flight of stairs to the basement and comes to the narrow bright-lit hallway that leads to Pathology. A door opens and Ryan Callaghan, his pathology lab partner, his closest dearest friend, who has lent him Neruda's love-poems, and reveres Lorca and Cohen, who like Adler, wants more to be an artist than a doctor, has completed his 8:30 a.m. pathology oral and nervously rubs his eyes, staggering awkwardly into the hallway. His green scrubs seem to be slipping off his ghostly body. His face radiates a sallow expression of despair. Callaghan collapses on a wooden bench outside the pathology lab, reaching into his pocket to remove something like a white handkerchief, tightly folded, held together by rubber bands. Adler sees the white object swell as Callaghan removes each elastic, twisting right, then left, like a Rubik's cube, as it expands to a foolscap-sheet laden with writing.

"You have your study-cards," Callaghan says. "I have my folded foolscap-sheet."

"Did those notes help?"

Callaghan reaches into his scrubs for a stick of gum and gestures with his thumb down.

"What went on in there?"

"He had it in for me. Dr. Kauffmann murdered me." Callaghan folds up his study sheet and stares into space. "This goddamn specimen. Was it a lung section? Or pancreas? He asked what was the process responsible for the lesions. Can you believe that?"

"Lesions?" Adler asked. "What sort of lesions?"

"How am I to know? Was it lung or pancreas? You have to start somewhere. It was in a goddamn glass jar and it was floating in formaldehyde so I said it was lung and he stared at me and did not say a word. I swear I had no clue what the hell I was talking about so he waited."

"That was all— he waited?"

"It gets worse. He nodded. He smiled. That just about killed me—you know how he smiles and nods, well, he sits in his goddamn lab coat and rocks a little bit in his swivel chair the whole time. So, I am talking slow, real slow, about this lung and I am watching his face for any sign, any twitch, any blink. Ben, he has this smiling poker face, I swear, and then he asks

me if it is the right or left lobe, and then I know I am totally screwed because the smile went off his face. Goddamn pancreas.”

“Shit. Pancreas. Didn’t you tell him it was the pancreas?”

“Too late. He asked me about fatty liver. He showed me slides.” Callaghan says. “I stayed up two nights straight, no sleep, making notes, reading; I knew Pathology backwards, I swear. The entire fucking textbook. This one goddamn question—” Callaghan sighs. He leans forward and pounds his thighs with frustration. Adler comforts his lab-partner, but Callaghan is inconsolable.

For a moment Adler catches himself thinking, better him than me, better he should flameout—at least I may have a chance of passing. The thought was cruel and unfair and soon left his mind.

“I fucked up.” Callaghan adds. “I should study pharmacology for tomorrow. Or maybe not.”

“Study and don’t give up,” Adler punches Callaghan’s shoulder. “You just had a bad day.”

As Callaghan departs, a door swings open. Dr. Kauffmann, Chief of Pathology at the university hospital, emerges, spectacled, grey-haired, radiant in a white lab-coat. “Benjamin Adler? Please enter.”

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On the table beside Professor Kauffmann is a stainless-steel pan containing sections of human brain and liver. To his left sits a large bottle, a floating specimen. Kidney? Adler wonders. Beside a slide projector rests a large screen and around the darkened lab are specimens—heart, pancreas, testicles, a uterus with fallopian tubes and ovaries, bone, and brain slices in columnar tubes. Drawings of cells hang from walls; an X-ray of the skull is alit on a screen. To Dr. Kauffmann’s right stands a huge bottle with a conical organ penetrated by numerous holes and covered with a dark pebbled grain on its surface like old Swiss cheese or a misshapen piece of leather with many eyelets. Adler supposes it may be lung.

“You have had a chance to look around, yes? Your eyes are used to the light?”

Adler nods.

Kauffmann asks: “Do you see, perhaps, a specimen that you want to talk about?”

“Nothing just yet, sir.”

Adler checks the specimens and notices Dr. Kauffmann reading a list of names from a file folder.

“Adler, I see you and your lab-partner Callaghan missed six labs this year. Can you explain that?”

“I’m sorry sir,” Adler says.

“You missed four labs on the liver and you attended only one autopsy. Your attendance is conspicuous by its absence, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’m sorry sir.”

“Sorry is not an explanation. Is there some circumstance you should tell me about? Your term mark is 59%. You will have to do very well on your final oral and your written exam in pathology.” Dr. Kauffmann pauses. “The pathology final is difficult. I have the impression that you consider pathology unimportant in your medical career.”

“Not exactly sir.”

Dr. Kauffmann reaches for a paper and adjusts his glasses. "Pathology is the study of disease. There is not enough study of Life in medical school. I believe you and Callaghan wrote this in the university newspaper."

"Yes. Only to make a point, I suggested we spend no time studying Life and the Humanities and too much time studying pathology."

"How do you know?" Dr. Kauffmann smiles. "You and Callaghan were hardly ever here."

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Dr. Kauffman gives a brief lecture about the scourge of disease and its relevance since disease and death claim all humankind.

"Definitely," Adler says. "I couldn't agree more."

"Good. Now tell me a bit about cirrhosis," Dr. Kauffmann asks.

"Cirrhosis?"

Adler feels his body falling into a dark shaft of terror. Adler stammers and begins. Adler speaks of cirrhosis as a pathological condition of decreased function of the liver, struggling to recall cirrhotic types, viral, infectious, endocrine, toxic, alcoholic, circulatory, biliary. He desperately lists each cause with a halting explanation. He knows he is at bat in his last inning when Dr. Kauffmann pitches a terrible fastball towards Adler—a new specimen, a diseased organ with a nodule. What is this—liver perhaps? Metastatic cancer? An amebic cyst? Adler takes three swings and realizes he has struck out.

After what seems an interminable silence Dr. Kauffmann speaks. "Your grades in pathology are seriously in jeopardy. Because of your low term mark and attendance, you will have to get over 85% on your final written exam."

"I studied for my oral," Adler says.

"You gave an inadequate description of cirrhosis. I suggest you begin with that," Dr. Kauffmann shakes his head. "You have one week before the written pathology exam. If you know your work, you can demonstrate your knowledge in the written exam. You must think more critically, categorize more clearly, and express your understanding of the disease process. You have failed your oral exam."

Dr. Kauffmann opens the door and ushers Adler out of the pathology lab.

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Lisa sits waiting on the wooden bench outside the pathology lab for her 9:30 a.m. oral. She is slim and pretty with ash-blonde hair and blue-grey eyes. "How did it go?"

"Terrible. I flunked the oral. So did Callaghan. We studied atherosclerosis. Dr. Kauffmann is out for blood."

"What did Dr. Kauffmann ask you?"

"Liver cirrhosis."

"Why didn't you study cirrhosis? Why didn't you come to labs?" Her eyes search his.

"Yes. I brought it on myself, I see—so punish me more."

Adler slowly ascends the stairs and leaves the hospital. Outside the rain has turned to a light mist. Instead of returning to his attic room he wanders to the city docks to watch the ferries crossing to Wolfe Island, then trudges along Montreal Street to the train station and passes miles into the country, scowling, irritated, uncertain of what his next steps will be. He calls Callaghan from a pay-phone, yelling and angry about the bum-tip, and the two argue about their future in medicine and discuss their losses. Adler walks all morning until afternoon

when he returns to the campus and decides to borrow Lisa's notes. He has never had a passion for pathology but carefully reads the lectures he has missed.

The next morning Adler wakes at dusk. He showers and solemnly arranges his desk and notes as the sun rises. He has put his novels by Camus, de Beauvoir, Sartre, and poems by Plath, to one side. He studies pharmacology for the afternoon exam, realizing he has wanted to be a doctor but like Callaghan he wants to be an artist and now stands to lose everything he has done to reach this point. Lisa comes over the next two evenings. She quizzes him on pathology until the facts are branded into his mind, until each name and each image are mastered.

Now Adler is reluctant to read novels and poems, as if their hypnotic words like the Sirens' voices will plunge him into despair and death. Evenings he calls Callaghan and the two discuss the merits of study while each morning Adler rises early to study pathology until night when he falls asleep with his dog-eared study-cards beside his bed.

A week passes. At last, the dreaded pathology exam arrives and Adler, Callaghan, Lisa, and the medical class sit silently on wooden desks below the watchful eyes of invigilators and write longhand on exam foolscap.

But that evening after the written pathology exam Lisa and Adler sip wine together and he recites Neruda's poem to her, every word, faultlessly.

Si tū me olvidas.

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