

*Primum non nocere*

I was fifth in line at the lobby Starbucks when I saw the yellow giraffes, orange lions, and purple hippos go by. The dad, her widower, carried the same 20-pound infant carrier I picked out for Nick two years ago, before he was born. Navy, with a tan liner printed with stylized safari animals. He waited at the elevator bank. When the doors opened, he shifted the carrier from one arm to the other—it's heavy, I remember—he walked in, and the doors closed behind him.

After the surgery, three weeks ago today, I wanted to curl up on my office floor and sleep for a year. When I said "I'm sorry for your loss," I looked at his eyebrows—it's a trick I've learned. One long, wiry gray hair curled upward towards his hairline, and I focused on that until the thought bubbled up, a mental gas embolism: It looked like an antenna, detecting—so I delivered the news to his other eyebrow and patted his shoulder and walked away. Moments later, I overheard him ask a nurse directions to the NICU.

It turns out, had she not been shot twice in the abdomen serving a warrant to some serial criminal, had the idiot driver yielded for the ambulance instead of one-upping the Honda in the next lane, had the bullets lodged a centimeter to the left, today she'd be starting her maternity leave.

There's so much you can't comprehend without first-hand experience. You know in the abstract you'll lose a patient occasionally; you can't take it personally. It happened to me once before, but he was old; his children were retired. Having kids is like that, too; no one tells you in med school that the natal bundle conceals a connection to every other parent on the planet. It's like the odd-numbered problem in the book, with no solution in

the back. You're clever, they imply; work out the problem yourself.

Instead of the nap, I settled for a venti coffee, black, then like an idiot I paid my respects to the kid in the NICU. "Christina" printed on the tiny plastic bracelet on the fragile ankle. She clung to my finger.

Had I slept better the night before, she and her unwidowed husband would get Christina today, who's now big enough to go home.

On the wall in the NICU was a decal of Humpty Dumpty, pre-accident. I looked at it as I stood over Christina's bassinet and it was like a conviction, the stupid vinyl piece of crap. When no one was looking I tore it off the wall and took it to the lab and I grabbed a pair of shears and shredded it.

People constantly come in broken; I put the pieces back together. And then I wash up and change my gown or scrubs and do it again. This is what I do.

I keep seeing those doors close behind him. Over and over, they open, he walks in, and they close.