

An Intern's Nightmare

7/20/23 for Sixfold Fiction

Each time my pager went off, a new wave of anxiety and fear came over me. Would I know what to do? Would I find the correct answer to the problem? Would I be able to sound like a doctor? This internship was a twelve-month experience of panic, fear, and fatigue.

It was ten o'clock in the evening on August twelfth, nineteen eighty-four, when I got the call. The infamous nurse, Cindy of the Cardiac Care Unit (CCU), was the one paging me. She chewed up interns at a rate of two or more a day. Many were left with tears or scars, and it wasn't only the men. Women like me were barely worth talking to in Cindy's world. Any intern that didn't make it through this hazing was skipped over, and the upper echelons of the team, resident, or attending were called after that. Everyone knew what it meant. You didn't make the cut.

I believed I had passed the initial screening process of the dark-haired svelte model of a CCU nurse. Apparently, she was willing to talk to me, but my hazing was not complete.

"Get up here right away, Wells. We have a problem."

"Aw, I just got into bed after admitting two more chest pain patients."

"I really don't care. One of the people you admitted is going into Bigeminy. You know what that is, right? Where every other beat is abnormal and doesn't deliver blood to the body."

I was so excited that I knew and said, "Of Course, I know. Can't you take an order for an increase in his medication over the phone?"

"No, there are some other problems, and I need you here immediately."

Looking in the mirror of my small on-call sleep room, I realized I was quite the sight. My tousled short brown hair needed combing. My short wrinkled white coat pockets were stuffed with references and examination equipment that were in desperate need of order. My five-foot-nothing frame didn't inspire confidence either. My permanent pixie smile made you feel like I was on your side, even though it also read as a bit of untimely humor.

"OK, I'll be right there." I straightened myself as best as I could.

On arrival at the CCU, Cindy was seated looking at all the monitors for the six-room unit. I walked up, and she pointed to Mr. Garcinia's strip. One non-functional beat followed one normal beat. The pattern repeated over and over again. This meant his heart was very irritable, and he could be at risk of either having another heart attack or going into a catastrophic rhythm. I ordered an increase in his intravenous anti-arrhythmic medication.

I stared at Cindy since I could have done this over the phone. For the first time, I realized she was probably only four or five years older than my age of twenty-six. I was waiting for her to tell me the real reason she brought me here other than to mess with me.

"Jo, you have to go into his room and tell his family to go home. He was in a normal heart rhythm until they came, and now you see how he is."

"Wait, isn't this part of your job?" It was unheard of to question Cindy.

"I can't. I have other patients. Just go do it."

I tried looking more official than I felt and entered the room. I was immediately struck with what looked like a sixteenth-century painting of a family paying tribute to their patriarch. There were about ten people around the bed of this single patient glassed-in cubicle of a room.

Mr. Garcia was the center of attention. There was a very tall wide man who was all muscle standing at the right hand of the man trying to have a heart attack. I ignored these distractions, looking and speaking only to my patient.

"Mr. Garcia, I am so sorry to have to do this. Your family needs to go home. You see, since they have come, your rhythm has been quite irregular and indicates cardiac stress. It may be that you are happy or upset, but regardless, it is important that you just rest tonight. You need quiet."

The room went from the usual family chatter to complete silence as soon as I finished my little speech. I looked at each one of the people around the bed and saw a predominance of adult men and a few women and children. The tall man near the head of the bed pointed at me.

"Do you know who he is? I mean, do you KNOW who he is?"

There was another pause before I answered. This time I spoke directly to the man asking the question. "Yes, I know exactly who he is. He's my patient, and I am obligated to do what is best for him regardless of the impact on his family. He needs rest, and I am going to make sure he gets it."

The intake of breath was dramatic since the entire family inhaled and then held. I waited again. This time the man of the hour, my patient, pointed at me and spoke.

"Heh, Heh, Heh. I like her. I really like her. You got some moxie, kid. All right, everyone, do what she's telling you. Go on. You can call me in the morning."

The entire family imitated my patient's laugh, even though it was clear that none of them found this funny. All ten people got ready to leave. They gathered their belongings as they said

their goodbyes to the man in the bed. More than half glared at me as they left the room. Within thirty seconds, the room was empty and quiet.

"Mr. Garcinia, I'm sorry to be so rough on your family, but you need a night without stress. If there is something I can order to help you sleep and relax, let me know. It's time to let your body heal."

"Don't worry about it. You're aces in my book. I liked what you did. I'll let the little girl outside, the nurse, know if I need anything."

I left the room wondering to myself what had just happened. When I crossed the threshold between the room and the nurse's station, Cindy put her arm around my shoulders from the side and asked me in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Do you know who he is?"

"I just did that with them in there. Don't start with me, Cindy."

"Mr. Garcinia is the head of the Mafia in this county. The family owns casinos in Vegas. They own a sports team, and they're trying to relocate it here. He controls the Teamsters and who knows what else."

"Cindy, that sounds like important information. Things you should have told me before I went in the room!"

"I, I, I ..." She never got any more out than that. I walked away.

The next day I woke up in my sleep room and tried to use caffeine to compensate for all the things I lacked. When I went to the CCU, it was clear the day nurse had heard the story

because she gave me a smile and a thumbs-up as I entered Mr. G's room. I started to apologize to him again. This time from the foot of the bed.

"Come here, come here," he said, motioning me to the head of the bed. "I want to talk with you."

I was sure I was dead. A hit would be put on me, and I would never finish my training. I repeated my apologies, and he told me to hush. I hushed.

"I am so impressed with you. I want to ask you a favor. I want you to be my doctor."

"I am your doctor."

"No, not just now, but as your job, I would be your only patient. You understand, right?"

I understood completely. It would be like a threat of death for me every time his heart had trouble. In fact, I could imagine that if he died, then I would follow after. I was a young trainee. Nowhere on my list of things I wanted to do was 'Doctor to the Mafia.'

I realized I was supposed to speak and stuttered my answer out, "Mr. Garcia, I am so honored that you would ask me. It is a big thing you are asking, and I will have to think about it. I didn't plan on anything like this. Can I let you know tomorrow?"

He smiled a bittersweet smile and leaned back, saying, "Of course, I would expect no less from a professional."

I went home early after I finished the care and notes for all the people on my part of the medical service and including visits to the five other people I'd admitted the night before. I ate a

take-out burger meal and lay in bed. I couldn't fall asleep. I'd slept less than four hours in the last thirty. Now I had insomnia. Completely ridiculous.

I was thinking about Cindy and Mr. Garcinia. How would I say no to the head of the Mafia? Should I say no to the head of the Mafia? I quickly concluded that I had to say no to the head of the Mafia. If I died as a free doctor, it was better than being attached to a Don with a serious heart condition.

Cindy was another matter. Her attitude of messing with interns had gone too far. She acted out her hazing one time too many. The night shift was on duty, and I called the number for the CCU and asked for Cindy.

"How are you tonight, Cindy? Is Mr. Garcinia well?"

"He is doing great. I even got some credit from him for sending you into the room last night. He is still talking about it."

I couldn't do it. I wanted to mess with Cindy, but I couldn't. I didn't want to change who I was. I didn't want to become a harsher human to be a doctor.

"OK, that's good. Thanks for the update."

I fell asleep immediately after the call and woke up the following day, ready to do it all again. It was about eleven am when I got to Mr. G's room. I girded my loins and said what I needed to say.

"Mr. Garcinia, I am so flattered by your offer. I just don't know how to tell you what it meant to me. I've learned so much from our encounters, but I can't give up my dreams of being

an internist and quit my training. I want to provide care for the uninsured and less fortunate. I don't think this is a good fit for either of us."

He nodded an acquiescent Don nod. "What kind of things did you learn from me?"

I had to think quickly. I'd said that to make him feel better, but in just that second, I realized it was true. "Sir, until last night, I thought I had to be somebody different than who I am to be a good physician. Not the basics, but I couldn't use my own personality to communicate with people and be a good physician. I'm really pretty much a smart aleck. Most of the teachers in medical school are serious and dry sort of folks."

He smiled and nodded along with me. I paused and waited as I thought he was going to say something. "Go on."

"Well, last night taught me that my natural instincts serve me well. I can be who I am and be a good doctor too. That is the most valuable lesson I've learned as an intern. I thank you for it."

He was now choked up, so I shook his hand and started to leave. I turned at the door. "If you behave today, you might get to go home tomorrow." I wagged my eyebrows and left the room. A smart-mouth doctor was born.