

## Circuit

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Dr. Herman Pearlman sets his napkin down and asks Zana, his wife, if she has any regrets. Their plates bear remnants of spaghetti and shrimp which he cooks with red wine on nights of celebration.

She mops up sauce with a heel of sourdough. “Nope. And you?”

He presses a fist to his mouth then spreads his hands as if to bless the table. “I might have stayed. Probably should have.” He means all those nights he left their bedroom around three a.m., weeknights and weekends going back years, so that he could work on papers in the den.

She pushes her plate away. “No worries, Herm.”

They’re in the breakfast nook. It’s where they take most meals, celebratory or not.

“I hope I didn’t creak floorboards,” he says. It’s an old apartment and he always tried to glide on stockinged feet. He used to joke that real science happens without heavy fanfare.

She blows her nose. “You didn’t wake me up.”

He nods. He appreciates her selflessness and uncomplaining attitude while he worked, some nights till dawn, pausing only to take brief naps on a sofa in the living room or to admire the view from the window by his desk: the Embarcadero all lit up, freighters festooned like Christmas trees, the Berkeley hills twinkling in the distance across the bay.

She pours more water. “How many did you write, Herm. Over the years.”

“Papers?” He sighs. “Too many to count.”

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“Too many,” she beams as if it were her own accomplishment. In a way, it is.

Tomorrow, the main event is Grand Rounds, the monthly convocation of doctors, nurses, and medical students that Herman has presided over for decades as chairman of the department of medicine at the San Francisco General Hospital. In fact, it will be the first time he’s not presiding. The meeting will be dedicated to his retirement.

She leans forward, batting eyelids. “Nervous?”

“About what?”

“What do you think?”

It’s a cool evening. The season—early September—reminds Herman of the beginning of a new school year. He went to Masterman High far away in Philadelphia. He recalls dried leaves scattered on the sidewalk, a chill in the air, polished surfaces of uncracked textbooks. It’s the thought of starting something new—retirement—that makes him remember those days. That and the fleeting sense of youth.

“And now the pièce de résistance,” she says. This is housed in a box from Lucca’s, one of San Francisco’s last remaining Italian delis.

Zana rises to arrange the cannoli on a painted sunflower dish while Herman pours himself a third glass of wine. Not being a connoisseur, not even a drinker, he can’t remember if white should age. This one had been in the fridge for months beside the bottle of red used for cooking. It had been a gift from Sandra Phillips after he announced she’d be taking over the chairmanship. Sandra’s specialty, dementia, is a safe distance from his area of research, AIDS. Not that it matters, but he’ll be remembered *distinctly*. The idea does make him smile.

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“Pace yourself,” Zana says, returning from the kitchenette. She sets the cannoli plus a white business envelope on the table.

Herman ignores them both. He produces a jewelry box from a pocket and extends it to her.

“You got me a gift? Herman. *I’m* not the one retiring.”

She flips open the box, affixes the earrings, and says *beautiful*—though she can’t exactly see herself in a mirror. “Open yours.”

He trains his eyes on her earrings. They flicker in the candlelight. They also remind him of another earring, a solitary stud that once gleamed under florescent bulbs. He wracks his memory for the name of the patient who wore it but can only recall the nurse who hovered nearby—Jose Hernandez. *Who can forget Jose?* He’ll be there tomorrow, a featured speaker.

“Herm, aren’t you curious about your envelope?”

“They’re silvery,” he says, still mesmerized by the earrings which seem to be connected—in his mind—to the solitary stud.

“Not platinum?” she asks.

“What?”

“You said silvery.”

He shakes his head. “I meant *platinomy* but that’s not a word.”

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Zana blushes. She leans over to kiss him. He rises to meet her, teetering right to left. She swivels around to break his fall but he waves her off. “I’m just tipsy. All that alcohol.” He sits back down.

“Open yours, Herm. Seriously.”

He rips open the envelope and skims the letter welcoming him to Bruno’s Neighborhood Gym. It’s where Zana goes for Pilates. She’d been threatening him with membership for months. “Total body health,” she says. “We’re going to improve your lifestyle.”

“I get exercise.”

“Your arms are like spaghetti.”

“Rigatoni.” He smiles. “Al dente.”

“We can do it together, Herm. Pilates. It’ll be fun.”

He dredges up the refrain about his daily walk to and from the hospital, which includes one of the steepest hills in the city—Potrero Hill. “How many men at nearly seventy—

“—Why go there, Herm?”

“You mean age?”

“No. I mean hospital. There’s no need to *walk* there.”

“They’re keeping an office for me,” he says slyly.

She narrows her eyes. “Try some cannoli.” She hands him one with chocolate chips.

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“Cannoli once in a blue moon? What about snack chips and diet soda every day for lunch because you’re too busy writing papers or teaching or seeing patients or rushing to another meeting. That’s what we’re talking about.”

He waves the white napkin. “I surrender.” He loosens his tie, a vintage Jerry Garcia pattern. He’s not much of a fan of Garcia’s tunes or the Grateful Dead—music for a wild scene rather than quiet contemplation—but Zana picked it out like she’s done most of his neckties—her ongoing project to inject color in his life if not cheeks. “So, what now?” he asks.

Zana rises and sashays down the hall. “*We* retire.”

He follows her, still not quite back to par but feeling stronger. He’s convinced it was the alcohol.

Once in the bedroom, they start to undress though he finds himself unable to loosen his tie. He’s not completely sober.

“Let me.” Zana straddles his lap, untangling silk. “Herm, you’re hopeless. I hope you know that.”

“I might have an inkling.”

He wonders how many couples keep things going. He’s proud of their frequency—once per month, like clockwork. Most sexual partners peter out after they’ve been married for four decades.

They kiss but Herman senses something new—a stuffiness in his chest.

Zana notices the perspiration on his brow. “Herm, are you okay?”

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“It’s the wine.”

“I know but you only had two glasses.”

“Three.”

Zana starts to put her clothes back on. “I’m taking you.”

“It’s not what you think.”

“And what do I think, Herman?”

“That I’m having a heart attack.”

“Well?”

He lies on his back and refuses to go the emergency room. “I will take another piece of cannoli though.”

## 2

Jose Hernandez switches off the nightlight. He’ll do tomorrow’s speech without notes or slides. He has the story well-rehearsed. He thinks of it whenever he sees medical students scurrying about in their short white coats. Admittedly it’s a bit dark but with some levity, a tragic comedy, particularly when young Pearlman plods onto the scene. He was a bumbling medical student with no gumption to shine. *Look at him now: Dr. Herman Pearlman, full professor, soon to be emeritus.*

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Gregory, Jose's husband, snores beside him in bed. The ruckus used to keep Jose up at night. Now he falls asleep to it, celebrating each moment of their lives together. *Who can we thank?*

"The Candy Man," Jose almost sings out loud, but instead he runs through the story once more.

It was 1982, late night or early morning. It might have been foggy and drizzly too. At least that sets the stage. Jose wants the audience tomorrow to be intrigued: it's not every day that your idol retires.

And so it goes:

An ambulance had just arrived at the SFGH emergency room. The patient had been found lying on a sidewalk, unarousable. He had a silver stud in his right ear, hardly a unique feature for a young man in the city. Otherwise, there was no identification, no name.

Jose rang for the on-call medical student. The hospital was—is—a teaching facility, but students were generally more trouble than they were worth. Young Pearlman—in his short white coat—was no exception. He stood like a deer in the headlights, focused on the earring rather than the critical parameters of hypotension, shallow respirations, altered mental status. In fact, the patient was practically comatose. You could say the same about Pearlman. It was time for the in-house senior resident to step in. Jose made the call.

The resident immediately ordered IV fluids, portable chest x-ray, EKG, and an arterial line. Jose rushed to get everything done. He was also on the phone to the ICU to arrange the transfer of the patient, not that he believed this would change the outcome—Jose knew which

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patients were terminal—but he preferred that another nurse step in at the end. You had to roll up a towel under the chin to shut the mouth, one among many tasks to prepare bodies for the morgue. Mouths of course were meant to breathe, taste, kiss, not to be clamped to prevent bandits from stealing gold and silver fillings. Plus, nobody—meaning *no body*—should ever be embalmed with an open mouth as if the dead might shout *hallelucha* from their casket. Jose had clamped far too many in recent months—all of them young men with unusual if not mysterious maladies.

Jose moved to the illuminated screen where the freshly developed chest x-ray now hung. He could decipher films better than many seasoned radiologists. What he saw was a picture of some kind of pneumonia. The lungs were speckled with opacities that looked like birdseed. He overheard the senior resident explain to Pearlman how miliary pneumonia—*miliary* for millet seed—was caused by disseminated tuberculosis.

Jose leaned in and asked who would come down with that. Pearlman interjected, *those with impaired immunity*. So, thought Jose, the student knew his stuff. He read books and paid attention to lectures. Still, he couldn't explain why this patient had become immunocompromised. No one could.

The resident dispatched Pearlman to the library to find out more. Later in the morning he'd present findings during clinical rounds, led by a famous professor whose cold stare had forced countless students to rethink their decision to enter medicine.

Meanwhile, the patient expired shortly after arriving in the ICU. Herman was still in the library. Jose was attending to new cases. The first rays of light were darting over the bay.



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Any relief that Jose felt over not being the one to prepare the body was overshadowed by the tragedy of another young man's death. Since he was coming off shift, too frazzled to sleep, he decided to hear what young Pearlman had to say.

The medical team huddled over coffee in a quiet corner of the cafeteria. The professor asked the student to speak up. Pearlman shuffled notecards with shaky hands and talked in a breathless tone, sweating profusely. A minute in, he stopped talking altogether, too nervous to continue.

Clearly, thought Jose—thought everyone—Pearlman had been rattled by the death. It might have been his first as a clinician and the faltering—the inability to speak—could be forgiven, but doctors or at least medical students had to pull themselves together, as did all members of the hospital team. Pearlman seemed to lack toughness or Teflon coating. Jose doubted he'd make it through training. And yet no one could have imagined what Pearlman had in store for them: a future career studying AIDS, a pioneer of Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy or HAART, a savior to everyone infected by HIV.

Gregory was—is—one of them.

Jose rubs his husband's shoulder. Gregory stirs but remains asleep. Decades ago, HIV loomed like an imminent death sentence. Now, thanks to Pearlman and researchers like him, it's become more of a chronic ailment. People are surviving and living full lives. They are falling in love and having families.

“You're a mensch, Herman Pearlman,” Jose whispers, having picked up some Yiddish over the years. “Let no one say you aren't.” And let no one say that he—Jose—hasn't come

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around to admire the native talent of *some* medical students. *But don't let that get to your head, Pearlman. You still dress like a nebbish even if you wear a long white coat.*

That's a fine closing remark, thinks Jose. Pearlman, whose self-deprecating humor is well known, will agree that Zana kept his ties from becoming as bland as the rest of his wardrobe.

## 3

This is Herman Pearlman, pale as a ghost, Zana observes.

Her husband sits on the edge of the bed, head between knees, the preferred position on a plane about to crash. *How can he know it's not a heart attack? He thinks the blue pills solve everything.*

Herman just took two.

She sits beside him. He exposes the underside of his wrist to make it easier for her to check his pulse. It's slow and regular—a good sign, though she's no doctor. This year, for sure, she'll take CPR. They offer free classes at the public library.

“Herm, is it another panic attack?” She says *another* though he hasn't had one in eons. His silence is close enough to an affirmative. She believes he's rattled by the speech tomorrow—the great goodbye, his swan song.

Herman wipes his forehead with a hanky.

“It's hard,” she says, “but tomorrow you merely have to say thanks and smile and get all teary eyed. Nothing fancy.” She doesn't need a *thank you* herself, though that would be nice.

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After the event, they'll spend a weekend together along the Mendocino coast. She's made reservations. The motel has a jacuzzi. "Think about the weekend, Herm. Focus on that."

He looks glum.

"We all get anxious," she adds.

She said that to him back in 1982. They'd just begun dating, not long after the debacle on clinical rounds. She liked to think her words inspired him to regain vital confidence, to speak in front of groups, but it may have been the pills—the beta-blockers provided by a kindly psychiatrist at student health. The medicine quelled Herman's racing heart, shaking hands, quivering voice. He could resume presentations. By the time he graduated medical school, commencing residency in internal medicine at SFGH, he was a veritable star. He knew more about AIDS and HIV than anyone and had little hesitation telling audiences about it, providing he took the pills. But he always took them no more than twenty minutes before a speaking engagement. *Why's he taking them now—the night before? He shouldn't be this anxious. Maybe it's not anxiety. Maybe it's...*

"Shouldn't we get an EKG Herm, just to be certain?"

Herman waves his hand to dismiss all concerns, mustering a stiff smile. "Talk amongst yourselves." It's a poor rendition of the *Saturday Night Live* skit, "Coffee Talk." He's not a natural comedian and he can't hide his feelings. Forty years of marriage have taught her something. Besides, she realizes, now's not the time for jokes.

"You're telling me it's not your heart? Herm, look at me."

He nods, which could mean yes or no. That's infuriating.

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“Retirement’s not easy,” he murmurs.

She takes a deep breath. “If you’re this nervous, we could deliver the speech together, holding hands, just like the Bobbsey twins.” She almost chuckles then remembers it’s no time for jokes.

“Bobbsey twins?”

“Didn’t you read kids’ books or was it always the New England Journal of Medicine?”

He shakes his head. “I just need to work. Then I’ll be fine.”

She knows this is code for trudging to the den. She assumes he has a polished draft of the speech, yet he’ll be making revisions till dawn. It *has* to be perfect.

“Herm, remember, you don’t need to say anything more than thanks.”

“Do you think...” He pauses.

“I’m listening.”

“That it went wrong?”

She furrows her brows.

“When I faltered, it was wrong.”

“Are we back to that?” It’s nearly midnight and forty years later. “Herman, let things pass.”

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“It was my first death. Yes, they consoled me, the team. Even the professor who didn’t console anyone, ordinarily. He was actually quite nice.” He rubs his thighs as if to smooth out wrinkles. “But they didn’t know.”

“What?”

“It wasn’t enough to do my best. I had to be the best. I had stage fright because of this. It’s why I’m in the den when I should be, I should have been—”

Zana puts her hand on his cheek. “You wanted success, Herm. And you managed to save a few lives. There’s no law against doing well *and* doing good. Besides, I’ve no regrets.” She pinches his ear. “Bruno’s gym. There’s no choice in the matter.”

Herman heads off to the den.

“One more thing,” she calls.

He turns.

“You can have your cannoli and eat it too.”

4

A sea of whitecoats and surgical scrubs stretches to the back of the auditorium. Sandra Phillips has never seen the place so packed, and while she might brag that they’re here for her, meaning her debut as chairperson for the department of internal medicine, she’s under no illusion. Dr. Pearlman’s the draw. She’s fine with that. He was her mentor.

She’ll miss his rounded shoulders and lumbering stride, his tiny office stacked with reprints and journals—a genuine fire trap—plus the shared lunches of cheese crackers and Diet

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Coke in the doctor's lounge. She glances at her speech, a text of fifteen Power Point slides lauding Herman's research over four decades. Maybe one day it will be her turn to be valorized before a packed house. By then, San Francisco will probably be under water.

Herman sits in the front row next to Zana, a hand cupped in hers resting on her lap. Sandra is distracted by Zana who wears her years like the silk evening gown that drapes her trim body—glamorously. Sandra is reminded of a brunette Helen Mirren. Not the young actress of soft-porn fame, but the elder stateswoman of the silver screen—maybe sexier. Herman, on the other hand, is dressed for another day at work—drab khakis and white Oxford, no color aside from the tie.

Sandra catches Herman's ambivalent expression. He'd rather keep working, she knows, but why? He has enough publications to be immortalized. Why not stroll into the sunset with his wife? Sandra regards her ringless hand. Her last date was more than ten years ago, and she can't remember the woman's name. If she could turn the clock back, she'd follow Herman's lead and waste no time finding someone, anyone, who can rock the day in an evening gown.

She taps the mic, welcomes everyone to grand rounds, and gestures to Herman and Zana. There's a standing ovation directed at the couple. Sandra lets the thunder settle.

Her speech covers Herman's research developing HAART. She follows her notes—it's mostly technical stuff—but she's privately preoccupied with the question of how medical science can illuminate so much about the *single* body yet so little about *two* bodies, or rather what draws them together and keeps them together through thick and then, success, failure, youth, old age,

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career, retirement. There must be invisible strings, magical elfin strings, but she knows little about them. She glances at Herman and Zana from time to time. Theirs is the real mystery.

Before long, her speech is over, and the audience claps and shouts bravo. Returning to her seat, she pauses to hug Herman and peck Zana on the cheek. She sits down in the row behind them and turns her attention to Jose Hernandez, the hospital director of nursing, who has just assumed the podium. He's known Herman since he was a squirt, meaning a medical student, and he makes little secret of the fact.

Jose wastes no time launching his first joke. It's about Herman's haberdashery or the lack thereof: "In this regard, our man of the hour is no Mr. Excitement, notwithstanding the neckties, and we know who we can thank for those." Jose waves to Zana. "Take a bow. You put up with him."

She stands and the audience guffaws. Sandra studies the graceful arc of Zana's back.

Jose delivers his talk—a rather dark tale about Herman's first patient death, maybe too dark for a retirement celebration, but accurate. Everyone should know that fame in the world of medicine arises amid disease, suffering, grief. She checks herself. *This is a celebration.*

The audience stands for another ovation as Herman ambles to the stage. Sandra taps Zana's shoulder and whispers congratulations. Zana turns around with glossy eyes and thanks Sandra for her speech. "But you might have to change the locks," she says. "I think Herman's secretly planning to come in tomorrow."

"We'll bar the doors," Sandra says.

The audience quiets down.

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“Ladies, gentlemen, and non-binary folks,” Herman says, scanning the auditorium. He looks at his notes, neatly ordered on numbered notecards. “I stand here, grateful, humbled, not a little bit sad. Forty years ago, which seems like yesterday...”

Here it comes, Sandra thinks.

Herman tilts in slow motion to the left, then to the right, and suddenly disappears behind the podium. Sandra runs to the stage, as do others. Herman lies on his back, frothing at the mouth. She checks his pulse. It’s thready, fast, irregular, and then it’s gone. She puts her head on his chest. *Where’s a stethoscope when you need one?* She begins compressions and someone runs for a defibrillator. Jose puts an arm around Zana to lead her away.

## 5

Herman emerges from the darkness. The world spins. His chest feels like a trampoline. He wonders if this is what happens after retirement—people jump up and down on you—only with the world spinning, they’d likely fall kerplunk.

Heads lean in. Herman wants to speak but there’s a tube down his throat. They would never do this to him back in Philadelphia. He tries to sit up, but firm arms keep him flat. *That’s not nice.* At least he can rub his eyes—also, his sternum. *Ouch.* Things are coming into focus. He’s in an ICU. If he’s not mistaken, Zana’s in the background. She might have lost an earring. The remaining one is in her right ear. That strikes a chord.

Someone, a stranger, asks if he knows his name. *What a question.* Of course, he knows his name and he’d like everyone else to know it too and then return to whatever they were doing



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before the craziness. *The mishegoss*. But what were they doing? He can't recall despite his superb memory. *Speaking of things, there was a certain patient whose name...*

And then Herman remembers—not the name of the man with the silver stud whose name no one remembers or perhaps even knew—but the faces, the adoring fans, the people who'd come to hear him. He envisions a large audience—larger than he'd ever imagined.

One voice stands out. He'd recognize Zana anywhere. She's the one to make sense of it all.

*My love, how did I sound? Could they hear me in the back of the hall? I wasn't too feeble?*

Maybe he's not in an ICU after all. Maybe he's back home, reminiscing. At least the life-support screen resembles a desktop computer, which means, in fact, that he's in the den. *Yes, that's it. Zana's in bed and I'm in the den*. He expects a view of the twinkly lights across the bay. He recalls crunchy pastry with creamy interior—something to eat and to have to eat. She'd just served dessert in the breakfast nook. Was it this morning? Perhaps longer. With all the writing, the proofs and publications, time flies.

*Are you still awake, my dear? Should I bring you the box of cannoli? We could have a snack. Never mind the crumbs.*

He feels that stuffy sensation again. The world falls dark once more. For an instant Herman thinks it's a power outage, which happens from time to time on Potrero Hill. For others standing in the room of the ICU, it's a flat line on the monitor.

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Another stranger leans over his chest with paddles and asks that everyone take a large step back. “All clear?” he shouts before administering an electric shock. It’s followed by silence and then another *all clear* and then another shock. Each burst sends a flash into the night, like something silvery.