

## SAFEKEEPING

By

Lewis K. Schrager

Adam Cohn was finishing a note in the last of his patients' charts when Erica Marks, the senior medical resident on call with him that evening, hustled into the Cardiac Care Unit.

"Just got a call from Kornfeld," Erica said. "He's admitting an eighty-five-year-old woman to the CCU. Her name's Sylvia Montague. She's coming to you."

"A Kornfeld transfer?" Adam muttered. "You gotta be kidding."

"What's your problem with Kornfeld?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe because he keeps his patients in hospital until he's managed to run every goddamn test that he can think of, even when they're feeling just fine."

"Just rumors. He's really not a bad guy."

"Why? Because he orders deli platters for the on-call teams on Saturday nights?"

"Exactly. Why do you think everyone calls him 'Dr. Pastrami'?"

"Somehow that's just too low a bar, even for a pastrami addict like me. Besides, that business with his patients isn't just rumors. I saw it. Back in the fall he admitted some lady as a rule-out M.I. Kept her in hospital for almost a month, ran her through every test in the cardiology suite—twice. Must have run a six-figure bill before he let her go home."

"For a rule-out? What reason did he give?"

"He kept writing on her chart that she had chest pain overnight."

"Did she?"

“Hell no, at least not on my nights on call. Made the patient crazy, made me look bad—I don’t like rounding on my patients and having the attending asking me if I was asleep when my patient was having angina. Really pissed me off.”

“Did you report him?”

“I talked to the chief resident about it.”

“And?”

“And nothing. You know that Kornfeld’s one of their boys. Graduated from the med school; did his internship, residency and cardiology fellowship here. They all love him. The chief said that Kornfeld was acting within his discretion—so that’s about it.”

“Wow. Well, to be honest, I always thought there was something a little sleazy about him. But if what you’re saying is even half right, he’s really a schmuck.”

“A schmuck who should have his admitting privileges taken away,” Adam said.

“Where’s this patient coming from, anyway?”

“Pittman,” Erica said.

Adam glanced at the clock on the wall and then back at Erica, his expression pained.

“Kornfeld’s transferring someone from Pittman at ten-thirty on a Friday night? Why?”

“The note says it’s for safekeeping.”

“Safekeeping? What the hell does that mean?”

“Who the fuck knows?” Erica said. “Kornfeld probably considers it one more chance for him to save another patient from those know-nothings downtown. Bottom line is that she’ll be here in about an hour. Better get the rest of your work done while you still can. With any luck you’ll put her to bed quick and still get a couple hours of sleep.”

Adam was just completing his night rounds in the Medical Intensive Care Unit when he received a page from Kathy McCarthy, the night nurse in the Coronary Care Unit, informing him that Sylvia Montague had arrived and was ready for him. Adam finished writing his last note, headed up the one flight of stairs to the CCU and stopped at the nurse's desk. "Her name's—"

"Sylvia Montague," Adam said. Erica told me."

"Well, that's good, because that's about all I know about her so far, except that she's eighty-three years old," Kathy McCarthy said. "Here's Kornfeld's transfer note. Not a whole lot there." She handed Adam a manila folder with a single page inside. "Lucky that the Pittman folks copied her chart and sent it over with her. I'm putting it together. Should be ready in a minute."

Adam glanced at the two-inch-thick stack of papers that Kathy was hole-punching and fastening into an Eastside Hospital binder. "Looks like they were busy," Adam said.

"Oh, yeah," Kathy said. "From the little I've been able to read, she was bad sick when they admitted her a couple of weeks ago. Looks like they did a good job on her, she's stable now."

"So, why is she here? Oh wait, I know—safekeeping."

"Exactly. We just need to be sure she doesn't crap out until Monday morning."

"What happens then?"

"Going to surgery, aortic valve replacement. Kornfeld didn't let you know?"

"Apparently not."

"Figures. Well, then, let me be the first." Kathy put in the last of the pages and clicked the binder closed. "Here," she said, and handed the heavy chart to Adam. "It's all yours. I put her in the last bed. She's a real sweetheart, you'll like her."

“Don’t know what I’d do without you,” Adam said.

Kathy smiled. “I do, honey. You’d totally fuck up. You all would.”

Adam smiled back. “Totally,” he said.

Adam glanced in through a parting in the curtain around Sylvia Montague’s bed. She lay with her back nearly upright, breathing slowly through pursed lips, prongs from a plastic oxygen cannula inserted at the base of her nostrils, her eighty-three years evident in her tousled mat of blue-gray hair, the webs of purple veins visible beneath the paper-thin skin upon the bony cheeks of her narrow face, the wrinkles gathered on her brow, around her eyes, beneath her chin. Even with this quick look, however, there was something about Mrs. Montague’s appearance that seemed to radiate a thoughtfulness, a sense of quiet dignity and determination. Probably her eyes, he thought, a piercing blue that even the seriousness of her underlying illness could not dull.

Adam tapped his knuckles against the hard plastic cover of the hospital chart, simulating as best he could a gentle knock on a door, and leaned in through the opening in the curtains. “I’m Dr. Cohn,” Adam said. He parted the curtains wide enough to step through. “Mind if I come in?”

Mrs. Montague turned towards Adam, appearing perplexed. “Dr. Cohn? Where is Dr. Kornfeld?” she said, her voice soft, breathless.

“He said he’d be here soon,” Adam said, knowing that this could mean anywhere between fifteen minutes and three hours from now.

“Good,” she said. “I’m looking forward to meeting him.”

This seemed strange. “Dr. Kornfeld never saw you while you were at Pittman?”

“He didn’t think it was necessary,” Mrs. Montague said. “I’m getting my heart operated on by Dr. Henderson first thing Monday morning. We all agreed it would be best for me to spend

the weekend here beforehand. That way I can be sure to be ready. I've been told that Dr. Henderson doesn't like surprises."

She certainly was right about that, Adam thought. Dr. David Henderson, chief of cardiovascular surgery at Eastside, was an internationally recognized expert at heart valve replacement procedures. Everyone knew that he hated surprises, especially when they threatened his record of surgical success. He rarely took frail, elderly patients to surgery, especially for heart valve replacements; too risky, too great a chance for complications. Not worth the risk to his statistics. It seemed hard to believe that he would have agreed to operate on someone as sick as Mrs. Montague seemed to be.

Adam didn't like surprises, either—like learning that Kornfeld hadn't examined Mrs. Montague at Pittman before accepting her as a transfer. He wondered if Kornfeld actually understood the full extent of Mrs. Montague's condition. "Excuse me for a minute," Adam said. "I'm going to see if I can get a better idea when Dr. Kornfeld will be arriving."

"That would be wonderful," Mrs. Montague said slowly, each word seeming to come within its own, separate breath. "Thank you."

Adam stepped outside and pulled the curtains shut. He stood off in a corner, flipping through the Pittman chart beneath the light over the exit door at the far end of the CCU. It described how Mrs. Montague first arrived there in florid congestive heart failure, sitting bolt upright on a stretcher in the emergency room, gasping for breath as froth bubbled out from her drowning lungs. Her heart was in atrial fibrillation when she arrived, due to an enlargement of her left ventricle that was caused by a stiffened and corroded aortic valve, the Pittman admitting intern wrote. Most likely damaged by a bout of rheumatic fever suffered while Mrs. Montague was still a girl.

Adam immediately wondered if they had thought of cardioverting her. He knew that, in many cases, a gentle shock to the heart was all that was needed to coax it back into a normal rhythm, which commonly was all that was needed to relieve congestive heart failure as well. It was an easy enough procedure to do. It seemed odd that no one had thought of doing this, until reading a follow-on note by the intern, who pointed out that the stiffness in her calcified aortic valve had resulted in the left ventricle becoming dilated to the size of a grapefruit. Apply an electric shock to a heart that badly damaged, the intern wrote, and she's likely to develop ventricular standstill. Sudden cardiac death.

Adam shook his head at his own ignorance. He had learned in medical school how useless and dangerous it was to shock hearts in this condition, yet the lesson had slipped his mind. Maybe because of the late hour, he thought. His continued review of the chart provided further evidence of the skill by which the Pittman team took care of her. Despite their efforts, however, it seemed clear that Mrs. Montague remained in bad shape; a nurse-assisted trip to the bathroom was enough to leaving her gasping for air upon her return to her bed.

As Adam neared the end of the chart, he found the explicitly stated reason for her transfer: *Scheduled for aortic valve replacement, 7:00 AM, Monday, February 2, Dr. David Henderson, Eastside Hospital. Accepted for direct transfer to Eastside CCU under care of Dr. Richard Kornfeld.*

Adam considered the plan and realized that it didn't seem right. Just his one look at Mrs. Montague made it seem clear that she wasn't fit for surgery. The intern's final note provided the explanation. Despite their best efforts, her lungs were still wet, she still suffered from congestive heart failure, doomed to a bed-bound existence for the remainder of her life—unless her aortic valve was replaced. The intern's note documented that she and her team had tried to convince

Mrs. Montague not to have the surgery due to the high risk of the procedure: in her condition, she only had about a one-in-five chance of surviving. The intern noted however, that despite the bad odds, she was determined to go through with it. “I can’t stand the idea of spending the rest of my life like some goddamned fish dragged from the sea,” Mrs. Montague had told the intern. She said that she didn’t want her grandkids to remember her as a bed-bound invalid. Finally, the Pittman intern noted that Mrs. Montague’s mind remained incredibly sharp, that she was fully capable of making her own medical decisions.

The final lines of the intern’s note provided both explanation and warning. Mrs. Montague’s son, Thomas, was a prominent lawyer from Chicago. Through his contacts he convinced Dr. Henderson to schedule her for surgery, and also selected Dr. Kornfeld as the Eastside cardiologist who would arrange the transfer to his care before the operation. The intern concluded with a warning that Thomas Montague is very close to his mother, that he’d flown in for a few days every week while she was at Pittman. “You MUST speak with him before performing any procedure on her, and I mean ANY procedure! I’ve attached his number to the front of the chart; BE SURE YOU USE IT!”

Erica Marks nearly ran into Adam as she entered through the back door of the CCU. “What’s up with her?” she said.

“Afib, rheumatic aortic valve disease, cardiomegaly, CHF,” Adam said. “Looks like her team at Pittman did the best they could for her.”

“So, why is she here?”

“Aortic valve replacement.”

Erica looked as surprised as Adam had felt when he first read it. “Seriously? With that pathology?”

“Looks like it.”

“Who agreed to this?”

“Henderson, apparently,” Adam said. “She’s on for Monday morning.”

“I don’t get it,” Erica said. “Henderson won’t do elective surgery on patients with heart failure, not when a bad outcome is so predictable. I know that, you know that, and I’m damn sure that Kornfeld knows that. So why is she on Henderson’s schedule for Monday?”

“Her son’s some honcho lawyer from Chicago. Looks like he pulled some strings. Besides, his mother knows the risk. They tried to talk her out of it at Pittman, but she’s determined to go through with it.”

“That’s fine for her, but Henderson? The last thing he wants is to have somebody die on the table.”

“Well, then, who the fuck knows?” Adam said. “Maybe he thinks he’s just doing just another valve job on another old lady with rheumatic heart disease and aortic stenosis. Maybe he doesn’t know much else about her.”

“I sure hope that Kornfeld knows.”

“Wouldn’t bet on it,” Adam said. “Kornfeld’s never seen her before, and aside from a transfer order he hasn’t left a note on her chart.”

“It must have been Kornfeld who got her on Henderson’s schedule so fast.”

“With the help of Montague’s son. But did Kornfeld—”

“Tell Henderson the whole story about her?” Erica said. “I damn sure hope so, but we’ll find out soon enough.”

Adam flipped to the section containing the nurses’ notes and turned to the final one. “Check this out,” he said to Erica. “Transferring now to the care of Dr. Richard Kornfeld at



Eastside Hospital, for observation until surgery on Monday. Patient is aware of the risks and has signed appropriate consent for the transfer and subsequent surgical procedure.”

“She may be aware of the risks, but I’ll bet anything that Henderson doesn’t have a clue what he’s gotten himself into,” Erica said. “Tell you what, though; when he finds out, he’s definitely going to scrub her from the schedule, and he’s also going to be mighty pissed at Kornfeld for tying up an operating slot.” Erica stood up, stretched her arms high over her head and took hold of the stethoscope that draped around her neck. A wry smile crossed her lips. “Yup, I’d say that Dr. Pastrami has gotten himself into some deep deli mustard here. I’d just love to be around when Henderson finds out. I’d laugh my ass off watching Henderson rip into that schmuck. So, how about we get our exam done and go to bed?” As Adam pulled his stethoscope from out of his pants pocket, he recalled the patient whom Kornfeld unnecessarily had kept in hospital for an entire month and the thought came to him that he, too, would love to be there when Henderson found out about Kornfeld’s fuck up with this patient.

Adam hesitated just outside the closed curtain, Mrs. Montague’s irregular snores signaling a restless sleep beneath overhead lights still left on. “Should we wait for Kornfeld?” he said.

“Who knows when he’ll show up?” Erica said. “Could be five minutes from now, could be five hours. If we get her tucked away, maybe we can squeeze in a few hours of sleep.”

They slipped inside between the curtains and found Mrs. Montague asleep in the bluish-white glow of the ceiling lights. She lay half-upright with the back of the mechanical bed raised to nearly forty-five degrees; only her head, shoulders and spindly arms showing outside the white blanket tucked snugly around her. The raspy sounds of her breathing filled the room, interrupted by an occasional gasp through her partially open mouth. Her face and arms appeared

as pale as the blanket; but for her breathing and the lonely notes sounding out the beating of her damaged heart on the monitor above her bed—muted, irregular, like jazz played by one finger on one key of an electric keyboard—it seemed as if she already had departed this world.

“Should we wake her?” Adam said.

“She’ll probably wake soon enough,” Erica said. “But if we can do a quick exam and she stays asleep, so much the better.”

Erica took her place on the left side of the bed while Adam, standing opposite, searched Mrs. Montague’s right wrist for her pulse. She did not stir at his touch, and also remained asleep as they eased back the blanket and the sheet beneath. She still wore the hospital gown from Pittman, faded green with a tie behind the neck, *Pittman Downtown Hospital* stenciled on the front, just above her right breast. Even before removing the gown they could see evidence of the burden carried by the old woman’s heart: the area just below her left breast heaved irregularly against the flimsy cloth as if something was battering against her chest from the inside, struggling to escape.

Adam and Erica inserted the earpieces of their stethoscopes and pressed the diaphragms of their instruments up against the area beneath Mrs. Montague’s left breast heaving with each of her irregular heartbeats. With each beat a heart murmur reverberated, sometimes loud and sometimes soft, sometimes coarse, sometimes musical, carrying with it nearly as many variations and subtleties as the human voice itself. Adam heard this and imagined the sorry state of her aortic valve, corroded and calcified, the leaflets barely moving in response to each contraction of her hypertrophied left ventricle, her blood barely managing to squeeze through before leaking back in as her heart muscle relaxed. No wonder she wanted the valve out, he thought. Too bad it came at so high a risk.

Erica lifted the listening end of her stethoscope off of Mrs. Montague's chest. "Let's check out her lungs," she said.

They each took hold of a shoulder. Assisted by the angle of the bed, they eased Mrs. Montague forward far enough to allow them to slide the diaphragms of their stethoscopes between the bed and her back. They started listening at the lowest reaches of her back, methodically making their way up to her shoulders, the breath sounds at first crackly, like someone squeezing a handful of bubble wrapping.

"Still wet almost half the way up," Adam whispered.

"And Kornfeld's going to clear her for surgery?" Erica said. "*Holy shit!*"

Perhaps it was the jostling, perhaps it was Erica's too-loud whisper, but whatever the reason, Sylvia Montague awakened. She shifted her head on her pillow, slowly opened one eye and the other. She raised a hand, shaded her eyes from the lights and turned toward Adam. "Who are you?" she asked, her voice dry and soft.

"Dr. Cohn, remember?" Adam said.

She looked towards Erica. "You're not Dr. Kornfeld!" she said.

"No, I'm Dr. Marks. Dr. Cohn and I work with Dr. Kornfeld."

Mrs. Montague tried to say something else, but the words stuck in her mouth; she lightly smacked her pale lips against the dryness. Adam left the room and returned a moment later with a plastic cup filled with ice water. Mrs. Montague closed her lips around the straw, took in two sips, then let it fall. "Thank you," she whispered. She paused, momentarily closing her eyes, seemingly exhausted by the simple effort of drinking. "But where is Dr. Kornfeld?"

"He should be here soon," Erica said.

He should've been here already, Adam thought. He should have been here long ago. He should have told someone—Erica, himself, one of the nurses, *someone*—why he decided to transfer this woman so late on a Friday night. He should have done a lot of things differently with this case, but that just seemed to be Richard Kornfeld's way.

"My son has heard good things about him," Mrs. Montague said, struggling to get the words out. "Please tell Dr. Kornfeld I would like to speak with him when he comes." With that, she closed her eyes once again and turned her head sideways against her pillow.

"I'll be sure to tell him," Adam said, wondering if she heard him at all as she seemed already to be asleep.

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Kornfeld burst into the CCU and found Adam asleep in a chair, his head resting on his forearms crossed atop the nurse's desk. He shook Adam's shoulder. "Where's my patient?" he said.

Adam sat up and answered through the fog of an interrupted, dark dream. "Bed eleven," he murmured. He rubbed his eyes and glanced at the clock on the far wall—just past one-fifteen. "I'll get her chart." He reached up, pulled the chart from its slot above the desk and handed it to Kornfeld. "Mrs. Montague said she wanted to talk to you when you arrived."

Kornfeld murmured something through his low-hanging mustache. He spread the chart on the counter alongside of Adam, bent over and, leaning on two outstretched arms, began to read. The dour expression on his round-cheeked face showed no evidence of response to anything on the pages save, perhaps, for the occasional twitch of one of his thick, auburn eyebrows. Although he was still in his mid-thirties, the uneven stubble on his chin, the wrinkles

crossing his forehead and gathered at the edges of his eyes gave the appearance of a man older than his years.

And then Adam noticed the sweat, a dappling of tiny beads on the pink skin just below his receding hair line, sprouting at his temples, glistening like ill-applied glitter makeup in the single fluorescent light left on in the otherwise darkened room. As Kornfeld's narrowed eyes darted across the final pages of the chart, Adam noticed the droplets growing larger, coalescing, beginning a stuttering, serpentine migration towards the first ridge of forehead wrinkles. As Adam studied Kornfeld with a growing sense of concern, his eyes were drawn to Kornfeld's trembling hands flipping through the pages, turning them far too quickly to fully comprehend the words flying past his twitching eyes.

Kornfeld turned over the final page and closed the chart, his trembling hand petting his mustache. "Sounds like she's still in failure," he said. "You think she's still in failure?"

Adam focused on Kornfeld, his eyes betraying his disbelief. Everything on the Pittman chart made it perfectly clear that she'd been in congestive heart failure since she hit their ER. She's definitely better now than when she was admitted to Pittman two weeks before, but the intern's final note explicitly stated that, yes, she was still in congestive heart failure, that they couldn't dry her lungs out completely. That could not happen, Adam thought, until her damaged aortic valve was replaced, allowing her heart to work more efficiently—but her heart failure made that an extraordinary risk. A classical medical Catch-22, Adam considered; surely Kornfeld should understand all this. "When Erica and I examined her, she was wet about half the way up," he said.

"*Fuck*," Kornfeld whispered. "*Fuck-fuck-fuck*."

Kornfeld pulled out his stethoscope and headed towards the curtains surrounding Mrs. Montague's bed. Adam followed a few steps behind. How could this be such a fucking surprise to you? Adam wondered. And the sudden thought of it left him cold and feeling vaguely sick.

Kornfeld pulled back the curtains and burst through. He made no attempt to waken Mrs. Montague before jamming his stethoscope between her back and the bed. In just a few seconds he'd heard enough. He pocketed his stethoscope and walked past Adam and out of the room.

Adam caught up to him at the nurse's station. His hands were shaking badly, and the sweat was really going now, trickling in jagged rivulets down the sides of his face, glistening across the back of his neck, wetting his shirt collar. Kornfeld blew out a long exhalation that fluttered the end of his mustache. "We need to shock her," he said. "Get the crash cart."

Adam heard the words, but he was very tired and didn't feel as if he had heard them right. "Shock her?" Adam said.

"She's in heart failure. She can't go to surgery like that."

"Dr. Kornfeld, you know she's got a calcified aortic valve and a dilated left ventricle, right? If you shock her, she's going flat line."

"I've cardioverted plenty of patients with hearts in worse shape than hers," Kornfeld said. "No fucking way Henderson's taking her on Monday with lungs that wet. We need to get her out of a-fib, back into a normal heart rhythm."

Adam took a deep breath. "Look, why not put off the surgery? Maybe we can get more aggressive with her meds, try to dry her out slowly."

Kornfeld stared at Adam, his hands shaking, his normally pasty-pink skin now glowing red, his face streaming sweat. "I told Henderson that she'd be ready for him on Monday morning, and she goddamn will be. Now get me the crash cart. I'll get her ready."

For a stunned, silent moment, Adam didn't know what to do. Erica probably was asleep in the residents' on-call room; even if he paged her, she might not be down in time. Then he heard the stomach-turning gurgling of a patient's ventilator tube being suctioned out. He ran toward the sound and found Kathy reattaching the ventilator to a comatose patient's tracheostomy tube. "He's going to shock her," he said.

Kathy turned towards him, her gloved hands still holding the suction tube, not understanding. "Who's going to shock who?"

Adam took a deep breath, swallowed hard. "Kornfeld. He's here. He wants to cardiovert Mrs. Montague."

"What?"

"Kathy, he's going to shock Montague!"

"Shit!" Kathy threw the suction tube into the trash can, ripped off her gloves. "Does Erica know?"

"Not yet."

"Call her. I'll deal with Kornfeld until she gets here."

Kathy dropped the gloves into the trash and hurried out toward Mrs. Montague's bed. Adam got on the phone and dialed the on-call room. Erica answered on the second ring.

"Yeah?" Erica said, her voice heavy with sleep.

"It's Adam. Kornfeld's here. He's planning to cardiovert Mrs. Montague."

"What?"

"He's going to fucking shock Montague!"

"When?"

"Now!"

“Stop him until I get there,” Erica said.

Kathy stood between Kornfeld and the curtain around Mrs. Montague’s bed, her hands on her hips. From the way she looked, he was going to have to throw her out of the way to get past. Kornfeld had the defibrillator cart alongside of him. “You can’t do this without her consent,” Kathy said.

“That’s bullshit,” Kornfeld said. “This is a medical emergency. She’s my patient and she’s in severe congestive heart failure. This is the only way to fix it.” He lifted a paddle of the defibrillator to drive home his point and slammed it back into its holder.

“Break that and it’ll cost you,” Kathy said.

“She’s been like that for two weeks,” Adam said. “Read the notes. They dried her out as best they could at Pittman, but with that heart—”

“They didn’t do jack shit for her,” Kornfeld said. “Typical fucking Pittman. They’re goddamned lucky she didn’t die on them.”

Adam realized they were getting nowhere. He decided to try another tack while waiting for Erica to arrive. “Dr. Kornfeld, she told us she wanted to talk to you,” Adam said, forcing a calm into his voice that he did not feel. “She specifically asked that you wake her.”

“No time,” Kornfeld said. “I’ll talk to her later.”

Erica burst in through the CCU doorway, still tucking her sleep-rumpled scrub shirt into her pants. “What’s going on?” she said.

In the moment of distraction, Kornfeld sidestepped Kathy and pushed the defibrillator cart in through the curtains and up against Mrs. Montague’s bed. Kathy yanked the curtains open. “Somebody lower the bed,” Kornfeld said.

“You can’t do this,” Erica said.



“She’s my patient,” Kornfeld said. “Where’s the crash cart?”

“Wake her,” Erica said. “You don’t have consent.”

Kornfeld said nothing. He reached into the tray below the defibrillator and grabbed the lubrication tube, its tip crusted with a dried droplet of clear gel that hung like a tear. He squeezed the tube and squirted the gel on one paddle and then the other. And then Adam remembered the note on the front of the chart with the phone number of Mrs. Montague’s son. “You need to call her son first,” he said. “He wants to be informed before we do anything to her.”

“No time,” Kornfeld said. “Somebody lower her fucking head already! And bring me the goddamned crash cart!”

Adam glanced across the room at the red metal cart, its stack of drawers filled with the instruments and medications needed to perform advanced resuscitation in the event of a cardiac arrest. He made a motion towards it, but Erica grabbed his arm. “Don’t!” she said. “You’re not having anything to do with this. Neither am I.”

Kornfeld set the lubed paddles down on their sides and reached for the controls to the bed. He held it in his shaking hands, mashed down hard on a button with his thumb. A motor beneath the bed whirred, the head of the bed began to drop. Mrs. Montague stirred. Adam glanced up at the heart monitor, suddenly aware of the quickening in the irregular monotonic beeping. “Consider yourself on report, both of you!” Kornfeld said, looking first at Erica and then squarely at Adam. Kornfeld’s expression was unlike any that Adam had ever seen, his face burning red beneath the day-old growth of chin bristle, his mustache fluttering with each quick breath, his eyes flashing with manic anger. Sweat streamed down his face, soaking his collar, dripping from the end of his nose. “Bring me the goddamned crash cart!” Kornfeld shouted.

“I can’t do that,” Adam said.

“I’m calling her son,” Kathy said.

“It’ll mean your job,” Kornfeld said. Kathy grabbed the chart and hurried to the nurse’s desk. Adam heard the click of Kathy’s nails as she punched the number into the phone.

With the bed now flat Kornfeld slipped his hands behind Mrs. Montague’s neck and untied the knot in the gown strings. He slid one of her arms and then the other through the short sleeve holes and folded back her gown. She lay there, naked to the waist, radiant in the blue light overhead. Kornfeld lifted the paddles and clapped them together, smoothing the gel out over their shining silver surfaces. Perhaps it was this sound, a gel-muted click of metal on metal, a sound all-too-familiar to Adam, a strange, unnatural note sounding the entrance to the doorway of death, that awakened him fully to the reality of what Kornfeld was about to do. Ignoring Erica’s warnings, Adam stepped into the room and headed to Mrs. Montague’s bedside, directly across from Kornfeld. Adam dropped to one knee and took Mrs. Montague’s face in his hands. “Mrs. Montague,” he said. “Wake up! Please wake up!”

Her eyelids stirred and her mouth opened in a large, dry-throated yawn. “Dr. Kornfeld is here to see you, Mrs. Montague. You wanted to talk to him, remember? Wake up! Please!”

With this her eyelids lifted. Her eyes locked on his, her expression one of exhausted confusion.

“Her son is on the phone!” Kathy shouted from across the room. “He wants to speak to you, Dr. Kornfeld!”

“Clear the bed!” Kornfeld said.

Adam looked up. Kornfeld stood above him, paddles raised, sweat glistening on his face like a horrible, sequined mask. Before he could move, Kornfeld pressed one paddle down atop

Mrs. Montague's chest and set the other squarely over her ribs where her heart heaved against her skin. Her sleepy, confused eyes came suddenly awake at the shock of the cold, gel-wet metal.

“Thomas?”

Her head turned and she looked directly at the sweating, crazy-eyed man standing above her, pressing the paddles onto her chest, the heart monitor pulsing fast, frantic. “Dr. Kornfeld?”

It was all Adam could do to get away from the bed in time. Her body came alive with the jolt of electricity, lifting her off the bed for barely a fraction of a second but what seemed to Adam an eternity. She came to rest with her eyes open but still, the glazed look of death already upon them. From the monitor, a single tone sounded, unwavering, steady as the motionless yellow line scrawling flat across the display.

Kathy hung up the phone and called for the cardiac arrest team. Kornfeld threw down the paddles, pressed his hands against Mrs. Montague's gel-sticky chest and started pumping. He pumped on her chest like nothing that Adam had ever seen before, arms locked at the elbows, throwing all his weight behind each of his downward compressions, sweat raining from his face upon the body bouncing on the bed with each thrust as if it were a lifeless, stuffed doll. He pressed down on her again and again and again, his face contorted in a grimace of effort and anger, the *pop-pop-pop* of breaking ribs filling the room. The sounds sickened Adam. As the cardiac arrest team burst into the CCU, he walked away.

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Kornfeld was long gone and Erica had retreated to the on-call room by the time that Kathy had the body ready for the trip to the morgue. Adam remained frozen in the chair by the nurse's station. He felt a warm hand on his shoulder. “Sorry to hassle you, but someone's going

to have to call her son,” Kathy said. “The phone’s been ringing and I’m sure it’s him. I’m damn sure not going to be the one to talk to him about this.”

“What about Kornfeld?” Adam said.

“What about him?” Kathy said. She shrugged and rolled her eyes and went off to check on a respirator beeping from somewhere at the far end of the CCU.

Adam opened Mrs. Montague’s chart to the phone number for Mrs. Montague’s son that the Pittman intern had attached to the first page of the chart. He stared at it for some time before reaching for the phone and dialing the number. He heard the voice on the line. Adam took a deep breath, brushed his hand across the sweat on his forehead. “Mr. Montague, this is Doctor Adam Cohn from Eastside Hospital. I’m sorry to inform you...”

THE END