

Chief Complaint



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83-year-old female presenting with...

What? I wonder what the triage note said when my grandmother arrived at that hospital. Was she able to tell them, this tenacious woman stuck in a body that had long since ceased to function? Had the foggy grasp of hypercapnia already blanketed her mind, shielding her in a gray twilight from everything around her?

The luxury of “She passed quietly in her sleep” is not granted to me anymore. It gives way to cations and anions, pumps and drips, urgency, adrenaline.

Death no longer comes quietly.

It beeps and

whirs and

Screams,

an elephant in a porcelain store, gleeful and oblivious in its destruction.

Her medical history is significant for...

Letting me win at hide and seek. Home-making birthday cakes. Knitting in front of the television. Covering her head when she prays.

When the nurses’ fingers traced the lacy, worn skin on her arms, feeling for the familiar bounce of a venous wall, did they know? Did they know how those arms held me when I cried? How she wore a gold bracelet on that wrist every day until her youngest sister died? How my little fingers would trace the sunspots on her arms when she fell asleep? How time and distance and circumstance had ripped us apart?

Did someone talk to her about her code status? 83 is an entire life lived, right? I have sat on the corners of people’s literal deathbeds and said the same words... *medicine, compressions on your chest, electricity, breathing machine...would you want...* Did she die, having chosen it, having decided for herself?

Was someone there, holding her hand, when she went? Was she scared? Thankful? Resigned? I don’t know why it matters, why these details eat away at me, why I keep grasping at these straws as if there is an answer that is satisfactory.

My mind runs the last hundred times I delivered news of a passing to a family. *Compressions, blade, 7.5, tube please, 24 at the lips, epinephrine...did everything we could...* Did I tell them they died a good death? I can’t remember. I’m not even sure I know what that means.

I’ve never seen something so trivial as death stand between people who love each other. I said that, once, kneeling on the floor next to the shards of a woman who was watching her 23-year-old son slip away in the ICU. She had asked me if he would know, after he passed, how much she loved him. I spoke to her quietly, surely, with a confidence I had not earned, as if I had some secret pact with God, as if I knew or understood. *I’ve never seen something so trivial as death stand between people who love each other.* I repeat those words to myself. They feel empty.

Was it...potassium? It’s always potassium. Did her heart, finally weary of its burden, just stop? If I could just find *something*, an electrolyte disturbance, a positive blood culture, an arrhythmia, a...

But that wouldn’t change this. There is no comfort to giving name to the series of events that quieted her breath. It does not matter what pathophysiology it was, what stream of chemical cascades brought the peaks and valleys of her heartbeat to a halt. The end point, every time, is the same. There is, I think, no sense to be made of this. So I run it again.

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