



Chicago, 1985

Joshua straddled the limp body. Palms opened. Fingers splayed. Thump! Thump! He pounded the unmoving man's chest. "Start pumping!" he willed the man's heart.

Breathing heavily, he paused, flexed his fingers, and raked the sweat from his brow up into his tousled, prematurely grey head of hair. He'd been on duty at the hospital for almost thirty-six hours and was nearly exhausted. Seconds later, he resumed, panting with every thrust of his thick, muscular arms.

"Come on, come on, damn it! Don't give up on me yet!"

"Damn It ain't no use, Doc. He's a goner."

Joshua looked up in a daze. How long had André, the night shift orderly, been standing there? Defeated, he braced his massive six-foot-three-inch frame and carefully climbed down from the gurney to prevent the thing rolling haphazardly into the crowded waiting room.

The harsh white light of the emergency room illuminated people sprawled on chairs and huddled in small groups, silently staring back at him. He recognized some of them. There sat Mrs. Katsimbalis, an old woman who still dressed in mourning fifteen years after her husband's death. She came in every Thursday or Friday night, out of loneliness.

Across the aisle, frazzled-looking Mrs. Francetti shook a finger in her son's squalling red face and yanked him upright by a handful of worn shirt. Her abrupt gesture revealed telltale pinholes dotting her arms. Rings of thick, acrid smoke from her cigarette smoldering among the mound of crushed butts in the ashtray hung in the air between mother and son. Caked blood crusted the edges of a nasty-looking gash on the child's head, but Mrs. Francetti had more likely returned to pick up some more tranquilizers.

A few feet away a black man sat by himself, hunched over. Splotches of dried cement flecked his wizened face, twisted with pain. He cradled his arm wrapped in a crude, a bloodsoaked bandage.

A typical night at Cook County. No sleep, and the countless cups of gray-brown coffee just weren't doing the trick any more. Once, Joshua's residency would have been considered a plum by his medical school colleagues, but that was long ago—before the addicts and the abusers, the blood and death, and the loading dock with its endless supply of broken bodies.

"Doc, there's still someone out there you need to see . . .another goner."

André again. Joshua sighed wearily. The state, in its infinite wisdom, had passed a requirement that only a physician could pronounce a person dead.

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The ambulance drivers and morticians quickly figured out that the cheapest and fastest way to find a doctor to sign a certificate was at the County emergency room. A mountain of paperwork grew for everybody.

Joshua reached for his ophthalmoscope—a reflex action.

"You won't be needing it, Doc. Not for this one."

Outside, Joshua filled his lungs with the cool night air. His temples were throbbing. He blinked a few times as he looked up and down the loading dock. Not a hearse or ambulance in sight.

"It ain't on the loading dock." The orderly jerked Joshua around the corner by his arm. "It's over here."

As they rounded the corner, Joshua's hesitated almost imperceptibly before his eyes followed the beam of André's flashlight. Something oozed out from under his shoes and his feet slipped. He grabbed the wall to steady himself. After three years of residency, he dreaded what was coming. He gulped the night air, hoping the dread would pass. Finally, he looked down.

"Holy shit! Holy fucking shit!" He was standing in a pool of blood. Within inches of his feet lay the body of a jumper, the pebbled sidewalk surface seemed to be fused with his flattened chest. The blood-soaked plastic I.D. bracelet was unreadable, but still intact. The head looked like a smashed watermelon. The patient's bare legs were covered with warts and lesions.

When he finally controlled his gagging, Joshua placed the ends of his stethoscope into his ears. He moved slowly, disconnected, like a robot. "Where do you expect to put that thing?" André asked.

Joshua froze, his mouth agape, and then spit out the small amount of vomit that had lodged in his throat. He pressed a fist against his stomach to stem the nausea and then looked up into the blackness of the night. Ten floors above, through an open window, he saw a nurse's face, contorted in horror. Her expression mirrored his own revulsion, even though jumpers were not uncommon here.

And this was not the first AIDS-related suicide at County. Joshua had begged the hospital administration to put bars or screens on the AIDS patients' windows. He could recite their oftstated excuses from memory: "This is a place of healing—a hospital, not a prison. It would create the wrong image in the community." Sanctimonious bastards. The only thing that mattered to them—he was convinced—was the bottom line.

In the emergency room and in spite of the adrenaline already racing through his blood stream, he reached blindly for a cup of coffee. His shaking hands knocked the coffee clumsily to the floor. He stared listlessly as a cockroach climbed into the cup, came back out, then scurried across the floor, as if to

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spread the news of its good fortune. Or, Joshua mused cynically, to warn the others of just how bad the coffee was.

A wave of hopelessness washed over him: The best, most up-to-date technology and equipment might help heal diseased bodies, but as long as broken spirits and lost souls were neglected, all their money and effort seemed futile. Good Lord! he thought, unless I happen to be on duty when his file comes down from upstairs, I'll never even know the poor bastard's name. The disease hadn't killed him as much as society's apathy and fear.

Joshua's pen hovered over the Cause of Death form as he contemplated what to write. The disease hadn't killed him as much as society's apathy and fear. That same apathy and fear—fueled by greed—kept County's higher-ups from spending a little extra on screens for patients' windows. A jumper at County would hardly command more than a couple paragraphs in an inside section of the newspaper. He was little more than an unfortunate statistic to them—a death waiting to happen, a body taking up space and draining expensive resources. If the truth were told, management might admit the hospital was actually better off with the doomed patient out of the way.

These hated moments occurred way too often. Joshua collected the bile mixed with his saliva onto his tongue and spat into an empty coffee cup. Taking a prescription bottle from his pocket, he held it to the light, momentarily appreciating the shadow-like kaleidoscope shapes created by the capsules of benzedrine shifting against the amber-colored plastic container. Popping the last three remaining pills into his mouth, he snapped his head back, forcing them down dry.

Biting his lower lip, he scrawled, "Nobody gave a shit!" across the Cause of Death form, ripped it off, crumbled it into a ball and dropped it onto the floor. Looking down at his feet, he remembered the hospital's rule to destroy his blood-soaked shoes. We can't protect our patients, but we have plenty infectious-waste rules to protect us from OSHA fines! He seethed with anger, and the pencil in his fingers snapped in half.

"Not in my hospital!" he hissed under his breath, "Not when I'm in charge!" He flung the broken pencil at the line of roaches marching across his desk.

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