

As the night shift ICU nurses gathered around the conference room table, Alex sat at the far end of the table mentally rehearsing the speech she would use when assigned to take care of David. She would request reassignment not because she couldn't cope with his situation, but because she needed a change of pace, something more challenging. No one could get upset or accuse her of dumping on them not if she were asking to take care of a more difficult patient. David was low maintenance and unchallenging from a nursing perspective. It would be easy for the other nurses to understand why she was bored caring for him.

"Now let's see," said the charge nurse, tilting her head back to see through the bottom half of her bifocals. "Alex, you've been taking care of bed three. Do you have any problems taking him again tonight?"

Alex scrolled quickly through the recesses of her brain but the rehearsed speech was gone. Before she realized it, she blurted out, "No, I'll be glad to."

As soon as the words left her mouth she felt a fullness in her chest. She wanted to retract her answer but the right words wouldn't come. David would be her responsibility for at least one more night. She sighed deeply. At least her patient in bed two shouldn't be difficult. He was an older gentleman hospitalized

wit hcongest iv eheart fail ureand pneumonia. Fromt hecharge nurse's report , he sounded st abl e.

When change of shift report ended, Alex made her way toward David's room. She licked the dryness from her lips and wiped the moisture from her palms on her pants. The fullness in her chest made it difficult to take a deep breath. For several moments, she stood between rooms two and three, glancing back and forth at the two doorways. She knew she'd have to check on David, but the discomfort in her chest made her stop outside his door. She turned abruptly and walked quickly to room two. The old man looked at her with small dark eyes and smiled. The vise in her chest eased its grip as she returned his smile and patted him on the leg. He seemed to be a pleasant old man. At least one of her patients would be enjoyable.

As she walked the short distance between the rooms, the fullness in her chest returned. The pulsations of her racing heart echoed in her ears. Beads of sweat collected on her upper lip as she checked his blood pressure and counted his pulse. She softly called his name but as on the many nights before, there was no response. She closed her eyes and nodded silently to herself. Barring any problems, she'd keep her contact with him to a minimum.

Three hours into her shift, the repetitive beeping of an alarm drew her attention to room two. She stood at the foot of the old man's bed and stared at his heart monitor.

"Do you feel those extra beats?" she asked. "You're throwing a few PVC's."

The old man smiled and shook his head.

"No, ma'am," he replied. "The only thing I feel is a little bit hungry. I don't suppose you could get me a ham sandwich, could you?"

"I could try," Alex replied, "just as soon as I figure out why you're having these PVC's."

She pulled his chart from the rack and reviewed his labs. His physician had noted the low potassium level earlier that

day but his order to administer IV potassium had apparently been overlooked on the evening shift. She smiled to herself and nodded. All it took was potassium should take care of his PVC's. She made her way to the supply room and filled a syringe with potassium.

On her way back to his room, a soft blue light coming from David's room distracted her. She thought it was the glow of the television but when she looked past the partially drawn curtain the television screen was black and the overhead lights were off. Her hands trembled as she pulled the curtain back. There, sitting motionless in the chair beside David's bed, was her not her. A soft, pale blue light radiated from her face. Her eyes were bright against her deep olive complexion. Long brown hair flowed from her scalp. Alex was overcome with fear and turned toward the door.

"Don't go."

The voice was soft and reassuring, just like she remembered. She wanted to run but felt frozen in her tracks.

"Don't be afraid," her not her said, "I'm here to comfort you. Now close the curtain."

Alex's breathing quickened as she pulled the curtain.

"I know about your nightmares," her not her said, "and I'm sorry. It hurt me knowing what you've been going through so I had to come see you. I'm at peace now. Look at me. My body is healed. I don't hurt anymore. There's no pain, none at all. Everything is okay. It's time for you to bury those bad memories and get on with your life."

"I had them buried," Alex said. "For years I had them buried, but they came back. Why'd they come back, Mom? Why?"

"Because of David," she replied, shaking her head from side to side. "He's suffering and so is his family."

"Is he hurting, Mom?"

"No, baby. He's not hurting, but his family is. His parents are fighting those same demons that tormented you after I died."

They're questioning the decisions they've made to prolong his life. Al ex, they know he has no future."

"Is he going to die?" Al ex asked.

Her not her closed her eyes and slowly nodded her head.

"He wants to die. And, yes, he's going to die, but not soon. Not without help. If nothing changes, he'll live for several more years in a nursing home."

"Help? What kind of help? What do you mean?"

Her not her rested her head against the chair and looked up at Al ex.

"Sometimes we allow people to make mistakes which influence fate," she said, softly. "And at other times we work with troubled souls here on earth to alter the course of another individual's life."

"I don't understand," Al ex said, shaking her head.

Betty Johnson interlocked her fingers and extended her index fingers where she rested her chin. "Do you remember the night when I was in the hospital and your father received the phone call telling him I'd taken a turn for the worse?" she asked.

"You mean the night you coded?" Al ex asked.

"Oh, dear, the night I coded," she replied, smiling. "I still picture you as a seven-year-old school girl and forget you're a nurse."

"Oh, no, I remember," Al ex said.

"I coded that night because one of the nurses administered the wrong medication. She'd been allowed to tempt fate. I should've died that night, but unfortunately the physicians were able to resuscitate me. Even so, in the long run, it hastened my death and lessened my suffering."

Al ex shook her head.

"Who is 'we'?" she asked. "You said sometimes we are allowed to work with troubled souls."

Her not her's eyes twinkled as she and rocked slowly back and forth

"We," she replied, "are the spirits of people who had to

suffer unnecessarily, either physically or emotionally, before we died.”

Alex shook her head with a pained look on her face. “This is all so confusing. What do you mean when you say you’re all owed to work with troubled souls?”

“That’s difficult to explain,” her mother responded, “but one day you’ll understand.”

“Alex, are you in there?” someone called from outside the room.

Alex pulled the curtain back a few inches and looked out. “Are you looking for me?” she asked.

“Oh, I was,” her coworker replied. “Did you know bed two is having PVC’s?”

Alex nodded silently and offered a weak smile. “Oh, I know,” she said. “I’ll be right with him.”

The nurse stared at Alex and walked closer. Alex pulled the curtain tight against her face.

“Are you okay?” the nurse asked. “You don’t look good.”

“No, I’m fine,” Alex answered nervously. “I’ll be right with him.”

She closed the curtain and turned around. The room was dark except for the silvery light of the moon coming through the blinds in the window. The chair beside David’s bed was empty. Trembling, she made her way around the bed and sat down in the vinyl chair. The normally cold vinyl felt unusually warm. Chills ran down her spine and covered her body with goosebumps. The hairs on her arms stood straight up. Maybe this was the beginning of the end, the beginning of a nervous breakdown. How else could she explain what she thought she had just seen and heard?

Still sitting in the chair, she tried to steady her hands as she removed the cap protecting the needle on her syringe of potassium. Her hands trembled as she inserted the needle into the plastic I.V. tubing and injected the potassium. David withdrew his arm and contorted his face in pain as the potassium burned his vein like a blazing fire. Alex jerked the needle from

the I.V. and quickly slipped the syringe into her pocket. Without intervention, the potassium would kill him. Confused and afraid, she wanted to run. She took several deep breaths and walked briskly from David's room to the supply room to fill another syringe with potassium. She went quickly to room two and injected the potassium into the intended bag of I.V. fluids. Her heart pounded as she looked anxiously around the ICU. Everything appeared quiet. Her mistake had gone unnoticed. She gathered herself and headed for the breakroom, hoping to find it empty.

"Hey, Alex. How's it going?" asked a nurse seated at the table sipping on a cup of coffee.

Alex interlocked her fingers behind her head to hide her trembling. "Fine. Why do you ask?"

The nurse shrugged her shoulders and took a sip of coffee. "No reason," she replied, "just making conversation. The unit secretary was looking for you. Did she find you?"

"Oh, she found me," Alex replied. "Wanted to let me know that Mr. Jamison was having a few PVC's. His potassium level was low on his earlier lab work. Dr. Black had ordered IV potassium when he made rounds but it never got hung. It's running now." She paused for a moment. "Could I ask a favor of you?"

"Sure," the nurse replied. "What do you need?"

"Nothing much," Alex replied. "I wanted to go to the snack bar and grab a bit to eat. I just need someone to keep an eye on my patients while I'm gone."

The nurse nodded her head. "I'll be glad to," she said. "Who do you have?"

"Bed two and three," Alex replied. "They're both stable. Neither have had problems tonight except for the low potassium and PVC's on bed two, and he's got potassium hanging now. I won't be gone long."

"Take your time. It seems pretty quiet around here tonight."

As Alex walked toward the double doors, she glanced at the monitor above David's bed. The QRS complex showing

the electrical activity of his heart was beginning to widen. His heart was feeling the effects of the potassium bolus. She bit her bottom lip and shook her head. She knew what was coming. The complex would continue to widen until it looked like a wavy rope on the monitor. If notling was done the heart would stop. The monitor would be flat line. David would be dead. She pressed the automatic door opener and walked hurriedly from the ICU.

Tears ran down her face as she sat in silence sipping a Coke in the deserted snack bar. At any minute she expected to hear "Code Ten, ICU" over the intercom. How could she sit by and do nothing? How could she let him die rather than admit her mistake so measures could be taken to counteract the effects of the deadly potassium bolus? With each passing minute, she became more anxious. Her palms grew sweaty and her heart raced. She tapped her feet nervously beneath the table and drummed her thumbs rhythmically on the tabletop while she stared at the large, round clock on the back wall of the snack bar. Ten minutes passed but no code. Perhaps her mistake wasn't as costly as she had expected. As the minutes crept slowly by, her anxiety gave way to curiosity. She pushed back from the table and looked around the room. No one was present but the young girl behind the counter. She slipped her hand into her coat pocket and checked the empty syringe. In one smooth motion, she dropped the syringe into her paper cup. She crumpled the cup around the evidence and tossed it into the trashcan, breathing a sigh of relief as she headed back to the ICU.

As the automatic doors of the ICU swung open, Alex saw several physicians and nurses hovering outside of David's room. It wasn't what she had expected to find. Why wasn't there the bustle of activity she had expected to see with a code? She quickly scanned the faces, searching for expressions of concern while secretly hoping to see Dr. Nichols. She was disappointed he wasn't among the group.

“What’s going on?” she asked nonchalantly.

“I’m afraid David died while you were on your break,” one of the nurses replied. “You hadn’t been gone more than two minutes when the monitor tech noticed he was in ventricular fibrillation. I was about to call a code when Beth saw the sticker on his chart indicating his family made him a ‘No Code’ this afternoon. I spoke with the on-call physician and he ordered some lidocaine, but it didn’t help. He fibrillated for a few minutes and then went flat line. He was pronounced dead just before you came back.”

“Do his parents know?” Alex asked.

“They’re on their way. We called and told them he’d taken a turn for the worse and that they should come in. Didn’t want to tell them over the phone that he had died. It seems so impersonal.”

Alex shook her head and sighed loudly. Her heart raced anxiously in her chest. “Any idea as to what happened?”

“Not really. He may have herniated from cerebral edema with his head injury. But that doesn’t usually cause V-fib. Makes you wonder if he had an electrolyte imbalance. We probably could have saved him with CPR if he hadn’t have been a ‘No Code.’”

“He’s been through so much?” Alex replied. “He’s probably better off this way. I’ve got ten closets of his family over these past few weeks so it might be best if they hear the news from me.”

“Sounds good to me,” the on-call doctor replied from the table where he sat writing the death note. “I was dreading facing his parents alone.”

The double doors of the ICU flew open and banged loudly against the metal doorstops. Alex recognized the hospital’s chaplain from an earlier encounter with a dying patient. He was an older man with silver hair and a salt and pepper goatee. His presence when death had been called was always welcomed.

“The Watson family is here,” he said in a soft, reverent voice. “Should I bring them back or wait with them in the

conference room?”

“Why don’t you put them in the conference room?” answered the tired, sleepy resident. “I’ll be in total shock to them shortly.” He shook his head and sighed deeply. “God, I hate his part of the job. I haven’t had any sleep tonight. I look like crap. And now I’ve got to tell two people whom I’ve never met that their son is dead. I wonder why they didn’t tell us about this glamorous part of the job in medical school?”

Jerry and Alice Watson rose in unison to meet them as they entered the conference room. In the dimly lit room their faces looked even more tired than Alice remembered.

“Mr. and Mrs. Watson,” the doctor began, “I’m Dr. Jones, the resident on call tonight. As you know your son began having problems with his heart rhythm a short time ago. From a technical standpoint, he experienced ventricular fibrillation. When a person’s heart stays in ventricular fibrillation, it makes it almost impossible to perfuse the body’s vital organs. There are medications which can sometimes correct the arrhythmia but when a patient is made a ‘No Code’ we’re not allowed to administer those medications.”

Mr. Watson held up his hand to interrupt the doctor.

“He didn’t make it, did he?” he asked.

“No sir, he didn’t,” Dr. Jones replied. “With him being a ‘No Code’, our hands were tied. There was very little we could do.”

Alice Watson buried her face against her husband’s shoulder and sobbed softly. Her knuckles turned white as she squeezed his hand.

“Driving to the hospital we had the feeling he might have died,” Mr. Watson responded. “It may have been something in the young lady’s voice who called us to tell us he’d taken a turn for the worse, but my wife and I both had the feeling he was gone.”

“I’m sorry to have to tell you this,” Dr. Jones replied, shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other. “I understand

he's been struggling for quite a while. I wish we could've done more."

"We appreciate everything that's been done," Mr. Watson replied. "We've known for some time now that his chances for recovery were very slim."

"Sir," Dr. Jones replied, nodding his agreement. "I'm not completely up to date on his case but in reading his chart, it sounds like his head injuries were rather extensive. Again, I'm very sorry. If there's anything we can do for you, please let us know."

He extended his right hand and firmly shook Mr. Watson's hand. His job was over. It hadn't been as painful as he expected.

Alex took Mrs. Watson's hand in her hand. For several minutes he let her sit quietly in an awkward silence.

"I'm not quite sure what to say," Alex said. "I know his has been difficult for the two of you."

Mrs. Watson put her finger to her lips.

"It's okay, Alex," she said. "Jerry and I have known all along that David wouldn't recover. Our son died weeks ago in the accident. His body has been kept alive artificially and now, it's finally over." She paused and looked at her husband. "Please don't take his wrong," she continued, "but in all honesty, we're relieved that it's over. Maybe now we can get on with our lives. Call it a ~~not~~ her's intuition, but I had a feeling, probably ten minutes before the phone rang, that David had died. I'd been restless all night and was staring at the ceiling when a sense of peace and tranquility came over me. It was almost as if David had stopped suffering and the peace he felt filled my body."

Alex guided the Watson's through the double doors of the ICU and into their son's room. His tubes and lines had been pulled. The white bed sheet had been tucked neatly under his chin. He appeared to be asleep. She stood by silently as his parents ran their fingers through his hair and reached under the sheet to hold his hands. Tears trickled down their faces.

“At last, he’s at peace,” Mrs. Watson said. “Thank you for everything you’ve done. You’ve been so sweet throughout of this. You’ve helped make a desperate situation bearable.”

Mrs. Watson wiped the tears from her eyes and hugged Alex’s neck. She kissed her son’s cheek and then took her husband’s hand and walked out of David’s room. The double doors of the ICU closed quietly behind them. Their ordeal was finally over. Alex’s was just beginning.