

The Handover

A Surgical Student Ritual of Passage

“Give me the goods,” snarled the Chief and Head of the Department of Surgery at the greatest institution of healing in the Wide Western Division...Leadbetter Central Hospital. Now all eyes at the conference table, a twenty-meter by two-meter double wide expanse of Fiji hardwood, beam toward you, grinding and homing in on your tense determined face like a high speed burr slicing through the flat plane of an acutely inflamed temporal bone. As the youngest and least experienced member of the Surgical team, you are officially known as the “TI”...(pronounced Tee-Eye for Training Intern). “TI” is given to you as a label of entitlement, power and accomplishment as you near the end of six years of brain hammering toil signaling at last that you have reached your final year in medical school. You are now the on-call, on-deck disease fighting foot soldier, a young doctor of the night running through the corridors of Leadbetter Hospital like a newly discovered genetic combination of HCG...a stunningly spectacular new breed combination of Human-Cheetah-Gazelle, designed and trained to reach any ward, lab or specialty department in record setting time. You, the best and brightest in your class are now poised and ready to deliver clinical summaries of cases admitted from a busy on-call night of pain, sorrow, human misery including your account of scrubbing and assisting on more than a dozen emergency surgical operations as well. You are that “Mighty TI,” so excited and filled with the pride of your night’s accomplishments that you cannot allow yourself to admit that you’re flat out tired, dispirited and exhausted such that every bone in your body feels twisted and wrenched to near breaking and dislocation while all your muscles burn as if the blood in their arteries and veins had been grotesquely replaced with flaming lead-free gasoline. But you tell yourself in a voice that only your ears register: “I can do this presentation. I must do this presentation...no matter what!”

As the youngest of the surgical trainees you now sit at the ‘Great Surgeon’s Throne’ in the blindingly hot penetrating beam of the entire Surgical department as all eyes slice at you. The other medical students, wearing nervous, deactivated Parotid gland dry-mouthed grins and obvious Edinger-Wesphal dilated pupils, shift in their seats while quietly wishing you luck for they know that soon their time will come and they will replace you. Some seem on the verge of a hypotensive crisis as they sweat themselves into dehydration as the tension mounts. Senior staff and Registrars deliver their investigative stares and waste no time as they begin dissecting through your vulnerable superficial epidermal defenses crafted by billions upon billions of silent apoptotically dispatched corneal cells devoted to protecting you against the hostile outside world of microbes, chemicals, invisible radiation, unnamable particulates, paint flakings, animal dustings and insect leavings. Their piercing, hacking, chopping glares cause you to feel their stares like a swirling sweet ill-wind blowing through the chinks between the busy swinging doors of an active Covid emergency department, as a cluster of five words, bunch together in your throat as if prepared for verbal mayhem and now driven by powerful muscular forces of

modified breathing, prepare to leap free from your mouth, over your palate and away from your tongue. Suddenly you pause, stare straight ahead, gulp air for a second, then abruptly release a series of throat clearing gasps like a sharp scimitar bladed zephyr from the perpetually dark humidity rich micro-cathedral recesses and alveolar lined crevices of your lungs as sound in the shape of a gigantic swirling, wildly vibrating bolus of air, explodes past the ever vigilant paired cartilaginous jewel pieces named- Arytenoid, Corniculate and Cuneiform- holding taught your vocal cords as they signal the escape of an unmistakable and impossible to misunderstand phrase that bursts forth with the power and boldness of a combat Marine storming the shores of an enemy held island:

“Come, let’s gather some berries.”

Suddenly the room is as silent as an empty tomb. Seemingly paralyzed eye lids snap wide! Every leaf, fiber and diaphragmatic sarcomere in every chest suddenly contracts causing almost all the air in the great room to rush into the void.

The Chief glares at you, his dilated pupils grotesquely magnified by his thick shiny glasses, as your uncontrolled facial muscles begin a rhythmic twitch and you stare back at him over the narrow, micrometer-sized shrinking space. Your eyes roll in an ever so vertical direction as you note the paralyzed blades of the solitary solitary ceiling fan which, as if jolted by a microwatt of electricity, seem to move a distance approaching a micron arc. Now, having made such an outlandishly senseless statement, you feel hopelessly trapped and look for a place to hide and wish for the impossible: your own sudden death and quick disposal in an imagined hidden cave under the conference room “CGT”... Chief’s Great Table.

The Chief glares at your face as he wears a look of uncontrolled threatening terror and you secretly again wish that death would visit and give you peace. The vermilion border of your lip suddenly twitches in the fashion of an ECG squiggle and your nostrils flare like the wings of a wildly released sphenoid bone and, inhaling a nanoliter of air, your voice emits, you are convinced, the tiniest gasp clearing sound in the universe as you will yourself to stillness.

The Chief’s stare is now like a blast of liquid nitrogen...cold, frozen, stiff, straight and as unyielding as a beam of case hardened stainless steel.

“What did you say,” he asks with the faintest twinkle in his eyes as the room lapses into unimagined stillness. And again the Chief’s baritone smothers the room. “I haven’t heard that

since I was a first year medical student which was..." he continues clearing his throat while whisking away traces of watery mucous, "Nearly a century ago," which causes a few barely audible laughing-coughs. So you warmly and dutifully oblige.

'Come, let's gather some berries.'

Suddenly the Chief is animated, friendly, proud.

"The rhythm of 'corneum lucidum, granulosum, spinosum, basale,' that's priceless!" he says. "That's what I like, getting back to the basics...ice cold basic anatomy, the heart of us all...basic anatomy. If you don't know anatomy you're on a lost, confused ship going in circles, going nowhere. Let this be a lesson to all of you. Now we're getting somewhere. As we used to say when I was a Baby MBBS..."

"BAIAG" (Bi ag - Basic Anatomy Is Always Good.) You can never go wrong knowing anatomy. Now onward Young TI Doctor. Proceed to the rest of the case, the intro is over, now get to the point."

Emboldened by his comment you cease your eye-meandering looking for an invisible hole in which to hide and charge full ahead.

"My patient is a 25 year old MVA DWT...UBT..."

"What was that again?" mutters the Chief.

"Motor vehicle accident. Driving while texting. Using blue tooth."

"I think I got that," says the Chief. "This sounds interesting. Any thoughts?" as he swivels and sweeps his eyes across the row of nervously shifting students. Suddenly, they began a sing-song chorus of questions mixed with differentials, their voices laced with confidence and determination.

"GCS?" "Vital Signs?" "Battle's sign?" "Raccoon eyes?"

"Beck's triad?" "FAST scan?" "Michelin Man?" "SOB?"

"Dirty dozen?" "Lethal six?" "Kerr's sign?" "Flail chest?"

The conference room comes alive with excitement. You the mighty “TI”, shift on your ischial tuberosities and smile comfortably, delighted by the energy in the room as the Chief offers you a nod and smile.

“We haven’t had this much excitement since presenting that last case of Fournier’s gangrene. I think we’ll make this an example of how to present a case and move onto the wards for “Grand Rounds.”

And soon the room emptied out you literally floated on a cloud of gravity defying Helium, thinking: “Can’t wait to put this in my UPSM Log Book.”

Corneum cells... .. are among the first defenders against the driven herd of the symptomatic evening after-hour afflicted who’ve made their way to the GPOLTK-pronounced “Gee polick” (Grand Portals of Lautoka Hospital) which, shining like a midnight Sun, welcomes all who come seeking relief and rest.