

Thirteen Months a Year

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the thousands of physicians that trained at LA County Hospital.

Chapter One

Jail Ward: Into the Inferno

The clang of the jail ward's metal door jarred me awake. I had fallen asleep at the large desk in the main hallway, trying to catch up on charting. I lifted my head and rubbed my eyes. The overhead clock read 12:45 a.m. Ten minutes of sleep and little prospect of more.

"Dr. King, Red Blanket," the charge nurse, Mary McConnahy, sang out.

Denny Klank, the night orderly, pushed a wobbly gurney carrying a child-sized man. *Please God, not a GSW. In med school I never saw a fresh gunshot wound, and I don't need to start now. I'm not ready for a perforated body gushing blood. Take pity on the patient.*

To my relief, I saw no blood, just red capsules strewn on his yellow silk shirt, and a slurry of half-dissolved capsules on the

front of his wife-beater undershirt mixed in a puddle of vomit. Two-hundred-dollar shoes extended from his baggy Pachuco slacks. A red flannel blanket covered his knees, the scarlet ensign of an emergency, according to the moonlighter's downstairs in the Main Admitting Room (MAR)—our version of an ER.

Relief flooded me, another Seconal OD. No big deal. Thanks to Dr. McLaren's briefing on day one, I knew something about the perils of downer ODs—treating seven of them since I started the night shift at 4:00 p.m. She had told six brand-new interns that it was like anesthesia.

“Keep 'em alive until they wake up. Secure the airway. If there's no gag reflex, intubate. No exceptions. Flush the stomach, then give a cathartic to induce diarrhea that will help eliminate unabsorbed capsules. Push IV fluids to prevent kidney failure. Most importantly, don't miss other causes of coma, brain injuries, diabetes, or hypothyroidism.”

Jailbirds or not, it seemed wrong that the service was only staffed with interns, the least experienced doctors in the hospital. I wondered if my debut behind bars was somehow thanks to my school's late, unlamented dean of students. He tried to blackball a half dozen “radicals” who had brought anti-war activism onto our campus. The dean made it known that he considered Vietnam War protestors to be traitors, and acted accordingly.

He wasn't my only problem. Numerous conflicts with our faculty left me in the bottom half of my class. Fortunately, my wife Jan was in the top ten. For internship we matched as a couple, otherwise there's no saying where I would be. Of course, on Friday June 20, 1969, one week out of med school, I was on the LA County Hospital jail ward, the sole physician caring for whatever the police dragged in. I'm Max King.

Two LAPD patrolmen followed the gurney, having an animated discussion about the relative merits of their girlfriends,

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one of whom sounded quite good at fellatio. They looked like weightlifters stuffed into their black uniforms. Their shiny black shoes clattered on the terrazzo floor. I felt intimidated. Cops are scary. As a medic in Chicago last summer, I saw firsthand what out-of-control cops could do.

The larger one said, “Suspected drug dealer. Ate his stash when he saw us coming.” He sneered at my long hair.

“The little fucker puked in the squad car and passed out,” the other cop said.

I staggered towards the treatment room to begin my newly mastered ritual. The orderly grinned at me—no doubt enjoying my predicament: New intern; knows nothing. He was right. Med school had not taught me anything I could use tonight. I had received a lesson in the generation gap from ambitious faculty that put their careers ahead of their responsibilities to patients and students. I had difficulty learning to keep quiet.

“Uh oh, this one’s trouble,” McConnahy said. She patted her nursing cap in place atop her orange Lady Clairol coiffeur and squeezed in between the policemen.

The officers immediately retreated towards the front vestibule to hang out with the khaki-clad sheriffs that staffed the jail ward. On the way, Big Cop said, “Fucking hippie doctors, what’s happened to this country?”

“McConnahy, what do you mean?” I wiped my sweaty palms on my smock, terror stricken at the prospect of someone dying under my care.

“He’s blue and he’s not breathing—better tube him.”

“What—how?” I stammered.

Without missing a beat, she put a laryngoscope in my left hand and an endotracheal tube in my right hand. She pushed the patient’s head back and pressed on his larynx. “Lift up his

tongue. Don't push it in too far. See his vocal cords? Inflate the balloon."

"I'll be damned. Thanks." With her help, I had saved somebody's life. I wiped my forehead and stood back grinning.

She smiled. "You gotta breathe for him. If you don't, he'll stay dead, and that's not the object of the game."

"Yeah, right, thanks again." I squeezed the Ambu bag she'd attached to his endotracheal tube. I wondered how my drug dealer's death trip went. Did he see a bright light and meet his ancestors? I thought maybe I'd ask when he felt talkative.

"Listen over both lungs. If the tube goes down the right main stem bronchus, it'll collapse his left lung." Her calm approach was like Mrs. Curtis, my second-grade teacher explaining phonetics.

"The lungs sound good."

McConnahy threaded a catheter down the endotracheal tube, causing a squishy sound. "Okay, nothing there." She connected him to a ventilator and removed a bottle of sodium sulfate from the cabinet, pouring it into the lavage basin.

"Don't these fools know that new interns started on Wednesday—taking their life in their own hands coming here?"

The phone rang. "You're in luck. Send him to Dr. Wong on medical admitting."

"He's not breathing. I can't send him anywhere."

I felt possessive of my first save. I wanted to mount him on a wall like a trophy fish; this was the first step in restoring my self-respect after four dismal years of med school, an academic tailspin that left me with deep self-doubts. Of course, I needed a lot more than a momentary success to restore my morale. Learning medicine on the fly is a haphazard, unreliable business, especially for the patients. There's a lot of luck involved.

"He overdosed in custody, so the DA ordered him released. If he's not gone in half an hour, it's a civil rights violation."

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The LAPD officers returned, along with a sheriff's deputy, a tan surfer type who looked puny next to them. Big Cop said, "Chicken-shit DA."

The other cop grunted and said something that sounded like "huge tits."

The sheriff's deputy stuck a piece of paper on the chart and said, "AMF."

"What's that mean?"

"Adios, motherfucker." He stretched the last word into five syllables.

"Habeas corpus, Deputy?" Reluctant to let go of my stumbling, fumbling heroics, I joked—my usual cover-up. "He'll be a corpse if he doesn't get proper care."

The sheriff smiled. "It couldn't happen to a nicer guy."

"You did all right," McConnahy said. "He'll go to the ICU—if they have a bed."

After my patient departed, I sat at the hallway desk to ponder my experience. The adrenaline rush heightened awareness of my surroundings. Like the rest of the hospital, sepia tones were the color palette of the jail ward. Tan stucco walls complemented the worn terrazzo floors. Brown composition wainscoting lined the hallways, badly chipped from thirty-seven years of contact with food carts and metal beds.

The Saturday before I started the internship, Nate Drager, a terminating intern headed for the Army, gave me a tour of the hospital. He walked me through the intake areas on the ground floor, the MAR, room 1050, and urgent care, room 1450. In the former, the patients lay on gurneys, and in the latter, they sat on wooden benches. In either case, they waited for hours before receiving rudimentary medical care.

Drager also coached me on the finer points of style and decorum. He wore a blue dress shirt and draped a stethoscope

around his neck. His smock was gone. He said that a minimalist style impressed the “chicks,” especially the students at the adjoining nursing school, the roof of which was in view of the hospital and featured a bevy of young women sunbathing during warm weather, making south-facing rooms popular with the convicts.

“The hospital has no real emergency room,” he said. “The MAR flings patients out as fast as they can. When they get it right, gunshots go to surgery, head whacks to neurosurgery, and GI bleeders to internal medicine. OB cases go to Women’s Hospital, except sometimes a pregnant woman with eclampsia goes to neurology by mistake. Everyone in custody goes to the jail ward, no matter what. It will be you against the world.”

The hospital was a relic of the Boulder Dam era, a nineteen-story cathedral with art-deco fantails—six feet of reinforced concrete that could withstand a low-yield nuclear weapon. The focal point of activity on the jail ward was the faux marble desk in the center of the hallway. Jazz Age architects had added the latest innovations, including a teletype to communicate lab results. An empty compartment was all that remained of that device.

According to my tour guide, the sheriff’s department had taken over the thirteenth floor a decade ago. Interior elevators were locked out. Only the one next to the front entrance was supposed to be in service. When it was out of action, the jail ward was as isolated as Devil’s Island. We couldn’t access any of the services downstairs—radiology, surgery, orthopedics, urology—but the MAR still sent walking wounded up the front stairs.

The sheriffs communicated with the outside world through a squawk box next to the front door, where a steel bulkhead enclosed a bulletproof window. A ward next to the sheriff’s vestibule held twenty women. During orientation, I’d gotten a key to the men’s

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area, but only the deputies could unlock the front gate and the women's section. After New Year's the Manson girls would be here for protective custody. Dozens of doctors made excuses to visit them, but I had no interest in meeting cold-blooded killers, male or female.

Like Dodge City, the sheriffs locked visitors' weapons in a safe. Sheriffs carried no firearms or nightsticks. They disabled rowdy inmates using their hands, feet, and sequestered blackjacks. Above the safe, a blackboard kept track of the comings and goings of the inmates. My job included recording whether a prisoner was healthy enough to go to court for arraignment—a vital task, as pre-arraignment time was “dead time,” not counted towards time served on sentencing.

“McConahy, can I bum a smoke?”

She slid a pack of Salems across the desktop. I removed a matchbook from inside the wrapper and lit my first cigarette in a month. The menthol felt chilly. She pulled a charred tuna can out of a drawer and shoved it at me. I flicked ashes into it, squinting from the smoke drifting into my eyes. *This is going to be my last cigarette ever. I hope.*

Blood, vomit, and pieces of gelatin capsules spotted my white uniform like candy decor on a birthday cake. The clock above my head read 2:15 a.m.—depressing. Barely ten hours into my first night on call, and I had already cared for more patients than I saw in two weeks as a student. At this rate, I was assured a rendezvous with the ballistics gods.

An image arose in my mind, graduation day a scant week ago, standing next to my wife Jan. If she hadn't gone catatonic on our OB rotation, taking to her bed for two weeks, she would have been at the dais delivering the valedictory instead of Mike Stallworth, who droned on about our “special” generation—if you asked me, special for the amount of drugs we consumed. He

asserted that we were destined to change the world. *If the MAR sends me a GSW, I'll need to change my underwear.*

A pungent locker room smell intruded on my reverie, coming from the back area, where sixty-five men occupied three wards designed for forty and shared one shower. In the summer, the smell of stale male sweat permeated the jail ward. The Bullpen, a holding area for stable patients, lay alongside the hallway. Prisoners might sit there all night waiting to be checked. It was a Spartan environment. No TV. No reading material. Lots of testosterone. In the morning, the stable ones headed to Men's Central Jail (MCJ), to the infirmary, to their cells, or booked into general population.

McConnahy tapped my shoulder. "Cy Kempton says he's having another heart attack. Of course, what he wants is another pain shot."

I retrieved a canvas-bound notebook from the marsupial pocket in the front of my smock. It contained my patients' names and file numbers, along with a summary of their medical problems. In trainee jargon, it was my "peripheral brain." In the first pages, I'd scribbled clinical pearls, tips on the management of emergencies.

Cy Kempton was case zero of my internship, owning the initial slot on my patient list. At age twenty-seven, he was a jail ward pariah with severe coronary artery disease, a high IQ, a rudimentary medical education from his brief job as a drug detail man, a penchant for writing bad checks, and, lately, a well-developed taste for opiates.

Chart in hand, I peered into his wardroom, one he shared with twenty other men. He sat on a bed talking to a patient in leg traction, laughing and gesticulating. I entered the room and he stood up, staggering back towards his bed. His forehead was pinched, his thick eyebrows fused into a single dark patch across his forehead.

“Cy, what’s the problem?”

He clutched his chest. “Gee, Doc, it’s terrible, crushing me like an elephant standing on my chest.” His description was straight from a medical textbook. “And the shots I’ve been getting just aren’t holding me.” He clutched his chest, whimpering.

“Okay, relax. I’ll get a cardiogram right away.” I turned to leave the room.

He grabbed my sleeve. “No, no, it’s just angina. Nitroglycerine doesn’t do a thing other than precipitate a headache, but Demerol usually works.”

“What sort of dose do you have in mind?”

“One hundred milligrams.” He straightened up. “But no Vistaril, please. It gives me a dry mouth.”

He was far too clear about his needs. In the summer of 1967, I did research on drug addiction and interviewed incarcerated addicts at CRC in Norco. I liked their stories. They were doing seven years without a chance at parole, and appreciated a fresh audience, making them quite entertaining. Kempton, on the other hand, was annoying, whiney, and manipulative—classic street addict behavior. I turned out the lights, went to the desk, and wrote a STAT order.

McConnahy hooted. “That con artist! Did he squeeze his eyebrows?”

“Yes, he did, as a matter of fact. Why?”

“We call it the BS sign. When one of the jailbirds wants to pull a hard con, he squeezes his eyebrows together. It’s what passes for sincerity around here.” I had missed that lesson in medical school. “Do you still want to give him some Demerol?”

“Well, just this once. Let’s see what happens.”

“You got it.” She headed for the locked narcotics cabinet.

I watched through a small window in the door. After the injection, Cy moved to the washstand mirror and flipped on the

nightlight, squeezing against the glass. He appeared to check his pupils. All at once, he had a beatific expression and ambled back to bed.

Bang! Clang!

The rolling thunder of the front gate announced the arrival of three more patients: a heroin overdose, a youngster with a ten-stitch laceration, and a drunk with a fractured foot. I took the worst one first, the heroin OD, breathing six times a minute, sending the other two to the bullpen to be treated later.

“Ten mg of Nalline, *stat!*” I scribbled the order.

Sam Hampter, a nursing aid, shook his fluffy afro. “Hold off, Doc. Let’s apply some leather. Smack shooters like to dream. They wake up mean.” We applied four-point leather restraints. I started an IV and injected the opiate antidote.

The patient awakened with a violent start. “You white motherfucker!”

“Hampter, what must I endure to save lives around here?” I asked.

The patient struggled with his restraints and ranted right through the rest of his examination—still shouting unpleasant epithets while Hampter moved him across the hallway to the observation room.

The phone rang. McConnahy said, “RB seizure coming up from the MAR.”

“Nice of them to call.”

An old man arrived twitching and shaking, his red blanket trailing behind him. His dusty, fruity odor was the fragrance of skid row: starvation, dirt, urine, feces, and cheap wine. I helped

undress him. His underwear smelled like a gas station urinal. Fecal matter glued the tatters to his skin.

“No lice anyway,” Hampter said, sticking a bite block in the patient’s mouth.

His tough, wiggly veins required three stabs to start an IV. I pushed Phenobarbital and he relaxed. I pricked his index finger, dabbing a glucose test strip in the blood. Undetectable blood sugar. I injected fifty cc’s of concentrated dextrose into his IV.

Pleased with myself, I finished the other admissions. I sent the drunk with a fractured foot to minor trauma downstairs—under guard and in chains—and started suturing the ten-stitcher.

“Hampter, it’s four thirty. Do interns ever sleep?”

“Not so’s I recollect. In fact, don’t think about it—here comes another one.”

A police officer accompanied a vaguely middle-aged man, who sat cross-armed, straddling his gurney like a cowboy on horseback. “He wandered in front of a car and got knocked twenty feet,” the officer said.

I checked the patient’s eyes with a penlight, dodging foul breath, issuing from a mouth full of rotting teeth. “I’m okay, lemme outta here. Gotta get ma purple T-Bird.”

“You’re in no shape to drive.” I assumed he wanted his car.

“No, man—I’m thirsty. Got my fixins at the flop. You know, purple Kool-Aid make T-Bird taste like good port wine, but it don’t hide the taste a that cheap shit Tokay.”

“Believe me, I won’t keep you here one minute too long.” I didn’t want him to stay long enough to go into DTs, complicating my life and endangering his.

“Doctor King, we have a female,” McConahy said, her voice a harsh contralto from nonstop smoking.

I trudged to the women’s treatment room, a converted closet. The unconscious woman was pregnant, near term, accompanied

by a police matron. “Drugged and gang-raped,” she said, “dumped in an alley off Slauson.”

Unconscious from a “Mickey Finn” cocktail, her vulva was raw and swollen, but no other injuries. Fetal heart tones were good. “Do you want a semen specimen?”

The policewoman gave a look that said, “What the hell for?”

Five thirty brought another visit from Denny Klank and his fearsome gurney. The world hid behind a hazy film, blurring the face of my latest OD. The sour smell of gastric secretions sickened me. The basin held half-dissolved red capsules flushed from his stomach. The labels were still legible: SKF F-40. Pharmaceutical-grade Secobarbital, Seconal, Red Devils, Reds, downers, all the pleasure of getting drunk without the calories.

My foot slipped in a puddle that had spread from the observation ward across the hallway. I tracked the flood, sloshing to where it mixed with blood and liquid stool the consistency of a chocolate milk shake. One of the early evening overdoses hung upside down off the end of his bed, still bound hand and foot. Evidently unaware of his circumstances, he had sought the bathroom, tumbling off the bed, yanking out his catheter, and emptying the urine from his bag onto the floor in a multicolor flood.

He hung tail up, like a deer on the grill of a pickup truck, bleeding from his lacerated urethra. He had relieved himself of a quart of liquid feces that dripped down over his bare buttocks, his back, and head onto the floor, resembling a chocolate-dipped ice cream cone with a splash of strawberry sauce. I giggled and choked, hurrying back to the desk and doing an ice skater’s sideslip on the wet floor. Tears streamed down my face describing the scene to Mrs. Hardesty, the night supervisor. McConahy’s efforts to suppress her laughter induced a paroxysm of coughing.

“Oh my God, that hurts.” The pimply-faced prisoner’s denim shirtfront was soaked with blood. I used both thumbs to push his fractured nose back in line. “Ow, ow, ow!”

“Not the time to make a pass at your new cellmate.” I painted adhesive onto his cheeks, taped a splint on his nose, and sent him to the bullpen for a return trip to MCJ.

Sunlight burned through the June haze, heating the hospital’s thick walls, making me squint in the glare. After sixteen hours in a pressure cooker, I had no time to celebrate my debut. Twenty “keepers,” and I had triaged another twenty who filled the Bullpen. More work ahead, lab tests to collect, X-rays to retrieve, consultants to call—worst of all, rounds at nine with Dr. McLaren, the jail ward director.

I ladled coffee from the tureen in the dented food cart and scratched my sides. The bitter liquid made me shudder. My mouth was cottony, unimproved by a second cup of coffee. I ran my hands through my hair, which I hadn’t trimmed in months—the Errol Flynn look, according to my wife, who liked it. I needed a shower and fresh clothes, but all I could do was shuffle back to a pile of charts to prepare for rounds.

Staff Rounds

“Mr. Debs is a sixty-seven-year-old alcoholic, found down having a grand mal seizure.” An hour and a half into rounds, my words struggled to find their way from my brain to my lips. “I aborted his seizure with five hundred milligrams of Phenobarbital IV push.” Dr. McLaren nodded approval. Five fellow interns stood at the foot of the bed.

“On examination, he was a chronically-ill male Caucasian who appeared older than his recorded age. Pertinent findings were a depressed level of consciousness, and pathologic reflexes

consistent with a post-ictal state. His dipstick glucose was zero, so I gave him fifty cc's of D50—”

“What were his eye findings?”

“They were okay, pupils reactive to penlight.”

“Did you put anything in the IV besides sugar?” She stuck her forefinger in front of the patient’s eyes. “Follow my finger, please.” She moved it side to side, up and down. “Lucky, no nystagmus.” *Flickering eye movements?* “A sign of Wernicke’s encephalopathy from acute thiamine depletion. With chronic alcoholics, an IV push of dextrose can exhaust their thiamine stores and turn the brain to mush, leading to Korsakoff’s psychosis.”

“I didn’t know that.” Embarrassment added to my misery.

She faced the patient. “Can you tell me where you are mister . . . uh?”

“Debs, Ernie Debs. I’m at County Hospital.”

“And what day is it?”

“Saturday, June the twenty-somethingth. Why do you doctors always ask the same dumb questions?”

Turning to me, she said, “You were lucky. All alcoholics get a gram of Thiamine with any IV dextrose.”

“Sorry, I should have known that.”

After rounds, I stared at my charts, feeling ignorant. My first shift as an intern, I had flushed stomachs and sutured lacerations. No knowledge necessary. I needed to get my bearings and do some badly needed reading. Instead, I had at least eight more hours of work. *At some point, I’ll get organized. In medical school, moonlighting as a med tech, I was the master of time and space. Not here, not yet.* I plodded from bed to bed.

Late in the afternoon, I sat on the bed of a college student, an OD from early Friday night ready for his return ticket to county jail. “Was it a suicide attempt?” I asked.

“You kidding? I got my Four-F notice. To celebrate, I scored a rack of Reds and a six-pack of Colt Forty-Five. Four cans and it was lights out.”

“Congratulations. My draft board would classify Quasimodo 1-A.”

In the early evening, it was still bright daylight. Time to go home. My mouth felt like paste, my head spun, and my smock stuck to my back. Our family life had become fragmented. Jan was on duty in pediatrics and was not due home until Sunday night. Our four-month-old daughter, Nora, was at my in-laws until Sunday afternoon.

“Help me,” Kempton moaned from the back ward. “Please, come quick.”

I spoke through the door. “What is it you want?”

“Gotta have some relief, I need a stronger dose of pain medicine.” Without another word, I ordered 150 milligrams of Demerol and left for home.

Home Life

Sunday morning at 6:00 a.m., I rolled out of bed into an empty house, showered, and left for work. After my first night call, my service had exploded to twenty-six patients, but a dozen were ready for a bus trip back to MCJ. By noon, half my service was gone. I checked out to the on-call intern and picked up Nora in San Marino.

I flopped down in bed with her, holding her over my head, cooing and drooling. I put her on my tummy. She fell asleep. My eyes got heavy. We napped together. Pure luxury. In an hour, I awoke and put her in her crib. I started dinner, hoping that Jan would get home at a reasonable time. At sundown, she returned from a thirty-six-hour shift. Her profile reminded me of Queen

Nefertiti. As a kid, I clipped a picture of the Egyptian queen's bust from a National Geographic and taped it to the wall. My brothers teased me about my 3400-year-old pinup.

"No sleep," she groaned. "I'm too tired to eat."

"I need to talk."

"You're not thinking of quitting, are you?"

"No."

"What's on your mind?"

"I feel dangerous—barely competent."

"You're a damn site better than the interns at our med school."

"That's not saying much. They had no ethics. I have no skills. Friday night I stumbled through forty patients, faking it all the way."

"Please don't do this. I'm wasted."

"I haven't felt right since we were freshmen."

"We're both tired, and the year has just begun. You can get it together. You have the brains, and your work ethic will serve you better than book smarts."

I smiled at the compliment. "I'll be on specialties where I know nothing."

"All this self-doubt after four days? I think they know that most interns are like you—ignorant and anxious. Hang in there. In a year, we'll have licenses."

"I'll have a draft notice to go with mine."

"Deal with that when the time comes." She held my hands. "This is a fresh start, a chance to clear your record. I believe you can become a great doctor, but it won't happen tomorrow." She drained a glass of port wine and trundled off to bed.

I was embarrassed that I didn't inquire about how she was doing. Next time.

After sleepwalking through high school, I met her in JC while killing time as an English major, trying to figure out

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what to do with my life. On a dare, I took pre-med biology, the hardest class in the school. She had moved to LA for her physician father's fifth job in ten years, leaving New Orleans, abandoning a rich fiancé and a life of privilege. When she beat me on the biology midterm, I knew I had met the woman of my dreams.

Monday was my first daytime "short call," a handful of minor problems including a sullen twenty-year-old with a rash on his face. "What's this?" I pointed at the red blotches.

"He tried to hold up a gas station," said the LAPD patrolman. "The attendant threw battery acid in his face."

"Lucky you weren't blinded. Have you considered giving up your life of crime?"

Driving home, I pushed the buttons on my car radio, surfing LA's two rock stations, KRLA and KFWB, looking for a hit tune by Tommy James and the Shondells that always lifted my mood. I stopped at a neighborhood *carniceria* for a bag of tortillas and a six-pack of beer. The sight of Jan's Volvo buoyed my spirits. Its exhaust manifold was still ticking. I took the dozen steps to our front door in three leaps.

Jan stood reading the mail in her white uniform. It showed off her legs and fit her curves nicely. "Smart outfit. I'll heat up the *carnitas* while you get cleaned up."

"Nora's down and Maria has already eaten." She headed for the master bathroom. Water drummed into the bathtub. She peeked out the bedroom door, exposing skin all the way to the floor. "Let's share a bath, darling."

"I'll bring the champagne."

I liked her sophisticated fantasies, acting like we were Nick and Nora Charles. They took me far from my hardscrabble roots.

I grabbed two cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer and an opener. Immersed in bubbles, she exposed her forehead, eyes, and nose like a prehistoric amphibian.

“Your *Veuve Clicquot*, madam.” I punched two holes in the beer can and handed it over. Her arm was lobster red from the bathwater. She liked it hot. We scrubbed each other. “It’s been over a week since we’ve made love.”

“Catch as catch can. The worst part for me is lack of sleep, not sex.”

“For six years we were side by side, twenty-four hours a day. Now we’re home together maybe two times a week.”

“We’ll enjoy the time with each other all the more,” she said, winking.

“The jail ward still plans to bite my ass with a *horrendo*, shot to pieces. In three weeks, I’ll be on neurology, a subject about which I’ve never had a single lecture.”

“I feel bad for Nora. She sees more of Maria than us.”

“Believe me, I’d love more family time. It’s not in the cards right now. Dean Scholl tried to get me blackballed. I need to repair the damage.”

“We did this subject Sunday night. You earned your lousy reputation. Live with it.”

I smiled. “Actually I’m proud of it. Anyway, how’s life among the kiddies?”

“My attending is a monster. She wants us to stay up all night. If we’re not with patients, we’re supposed to go to the library. Evidently, sleep deprivation is a teaching aid to make us better doctors.”

We toweled off and slipped into bed, making love for an hour.

Jailhouse Justice

I was back on night call a week into the internship. The short call intern signed out to me and fled through the front gate.

A chain gang of inmates in faded denim marched past him. I nodded to the deputy to take them to the Bullpen. Behind the line of prisoners, an old man rolled in on a gurney, gasping and wheezing. His lungs sounded bubbly, like heart failure.

With newfound confidence from reading Harrison's textbook, I barked orders, "Morphine ten milligram IV, tourniquets, two cc's of Mercurhydrin IM, nasal oxygen at two liters."

McConahy said, "You have to write those orders before I can honor them."

I smiled and wrote the orders. The morphine relaxed the old man. His blue-gray color turned pink. "I'm feeling much better, Doc. I can breathe now."

"No heart attack on your EKG." It was a skill my med school actually taught well.

A click-clack sound echoed from the terrazzo floor. I glanced over my shoulder at an officer in a tan motorcycle outfit, wearing bomber glasses indoors, his knee-high boots polished to a mirror shine. The sheriffs sarcastically called them "chippies," short for California Highway Patrol. A man in his forties lay on a gurney with a bloodstained sheet. He smelled of cheap wine. A serpentine laceration ran across his face, slicing eyelids, ears, and nose, penetrating the right cheek and creating a triangular flap that exposed his teeth.

"Hit a wall at fifty miles an hour," the officer said. "We chased him—weaving all over Imperial Highway."

"Was he KO'd?"

"Not that I could tell, just intoxicated—drunk as a lord."

"God loves inebriates." I phoned an ophthalmologist to come suture his eyelids.

Another patient arrived, his cough a low, guttural bark. He had W. C. Fields's rosy cheeks and bulbous nose. Deputy Parker scanned his arrest warrant. "You'll like this, doc. The public

health nurse turned him in because he hasn't been showing up for his TB treatments—on a bender for a month.”

I grabbed a surgical mask and placed it on the patient's face, snapping the band behind his head. “Put him in isolation. I'll check him later.”

I turned to the deputy and tapped my left forearm like a baseball manager. “Bring my ten-stitchers in from the bullpen.”

I sutured their wounds, classic lacerations inflicted with a nightstick blow across the orbital ridge. I visited the TB patient. Weeks ago, I would have taken an hour for a History and Physical workup. Now it took fifteen minutes.

Three men arrived in chains, rattling like Jacob Marley's ghost visiting Mr. Scrooge. The deputy removed their leg irons. I grasped the first inmate's right hand and held it up for the charge nurse, Peggy Lowery. The forefinger was as flat as a tongue depressor.

“Lockdown chicken, the winner and new champion.” He had won the chicken contest to see who held his finger the longest in the path of the heavy brass cell door as it closed automatically during lockdown.

Lowery was a slim blond in her late twenties, a perky change from the red, white, and blue-haired ladies of the night. She pointed to the crude jailhouse tattoo on his forearm. “Born to Lose,’ the tattoo says it all, Dr. King.”

The other two prisoners had minor injuries from scuffles with the police, requiring nothing more than tetanus shots. Soon all three were headed to the Bullpen. I leaned against the doorjamb and mopped my neck. “Lowery, it's eleven already.”

“Yes, Dr. King, time flies.” She brushed up against me. “You know, I've been working double shifts, taking uppers to keep going, and it's hard to sleep.”

THIRTEEN MONTHS A YEAR

Speed, no wonder she's so jumpy. That hand on my arm, am I being seduced or hit up for drugs?

"Do you think you could write me a prescription for a few Secondals? I'm due back for a double at seven, and I'll be a basket case." She ran her hand up the small of my back, causing tingles all the way to my neck.

"Just this once." I wrote a county script for six 100-milligram Secondal capsules. "Fill it here—and please don't ask again."

"Oh, gee, thanks a lot. Thanks an awful lot." Waving her prescription, she bounced away for shift change.

I hated feeling manipulated. An intern at my medical school had gotten in serious trouble over a prescription that he filled outside the hospital—handcuffs and jail kind of trouble. My sour mood lasted until McConnahy poked her head into the conference room where I sat catching up on charts.

"Another patient, Dr. King."

"Don't they know I'm busy?"

My newest was a crewcut adolescent wearing a pale-blue pullover sweater, surrounded by a crowd—police, orderlies, nurses, and Mrs. Hardesty, the indigo-haired night supervisor. "Goodness, look at this baby," she said. "He doesn't belong here."

"Found him in an alley," the Pasadena policeman said. "Rough part of town, off Fair Oaks and Colorado. No signs of violence."

I knew the area from my salesman days, porno flicks and dingy bars that served nickel sandwiches and twenty-five-cent beers. His respirations were slow, his pupils tiny pinpoints. Hampter solved the mystery by removing his shirt, exposing a needle mark on his left forearm next to a tattoo of a swastika with the words, "Aryan Youth."

"Fucking Nazi! This *Hitlerjugend* shot up heroin." After applying hard leather restraints, I gave a dose of Nalline.

In seconds, he lurched upward, glaring at Hampter. "Get this nigger away from me!" Turning to me, he said, "Take these things off me, you cocksucker!"

I offered a knowing smile. "My friend, I don't think you realize you're in jail and you shouldn't talk this way. You're in, ah, disagreeable company."

"You shut your motherfucking mouth."

I wanted to punch him, but he was in restraints and, besides, the jail had a way of evening the score. I settled for saying, "You're a very stupid young man."

Late in the afternoon, finishing in the men's area, Ward 13-600, I once again heard Cy Kempton's moaning. "I'm having terrible pain, man. I need some morphine."

I unlocked his door. "There's zip on your EKG, Cy. If I get around to it, I'll give you something." Whatever human kindness had survived the degrading experience of med school was leaking out of me. Feeling used took me to my crazy zone.

The young man in traction scrutinized Kempton and then me. "You know, Doc, you look worse than Cy. You ought a give yourself that morphine and go home."

On the way out, I peeked in the front window of the Bullpen. The Aryan youth sat in a corner near the toilet, his hair wet, his face puffy and apathetic. Motioning to Bill Brown, the daytime orderly, I asked, "What's with the junior Nazi?"

He chuckled. "He's getting the treatment, Doc. Some of the brothers are holding his head in the toilet, flushing the shit out of it."

"Right on."

I headed home at the end of another forty-hour stretch without a minute of sleep. At the front gate, I told Deputy Parker about the junior Nazi.

