



No rest for the wicked

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There is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked.
Isaiah 48:22

Brady woke and looked at the clock. It was 9:50 AM. His nephew's first birthday party would be starting in 10 minutes. He had completely forgotten and would definitely be late. The happy birthday song was well under way when Brady walked in the door. Looking chubby and happy, little Benjamin was fixated on the single flame that decorated the top of his cake.

"Look what the cat dragged in," said Sam, Brady's older brother. "Clerkship got you down? You look awful, bro." Sam was a psychiatrist. He too had gone through the clerkship process—the one that transforms medical students into doctors. Brady had been a clerk now for a total of 1 week. He had 2 years of classroom training under his belt, but now he was working in the hospital.

"What rotation are you on now anyway?"

"Internal med—the MTU."

"Oh. That explains it." Sam recognized in his younger brother the remnants of a horrible night. Puffy, purple-gray hammocks hung beneath Brady's eyes. Bristly scruff peppered his young but tired face.

"Here," said Brady, offering a package. "I got this for Benjamin. Sorry ... I didn't have time to wrap it ... just picked it up this morning." Brady handed Sam a large plastic box with a remote-control car inside. On the front, it read "Ages 5 and up" in large yellow print.

"Oh, uh, thanks, bro. I'm sure he'll enjoy it down the road. Why don't we get you some coffee?"

"Brady, how are you?" asked Amanda, Brady's sister-in-law. "I hope medical school is treating you well. You look a little Have you lost weight or something? Your face doesn't look as round as usual."

"School is fine," said Brady, even though he felt anything but fine. "How are you?"

"I just had the worst night ever with little Ben. I only got about 2 hours of sleep with his fussing. He's teething."

"He sure has grown a lot," said Brady, trying to maintain the conversation away from medicine. It seemed to work. Amanda spun into talking about her son's baby fat and the large quantity of diapers that they went through in a day. Brady was never so thankful to be hearing about the bowel and bladder habits of his nephew.

Over the next hour, Brady's responses to other adults at the midmorning shindig were mainly monosyllabic. *Yup. No. Sure. What? Wow. Yup.* Mustering an *Oh really?* on one occasion was one of his more dynamic moments.

The adults spoke with delight about recent shopping finds and investment options. Even on a good day, Brady

would have had little to contribute to such conversation. His 1-bedroom apartment was minimally furnished with items he had purchased second-hand. He was creeping further into debt by the minute, it seemed. And for what? Dreams of a medical degree he was considering abandoning. How would he pay back his massive loan? He had always wanted to be a barista. Maybe the local coffee shop was hiring. His mind drifted back to his night from hell.

Two days earlier Brady had been on call for the first time. As a medical student on call in the MTU, he was assigned to carry the fear-evoking code pager. At the medical bookstore the previous week, Brady had picked up a small handbook entitled *Clerk Nerds. The Informal Guide to Surviving Clerkship*. He read the section on carrying the code pager: *If it rings, run. Run with all your might, make yourself known, and let the team know you are able and willing to help.* The code pager had been making its way around the medical students in the MTU that week. Each morning, at handover, the clerk who was on call the previous night passed it along.

"Here you go, Brady," said his classmate Jen.

"Are you sure you were on call last night? You look rested." Brady clipped the pager to his side.

"No codes. I even slept for 6 hours. Anyway, I'm out. I can't believe I have the day off—I'll probably have a nap, do some laundry, take in a hot yoga class." She looked smitten with the thought of her upcoming freedom.

"I'll see you tomorrow. Enjoy your post-call day."

That morning Brady rounded on his patients and carried out his clerky duties. He used the afternoon for "scut work"—writing notes, ordering bloodwork, making consults.

Clerk Nerds Tip 17: Good clerks can't get enough scut work and will willingly offer to take care of endless amounts of menial tasks for their residents.

Brady was always asking the residents how he could help, but as a medical student he often felt redundant, like a modern-day flight attendant fiddling with his hands while a video on the backs of seats instructed passengers on safety features. He imagined the hospital would function just fine, if not more efficiently, without his presence.

At the end of the day, the team of residents and medical students congregated at a meeting led by the Chief Resident. "All right, who are the lucky ones on call tonight?"

Brady raised his hand, as did Alexia, the off-service radiology resident. Over the past week Brady had been impressed by Alexia's competence with internal medicine, despite the fact that she was off-service. As he contemplated the night ahead, feeling anxious about his first call shift, the code pager sounded.

Brady felt his heart rate rise. He jumped from his seat and sprinted out of the room and down the hall, even though the location of the code had not been announced. Once near the elevators, he heard a voice.

"Testing, testing, 1, 2, 3. Testing. This is a test."

Alexia had followed him into the hall. She tried her best to hide her smile at Brady's false start. "Remember? They always do a test run at the end of the day."

"Oh. Oops. Right." Brady's cheeks coloured. Standing face to face with Alexia, Brady took in her height. They had been working together for the past week, but only now did Brady appreciate how tall she was. He looked to the floor and noticed how the bottom of her green scrub pants sat 6 inches above her ankles. They looked more like clam diggers. Looking up again, he noticed she was swimming in her scrub top. Her long auburn hair was draped over her shoulders like a scarf. He wondered how anyone could look attractive in such shapeless attire, but somehow, Alexia pulled it off. Finally, his gaze landed on her green eyes. Alexia coughed purposefully to get his attention. He realized he must have been staring.

"Come on. Let's get back to our meeting," she said. Like a shadow, Brady followed her back down the hall.

"All right then. Now that we're all back," said the Chief Resident, looking at Brady with raised eyebrows, "I anticipate some deaths tonight. The palliative patients. Don't be alarmed if you have to pronounce a person or two."

After the meeting, Alexia and Brady made their way to the cafeteria for some food. They stood in line, both clad in their scrubs with lasagnas in hand. "I'll take care of this," said Alexia, taking Brady's dinner from him and placing it alongside her own by the register. He did not argue.

Clerk Nerds Tip 27: If there is an opportunity to eat, eat. If a resident or staff offers to buy you anything, accept it.

Alexia asked Brady what he wanted to learn about over dinner. "Hmmm ... I've never seen someone pronounced dead before. Could you teach me about that, as it's a possibility tonight?"

"Sure," said Alexia. "For starters, before you even go into the room, you want to know who is in there, how old the patient is, whether the death was sudden or expected. Review the chart before you go in, find out whether an autopsy has been requested, address organ donation. In the room, you need to check for heart sounds, feel for a pulse, and listen for breath." Brady studiously took notes. "And don't be alarmed if you feel a pulse. It could be your own. I made that mistake once."

An intense beeping sound radiated from Alexia's hip.

"Uh huh. OK. How old?" She hung up the phone. "I have a job for you. Are you familiar with Mr Jones?"

Brady was indeed familiar with the man. Mr Jones had been his patient since the start of the week. It was a straightforward case of cellulitis that was resolving with antibiotic therapy. Mr Jones' laboratory values were improving every day. Plus, they were becoming friends.

"Why don't you go up and see him?" said Alexia. "I'll work on discharge summaries. Page me when you're done."

Mr Jones was a 68-year-old retired fisherman. He had a number of comorbidities, including diabetes and high blood pressure. He was also a joker. He complained about his family doctor not spending enough time with him, laughing at the sign she had posted in her office in bold print and capital letters: *ONLY ONE ISSUE PER VISIT*.

"If I were shot twice, do you suppose I would have to go back the second day for the second bullet wound?" he had once asked Brady sarcastically.

"Hi, Mr Jones," said Brady. "I hear you're not feeling well."

"Just a tad squeamish," said Mr Jones. "Probably the turkey I ate for dinner."

Methodically, Brady noted that Mr Jones' vital signs were normal. Brady continued his assessment, conducting a thorough history and physical exam. He checked the most recent laboratory values, which were also normal. Brady paged Alexia and they met up again in the cafeteria to discuss his findings.

"So, with normal vital signs and laboratory values, along with a noncontributory physical exam, I don't think there is any immediate action we need to take. I've ordered some basic bloodwork and some antinausea medication."

"Excellent," said Alexia. "Let's go see him together." Alexia's pager beeped again.

"Hi. This is Alexia, the R2 on call for the MTU. Oh really? Oh. OK, we'll be over in a minute." She hung up her cell and looked to Brady. "Change of plan. We'll see Mr Jones later. Right now, let's go pronounce someone dead, Bradley. It's one of the palliatives."

Bradley? She thinks my name is Bradley? He chose not to draw attention to the error.

They were about to enter the room, when Alexia remembered something. "Did you happen to order lytes on Mr Jones?"

Electrolytes. Damn.

"No, actually."

"That's OK. Just do it when we're done here." Brady gave her a nod, and they entered the room.

The patient's son was sitting beside his recently deceased mother, holding her cold hand. He was on the phone. "You gotta come. Mom just passed I know, I know. The doctors are here now; I'd better go." He looked to Brady and Alexia. "My brother ... he'll be here soon too."

It was Brady's first time seeing a patient who had died. He had seen dead people in funeral homes before, relatives who were embalmed and well dressed, even wearing makeup. But this patient was lying in her hospital gown with messy hair, mouth gaping open.

The minute they had entered the room, Brady noticed a shift in Alexia's entire body language. Her personality became gentler. Her voice softened and she took a seat beside the mourning man. "I'm so, so sorry for your loss." She placed a hand on his shoulder. She went on to

pronounce his mother's death, just like they had discussed in the cafeteria: checking for her pulse, listening for breath sounds. As expected, neither were present.

"Time of death: 8:32 PM."

The door flew open. It was another man dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, holding extra-large coffees and bagged-up pastries. He was sobbing uncontrollably.

"I just left to get coffee. I didn't want to leave her. I didn't know Oh, Mom."

Brady took the coffee and food from the man, freeing his hands. He ran to his mother, crying into her.

"Her mouth, her mouth, someone please close her mouth!" He attempted to do this himself by pushing her lower jaw upward, but it kept dropping back down, her mouth an open black hole. After several attempts he abandoned this idea and instead hugged her hard.

"I'll give you some time with her now," said Alexia.

"It's never fun," she said to Brady, once they had left the room and closed the door behind. "You just have to try and make the situation the best it can possibly be."

Brady was feeling edgy, but before he could process things, Alexia's pager fired again.

"No rest for the wicked," said Alexia. Brady wasn't sure whether she was quoting the Bible or Hunter S. Thompson, but he nodded in agreement nonetheless. *If you don't understand a cultural reference, comment, or joke your resident or staff makes, just pretend you do and move on.*

After hanging up, Alexia's tone changed again. She seemed more stressed this time.

"I gotta go. There's a bleed on the third floor. I'll have my pages forwarded to you. If you think it's a dire emergency, if you're worried about a sick patient, come get me. But if it can wait, let it. This guy on 3 is crumping." With that, Alexia ran down the hall into the stairwell and out of sight.

Crumping? Brady wrote the word down in his notebook in the "look up later" section.

Over the next several hours, he responded to a number of pages on Alexia's behalf. In close consultation with the experienced nurses, he decided that none of those seen was a medical emergency. Heartburn. Constipation. Can't sleep. He hadn't touched base with Alexia in a couple of hours and decided to page her to check on her status.

"Hi. Bradley?" she said.

"Yeah—it's me."

"I'm going to put you on hold for a second. Almost done."

Brady waited. Five minutes. Ten minutes. And at this point, a strong urge to urinate overcame him. He realized he had not used the bathroom since the beginning of his shift. Doing so while on hold was certainly a risk, but at that moment it was one he was willing to take. He finished peeing and was relieved that Alexia had not yet picked up the phone. But just as he flushed he heard her voice.

"Bradley? Umm ... is that a toilet flushing?"

"Oh ... uh no ... just the cafeteria trolley going by." Brady sprinted out of the bathroom away from the sound.

"Right. Well, meet me on 5.7 and we'll review your patients. Oh, and PS, don't forget to wash your hands."

After meeting up, Brady reported on the patients he had seen. "So all in all, no medical emergencies. I held down the fort."

"Nice work, thanks. I'll follow up with them."

"By the way," said Brady, "how did things go with your patient? The bleed?"

"Not good," she said. "Plus I had to pronounce another palliative patient. Listen—it's 3 AM. Why don't you try to get some sleep?" Brady didn't ask any further questions. He assumed from her response that the bleed patient had died or was very close to it. He also reflected on his own level of fatigue. *Clerk Nerds* clearly stated that when a resident offers you sleep, take it.

Brady had slept for about 15 minutes when he heard his code pager ring followed by a muffled radio voice. Code blue, 4th floor, room 425, cardiac arrest.

By instinct, Brady jumped out of bed. He grabbed his phone, his stethoscope, and for some reason his toothbrush, and ran down the hall toward the elevator. In the first few seconds of his dash, he heard something crash on the floor—his new smartphone. The face had entirely smashed. He quickly picked it up and kept sprinting to reach the code. He and Alexia arrived at the same time. Chest compressions were under way.

"This is Bradley," said Alexia. "He's a clerk."

The senior internal medicine resident on call was leading the code. "Can you do chest compressions?"

"I know how, but I've never had to do them before."

"Well, you're going to have to tonight. Get in there and give Alison a break when she needs it."

Soon, Brady mounted the bed. In his sleepy state he had not paid much attention to the room he had been called to. But as he started pressing down on the patient's sternum, rhythmically with the heels of his hands, he realized who it was. "Mr Jones," he said, loud enough for everyone on the code team to hear.

"Do you know him?" asked the Chief Resident.

"He's ... he's my patient."

"Shelly's getting the chart—Alexia gave us a briefing, but tell us everything you know about him in the meantime."

The respiratory therapist temporarily took over compressions while Brady explained to the code team why Mr Jones had been admitted. He described his medical conditions. He had his medication list memorized: spironolactone, ramipril, rosuvastatin He explained that earlier in the evening, Mr Jones had been feeling weak and nauseous, but he had ruled out anything serious at the time. It was at this moment that he remembered about the electrolytes he was supposed to have ordered.

"Electrolytes. Did you order electrolytes?" asked Brady. He had forgotten to add them to the earlier bloodwork.

"Yeah. We drew them a few minutes ago," said the Chief Resident. Brady and Alexia shared a knowing glance.

The smiling, joking man Brady once knew now looked completely different. His skin was pale; his body was jerking slightly with each forceful press on the chest. Brady resumed the compressions and pretended Mr Jones was a mannequin like the one he had practised on in simulation sessions. Beads of sweat formed over Brady's brow and erupted over his back. Occasionally, he felt a snapping sensation beneath his palms—he was cracking ribs.

Clerk Nerds on CPR: If you're cracking ribs, you're doing it right.

Still, feeling those crunches and snaps beneath his hands was sickening.

A nurse rushed into the room. "The lytes are back," she said. "Potassium is 8.2."

"Shit," said the senior resident, who quickly barked out a long list of orders. But after another 20 minutes, the code was called. People slowly dispersed. Brady stood there in shock, not able to move. He heard the code team talking ... terms like *potassium-sparing diuretic* and *kidney damage* trickled into his ears. Time of death: 4:02 AM.

Their work continued into the morning. At 8:00 AM it was time for handover. Brady could feel guilt in every cell of his body. Once the team of residents, medical students, and staff had gathered around the table, Alexia summarized the night. "Overall, 4 patients died: 2 palliative and 2 unexpected. Mr Jones coded."

"Whoa." The senior resident leaned back in his chair. "Looks like you really cleaned things up." There were several chuckles.

"Brady, does that mean you got to do chest compressions last night?" asked another medical student. Her eyes were eager and envious. *Got to do*. As if performing chest compressions were his reward for killing his patient.

After 27 hours in the hospital, Brady left. Shutting the car door was a happenstance cue to break into tears that he choked on for the entire drive home. He kept choking on them in the elevator up to his apartment, and in his bed with his face against a pillow. *If only I had remembered to check the lytes*.

Brady rarely drank alcohol. The only reason he had beer in his refrigerator was because a friend had left a few cans in his apartment several months back. He cracked open a cold one, taking it into the shower with him. He stood there, hypnotized, feeling the cold beer slide down his esophagus while the piping hot water streamed over his body. He looked in his bathroom mirror. "This is your fault," he said, pointing at his gray, ghostlike reflection.

He took his laptop in bed with him and opened it.

Crump (definition). A slang medical term used to indicate that a patient's condition is rapidly worsening. See also: circling the drain.

Makes sense, he thought. But this was not helping his current state. Then he thought about the comment Alexia had made earlier in the night. *No rest for the wicked*.

Sure enough, references to the Bible appeared. He scrolled down and noticed that one of the hits was a music video by Cage the Elephant, a band he had never heard of. He opened the video to watch it.

No I can't slow down

I can't hold back

Though you know I wish I could

No there ain't no rest for the wicked

Until we close our eyes for good

With that, he closed his eyes. Waking up that evening, he spent his time eating delivered pizza and watching episode after episode of "Breaking Bad" while contemplating his withdrawal from medical school.

That next morning, after spending a tiring hour at his nephew's birthday party, Brady decided it was time to go.

"Thanks for everything." He hugged his nephew, inhaling that delicious baby smell.

"Let me walk you out, bro." Sam led Brady down to Brady's 1998 Subaru and opened the door for him. "All I can say," said Sam, "is that it gets better. Clerkship, I mean. It might never be easy, but it gets better." He patted his little brother on the shoulder offering a sympathetic face.

"Thanks," said Brady. "I hope so." After Brady got in the car, his phone rang. He looked at the unfamiliar number that displayed on the cracked screen.

"Hey, it's Alexia."

"Alexia? Oh. Hi."

"You're not in the bathroom, are you?"

"No. Very funny." He tried hard to appreciate her humour.

"Listen. I just wanted to call and see how you were doing. It was a rough night."

Rough night was an understatement. He felt personally responsible for the death of Mr Jones. He could not even hold it together to answer Alexia's question. The tears began to flood. "If I just did like you asked," Brady said between sobs, "if I only remembered to order the lytes, none of this would have happened."

"It's not your fault." Alexia's voice was soft. "Mr Jones had a lot of medical conditions. And as a resident, it was my responsibility to make sure the necessary tests got ordered. But we won't get anywhere by blaming ourselves."

She continued to explain that the guilt he was feeling was normal. "Everyone feels this way at some point, and if they don't, they're lying to themselves. All we can do is learn. And move on."

"Right," said Brady. He still felt horrible, but Alexia's words were comforting.

"Alexia ... by the way, my name is Brady. Not Bradley."

"Oh. Sorry, Brady," she said, not dwelling on her error.

"So, I'll see you Monday, right?" She waited for a response. Silence.

"So," Alexia said again, "I'll see you Monday, right?"

Brady took a deep breath. "Yeah. I'll see you Monday." 🌿

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