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FICTION | FALL 2020

## Resuscitation

By Daly Walker

Dr. Slater Knotts walked through the emergency room of the hospital where he was head of the pulmonary disease department. He was wrestling with what was best for Amato Bertini, his COVID-19 patient who was critically ill in the ICU. Everywhere he looked he saw people sick with the coronavirus struggling to breathe, being placed on ventilators, or getting CPR. Slater shook his head in disbelief. It was a war zone. Never in his 15 years of practice had he seen anything close to the suffering this pandemic was causing, not even the AIDS epidemic when he was in training.

At Slater's side was Megan, a tall first year internal medicine resident who was taking her rotation on Slater's service. She had been at Notre Dame, and became a Rhodes Scholar. Slater considered her to be one of the brightest residents he had trained. But he thought her headstrong and somewhat arrogant. Dressed in personal protective equipment—N95 masks, face shields, gowns, and boots made of PVC—they looked like two astronauts in a space capsule. From the ER, they went to ICU where an orderly wheeled by a gurney that carried a body covered with a sheet.

In a cubicle near the nurses' station, Slater peered down at Mr. Bertini. He removed the semi-comatose man's mask to get a good look at him. A gray stubble of beard sprouted on his chin. His dark hair was oily and matted, his eyes were closed. When he sucked in a breath, his lips pursed, and his skin bore the blue-grey hue of oxygen deprivation. Slater pressed his stethoscope to Mr. Bertini's chest. Each breath he heard was a bubbly heave, a heavy load lifted and dropped. Slater turned to Megan.

"Does he have family?" he asked.

"A son they can't locate," Megan said.

Slater tried to imagine what it must be like to be alone and drowning in your own secretions—the terror, the utter loneliness.

"What are you going to do?" Megan asked.

For a moment, Slater questioned himself. Does his life have meaning? Should we let nature takes its course? Or should we save him and commit him to what might be a life of suffering? Mr. Bertini gasped for air and moaned.

"Easy now," Slater said. "We're going to take care of you." He turned to Megan. "He's miserable. We need to make him comfortable. Morphine or a respirator? Those are the choices."

"There's a 'Do Not Resuscitate order' in his chart," Megan said. "You know, he has cancer of the prostate with bony metastasis."

"Prostate cancer won't kill him. The corona infection is benign," Slater said. "We're his caretaker. Even though he's old, we should treat him the way a caring mother would treat her child."

Megan narrowed her eyes and scowled.

"He's an adult, not a child."

Slater could feel himself getting impatient with her.

"Didn't they teach you the Vatican Declaration on Euthanasia at Notre Dame?"

“No. Why?”

“It says those in the medical profession must not end a life either by a willful act or by withholding care.”

“I don’t agree with everything the church says.”

“Your concerns are legitimate, Megan. But trust me, the right thing to do is to put Mr. Bertini on a ventilator.”

“The hospital is about to run out of ventilators,” Megan said. “What if a young person needs one and none are available?”

Her contrariness seemed disrespectful. Slater didn’t like being challenged by someone just out of medical school.

“There’s an ethics committee to deal with that.” Slater looked directly at her. “Our job is to take care of Mr. Bertini.”

Megan lowered her eyes and shook her head. Slater stepped out of the cubicle and hurried to nurses’ station. Marlene, the charge nurse, was at the desk.

“What do you need, Dr. K?” she said.

“A ventilator, Marly, and the stuff to intubate Mr. Bertini.”

“You sure?”

“That’s my decision.”

Marlene picked up the phone and started to dial.

“Make it stat,” he said. “Mr. Bertini is in trouble.”

Slater knew the intubation would spray the patient’s respiratory droplets on him, and in spite of the protective gear he wore, put him at risk of being infected with the virus. For a moment, he thought of his two children, Ed, age seven, Sue, age five, and his wife, Julie, whose asthma made her precarious. The last thing he wanted was to bring the virus home to them. He worried that his mask would leak or that his gloves wouldn’t protect him. But he put those concerns aside and went back to Bertini.

Soon a lanky inhalation therapist wheeled a ventilator into the cubicle. Marlene appeared behind him carrying a laryngoscope and a plastic endotracheal tube on a towel-covered tray. Slater turned to Megan, and pointed toward the scope.

“You do the intubation,” he said.

“No thank you,” she said coldly.

“I’ll guide you through it.”

“I prefer you do it.”

Slater frowned and stepped to the head of the bed. He inserted the blade of the laryngoscope into Bertini’s mouth. Slowly, with practiced ease, he exposed v-shaped vocal cords and, beyond, the dark hollow trachea. He held out his gloved hand, and the therapist placed the tube into it. Slater quickly slid it through the vocal cords and into the trachea. Bertini’s cough made Slater grimace. He blew up the balloon that held the tube in place. The therapist connected it to the ventilator and switched on the machine. Its bellows swished and sighed. With his stethoscope, Slater listened to Bertini’s chest.

“Both lungs are aerated,” he said.

Slater stripped off his rubber gloves and dropped them in a waste container. For a moment, he looked down at Mr. Bertini, watching his chest rise and fall like a pendulum that swung in perfect rhythm. Slater turned to Megan.

“As a physician” he said, “there’s a fundamental of medicine you need to remember. “

“What’s that?”

“Death is the enemy. Life is sacred.”

Beneath her face shield, her cheeks reddened.

“Patient autonomy is the most sacred thing in medicine,” she said.

“I don’t believe that’s always the case,” he said. “When you’ve been in practice a while, you will come to understand that.”

Megan shrugged, then turned and walked away.

On his way home, Slater drove through the rain. The silent, empty streets and unlit shops conveyed an aura of apocalypse. The drops that splattered his windshield reminded him of contaminated droplets spewing from Mr. Bertini’s lungs. The car’s wipers slapped side to side. Slater had read Camus’ *The Plague*, and he felt like Dr. Rieux traveling through his plague-stricken city, finding it hard to believe that pestilence had crashed down on its people. He came to Shoofly, a chic bar and restaurant. Through a water-speckled window, he could see young people laughing and drinking, crowded together without masks. Their gaiety and disregard for the virus angered Slater. Don’t they care about others? He blamed them for him not being able to hug his children or sleep with his wife. He blamed them for Mr. Bertini’s illness. He wished they could see his patient and know what fighting for your life is like.

Slater pulled into the driveway of his house and parked in front of the garage. He clicked an automatic opener. The door rattled up revealing his isolation quarters. An old oriental rug covered the cement floor. There was an inflatable bed and a beanbag chair. Julie had covered a small table with a red-and-white checkered cloth. A bottle of Pinot Grigio was chilling in an ice bucket. Slater entered the garage and lowered the door. He stripped off his clothes and with a towel around his waist went into the house.

“I’m home!” he called.

“I’m giving baths,” Julie said from up stairs. “I’ll bring the kids down after you shower.”

In the laundry room, Slater deposited his clothes in the washing machine and started the cycle. Being careful not touch anything, he went to the downstairs bathroom where he stepped into a shower with water as hot as he could stand it. He soaped himself from head to toe. For a while, he stood in the steam and let hot water needle his skin. He felt contaminated and drained of energy. His sick patients haunted him. All he wanted was to put the hospital out of his mind, to eat and go to sleep.

Back in the garage he put on a warm-up suit and a paper mask. Soon Julie, in jeans and a linen sweater, appeared at the door with Sue on one side and Ed on the other. Sue wore pajamas decorated with pink unicorns. Ed was dressed in red soccer shorts and a pinstriped Yankee’s shirt. Slater thought the three of them were adorable. He wanted so much to give them hugs.

“Hi guys,” he said.

“Can we play a game of Ping Pong?” Ed asked. “Please, Daddy.”

“You know I can’t.”

“Can you read us a story in bed?” Sue said.

“Honey, I can’t. I’m sorry. I don’t want to take a chance of making you sick.”

“I hate coronavirus,” Ed said.

“I do, too,” Slater said.

Sue began to cry.

“You’re both tired.” Julie bent over and gathered her up. “Say good night to your dad.”

Ed mumbled “goodnight” while Sue wailed louder.

“I love you,” Slater said.

Julie put Sue down and herded them away. Through the open door, Slater watched his children climb the stairs. A swell of emotion overtook him. He filled the glass on the table with wine and drank it. Soon Julie returned with a plate of chicken Alfredo and a green salad.

"They really miss you," she said.

"I miss them, too." Slater drew in a big breath and sighed it out. "This is the hardest thing I've ever done."

Julie passed him the plate and pulled a chair into the doorway where she sat while they talked and Slater ate. When he asked how the kids' day went, she said it is strange without their friends. "They're sick of this damn virus just like I am." Slater told her about Mr. Bertini and his disagreement with Megan, the resident.

"Maybe she was right. Maybe I should have let nature take its course."

"You did what you thought was best for your patient."

"Doctors of her generation are different."

"How so?" Julie asked.

"They place too much emphasis on risk avoidance and not enough on the patient."

Slater washed down a bite of Alfredo with wine. "I always try to take the patient's side of things."

"I know you do," Julie said.

They were quiet while Slater finished his meal. Finally, Julie said, "Slater, how long are you going to keep this up?"

"As long as there are sick people to care for." Slater folded his napkin. "It's why I went into medicine."

"The kids need you," Julie said. "I need you."

"Don't make harder than it is," Slater said. "Listen, I'm dead tired. I need to go to bed."

"Okay then, I'll leave you alone."

"I'm sorry, Julie. Things will get better."

"I hope so." Julie rose from her chair. She lowered her mask and blew him a kiss.

"Sweet dreams."

Slater went to the inflatable bed where he lay in the dark feeling sad and totally alone. He was weary of his work, weary of his devotion to his patients. What he craved was the love of his family. A cricket trapped in the garage chirped continuously. Slater thought of the unfairness of the world.

"Goddamn virus," he said.

Two weeks later it was dark when Slater walked from his car to the hospital. Megan had moved on to an oncology rotation at the cancer hospital. Slater was glad to have her gone, but at the same time he felt he had somehow failed to mentor her properly. Mr. Bertini was still on the ventilator, and Slater was thinking that if the man wasn't able to come off the machine, he would have to do a tracheotomy. He knew a trach was a super-spreading procedure that aerosolized the virus and sprayed droplets on the doctor performing it. The thought of taking the virus home terrified Slater. He prayed he wouldn't have to trach Mr. Bertini.

At the ICU nurses' station, he reviewed Bertini's medical record on a computer screen. When he saw that the patient no longer required high levels of oxygen, and was tolerating long periods of time off the ventilator, Slater managed a smile. For a moment, he sat thinking. Then he stood up and walked to Mr. Bertini's bedside.

"Amato," he said, "if you can hear me, raise your hand."

Mr. Bertini's hand rose from the bed. With the endotracheal tube protruding from his mouth, he opened his eyes.

"Well, hello there." Slater placed his hand on Mr. Bertini's shoulder. "I'm going to let you breathe on your own."

Mr. Bertini nodded his head.

"Just relax and breathe." Slater disconnected the tube from the ventilator and switched off the machine. "That's all you have to do. Breathing is your sole purpose in life right now."

For a long while, he watched Mr. Bertini, noting the excursions of his chest and the color of his skin. He studied the vital signs that scrolled across the screen of the monitor above the bed.

"In and out. Deep breaths. You're doing great, man. I'm going to get that tube out of your throat."

Mr. Bertini made a thumb's up gesture. Slater summoned Marlene to the cubicle's door and told her he was going to extubate Mr. Bertini.

"Praise the Lord," she said.

She handed Slater a big plastic syringe that he used to suck the air from the cuff that held the tube in place. Carefully, he slid it from Amato's throat. Mr. Bertini sputtered and coughed. Slater stepped back from the bed to try to avoid contamination.

"Who...?" Amato growled. His voice was husky. He cleared his throat. "Who are you?"

"Your doctor," Slater said.

"Did you put me on that goddamn machine?"

Slater nodded his head.

"Yeah, I did."

Amato cleared his throat again

"You put me through hell!"

"I'm very sorry for what you've been through."

"Don't be sorry." A slight smile came to Amato's face. "Thank you, Doc."

Slater's throat tightened and beneath his face shield his eyes glistened. He wished Megan were here to observe. There was much to be learned at the bedside.

Whenever a corona patient came off a ventilator, a song was played on the hospital's loudspeaker system. When Slater heard "Every Breath You Take," he smiled. But then the music was interrupted by the sound of a siren, and the red light of an ambulance flashed through the cubicle's window. Soon Slater's pager beeped. He took in a big breath and braced himself for whatever might come next.

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**Daly Walker is a retired surgeon. His fiction has appeared in numerous literary publications including The Sewanee Review, The Louisville Review, The Southampton Review, Catamaran Literary Reader, The Saturday Evening Post and The Atlantic Monthly. His work has been shortlisted for Best American Short Stories, a Pushcart Prize, and an O'Henry award. His collection of stories, Surgeon Stories, was published by Fleur-de-lis Press. A second collection of his stories is soon to be released. He divides his time between Boca Grande, Florida and Quechee, Vermont. He teaches a fiction writer's workshop at Dartmouth College in Osher@Dartmouth's summer program. His short story "Resuscitation" appears in the Fall 2020 Intima.**