

# Do No Harm

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“The Ambulance is almost here. The patient is stable but he’s lost a lot of blood.”

That wasn’t surprising. A gunshot wound tends to do that to a man. I knew that one of the Atlanta police had shot the man but I didn’t know why. And frankly, I didn’t care why. It isn’t my job to know why people get shot any more than it is to shoot them myself. My job is to save lives.

I glanced up at the brilliant golden letters emblazoned across the doors of the operating room. “Do No Harm.” These words encapsulated the Hippocratic Oath, my driving purpose as a physician. It was this clarity of purpose that attracted me to surgery. There was no grey area about it, no moral or ethical dilemma. If a man was sick, I made him better. Pure and simple. I liked it like that.

Police officers didn’t have this clarity of purpose. Their job was to protect and serve people, but sometimes, they had to injure and kill other people to do it, like the man who lay bleeding in the back of an ambulance. Maybe he was a criminal. Maybe he was a murderer. Maybe he was an innocent bystander. It made no difference to me. My job was to save his life.

The doors burst open as the patient was rushed in, the words “Do No Harm” glittering in the fluorescent light of the operating room. The patient could have been my brother. Black male, mid thirties, short hair and a square jaw. He was covered in blood, a bullet hole in his chest.

We hoisted him onto the table and the trauma surgeon to my side got to work immediately. Emergency surgery makes every physician’s job more difficult. Everyone is hurried and under pressure, but my job is perhaps even more challenging.

Few people understand the art and science of anesthesiology. No two patients react to anesthetic in the same way. Too little anesthetic and the patient might wake up during surgery. Too much and the patient might not wake up at all.

If I had more time to analyze the patient, I would have given him a barbiturate, a general anesthetic that would render him unconscious and unable to move. But that was too dangerous in an emergency situation. No time to figure out the proper dose. I injected a syringe of Alfentanil into his IV instead. It was a fast acting opiate that would take away his pain and hopefully put him under. But even if he woke up during surgery, the drug would make sure that he didn't remember anything.

The patient's eyes fluttered back and forth and blinked rapidly. He was drifting in and out of consciousness. They were piercing eyes, vivid eyes. Eyes wide with panic and shock. I pushed another syringe of Alfentanil into his IV. He wouldn't feel a thing.

I glanced at the door again as the patient drifted into unconsciousness. "Do No Harm." A clear purpose.

It was a purpose that my grandmother helped me find years ago.

My mother died when I was very young and I never knew my father. My grandmother raised me by herself. She was a product of the old South, of segregation and racism, and she was the strongest woman I ever knew.

She was an activist in her younger years. She organized sit-ins and protests and marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She raised me to never forget the battles that she fought and the victories that she achieved.

She never let me feel inferior or unimportant, even when other kids called me racist names. “Sunny, stupid folks is always gonna say stupid things. But it don’t matter no more. Ain’t nothin’ holdin’ you back. You gonna grow up and be a doctor or a lawyer and you gonna be in charge of stupid folk like that. Remember that, Sunny, whenever somebody calls you names. You study hard and you go to school and you succeed. Only name people gonna call you when you a doctor or a lawyer is ‘sir’.”

That was her measure of success, a “doctor” or a “lawyer.” Those professions meant something to her, they were levels of power and prestige that black people just were not allowed to attain when she was a child.

She preferred law to medicine. I remember the first time she explained the rationale behind her preference: “You gonna grow up and be a doctor or a lawyer, but I think a lawyer is better. Doctors always wear white coats. Whole hospital full of white coats. Then you go to a funeral and see everybody all dressed in black. What the hell kind of message is that? White for life and black for death? Nah, a doctor is good, but a lawyer is better. You go into a courtroom, Sunny, and what do you see? You see lawyers in black suits, white suits, blue suits, brown suits; every color on God’s green earth. I like that. Its equal.” And then she smiled widely.

I responded with “But don’t judges all wear black robes Grandmomma?”

My comment turned her smile into a contemplative frown. “Well I didn’t tell you to be a judge now did I?” But then her smile slowly returned. “Black robes... Well maybe that’ll just be yo’ edge if you a lawyer.”

The patient's foot twitched, jolting me away from fond memories of my grandmother. I grabbed his IV absentmindedly and gave him another push of Alfentanil, placing the empty syringe in my pocket with the others. The patient's body grew even more slack on the table, all of his muscles relaxing.

I glanced at the equipment monitoring him. The patient's blood oxygen level and blood pressure were both low, but the trauma surgeon appeared to have stopped the bleeding.

I couldn't stop my grandmother's bleeding. I remember the night she died, nearly fifteen years ago. It was winter, and I had just returned home to Atlanta from school. I was in my first year of college, taking pre-law courses and happily fulfilling my grandmother's plans for me.

I took her to the theatre. It was late and dark when we left, the cold night air stifling the dim moonlight. We were returning to my grandmother's car, parked in a back alley to avoid the expensive garages. When we turned down the alley, a man followed us and closed on us quickly.

I turned around and saw that he was holding a gun.

I was terrified, rooted unmoving to the spot like a sapling. But my old, frail grandmother was unafraid. She towered next to me like a warrior, looking at the man with a mixture of pity and disgust. It was dark and the gunman was hooded, but his hand was clearly black.

"Gimme your purse. I ain't afraid to shoot you." He spoke quietly and without confidence, his voice cracking. He appeared to be almost as scared as I was.

My grandmother spoke to the gunman in the clear and confident voice she used to scold me as a child. "What on earth is wrong with you? Tryin' to rob an ol' woman. Ain't you got a job?"

The gunman appeared to shrink a little. He was clearly uncomfortable. “No. Just gimme your purse. I swear I’ll shoot you.”

My grandmother clutched her purse to her body in open defiance. She spoke again, her voice loud and echoing down the alley. “Well I *do* have a job. I have worked every day of my life since I was a little girl and I ain’t givin’ my money to nobody who ain’t earned it. How old are you?”

His gun fell a little. The man was losing the small amount of confidence he had. “Twenty, ma’am.”

He was barely older than I was. And he called her “ma’am.” Even today, the thought stings me. A polite murderer.

“Twenty years old and you ain’t got no job. You ain’t goin’ to school neither, are you?” My grandmother’s voice was growing louder.

“No.” His voice was barely a whisper.

My grandmother was almost yelling at the man now. “No school, no job, and you pointin’ a gun at an old lady. There ain’t no reason for you to act like this. You got all sorts of opportunity this day and age. Now get outta this old woman’s face and go *get a job!*” These last words were a shout, my grandmother’s voice booming down the alley.

A brilliant light flooded down from a window above. A man called “What’s going on down there?”

The gunman jumped upright, his muscles clenched in terror at this new development. There was a bright flash as he fired his gun reflexively. My grandmother staggered backward as the bullet caught her in the chest, blood staining the purse clutched tightly to her breast.

I regained control of my muscles as she fell, catching her in my outstretched arms. I looked up at the gunman as I caught her, my face emotionless. His eyes cut through me like twin daggers. They were piercing eyes, vivid eyes. And they were pink.

Later, as I studied medicine, I realized that the man had Nettleship-Falls Syndrome, or ocular albinism type 1. The disease robs black pigment from pupils and makes them appear pink in bright light, such as the one that flooded down on the alley that night.

I stared into the eyes of my grandmother's killer for what seemed like an eternity, their delicate, pink hue mocking my despair. He turned and fled, running as quickly as he could from the dying woman in my arms. He did not even take her purse.

My grandmother was bleeding profusely, her aged frame pierced by a rose-eyed assassin. She looked at me weakly, the lines of vibrant defiance that had just etched her face replaced by a death mask.

The trauma surgeon's voice pulled me from my memory. "All right, I've extracted most of the bullet. He's stopped bleeding." The patient lay prostrate on the table, motionless. I glanced at the monitors to my side. His blood oxygen level had fallen even lower. Dangerously low.

I administered another syringe of Alfentanil.

My grandmother's death prompted me to abandon law and study medicine. It wasn't because I thought that a doctor's training could have saved her that night. She was old and frail. I knew that no doctor could have saved her. I chose medicine because of its purity. Its clear purpose.

As a lawyer, I could be on either side of the law. I might end up defending a guilty client or prosecuting an innocent man.. A lawyer's work was morally ambiguous. A doctor's was not. "Do No Harm."

The patient's monitors erupted into alarms. His blood oxygen level was critically low and his pulse was erratic and slow. The trauma surgeon acted quickly, methodically, applying the small, internal defibrillator directly to the patient's heart. He fought with the dying man, trying to keep him alive. But his efforts were unsuccessful.

"I'm calling it. He's gone. Time of death... 2:45 A.M." said the trauma surgeon, glancing at the clock on the wall. "I don't understand it. The bullet avoided his heart, we stopped the bleeding... He should have pulled through. Oh well." He stood up and stretched out his arms, an unfazed look across his masked face. "What did this guy do to get shot anyway?"

One of the nurses answered him. "EMTs said the cops returned fire when he shot at them. Armed mugging or something."

"Shame he didn't make it," said the trauma surgeon. His voice was mechanical and emotionless. I couldn't tell if he intended the comment to be sarcastic. It was obvious at least that he was not sincere.

I stared at the patient's lifeless face. His eyes cut through me like twin daggers. They were piercing eyes, vivid eyes.

Pink eyes.

I felt my pocket with one hand, feeling the numerous, empty syringes therein, the potent opiate that they once held now filling the stagnant veins of the dead man in front of me. Nobody would order an autopsy on a man with a bullet hole in his chest.

I walked through the double doors of the operating room, the message splayed across them broken by my passing, disconnected characters swinging meaningless behind me.

Do No Harm.