

### Sweetheart

Joanne Wilkinson, MD

*Pawtucket, Rhode Island*

There is an insultingly blue sky the day Mr D'Amato gets admitted, the color of all those annoying New England foliage photos—a dazzling clear background for the brilliant red trees on the hospital lawn. Walking down the glassed-in corridor on her way to the ER to accept the admission, Grace notes the spectacular beauty outside, on this crisp Sunday morning in October, and has her usual on-call thought: that the weather is meant for someone else, not for her.

It's possible to reach the ER by cutting across the parking lot outside, where the dry leaves scuttle enticingly on the concrete, but Grace doesn't allow herself this pleasure, because this is only the beginning of what promises to be a very long day. As she pushes open the inner door, she can hear the steady beeping of an ambulance backing up to the unloading dock. In all probability its inhabitant will soon be her patient as well, after a few hours of poking and prodding and tidying up by the ER. The patient she is on her way to get now has been tidied and spruced all night, labs collected, x-rays done, and impressions written and tied up with a bow to be presented to Grace, the admitting medical intern for the day, who wishes she were thousands of miles away doing something else, but is too tired to picture where or what that might be.

"D'Amato?" she says to the clerk, who hands her the metal clipboard holding the ER chart. The clerk is probably about 25, pink-cheeked, shining with good health and good food and fun things to do when she goes home. She is in the process of telling one of the nurses, who is restocking the crash cart, about the concert she went to last night with her boyfriend. Grace is 27 and has lines around her unmade-up eyes. Her hair hangs limply, having not been cut in several months. She lives alone and has a cat. When she's not at work, she goes for long runs and tries to dislodge from her mind the persistent images of her patients, waiting reproachfully in her head. She ran so far yesterday that her legs hurt, and now, as she flips up

the pages of Mr D'Amato's chart, she flexes her quads, reflecting absently on the pain.

The chief complaint is "found on floor," or as Grace's friend Lisa used to call it in med school, "FOF." Usually Grace likes FOF patients because they can have almost anything; a patient with chest pain usually has a heart or lung problem, but an FOF could have a stroke, a seizure, muscle weakness, dementia, a heart attack. The ER has discovered that this particular patient has atrial fibrillation. He also has labs consistent with extremely poor nutrition and, according to the social worker who brought him in, hasn't seen a doctor in more than 30 years. All this is interesting but probably doesn't explain why he was on the floor. Grace glances at his vital signs. His blood pressure is okay, he doesn't have a fever, his heart rate was initially fast because of the abnormal rhythm before the ER brought it down, but he has a respiratory rate of 28. High. She wrinkles her forehead, wondering why.

Mr D'Amato waits across the room on bed 2, looking for all the world like a wild man of the mountain with a long mane of matted yellow-white hair and an unruly beard, his fingernails and toenails long and curling. He is indeed breathing fast. When Grace asks him where he is, he ventures softly, "My house?" He has the startlingly soft eyes of a doe caught in the headlights as he looks around himself for clues and realizes he is no longer at home.

The social worker who brought him in has left a phone number, and Grace calls him after examining Mr D'Amato, apologizing for intruding on the social worker's beautiful Sunday morning. She hears children in the background and imagines them eating blueberry pancakes, sticky with syrup. The social worker, whose name is Jeff, tells her that he visits Mr D'Amato every Saturday at his apartment, but that Mr D'Amato has refused any other help, such as a visiting nurse or a housekeeper, and that his living situation has been in decline for the past year. Yesterday, Jeff found Mr D'Amato on the kitchen floor, exhausted and unable to rise. He lives alone. For

*From the Department of Family Medicine, Memorial Hospital, Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Requests for reprints should be addressed to Joanne Wilkinson, MD, Memorial Hospital, 111 Brewster St, Pawtucket, RI 02860.*

months he has refused Jeff's offers to take him to a doctor, saying he hates physicians, but on Saturday when Jeff said, "Mr D'Amato, I think it's time you went to the hospital," he said, "Okay." This is the sum total of what Jeff knows about Mr D'Amato, except that his wife died a year ago, and he has no children or other relatives nearby.

"Thank God for the corner pub," Mr D'Amato blurts out as Grace is measuring his calves and noticing that the left one is larger than the right, "because that's where I've been getting my meals." Grace cannot imagine this decrepit creature making it as far as the corner pub, and wonders if he is remembering another corner, another pub, another time. Or perhaps he is telling the absolute truth, and wondering why she doesn't seem to believe him.

"Mr D'Amato, I need to take some blood from your arm," she tells him, screwing a 23-gauge needle onto the heparinized syringe for an arterial blood gas. She suspects he has a clot in his leg, and that a piece of it broke off yesterday and went to his lung, and this is why he can't breathe. A blood gas will help her get the answers she needs. "It's going to hurt," she tells him, "but I'll be quick." He turns his big soft eyes toward her and nods, and she bends his wrist back and feels for his radial artery and says, "Little stick" as she pierces it, and he exhales calmly and says, "I was a pharmacist, you know. I met my wife there, before the war."

The syringe fills slowly with blood as Grace holds her hands very, very still, then presses a piece of gauze tightly to the puncture site as she withdraws the needle. She has become adept at applying pressure with one hand while she readies the syringe for the lab with the other, but as she starts to twist off the needle she feels Mr D'Amato moving the fingers of his free hand over the gauze, holding it in place himself, to help her. The unselfishness of this gesture makes her want to cry.

Waiting for the blood gas results, Grace goes over to the desk to begin writing orders. Mr D'Amato is in for a substantial hospital stay that will probably end when he is transferred to a nursing home, never to live independently again. She suspects he knows this, that this is why he has waited so long to seek help, knowing that when his deficiencies were revealed, he would no longer be allowed to struggle on his own.

Outside the window set high in the wall of the ER, Grace can see a scrap of brilliant tree framed by lumines-

cent, mocking blue. This is a hard time of year for Grace, who has spent many years of her life in libraries, laboratories, and hospitals, almost to the point where she can't imagine doing normal everyday things, having a real life. Most of the time, she looks at her little to-do list and talks medical talk with the other interns and doesn't think about it; but there is something about the far-flung hopeful clarity of the autumn sky, the smoky woodstove smell on the cool nights, and the brave fire of the dying leaves that causes her chest to ache sometimes, right in the middle, in the approximate region of her heart.

The blood gas is bad. Mr D'Amato most likely has a pulmonary embolism. Grace goes over to his bed to explain to him what will happen next: more tests, another IV, a trip upstairs. He listens with a dreamy expression, and when she is done, says simply, "I want my wife's picture. Can you get it for me?"

Grace stands and looks at him for a moment, her hand still resting absently on the bed rail. As she does this, a peculiar thing happens: she imagines she can hear the inside of his head, all the things he thinks but, prisoner of his impaired brain, is unable to say. She hears: it happens so slowly, you know, one day you're having a life and a home and someone you love in it, and then she's gone, and the days just kind of creep by until pretty soon you're at the corner pub every day, and then you realize you haven't dusted the living room in months, and you can't remember where those cans of Ensure came from, and you look in the mirror one day and there's this pathetic, disheveled person there and you don't even know who it is. More to the point, you don't even know who you are, and how you came to be living here, like this, or why. It happens just like this: you're sitting in an emergency room being told you're very ill, and you know they'll never let you go back, and you realize that this is the end of your life as you know it. But then you realize no, the end happened long ago, and you didn't even know it until this moment.

This is what he feels, but what he says is: can you get my wife's picture? And Grace answers. She covers his hand with her own and says, "I'll make sure you get it, sweetheart."

"Thank you," he says, relieved. Then, with a bright social look, he seems to revert back to his pharmacist days. "You must be one of the new doctors here. I don't believe we've met. I'm Jerry. Are you one of the new doctors?"

"Yes," Grace says. "I am."