

*Carol Wiley Cassella, M.D., Editor*

## Fragment One

Jonathan L. T. Munro, M.B.B.S.\*

IT is black predawn, rare still, and a glow from the mercury lights is on the asphalt and ice as I am walking to the hospital for another day in the operating rooms. My grandfather worked much of his life outdoors. He said that 6:00 AM was the best time of the day and he would have known. By 6:00 AM I will be inside, checking cylinders and labeling syringes in an empty room. I want to move faster today. But it isn't enough to notionally want to be faster. I mean, I have to have a plan, specific ways in which I can minimize turnover time. This is what I think to myself, alone, walking to work on salted pavement, oblivious to the beautiful lighted skyline over my shoulder. This Grandfather, my Mom's Dad, worked a family orchard, with long hours of labor, a long way from here. He started out by making fruit crates at age 12, and he could make more of them in an hour than any other boy at that orchard. The man he worked for let him keep one and take it home to put his clothes in. I was always told that I was like him. I had his odd gait and I love machines, but I am not exactly the quickest crate-maker around. He was a hard worker, everyone said. I wonder if he thought about speed when he walked to work? Myself, I could have done anything I wanted. *My* garden is the OR, but I don't bring any of it home if I can help it. Inside, it is now white and bright and quiet and still until I set off lyrically chirping alarms and have drawers banging, plastic flying to the bin in streams, saline dripping on the floor, suction hissing. I stare at the bellows falling. The room is ready. I'll have to ask for help today to push things along – my second patient hasn't been seen in clinic. I will dial in mystery through a canister but turn it off early so that I won't suffer the humiliation of a slow wake-up. Again. I am too smart for that, right? Those long, long, lonely minutes of calling the patient's name, fiddling with lines, getting the bed into the room, waiting for them to respond, burning with embarrassment. A fast hand-off in recovery is essential. Just get the patient into the room, I am told, and we will deal with it. Call me when you are ready to push the drugs, I am told. "Do you have any questions about your anesthetic today? Otherwise, I will ask you to sign consent for the anesthetic on this form which mentions the risks we have discussed." The

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\* University of Illinois College of Medicine at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois. [jonomunr@uic.edu](mailto:jonomunr@uic.edu), [jonomunro@hotmail.com](mailto:jonomunro@hotmail.com)

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bellows are rising and falling again. The marks slowly scrawl across the page and then the next page. Someone has come to relieve me. I must order some drugs for tomorrow. My clothes smell like the hospital. I am walking home in the dark; I pause at the stoplights to gaze at the skyline, wonderful; keep walking, open the freezer and preheat the oven.