

ROOM FOUR

By

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Dedicated to Esther Davis, who taught me what the textbooks didn't.

A portion of the sale of this book will be donated to the Sojourner Truth House in Esther's memory.

Chapter 1

I died in the second half of the Bears versus Vikings game. The one when the Bears beat Minnesota. Of course I didn't learn the score until much later. Had to look it up. But I'll get to that. It was supposed to be a monumental game. The Packers' quarterback had defected to the Vikings and that meant Wisconsin fans were rooting for the Chicago Bears, which was unheard of. So my sudden change in color to blue and my slumping back on the couch probably went unnoticed for a few minutes. That's my best guess anyway. A little warning would have been nice. But no. A lethal arrhythmia is apparently a silent event. My wife and I, we were over at a friend's place in the city and I think that's when it happened. What happened after that, well, it's a long story. I'll tell you what I remember.

"Hey, student-what's-your-name."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. You know how to do CPR?"

"Um, yes."

"Good. Take over here. I'm getting tired."

"But I've never done it on a real person."

"That's OK. This guy's dead. You can't make him more dead."

I watched the young man step onto a stool, position his hands and push on the man's chest. There was a group of people and a flurry of activity, clustered under the glare of two circular fluorescent lights. A young woman had a tourniquet on the man's arm and she filled tube after tube of blood, seemingly oblivious to the guy leaning over her pushing on the man's sternum.

“Are we doing hypothermia protocol?” asked the first man. I rubbed my eyes. He was wearing one of those headbands that had reindeer antlers sticking out the top. The younger man, the one doing CPR, had an elf hat on with oversized ears on each side and they bounced up and down as his head bobbed. Was it Christmas, I thought, no, it was January. The football game. I was watching football.

“Yep. Vfib arrest. He meets the criteria. But wait until we see if there is any return of circulation before we ice him down.”

“Another round of epi then?”

“Give it.”

“Last atropine.”

“He’s maxed on atropine already? OK, give it.”

I leaned on the wall on the side of the room and wondered how I had gotten here. There were three young men in short white coats standing next to me. One jotted down notes in a spiral notebook. One was playing something on his phone. The third seemed to be actually paying attention to the proceedings.

“See those two? They have a thing.”

There was an old man leaning on the wall on the other side of me. He wore a rumpled flannel shirt and olive-green corduroy trousers hiked over his paunch with a battered old belt. He had one of those vests with all the pockets on it like the things photographers wore.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Name’s Gerald, Gerald Verne. You can call me Jerry. Anyway. See those two. The short nurse and the guy, the doctor? They have a thing.”

“OK. A thing. That’s great. Look, I’m not sure how I got in here but I don’t think I’m supposed to be here. I’m not feeling so well. I think this must be a private matter. Is there a door on the other side of the curtain?”

The old man laughed loudly. No one surrounding the gurney seemed to notice. “That’s pretty good. I wasn’t supposed to be here today either, although I spent enough time in this damn place already. You don’t have to make an appointment for this, you know,” he chuckled and then gave me a strange look as if I had missed his joke. “Look at them. The holidays are over, you know, I’m surprised they still let them wear that to work. Not too professional in my opinion.” He gestured at the reindeer and the elf. He opened up a drawer on the cart next to the gurney. It was filled with labeled vials. Jerry took out one and rolled it across the top of the cart toward the doctor he had already pointed out. He didn’t notice it.

“Narcan, you dumb ass,” he said.

There still was no reply.

I watched Jerry pick up a box of bandages and poke the other man in the side of the neck.

“What the?” He turned around and Jerry rolled the vial past him again.

“Let’s give him two milligrams of narcan,” the doctor said, as he adjusted his collar and looked over his shoulder.

“Isn’t that what they use on drug overdoses?” I asked.

“No offense,” Jerry said. “You seem nice enough. But they try narcan on everybody. It’s worth a try. And if genius here would pay less attention to the nurses maybe he would remember.”

“No offense taken. Hey, it was nice talking with you but I don’t think I want to watch anymore of this.” I was feeling dizzy and frankly a little disoriented. This old guy next to me didn’t look like a doctor.

“Stop CPR. Good. Excellent. He has a strong femoral pulse. Olson!” barked the doctor.

“Huh?” said one of the short coat trio.

“How many interns do we need standing around at a code? Olson, get me a blood pressure reading and we’ll go ahead with the hypothermia protocol.”

“Well, look who came back,” Jerry said, with a big pat on my back. “You might be leaving here after all.”

The crowded room thinned out as the CPR stopped. And there on the gurney was a man who looked just like me. Exactly like me. I reached out my hand instinctively and grabbed Jerry’s arm, my mouth dry and speechless.

“Now you get it. Maybe the narcan worked. Did you shoot up? Is that what it was? I hear heroin is making a comeback.”

“What are you talking about? But it’s not possible. That’s not me. That guy. That guy isn’t me.”

“It’s not possible that you shot up? Do you snort it instead? I thought younger kids did that. Pills and what not. They used to tell me I could have made a fortune if I’d sold my pain meds on the street.”

“You think I’m a heroin addict?”

“I’m just trying to help out. Not here to judge.”

“That’s not me. It’s not possible.”

I watched as the one of the nurses returned to the room with four large ice packs. She placed two in my armpits, two in the groin. “Should I go ahead with the temperature probe foley?”

“What the, she can’t grab my, that thing looks like a garden hose,” I was stammering as Jerry held me back.

“Take it easy. I’m sure it comes as a shock. You’re young, right, what are you, about fifty?”

“She’s packing my testicles in ice! How am I supposed to take this easy? And she, she has tattoos and a bunch of earrings and did you see the guy with the elf ears? Do they just let anybody work here?”

I knew I was grasping at straws but sometimes when one complains it’s more effective to give them a litany. It was dawning on me that I might have a lot to complain about. If you’re lucky, one item might get resolved and of my list of complaints while being dead was the first one, having my testicles packed in ice was a close second.

A young man in a polo shirt picked up a plastic bag full of clothes. “Is that his too?” he asked, pointing at a cell phone on the metal tray.

“Yep,” said the nurse with the garden hose.

“What’s that?” he asked, picking up the case.

“Probably one of those cell phone holsters for his belt,” she said.

The man rolled his eyes and put everything in the bag. “This guy sure carried a lot of pens.”

The old man smiled at me. “Look, you’re only half dead. Or maybe all the way dead. I’ve never seen this hypothermia thing in action before. But it’s supposed to help. Cool down your brain while the rest of you heals up. You might be back in the old bod before you know it.”

“No, no, no, no. This is not happening.”

“Oh, it already happened.”

“Who are you, Saint Peter or something?”

The old man sighed. “I told you. I’m Jerry. I died on the way upstairs. I think it’s a paperwork glitch. Long story. What’s your name anyway?”

“Fries. Alan Fries. It’s spelled like ‘french fries’ but it’s pronounced ‘freeze’ like in ‘cheese’.”

“You always introduce yourself that way? Alan Fries as in Cheese? That would be handy if you were a cheese salesman. I don’t suppose you are? Or were, I should say.”

“I think I’m going to pass out,” I said.

Jerry laughed again. “I don’t know if you can do that when you’re dead. Listen, if you want to watch something other than Nurse Rachet putting the garden hose in your schlong, I’m going to head over to the nurse’s station and figure out how I got stuck here in the first place.”

I followed the old man numbly past the curtain, willing myself to wake up from the dream. The curtain was pulled halfway and as the crowd circulated around the bed I caught glimpses of feet, pale, still and unmoving at the end of the bed. My feet. The same man who had been running the resuscitation was now shouting into the phone. He was balding and wore wire rimmed glasses. “I told you already,” he said, emphasizing each word as if he was talking to a two year old. “I admitted him upstairs. I admitted him to Dr. Leak and he was accepted by Dr. Leak. He wasn’t in great shape when he left here but he was going to palliative care. He

died under Dr. Leak's care, seven floors above my head. I am not going to fill out a death certificate when I don't know how he died."

The phone buzzed in response and I couldn't help but lean in with Jerry to hear the response.

"We can't bring him back down to room 4. We have another patient in room 4. A live patient. And putting him in a bunk bed with a dead guy would be bad for morale."

The buzzing on the phone went up an octave.

"It's not my fault that Dr. Leak isn't fast enough to actually go see his patients before they die. Maybe this will light a fire under him to be a little more conscientious. No. No, it doesn't change things that he died on our gurney. Oh, so he wasn't moved over into the bed-type bed and so therefore he is still in the emergency department? Even though he went into an elevator and went seven stories up to palliative care? This department doesn't extend that far. Call Dr. Leak. He needs to do the death certificate." The phone slammed down. The doctor looked up at the acoustic tiled ceiling. "Why do I work with morons?" he asked. He turned his attention to the CPR student.

"Hey, Santa's Helper."

"Who, me?"

"Yes, you with the ears. Take those off when the family gets here. In fact take them off now. It sends the wrong message."

"What message?" asked the student as he folded the hat and ears into his lab coat pocket.

"The wrong message. We're not supposed to have fun at work. Saving lives. And you don't want this guy's family to forever associate elves with ventricular fibrillation. Who knows

what kind of Pavlovian response that could set up. Besides I want you to come with me when I go meet the family. You need practice in delivering that kind of news.”

The student was wide-eyed with the beginning of a smile. “Dr. Maglio, you want me to talk to the family about what happened?”

“Hell no. I want you to stand there, be silent, and look concerned. But you can learn something from me about how to deliver bad news.”

“But he’s alive. It’s not exactly bad news.”

The older doctor frowned. “You’re a cup half full kind of guy, aren’t you? That’s OK. I’m sure he’ll pull through just fine and go home still able to do the Sunday crossword puzzle.”

“But he has a pulse. His blood pressure is better.”

“Takes more than a pulse to do the crossword puzzle,” said the doctor, “but maybe just a pulse to get into medical school these days,” he added under his breath.

A woman in a lab coat looked up from her computer. “Maglio, give the kid a break.”

“She’s the boss,” whispered Jerry. “She’s the only one who can put up with all their crap.”

“Whose crap?” I asked.

“All the staff’s crap. You spend enough time here; you’ll get to know them.”

“If you know all the staff here then who was the guy doing CPR on me?”

“That guy? Him I don’t know. Probably an intern or a medical student. From the way Dr. Maglio was talking I would guess he was a student.”

“Wait a minute. Aren’t interns the lowest people on the totem pole? That’s who they had circulating blood to my vital organs?”

“Actually the students are lower than the interns. But don’t worry about it. CPR is the easy part. If you spend more time in the ER you’ll see the decisions are the hard part. That’s why I decided I didn’t want CPR. After enough poking and prodding, well, let’s just say I knew when I was done. Do not resuscitate.” He held up his wrist which was adorned by a medical alert bracelet. “They put it on the bracelet. I told them to tattoo it on my forehead but they wouldn’t do it. You had a great nurse working on you, by the way. She’s a peach. She’s who I would pick if I needed the garden hose. But I’ve always had a tip top prostate. About the only part of me that didn’t crap out.”

I was going to tell Jerry that I didn’t want to spend any more time here than I already had but that seemed to be beside the point.

“Don’t tell me to fill it out,” said a voice from behind me. I turned. It was the balding doctor with the wire rimmed glasses again.

“Maglio, would it matter?” It was the woman in the lab coat.

“Yes it would matter. It would matter that Dr. Leak is a lazy piece of crap that wants the ER to do all his work.”

“But he never saw him. The guy died on our gurney. You know his medical history. How hard would it be to fill out the stupid form?”

Dr. Maglio folded his arms across his chest and spun around in the chair. “It’s the principle. And besides, how do I know how he died? For all I know Leak came and put a pillow over his head and then I would be an accessory to murder.”

The director sighed and pushed her glasses down her nose. She had a brown lunch bag in front of her on the desk and a half-eaten saran-wrapped peanut butter sandwich sitting on top of it.

“Oh, for God’s sake, get over it. Jerry Verne was older than dirt, we’ve all taken care of him a hundred times and he had terminal cancer. He had a lot of reasons to die. Pick something plausible like respiratory arrest or even old age if you want to and fill in the blank. Someone is going to fill out the paperwork. I don’t care if it is you or Leak but I don’t want to see anything about this in my email tomorrow.”

Maglio mumbled something and turned back to his computer.

“I mean it, Maglio. I’m not even supposed to be working this shift, you know.

McCallister called in sick again with a sore throat. Give me a break. I had an arterial bleed in room 10, and open ankle in 2, and I have to go do a central line on the four hundred pounder with gangrene in room 9. You know, if the nurse takes off your sock and three toes just fall off, you’ve probably waited too long to come to the ER. But if you call an ambulance because you stubbed your toe drunk, you probably haven’t waited long enough. Yesterday was the drunk. Today it’s the guy whose toes just fell off. That was something that honestly, even for me; I could have lived without seeing. Anyway, I wish the drunk guy was still here so I could wheel him into the room and give a lecture on abuse of the 911 system.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Maglio smiled. “You know, we framed a sock once and gave it to one of the faculty when I was in training. One of the regulars in the ER donated it.”

The director scoffed. “You actually stole a sock from a passed out drunk in your ER? That’s low.”

“What are you implying? I said he donated it. Out of appreciation for the institution that had kept him alive on IV thiamine for so many years. At least I didn’t call in sick with a sore throat. If I call in sick it’s because I’m dead. And then I won’t call. Anyways, we framed the

sock in a shadow box to encase the smell and got a plaque that said 'The Toxic Sock Award' and gave it to the professor. I've been back. He still has it in his office."

"That's great. I knew I hired you for your love of humanity. By the way?" She was on her feet now and shrugging out of her white coat in preparation for the procedure and she looked down her glasses at the other doctor. "Do the paperwork."

"Did three toes really fall off?" asked Maglio.

"Yes. Don't remind me. And don't change the subject," replied the director.

"Did McCallister really call in sick with a sore throat again?"

"Yes. And giving me sympathy won't work. You still need to do the paperwork. But I might have to kill McCallister and then he would really have a reason to call in sick. I think he's probably out on an interview. Can't blame the guy. By the way, are you coming to St. Pat's with me?"

"I can't decide. I still think I might go back to the academic center."

The director rolled her eyes. "But you hate teaching. And you hate interns."

"So do a lot of other people in the academic center. That's a good thing. The interns pick up the vibe and they don't stay interns very long."

The director shook her head. "And I thought that model of teaching went out with the dinosaurs."

"It's effective. And they can do the procedures. Or at least deal with the gangrenous toes. And yes, I will do the paperwork. After I catch up on these other charts," he gestured at a stack in front of him. "These people are still alive so someone might want to read it sooner."

"Actually the joint commission is supposed to be here this week. And you know how rational their priorities are. They always pull a chart on a recent death. If they don't see a

complete chart on this guy they'll accuse us of leaving his body parked in the hallway or something. If it's not documented on paper it didn't happen, right?"

Dr. Maglio groaned. "Do you know what day they're going to be here?"

"I know not the hour or the day," began the director.

"Stop sounding like the pope."

"Actually I think it was scripture that predates the pope."

"Whatever. If I have to work on the day they're here I will stab my eyeballs out with a fork."

"Maglio, it's not that bad. The worst thing you have to do is keep a lid on your coffee cup and not eat food at the computer. I actually have to meet with them."

"And I have to run laps around the department trying to find the nurse who has the key to the supply cabinet that we lock once a year in honor of the joint commission. That's the worst part. Pretending that locking up all the gauze is going to improve patient safety. Can I stab them with a fork? Would I be covered under the malpractice plan if I did?"

"Maglio, I am the choir," said the director, "and you are preaching to me. How about you just get your paperwork done? And please don't stab anybody."

"Wherever I work next," said Maglio, "I'm going to pick a less sanctimonious medical director."

"Bite me," she said.

Jerry was beaming. He pounded me on the back and I barely felt it. I really had to wake up from this. "A glitch! It really is all due to a paperwork glitch. I'll be damned."

"You shouldn't say that when you're dead."

"Good point Cheesy"

“It’s Fries. Alan Fries. Like…”

“Like cheese. Yes, I know. You told me already. Do you mind if I call you Cheesy instead?”

“Actually, I do mind. Today has been bad enough without whoever you are calling me what I used to get called on the playground.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not. The other kids called me Cheesy.”

“Well, gee Alan. Maybe it’s because you introduce yourself as Fries-like-cheese all the time. Anybody ever point that out to you?”

“No. It’s just what rhymes. Besides, I was tired of being called French-fries before that. What’s the big deal?”

“Nothing. No big deal. Except it clearly bothers you enough to bring it up immediately in conversation even after you’re dead.”

“I’m not dead. This is a dream. Or a misunderstanding. Or it’s just what happens when they shock your heart and put that breathing machine thing on. It’s like anesthesia. People get all kind of weird hallucinations under anesthesia. I’ve read about it. Anyways, I didn’t bring it up. You asked if you could call me Cheesy.”

“And you introduced yourself as Cheese. That’s how I remember stuff. What is that called, a moniker?”

“No, it’s a mnemonic,” I replied.

“Mnemonic. Mnemonic. I always forget that word,” said Jerry.

“I can’t believe this.”

“I can’t believe you introduce yourself as Fries-as-in-cheese your whole life and wonder why you have a nickname. A lot of other things rhyme with your name you know. Trees for one. Then you could have been called Tree on the playground. You’re pretty tall anyways. Me Alan. Big Tree. Not a bad thing. How about I just call you Cheese for short?”

“Just leave me alone. I need to wake up. This is a bad dream. A really weird one. I must have fallen asleep on the couch watching the game.”

“I wonder how much time I have?” mused Jerry. He reached behind Dr. Maglio to the nurse that was bringing him the chart from room 4. She had teal green scrubs on with a pair of short shorts pulled over them that said “ho, ho, ho” across the backside. I watched in shock as Jerry pulled the ties loose on her scrub pants. “Hey!” she said to Maglio sharply.

“I think they have a thing too. Those two in your room? You know, the one that doesn’t know his ass from a hole in the ground and the nurse that had the garden hose? They definitely have a thing but I think these two have a thing too. A glitch. This is giving me all kinds of ideas. I think I have the run of the place until they sign me off.”

He was whispering again. He leaned on the doctor’s shoulder who was oblivious to the weight of the old man.

“If we’re really dead, you probably don’t need to whisper,” I said.

Jerry cocked his head and seemed to be sizing me up. He laughed. “Good point. You seem to be catching on quick. So what are we going to do with this interlude? That’s the real question. These guys hate paperwork. This might take weeks. And you, who knows how long you have?”

“You’re awfully cavalier about this. “

“I know. I know. I shouldn’t be so hard on you. You weren’t expecting to die today. Me, I’ve spent so much time in this damn place I thought I would have died a year ago. Cancer, kidney failure, you name it. Of course I don’t shoot heroin. You really should be careful with the hard stuff,” he added, patting me on the shoulder.

“I am not a drug addict!”

“Then why did the narcan work? Last I saw, you had a pulse and were headed to full resuscitation. Sounds like poppies to me.”

“I’m sure they give that to everyone. “

“That’s what they all say.”

“Jerry I am not even going to have an argument with you about this. They were doing CPR at the time too, in case you didn’t notice. And they used the ice pack thing and whatever else. I’m sure it was more high tech than it looked. Anyway, the narcan was probably a coincidence. I thought I asked you to leave me alone.”

Jerry was still wagging his finger at me. “It’s a second chance to stop the hard stuff.”

“I’m not dignifying that with a response,” I replied.

The phones rang nonstop all around us. Monitors beeped, pagers alarmed, overhead announcements came through the PA system. I didn’t understand how anyone could work here. It reminded me of the floor of the stock exchange, a place I had visited as a college kid only once. It took only one visit to convince me my temperament was not suited to be a trader. The ER was like the stock exchange but worse. And nobody seemed to be paying any attention to the alarms.

The secretary in the middle of the ER took yet another call.

“St. Augustine’s emergency department. Yes. Yes, I remember you. I know you called earlier. I asked them. They haven’t found them yet. I have your number. Yes. I will call you if we hear anything. I understand they’re unusual. We certainly want to return them if they are found. Yes. We’ll try our best.”

Maglio looked her way after she put the phone down.

“What was that about?”

“Nipple rings. Thinks they got lost in x-ray.”

“Did you see the patient? Is she cute?”

“No. And it’s a guy. And I don’t know if he’s cute.”