

Dear Reader; the events in this book are real. However, because of the long time period in between living them and writing them, conversations and events are not exact, but they are in fact symbolic and every bit as meaningful.

Many of the names and some of the time lines altered for privacy are not as obvious as names that deserved modification.

**HEADS: A NEUROSURGEON'S MEMOIR
and
A Gentleman's Guide to the Joint**

Bernard R. Lerner, M.D. and doncha freeman

A Brief History

I knew in my bones from the time I was a kid that I was born to be a surgeon. I hung out in my father's medical office and I trailed after him on hospital rounds. Listening to his flare-ups against incompetence was only part of my early medical education. Further coaching came from my neurosurgical nurse mother, an assistant to Max Minor Peet, one of the founding fathers of neurosurgery.

Sarah Lerner, a far-seeing woman, was adamant in her belief that medicine needed improvement - vast improvement. My mother was as certain in her conviction that I was going to rise to the occasion as Mary was convinced of the divinity of Jesus. It's true that Jewish mothers can be fanatical about their sons. And, as it happens, these sacred beliefs sometimes catch on.

Committed by a code of honor, a bond shared with my parents, I vowed to engage in the process of transforming medicine. I never thought about what rocking the boat might entail. Capsizing was never part of my vision. I held the firm belief that my devotion would keep me afloat. But then, I was not an all-seeing God. I was only a kick-ass neurosurgeon who saved lives on his own turf.

My thunderbolt direction struck me during my residency at Mayo Clinic. Operating a Zeiss counter-balance-beam microscope, did it for me. Manipulating a free-floating bit with my mouth, I could operate at thirty times the magnification over the naked eye, *throughout* the procedure, omnipresent in the four corners of the room on camera. Out of thousands of surgeons, at the time, only about fifty were ingenious or coordinated enough to get around the dexterity. The rest of the geniuses, not willing to make the effort, continued to operate *the good ol' old fashion way*, with the naked eye and the assistance of loops (small magnifiers with a light source), good for coal miners, but not appropriate any longer for surgeons. Having *this particular* microscope wheeled into the OR only to charge for the use of it, I

felt morally obligated to point out that accordingly their results would be disappointing.

Because microneurosurgery was revolutionary in the 1970's, and most doctors weren't jocks or pinball wizards, another sport reliant on hand-eye coordination, their problem was two-fold. Being of a revolutionary bent, and seeing that I could ski on glaciers and run a mile just under world record time, there was no other acceptable way for me to operate. I enlisted in a fellowship with the luminous and illuminating Professor Yasargil, a Houdini with this scope. If I weren't headed for Zurich on a mission to master the instrument soon to become instrumental in my meteoric rise to fame, I'd hang up my jock-strap.

Professor Yasargil could maneuver his way out of anything. Any problem he encountered, he dramatically diffused. I developed that talent easily in surgery, and I was a hell of a quarterback in college, but I never got the hang of it in the so-called real world. Professor Yasargil had his idiosyncrasies as well. He wouldn't operate if the Mediterranean tides weren't to his liking. Let him try that one at Northwestern University Hospitals. The Inquisition would be on his ass, exorcising his rank individualism right out the door.

Under this amazing talent's tutelage, I became a proficient, operating on over a thousand experimental rats - one rat at a time. Prickly, until I conquered the hand-eye coordination, the trickiest part. Any surgeon worthy of the oath masters technique...no two ways about it. A surgeon isn't much if he isn't an ace.

Magnificent, how physical agility, a keen mind, and super-empowered vision employed fixedly to save lives can do exactly that. Related to superheroes, it's all about the quality to bailout those in jeopardy. Six months of accelerated training and I was raring to go it solo. As soon as I crossed the pond, and returned to the States, I could bite on a bit and Zoom! My microscope was *my* superhero x-ray vision. I could operate upside down or sideways; whatever it took, I *would* do it, magnified, because I was able....and I got a kick out it. As far as professions go, in my book, nothing is more heroic than saving lives.

Coming on board at Northwestern University Hospitals in 1976, after Anthony J. Raimondi seized power, was another landmark big break in my uncertain history. The frosting on the cake was no longer WASP white only. Northwestern's Waspy board of directors was particularly fond of the color green. Besides...ethnic was in. The liberal and wealthy Doctor Raimondi took on the Department of Neurosurgery at Northwestern University Hospitals, I heard, for one dollar a year. An additional bonus came in the way of endowments he would bring in. His position as Chairman of Neurosurgery at Cook County Hospital was proof of his talent, doing exactly that. That's where I met him. I have to say I was impressed.

Fresh with the imprint of Mayo Clinic and newly returned from Zurich, by all accounts, I was wired to cut. Professor Raimondi prized my programming for his budding program at Northwestern. The prerevolutionary regime's unenlightened attitude of *let them eat cake* left the department anemic. Tony and I were the first transfusions.

When Tony roped me in, my action came from County Hospital. On the west side of Chicago, it was *the meanest place in the whole damn town*. On top on that, helicopter-landing pads brought in more trauma. Hard to beat that combination outside a MASH unit. For giving Death a run for the booty, we didn't have to go to Saigon. Although, I have to say, the surgeons coming back from Viet Nam could handle anything, even the burn units. They were tough. I took my surgical hat off to them, every day.

Working with them, and the *demanding* Professor Raimondi was, without question, empowering and intensely invigorating. These surgeons knew how to call the shots. For that, and loving Tony, knowing he could be counted on for anything, I took him on as a role model. Our similarities didn't end with devotion. Tony and I looked so much alike (silver grey hair, and all, from the time I was in my thirties) that the Japanese residents called me Son of Raimondi. I got a kick out of it every time the valets from the garage mistook me for Tony and brought me his Porsche or yellow Maserati Bora that he took up to 235mph. I *had* to take it out, to see what I could do. Then, I had to have one.

In perpetual motion, headed toward new ages of expanded horizons, I was on my way driving fast cars and riding smooth bikes. Traveling the tri-state area in record time, I spread the news about what I was doing at Northwestern. A constant influx of spinal reconstruction patients followed. In no time, the procedure became a microneurosurgical exercise, a warm up for critical cases. Never turning anyone away, beds spilled into the hallways. Tony didn't care about appearances; of course, neither did I. After all was said and done, Northwestern didn't lose their Veteran's Hospital, one of the many advantages we brought to bear fruit of our talent.

Three major intra-cranial procedures a week was my idea of something to rave about... I was crazy about doing heads. Lesser attending physicians could suck up martinis and fame, discussing hospital politics, teeing off, instead of cutting. I was glad when they played elsewhere. I picked up the slack. Is it any wonder that I never knew what was going on in the world outside the hospital, with all I had going on. I didn't know what popular music was playing or what movies where at the theaters. Luckily, breathing requires no special effort.

Managing my temper caused me to sweat every time the worst attending men hung around the OR. Tying fly-fishing knots and spouting gibberish, I could easily ignore...until these loose cannons scrubbed. Replacing one of the culprit's pedestrian bow ties with a rogue's noose would have been too good for him the day he dropped a drill, so sharp it could cut a diamond, on the patient's brain. When another idiot claimed sacrificing his patient's vision was unavoidable because the case was tough, I notified Tony that there was no reason for anyone to cover me.

Tony and I were having one of *those* conversations in the Gothic foyer of Northwestern's Wesley Pavilion, under a huge portrait of Loyal Davis, a former chairperson, until Tony had it removed. We watched Dan Ruge, a decent spine man in his day, inherited from Loyal's regime, walk past us waving ta-ta, saying good evening, always with cocktail in hand. Dr. Ruge strolled the shores of Lake Michigan (just across from the hospital) at five

o'clock sharp everyday, *no matter what*. After all, it was cocktail hour and he was a society doctor.

In view of the fact that blood made him excessively nervous, I thought it peculiar he came so far. Despite Uncle Dan's faults, (he also wore sear-sucker suits) he was straight up. Unlike many of the socially arrogant in his pack, he knew what he could do, and he knew what was out of his league. I picked up his slack, too.

I was sorry when Uncle Dan (not a relative) left us to attend President Reagan. Nancy wanted him...probably because her daddy, Loyal Davis, thought so well of him. Tony was delighted when Loyal said his goodbyes, and he wasn't sorry to see Uncle Dan go, either. Pedigrees were just lap dogs to him. He didn't like dealing with the mess they left behind. Before Uncle Dan departed, he bequeathed me his operating shoes. I told him *they're too small for me*; he shook my hand and said *I know*. Actually, they were remarkably comfortable. I wore them like a second skin, until the soles were worn through... mimicking my life.

The first time I stepped into Uncle Dan's shoes, it was to operate on a twenty-seven year old house painter with an aneurysm. Not altogether of the Adolf variety, he nevertheless, marched into Doctor Raimondi's office demanding *a Jew doctor... and* he wasn't messing around. There are patients who believe a huge benefit bestowed upon them if their doctor is Jewish. You can bet, if anything were to go wrong, they would scream *I want a Jew lawyer*.

Heads from the morgue in hand, I set out to define the complex anatomy of the patient's cavernous sinus and to map a route to the pathology. My other goal was to find a means of protection, in case I got into trouble.

This sixteen-hour neurosurgical procedure was the first external to internal double barrel by-pass and internal carotid artery trap ever performed. It would save countless lives. You would think I committed a crime from the reactions of surgeons who were not fans of mine. When their patients questioned them, asking the definitive *Why is the person in the room next to mine*,

who had the same diagnosis as me, leaving the hospital while I'm still in bed, there's going to be trouble. So sure of who I was and what I was doing, I became all the more vulnerable.

Through the years, unbridled self-satisfaction, over my successes, fed my ego and created a venomous dislike for me in several colleagues who slithered into our department, to remind me of deadly vipers, alpha bengala snakes. Next in line were the human upwardly mobiles, stumbling on my path, with their clubs to impede my way. Apparently, my fatal flaw, the thing that did me in, in addition to my exceptional skill as a diagnostician and my talent as a top gun neurosurgeon, was insufficient savvy about the treacherous real-life games pathological people play.

Tragically, it is an historical fact that those who lead the way off the beaten path can, and often do, wind up in prison, psych wards, homeless, or worse, hopeless. The dark night of the soul crept over me like a lunar eclipse. It's impossible to devote nearly twenty years of my life and have it demolished, with all the implications, without misery and a fatalistic dose of acting out. I do not go gently into that goodnight.

PROLOGUE

A carefully constructed world on the verge of a crushing breakdown was mine. An historic collapse would change my life forever, to include future possibilities in neurosurgery. Buried in my work, I didn't see it coming. Actually, it shocked the hell out

of me. I was completely confident that the safe harbor I created for patients, and anyone in need of my pioneering know-how, would define my entire life. Because I played a leading role in the rapid growth of microneurosurgery and in life and death dramas, giving it my best shot, all I could, twenty-four seven, I believed I was the master of my own universe.

The successful demonization of Bernard R. Lerner, M.D., also known as a fall or getting knocked on my ass, depending on the language you speak, became *painfully* obvious during the eighties, the decade of decadence. Unfortunate reversals of fortune are the by-products of extremes.

Given the opportunity, would I change the events that led to my fall from grace? Absolutely! If I could arrange the procedure without changing how I spend my life, in the service of others. The catch here is, I wouldn't have the vaguest idea of where to begin. Subsequent events turned out convoluted and sordid - not immaculate like the brain. Types of procedures with dealings totally beyond my scope.

Where do we find meaningful instruction, finely tuned, all mapped out in this experiential and sometimes cruel world. What happens when our plans go awry and the dark night of the soul creeps over us like a lunar eclipse.

An indispensable talent for doing well, when the shit hits the fan, may be to not travel like a tourist, but rather to be fully plugged-in. I don't seem to be wired that way. My vote has always been for spotless sunshine of everlasting joy... not altogether possible when survival of the shittiest wins the day. Darkness, I discovered, because there is an awful lot of absurdity in life, is as much a component of the passage as is the light.

When detours are nightmarish roller coaster rides, hang on to your gonads, or other precious heart parts. It's the logical thing to do when mighty but unenlightened forces come after you with a vengeance and a machete. Nefarious types will separate a uniquely talented neurosurgeon, or other persons, from all that they sweated for in building a worthy life. They do not consider their actions wrongfully considered ambition...they do not care.

Chapter One
County Hospital
1989

A worthy life is a subject deserving exploration. For me, it all begins with my intention to make my services available in the emergency room at Cook County Hospital - a dingy district where ambulance and cop sirens shriek all day and night. The trick with incoming wounded in this trigger-happy war zone is to be slick with a surgical blade. Neurosurgically lowering the numbers of the corpse population keeps me razor-sharp and meditatively peaceful, unlike anything else...with the exception of love.

The unmistakable growl of my Harley Davidson, pulling up curbside, attracts a fair share of attention on these mean streets, despite everything else that's going down. That's all right with me. I like being noticed. Sliding from the leather seat, feeling the way humid does when it sticks to hot, I lean against my bike, light a cigarette, and begin to wonder if the devil does care.

Only some things are for sure, like the fact that a bottomless drag satisfies my lungs with a potent nicotine rush. Pleasureful poison innocently disguised in white. Ahhh, I take another drag on death and blow shades of smoke rings into the moonlit night, as I watch the neighborhood drug dealer prowl.

He thinks he's slick but everyone knows what he's after with those fast paws. Ready steady cash money is no problem for him. He provides the stuff that goes up the nose, curls the toes, and makes 'em say *Hallelujah!* and *Amen!* Crashing down from the heavens users habitually wish they were dead. Can't help it once you're that high. They've got you comin' and goin'.

"I'm lucky no one notices me comin' or goin', any time day or night." Fast paws tell an anxious med student copping dope. "So be cool, man."

No shit Sherlock or you'd be in jail by now.

More on the mellow side, Johnny Lee Sunshine, a street philosopher, distracts me as he lumbers over. His hair pick, strategically located in his untamed afro, bobs up and down, and his boom box is always in tow. Regulars gather around as we exchange a street *peace and soul* handshake. Flashing those pearly whites, "Righteous" is all he has to say before we begin our routine, street performance for the locals. I know many people who can talk all day long. I like a person that can sing and dance, too.

We're into it, until a squad car pulls up. The cop separating the donut from his face yells out the window, "Turn that fuckin' boom box down before you wake the dead in cold storage. The morgue is only a block away." I step forward and he slows down, about to get out of the car with his big stick. "Sorry, Doc, I didn't know it was *you*... you're not wearin' one of them fancy Armani jobs." Having said that he leaves us alone.

Turning up the volume puts us back in the mood. Gruff, but warm, our deep tones harmonize with the soulful Josh White singing "St. James Infirmary".

***I went down to that St. James Infirmary, and
I saw some plasma there, I ups and asks the
doctor man, "Now was the owner dark or fair?
The doctor laughed a great big laugh, and
he puffed it right in my face, He said,
"A molecule is a molecule, son, and the damn
thing has no race."***

Worthwhile entertainment: eighteen minutes skin-to-skin, time enough time for a few tracks from *Free and Equal Blues*. Our approving audience nods their heads as we come to the end. Johnny Lee cuffs my arm and laughs. "I saw you boxin' at Tony's Gym. You're good Daddy-O." Imitating my boxing style, bobbing and weaving, he chants, "Fly like a butterfly and sting like a bee, Mohammed Ali got nothin' on me, 'cause I'm the Doc, I'm the greatest."

"I look that good?" I suck up the approval.

“Word is, you was a drag racin’ tougher than shit kid livin’ right here in the hood. Is that right, Doc?”

“Yep.”

“Can’t take the dude outta yo’ bad ass.” He feints a punch.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Mr. Sunshine.”

Happy-go-lucky, snapping my fingers and shuffling my feet, I dance to many beats. Inside the halls of academia, I’m Bernard R. Lerner, M.D., the youngest associate professor in the Department of Neurosurgery at Northwestern University Hospitals and a frequent volunteer at Cook County Hospital. On the street, I’m the Doc. Obviously, I’m not your garden-variety country club type of doctor, but don’t go to extremes and label me typical alpha male type, either. I’m a man on a mission. With steely confidence, I’ve made it my business to take neurosurgery so far into the future I revolutionize the science.

Still, the best part of me has never left County Hospital’s quarter. Drawn to the socially wounded, my first set of rounds is complete before I enter the hospital. I never forget to tend the homeless. I hope no one forgets to care for me if the shoe is ever on the other foot. Life is so precarious. I’d never turn my back on anyone who needs me. I never give up on anyone and I never will.

Singing the blues or Frank Sinatra, I mingle among the street’s downtrodden inhabitants. On the mark with a quick eye for disease, I don’t make an issue of it. They don’t go for that. Instead, I hand out money with a here you go, Pal or Dear, treat yourselves to supper after the show. My smile seems infectious; I’m glad to hearten the disheartened whenever I am able.

All the top surgeons invited to operate at Cook County are encouraged to teach neurosurgical residents rotating through the service. Those who show up to hone their skills can be counted on one hand when operating is an unpaid labor of love. Some of my colleagues, from the Lake Shore Drive side of town, don’t understand why anyone would spend time cutting anywhere other than the pristine and prestigious halls of private hospitals.

Presented the world on a silver platter, they are numb to the medically disenfranchised. Most of them, and they are a restricted type, don't care about the benefits received from working at County... *in the gutter*, as they so generously put it.

In the tradition of any other irreverent iconoclast, when conversations beg variety, I improvise. "How can I pass up a seventeen-hundred bed hospital when it's the place to be for any surgeon hot to cut? County's abundance of trauma quenches my vampiric thirst. Pathology cross-matches and types three units of blood - two for the patient and one for me - I'm not greedy." I do that Bella Lugosi, let me suck your blood thing, and the mocking becomes judgmental. "Grow up, Lerner," doesn't stop me. Ignoring my detractors, I'm encouraged when I hear my supporters say, "*You* vampires are something else." Of course, "Bernard you're a splendid teacher, a great surgeon and a real human being," pronounced by Mario Ammirati, a fabulous resident goes a long way to make my day.

"Death hangs out at County, and I've never known the Marauder to give anyone a second chance." I tell the residents and interns, and anyone else that cares to listen. "Walking in the shadow of death, with reverence for life, is the everyday world of great surgeons."

Another insight into the clandestine surgical society of carefully guarded secrets is the fact that medical professionals ingest a fair share of drugs. Addiction is an occupational hazard, a result of super-human grueling demands and impossibly long hours. I was on-call every other night, all night long, for eight years, facing horrors most people never encounter in a lifetime. Couple this with the certainty that humans are habitual creatures and you have a sure-fire prescription for dependency. Fifty percent of occupied beds in hospitals are for patients with diseases related to alcohol - the state-approved lethal substance. This is not an excuse - it's the actuality - so put away the cross and don't shoot the messenger.

Whatever the drug of choice, a surgeon unable to sustain the rigors of thirty-six hour days will turn to mother's little helpers. When long hours rule and are not the exception, staying awake

without drugs, plentiful in the environment, often becomes impossible. Necessity, like any other dictator, will exact a harsh penalty when circumstance doesn't count for much. A Catch-22 and an unfortunate way of life for too many of us suffering sleep deprivation and other maladies. I medicate old football injuries that destroyed my hips. I'm not judging anyone and I don't want to be judged. As long as colleagues do well with patients, I'm satisfied that personal issues be handled privately.

It's the seemingly straight-as-arrow types, pretending to be so bloody superior, that end up with nicotine stains in their underwear. Reeking from alcohol, they crap their pants, taking on cases for which they have no talent. To cover extravagant end-of-the-month expenses, they engage in dangerous sport, with no athletic ability, whatsoever.

Timmy, a favorite patient of mine, had the misfortune to be a casualty of this inferior breed. Personally, I have witnessed too many botched surgeries, and every time it happens, it blows my mind. My subspecialty seems to be cleaning-up the catastrophes of surgeons who go in over their heads. In Timmy's case, when I called his surgeon and insisted, *Why didn't you send Timmy to me in the first place; you could have kept the money*, hanging up the phone ends Timmy's tribulations for him. I wonder how he sleeps at night. I knew a good man, who was a bad surgeon; he shot himself.

My first step into Timmy's room, Timmy's worried-sick broken-hearted mother cries, "Help me, Doctor! Timmy is always looking at teenage girls in fashion magazines. He doesn't act like my child anymore." Timmy's father turns away from us to stare at shades of watery blue on the TV. I'm a father; I understand his pain. Timmy's blemished scalp that looks like transcontinental railroad tracks will heal. Gratified as I am to have saved Timmy's life, I'm sorry to say it will take a long time for him to recover somewhat functionally with a persistent neurological deficit. If it weren't for me, and Timmy's desire to live, he wouldn't be getting ready for an imaginary night out on the town. Finished examining my handiwork, I check out his.

“I give my dates nice gifts, don’t I?” He giggles as I show him how to scotch tape the paper perfume bottles to the models in the magazine. “I want to take them to see a scary movie and eat ice cream.” Timmy beams with pride, holding up the magazine for his disturbingly quiet parents to see. Because their silence is painful, I interject “That’s great, Pal.”

Embracing me with his wide clear child blue eyes, he points to my boots. “I like your cowboy boots, Cowboy Doctor. doncha brought me a book about cowboys. I *really* like doncha.” He giggles and giggles some more.

I tousle his hairless head. “Me too, Cowboy, I’m crazy about doncha. I have to head over to the emergency room now. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He doesn’t notice when I leave. He’s already alone with his dates, no different from any other guy hoping to get lucky.

The emergency room is a titanic sea of misery that jump-starts my adrenals. The first thing I get on is a local barroom brawler, brought in by the local police, vibrating as though he’s connected to an unseen electrical socket. Doing combat with Chicago’s finest is dangerous to one’s health. “I need an operating room,” I call out to Nurse Kelly. And don’t stop moving the way you do.”

“I enjoy watching your ass too, Doctor. I hate to disappoint you, but all operating rooms are engaged.”

I grab a minor craniotomy kit with a drill in it. Boring a hole in Mr. Strange’s cranium, I explain to observers, looking a little stunned witnessing their first unsterile procedure, “Anesthetizing isn’t necessary. There aren’t any pain fibers in the brain. In case you haven’t noticed, Mr. Strange is unconscious. Improvising at Cook County Hospital becomes second nature. I don’t know how many times I’ve delivered C-section babies in the elevators.” A blood clot, the color of crankcase motor oil, squirts out of Mr. Strange’s brain. “At Northwestern, called to task over insurance issues, for performing this same procedure, I raised the question, *What about the life I saved?* Never mind that. I was warned *stick to the rules*. The almighty rules. The good news is Mr. Strange

will be fine. I'm out of here. My woman is waiting for me to take her out to dinner this fine evening. I'll check-in on this madman later."

Returning to the hospital, after midnight, I find my much-recovered patient tipping back a bottle barely concealed inside a brown paper bag. Mr. Strange takes a healthy slug and gurgles, "You're my savior, Doc." Tears fill his eyes as booze runs down the sides of his mouth onto the dirty bed sheets stained with food and vomit. I do the unpardonable, unleashing tidal waves of curses, beginning with "You satanic bastard, how dare you repossess my booze when I need it the most. And another thing, smart ass, snakes are crawling through every fucking orifice of my body and elephants are jumping through goddamn hoops..."

"At least you have some entertainment while you're here. Some of our guests miss out on the weird Technicolor visuals." Howling, "Eat shit and die," the way he does, reminds me of how easy it is to go from savior to anti-Christ. Tears of gratitude are the fastest evaporating substance known to man.

Answering a page, expecting it might be doncha, hoping she's not pissed off that I didn't go out dancing with her, I'm disappointed. It's not doncha. It's the triage nurse at Northwestern. Knowing flattery appeals to my vanity she lays it on thick. "Doctor Lerner, I know you're not on call tonight, but you are the best." Nurse Duffy's Irish brogue is lilting and pleasant to my ear. "You are, however, one of the last doctors on earth, devoted enough, to make house calls... unfortunately the darlin' on call isn't responding. Please bring that adorable bum of yours over to Northwestern's ER. Help us out. We have a situation."

"I'm on my way, but *you* have to call doncha and tell her I'm detained."

Chapter Two

Northwestern University Hospital

Imprinting ducklings couldn't follow each other, one after the other, with more abandon than Neurosurgical residents wandering around the Emergency Room. "Collect yourselves at the viewing screen," I order in a well-modulated tone to hide my displeasure, as I flip Mrs. Seymour's angiogram in place. One of the members of the flock, a cocky third year resident, folds his arms over his chest and squawks, "Looks as if it's over for her. Rotten luck" hits the back of my head and a glacial air comes over me. With the conviction of General Patton before the invasion of Sicily, I address the residents. "Our mission is to evacuate the hematoma, clip the aneurysms and peel off the arteriovenous malformation. Any abnormal pathology in our way goes too. Now then, you eight-year wonders, you've supposedly passed your National Boards..."

"You know I've passed my boards."

"That's right, Fussins, you've been granted a license to practice on the unsuspecting public. Tell me, how is it that you ignored the symptoms and assumed a diagnosis so final that it should be spoken as solemnly as a prayer." Face to face with this impertinent resident, who never knows when to remain silent, I pull no punches. I state the facts. "You're a pathetic excuse of a neurosurgeon. No bastard ever saved a life that didn't care in the first place."

"I was stating..."

"Drop to the floor, now, and give me twenty!"

Fussins makes a big show of it as onlookers gather around. Between gulps of air, he wheezes. "I could... do.... fifty pushups... with one hand.... tied.... behind... my... back."

I shake my head in disbelief, amazed at the puny effort.

"For those of you that crave the opportunity to stand victorious against overwhelming odds, the operating theater is

the arena of this battle. Let me enlighten you, before you proceed. All the power and magic in this crazy world happens inside the brain....proceed with reverence and make sure your performance is worthy of the task. If you're hungry, eat. If you need to take a crap do it now. This isn't going to be a chip-shot."

The pre-op holding area is bare bones impersonal, except for the crucifix on the wall and the families waiting. To be on the safe side a priest gives last rites to the patient going under the knife. He considers there may not be a tomorrow for surgical patients. That's not the case when the knife is mine.

Alone with Mrs. Seymour, her hand in mine, I whisper, "I won't let anything happen to you, sweetheart. I promise you, you'll do well." This sixty-seven year old woman may not hear what her neurosurgeon has to say, but I'm sure my confidence connects our souls. All things being equal, I'm ready.

"First, I'll clip the aneurysms, and since the arteriovenous malformation is right in front of us let's take it, too. You do see it, don't you, Doctors?" I glance up from my microscope for a sign of comprehension. "I'm going to peel these monsters right off the surface of the brain."

"You should, *of course*, perform individual operations for the aneurysms and a later one for the arteriovenous malformation, but you won't, not you."

"Grandstanding right on cue; you know perfectly well, Gluck, I wouldn't open someone twice when I can handle it in one go."

"Grown-up surgeons operate with caution. They don't need to show off with excessively expensive microscopes, like it's a toy."

"The greedy bastards wouldn't take the time away from their money producing hand holding practices to learn how to operate this beautiful instrument. Now shut up and make yourself useful. First, arm three veri-angle clips on three veri-angle clip applicators. Then, be sure several Sundt-Kees clip grafts are ready in case we run into trouble. Gluck, *do not*, come back into *my* OR without

surgical trousers, under any circumstance. Microorganisms common to the vagina contaminate the operating field. You *should* know that by now.”

She storms out, taking her unshaved patchouli scent with her.

“You’re confrontational streak isn’t winning any popularity contests.” Dr. Ammirati, one of the best residents in the group, shakes his finger at me. “Talent is no excuse.”

“It’s not purely a blessing either. Unconventional behavior is a predominant trait of our breed. After all, we’re artists. When the surgeon is the surgery, the art and the artist are not of separate values. Only a Michelangelo should open up a spine or play peek-a-boo with the brain. Why should I care if Nahrwald supports me? No one has to approve of the artist to buy their paintings, listen to their music, or read a particular author’s fiction or nonfiction...but I’ll tell you something...my patients *love* me.”

“And so they should. It really doesn’t bother you that your superior talent isn’t appreciated by the Cheese...to Nahrwald you’re just the pain in the ass nonconformist inherited from Raimondi’s regime.”

“My friend, the glory days of medicine are over. And we, the rock-star neurosurgeons, unwillingly inherited by the new clout, just keep on cuttin’. Nahrwald didn’t do medicine any favor ushering in corporate medicine and neo-conservatism. I’m against a machine that competes historically with the Catholic Church as the bane of modern medicine. I could never approve of corporate medicine or the Machiavellian ways behind the scenes. I wouldn’t want to end up a patient in a hospital run like a machine by business men. Take the heart out of medicine and it has no authenticity. When doctors no longer diagnosis, without running every test under the sun and medical attention, given in the smallest doses for the most ridiculous amount of money, healing becomes ineffectual. Diseases don’t read textbooks. My strategies allow miracles. I make things happen, not on a spreadsheet or Wall Street, only in the operating theater or sitting across a desk from patients listening....and so do you!”

“Aren’t you worried about getting you’re tit caught in the ringer?”

“Even when the dust was flying so thick around here that daylight was blocked out, all I cared about was saving lives. There’s nothing between life and death but the skilled intention of the surgeon. I have no interest in politics. There’s no place for ego when you open a head. Lately, all I hear from some of the residents is how cool they are because it’s easy to get laid when they mention they’re neurosurgeons. You laugh.”

“What do you tell them, Bernie?”

“I tell them function instead, at least while you’re in the OR, as a highly specialized neurosurgical instrument with the objective to get the patient out of the operating theatre neurologically intact, speaking coherently, and moving all four extremities. Save the rest of the drivel for cocktail parties, I’m not impressed.”

Nahrwald begins his days sending terse little notes to me in the operating room. Today, it’s *Dr. Lerner, join me in the surgeon’s lounge.*”

“Tell Numbnuts to scrub and join me in the OR if he wants to talk to me” is my sent reply.

Surprisingly, he puts in a personal appearance. With all the finesse the man can muster, he simpers, “Doctor Lerner, would you mind if I bring a personal matter to your attention... in front of others?”

“Shoot.”

Numbnuts shows no interest in the surgery, Mrs. Seymour, or the anxiously awaiting, eagerly listening entourage of nurses and physicians. He clears his bony throat. “Doctor Gluck has been by to see me, Doctor Lerner. You inferred that her perineal fallout might contaminate exposed brain.”

“What’s your point?”

“That is not an appropriate way to talk to a lady.”

“I thought she was a surgeon at the time I said it, or was she posing?” I imitate the posture he assumes for camera shots he

has taken on a regular basis. Marginally under my breath, I exhale, "You're such a shmuck."

"What was that you said?"

"I said good luck standing in as Gluck's champion."

"I never..."

"Don't deny it. You constantly defend her bad technique. As if that isn't enough of a distraction, I have to deal with the additional insult of her stinking body odor."

"*Really, Doctor Lerner.*"

"No kidding. What is worse is she operates with six fingers on each hand. I eat a box of antacids whenever she scrubs. *You*, of all people, should know what I mean." I give the whip time to consider the insult. "Would you like me to discuss technique with you, or may I focus exclusively on my patient?"

He bails out.

Millimeter by millimeter, the tenth hour of surgery, the arteriovenous malformation, peeled from the cortex of the brain, six inches of a wormlike vessel have been resected. With a substantial amount of work ahead, after such an intense silence, I hum *Ode to Joy*,

The circulating nurse mops the sweat from my brow. I reject another offer to take over. *I'm Mrs. Seymour's best shot.* Just when I thought I got rid of all the gatecrashers, the head nurse enters the OR behind a rather imposing figure. I hear her say, "Doctor Hook is a visiting neurosurgeon from Heidelberg. He *insists* on observing."

Glancing up from the scope, into the one good eye of Keith, I recognize the imposter behind the mask. Keith is not a doctor, despite the remarkable coincidence that he is scrubbed, gowned and gloved, and everyone addresses him as Doctor Hook. Keith is doncha's officially undiagnosed bi-polar personality disordered brother.

"Doctor Hook, are you here to assist or observe?" I play his game.

Positioning himself at the viewing scope, the character milks his part for all it's worth, articulating well thought-out observations, in a phony German dialect. I suppose he's coming

close to the point of his visit when he gets real. **“Sorry to interrupt, Bro,’ I’d like to stay but I have to go. This is so fucking amazing. You blow my mind. Take a break with me....it’s important.”**

Alone with him in the locker room, I have to laugh. **“I don’t know how in the hell you convinced them you’re a neurosurgeon, and I don’t want to know.”**

“I’m fully aware that I’m a pain in the ass, man. It’s not that I don’t love ya. I do. Now, do me a favor and call the garage.” He hands me the phone. **“I need your Ferrari. Next time, I want to participate - nothing fancy - just a little knick-knack kind of brain thing. Initiating me into the service would be *very* cool. You’ve got balls, I’ll give you that. *Damn.* You didn’t even look surprised to see me.”** He stuffs an Italian beef sandwich in my pocket. **“I’m proud of you. Eat the sandwich I brought you, dolly.”**

Alone in the locker room, with a few minutes to myself, I take 2-mg of dilaudid for my aching hips, down a cup of black coffee loaded with sweetener, inhale a killer beef sandwich from Taylor street, and head back.

After twenty-two hours, Mrs. Seymour’s brain, decidedly decompressed, pulsates again with excellent color. Satisfied with the results, I pop off my bloody surgical gloves and shoot them in the surgical wastebasket. I’ve successfully completed a surgery that witnessed the rotation of four residents, three sets of scrub nurses, two neurosurgical anesthesiologists, and Keith. Exhausted and exhilarated, my day made, I can put another notch in my scalpel.

In the waiting room, Mrs. Seymour’s grateful and much relieved family receive the good news. I must be invisible. They thank the Almighty for saving their mother’s life. Not unaccustomed to this practice, I avow, **“In case you didn’t know, I was also in that operating room for twenty-two hours. Good**

evening.” *I don’t like being excluded from the credit I deserve and crave.*

Outside the door of my last patient on my last rounds, Gluck paces, anticipating her prey. She-devil pounces. “You think you’re some kind of god, don’t you. I came to tell you you’re nothing but a showoff. And, by the way, I heard you’re under indictment. Too bad. Since you find everything so amusing, have fun explaining this away, you chauvinistic prick.”

“I’m not chauvinistic, Gluck. Your irresponsibility turns me against you. It’s a good thing I checked on Mrs. Seymour, again. I had to change some of the orders you wrote. Obviously you were preoccupied with more important matters. It’s no mystery that you sympathize with your supposed friend Fussins. I happen to know that’s another one of your illusions. Look around you; you’re in a Wasp’s nest. Ethnic is on its way out. Most of the surgeons, talented as gods, already left. For your information, gods *are* showoffs. I thought mythology was your specialty. Besides, I don’t care if *you* like me; I’m not trying to win a popularity contest.”

“Fuck you.”

Walking away, flipping me off, over her head, with both hands, she must think the gesture symbolizes a victory of sorts. She reminds me of Tricky Dick Nixon.

In spite of everything, I am touched with the masterful repair work called healing. Walking the long bridge corridor, alone, I hear the echo of my footsteps behind me, resounding in my brain, as haunting as a refrain from Chopin’s *Nocturnes*.

This defining moment, at the crossroads of the improbable and the incredible, I will pay a heavy toll for my soul’s complications. All the magic and all the knowledge I possess will not change my destiny. The door behind me is closed. I have no illusions about an ongoing career at Northwestern University Hospitals. Even so, there is no lock strong enough to keep me from attending the patients on my service until I release them into capable hands. I stare down at mine and breathe in the renewing spring evening air, as refreshing as birth. Life, I am

about to discover, will take on a whole new meaning and I'm not in the least prepared for it.

Chapter Three

The News

I know that pure love is the magic elixir for all souls lost and weary, or for those who simply need a good stiff drink after an excruciatingly long day. Mental and physical exhaustion is merely part of the equation. There's also a nagging forewarning about my imminent debut on the evening news.

Still, I'm lucky to open the door and find what I truly need. doncha waiting. doncha in candlelight and Frank Sinatra singing, *I've got a crush on you, sweetie pie, all day and night, sweetie pie, pardon my mush but I've got a crush, my honey, on you...* As I sing along with Frank, doncha gently presses a perfectly built martini to my lips. An embracing shelter of knowing, that's what love is.

Drifting, drinking my martini, floating on a wave of memory, I return to the place in time when we first met. October 4, 1980.

Instantaneously in love, or, at the very least, I'm consumed with a serious case of full-blown lust. Passionate, sensual, like the inside of a ripe fig, and then all at once, all together, she's academic, coy, strangely ironic, and hauntingly beautiful. Finally, a woman I craved with every neuron, nerve cell, and fiber of my being.

A Cheshire cat grin that could cover most of my body did not begin to conceal my disobedient erection (down boy did not work). Greedy eyes, indiscreet like the exploitative bourgeoisie that I can be, roamed a frisky romp. My fingers twitched vigorously with an insatiable desire to explore her meticulously, in thoroughly nonmedical ways.

"Take off your clothes ms. freeman and stand with your face to the wall, back side towards me. I want to examine you." I

spoke in my most professional tone. I had to disguise my internal pant that could blow off the top of my head. My intentions, being what they were, she was not going to sniff out my heat. Not unless she was clairvoyant or of a breed that begins with b and ends with i-t-c-h. I saw a long line of dead bodies in her path. You could go into business selling revolvers with one bullet in them to her ex-lovers. I was sure of that.

Showing no emotion, Eden's veteran temptation, with soft curves, slipped out of a diaphanous dress, moving the way liquid is fluid. The cadence of time changed when that amazing hair, all wild reddish tangles in waves, came undone, tumbling down to the curve of her waist. The longest strands tickled the dimples at rest on her butt cheeks...*they* begged attention. She screamed sex appeal to the heavens above. Persuasion, with a cape of luxurious hair, entered my Garden of Eden, suffering the effects of a cervical spine injury and a radiculopathy, nerve pain radiating from the source.

I couldn't wait for the first of many house calls. My heart pounded hard, excessively hard. I will have her I told myself. With the slightest edge of coolness in my voice, I asked if she was a dancer, knowing perfectly well that only dancers move that way.

Her meditative reply revealed she read my secreted thoughts. "Hmmm, yes...well, healing is a lost art.... medicine a torturing science....you have a disarming voice, Doctor Lerner. You give the impression of intimacy."

"Are you saying that I want to screw you, ms. freeman?"

"I'm sure you'd never screw anyone... not if you want to affect the heart of the matter."

Immediately after our rendezvous, I mean the examination; I overhear a fragment of her breathy telephone conversation. She told her friend that her doctor is a magnetically powerful man with a rugged face and earthy good looks. She said I moved her. She called me a beautiful genius because I made a diagnosis after five clueless idiots tortured her needlessly. I loved when she said I have a Ben Casey-Dr. Kildare thing going on, with a twist. I'm in love is how she ended the conversation.

I penetrated her deeply. Oh yes, I knocked her silky little socks right off and we didn't even kiss, not for months. Not until

her birthday on December 11th. That was our first kiss. I laugh aloud. My mind returns to the present when doncha asks me “What’s funny? I thought you were asleep.”

“Just thinking.”

“Funny thoughts?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.... and beautiful.”

She massages my tired muscles. She spoils my aching feet. Further pleasures are toothsome treats. doncha is the mistress of indulgence. She is the high priestess of tolerance for pure faults. I take her in my arms. “I want to swallow you whole. I want to inhale a bottomless breath with you in it.”

Please, I plead, intense with a crazed passion, if there is a higher power in this universe hear me now and don't take this beautiful woman that I adore away from me. With the impact of the possibility of losing her, I tremble. What am I going on about? What in the hell do I think I'm facing? I have no idea. This is depressing. Snap out of it.

Switching to another venue, now that the event is safely past tense, I relay with unveiled humor Keith’s visit to the OR.

“I can’t tell where your crazy brother’s personality ends or where his mania begins.”

No sooner do I end one Keith story than another finagles its way in. There are so many. “I saw this gangster kid on the street tonight, one of the kids around County, reminds me,” I say in my best W.C. Fields imitation, “of the time Keith took me on a ride to hell. Ah, yeesss, it’s almost funny, in retrospect. I say allmooost.” I laugh and kiss doncha’s beautiful face and hair. “Your brother drives as well with one eye as any race car driver does with normal vision. His peripheral vision is incredible.”

“I wouldn’t go in a car with him if it was raining cyanide. He’s been driving that way since he was twelve years old.”

“Are you kidding? He started driving at twelve?”

“We weren’t socialized properly. My parents were legendary freewheeling kids when they had us. My mother, dreamy like Luise Rainer, and my father was a Kirk Douglas look alike and macho ...”

“What about me?”

“You’re more the James Dean type, sweetheart.”

“You’re like that leggy Auntie Jacky of yours with the Rita Hayworth appeal. To be honest, I’ve never fully recovered from your *Gilda* days.”

“You had it coming so leave it alone. Besides, you were equally as wild when you were a lad so don’t look so disapproving, Sarah’s monster.”

Taking another pull off a joint, my forever flower-child plunks into a one-sided argument on the trade-offs between freedom and structure, as if the twain shall never meet. I listen to her speak and I think of how much she reminds me, in her quirkiness and braininess, of Sarah.

“My mother was indomitable in her conviction that I was destined to be an even greater neurosurgeon than Max Peet. Max Peet inspired Sarah even before she became his neurosurgical scrub nurse. He saved her life.”

“So Freudian.”

“Sarah Lerner was a perfectionist, outshining the call of duty. She put me on track after she picked me up on a beach in Mexico. Determined to direct my future achievements, my mother enlisted department heads to tutor me. She even sat in on my classes....she wasn’t taking any chances with me. Let’s face it, I’m a Renaissance man because my mother worshiped excellence the way the truly religious worship God.” *I’m glad Sarah never will know about what’s happening in my life.* “Anyways, let me finish telling you my story about Keith transporting me through hell, but not without salvation.”

“Salvation? This *should* be unique.”

“Keith is a trip, but I don’t like losing my bearings. Wild man, took me for a-hell-of-a-ride, doing over 100mph through a crack house neighborhood. He was *supposed* to be making a brief stop...not one that would have lasted through eternity. All he had to say, while I was ducking down in the seat trying not to get killed, was these guys don’t seem to see eye to eye with me.”

“Funny.”

“Your maniac brother insisted I take his other gun out of the glove compartment and shoot back at them, and he was serious.”

“You didn’t...”

“I hate guns. It gets stranger. Cornered in an alley, with nowhere to go, dragged out of the car, surrounded by crazed underworld types, I thought for sure this is the end. I began saying the Shema.”

“That’s terrifying! Did your life pass before your eyes?”

“Fortunately, it didn’t. Marmalade, a kid I know from around County, a member of this gang ready to murder us, spared us. It turns out he remembered me. I decompressed a gunshot wound after his best friend, poor kid, received a bullet in the head as an initiation from an opposing gang. A simple neurosurgical exercise on Jimmy Brown saved our asses.”

I turn on the TV. doncha’s face blanches in the blue TV screen light. *Doctor Bernard Lerner, an eminent neurosurgeon from Northwestern University Hospitals, has been indicted by a Federal Grand Jury for filling prescriptions for dilaudid and opiates for fictitious people, dead people, and compliant people.*

“Have you saved anyone’s ass in the DEA lately?”

My first reflex in that moment is “I need a dilaudid and a few valium to chase it. Pass the joint over.” I chug a stiff martini in one swift gulp and take the deepest pull I can off the joint.

“When did this begin?” doncha asks softly.

“While medicating myself for chronic pain from old football injuries....I tried to withdraw but it interfered with my performance.”

She smiles like an angel. “You’re performance is sublime.”

I press my lips to a solitary tear on her warm cheek. “I do the best I can with what I’ve got.”

“I meant them harassing you. Trying to turn a neurosurgeon into a criminal, how many points is that! Go after real culprits” she fires at the TV before she comforts me with strength she has not wasted on anger.

The Fed’s want a prison sentence; drug rehab is too good for this smart-ass wonder-boy. *That’s the news folks! Everybody loves a hanging.* Fear erupts inside me. Sitting in complete silence, I feel doncha’s gashed silence bleed. In the mirror of my soul, I self reflect an awful darkness. *What must she think of me? What will I do if she leaves me?* I unexpectedly become

conscious of another addiction. I am seriously addicted to doncha.

In the morning, I call a well-known criminal attorney, who indicates to me via his cherished client Keith, that if I don't *beat the rap*, I will lose my license to practice medicine. Julius Echeles, a short-tempered bellowing barrister, does not use sugarcoated language. After long years defending unbreakable criminals and a motley assortment of sociopaths, he no longer hears the truth. Frankly, I haven't heard that it interests him. Looking back, I have the perspective that retaining a criminal attorney was a lamentable error. Some things become clearer through the retrospectascope.

Reporters besiege me the minute I step out the door. Swamped with TV cameras, microphones shoved in my face, a smelly sweat logged newsperson, whose name sounds like Mindless Pee, wants to know, "With all the self-medicating you've done, what's the worst thing that ever happened to you in the operating room, Doctor?"

"Watching someone else operate." Standing firm like granite to keep the crowd from trampling me, they expect more. "The truth is simple. There's nothing more to be said."

doncha's voice is in my head. *Forces of the universe touch us and change everything, forever.* Now, I know what it's like to be haunted and hunted in a world of bullies, where the rabbit does not have the gun. Of course, all bullies know the rabbit never has the gun. The rabbit wouldn't know what to do with a gun. A surgical blade is of different metal altogether....and so is character.