

Forced Participation
Third Place Prose 2007

“Don’t put those there,” a stern voice instructed from behind me, as I fumbled to unload the contents of my hands.

Five minutes earlier, at request of my resident, I had gathered the necessary tubes, needles, and alcohol wipes used to draw blood. The medical team had just admitted a new patient—a direct transfer from an outside hospital—and because the phlebotomist had already left for the evening, we had to draw the patient’s blood ourselves. Correction—I needed to draw the patient’s blood myself. Once I had set down the equipment in a location acceptable to the commanding voice, I turned around to see exactly who had delivered the instructions. In the corner of the room, sitting in a chair leaned back against a wall, I discovered a uniformed police officer, casually flipping through a People magazine. He had a rather large gun strapped to his plump waist. His presence caught me off-guard.

“You can’t put needles or sharp things down near the prisoner,” he said, not once looking up from his magazine.

I did a double take, looking back toward the patient. At first glance, he looked no different than anyone else lying in a hospital bed—until I traced the length of his arm with my eyes, realizing that a gleaming steel handcuff bound his wrist to the hospital bed. Upon further examination, I noticed that his other arm also bore a shackle, as did one of his legs; he was virtually immobile, although, judging by the sight of his pale, sickly face, I really couldn’t believe that he would have run off anyway. He looked like he felt horrible. Despite (or, perhaps, because of) the presence of the guard and the handcuffs, I felt supremely uneasy. Wondering what the man had done to land himself in prison, I imagined him as a drug dealer or a burglar or—worse yet—a murderer. Then, taking it one step further, I worked myself into a panic thinking about trying to draw blood—something I was already horrible at—from a hardened criminal. I’d seen *Silence of the Lambs*; if I didn’t perform perfectly, I imagined that he’d find some way to hunt me and my family down: *This is payback for the sloppy, painful job your son did while drawing my blood!*

With my poor track record of drawing blood, I instantly felt doomed. My short but illustrious blood drawing career consisted of two awful, scarring experiences. The first time I had drawn blood, I had practiced on one of my very unlucky classmates. Although I had miraculously punctured the correct vein, I had fumbled while trying to connect the small tube to the needle, inadvertently moving the needle and allowing a giant bruise to form under his skin. When I finally realized what I had done, he already had a gigantic, purple contusion spreading across his forearm; it looked incredibly painful. After beginning my internal medicine rotation, I had held out for as long as possible before attempting to draw blood again. Oh, I have lecture now or I think the nurse was planning on drawing the blood, I would lie to my residents, avoiding the task at all costs. Although it worked for the most part during those first few weeks in the clinics, I knew that I could not escape it for long. At the end of one particularly exhausting day, I had the second of my two encounters, this time with a middle-aged woman who—with just my luck—was already deathly afraid of the medical system.

Outside the woman’s room, one of my residents had instructed me to insert the needle with a quick, firm motion—the quicker, the less pain, the better. I took the advice very seriously and about two minutes later, the resident came running into the room in response to the deafening scream of my patient. Apparently I had used too quick of a movement; the needle had

literally bounced off the woman's skin, instead spearing her forearm about an inch off of my intended mark. She shrieked in pain, while I quickly removed the evidence. For a solid two weeks, I was the running joke of the residents; every time I walked into the residents' room, someone would make a dart-throwing motion with their hands, bursting into laughter.

Not surprisingly, I'd been reluctant to try again. Tonight, however, no one else had wanted to deal with the prisoner, so the duty of drawing the labs had been handed down the totem pole to the lowest ranking member of the team; I had no choice and neither did the prisoner. My stomach churned with a queasy feeling, knowing that both the prisoner and I were about to have an experience that each of us would have preferred never to have had.

Following the guard's stern instructions, I dropped the needles into the safety of one of the pockets on my short white coat, and then I silently went to work at the patient's bedside. Taking more time than I needed to unwrap and arrange the equipment, I used the extra moments to calm my nerves and steady my shaking hands. For my own safety—and that of my family—I knew that this had to go flawlessly. No missing the veins, no bruises, no pain.

"You're nervous," the prisoner astutely observed, breaking the silence. My trembling hands had betrayed me.

"Are you just afraid of me?" he questioned me, chuckling. "Or should I be more worried that you don't know what you're doing?"

"I think both," I blurted out, unable to censor my thoughts in my current state of terror. The man laughed some more.

"You gotta relax, man," he continued, "I promise I'm not going to hurt you."

For some reason, his voice comforted me; I trusted him.

"Tell you what, I'll make you a deal," he offered. "I'll teach you how to draw blood in return for a Snickers candy bar." It seemed like a fair trade to me.

"I've had too many damn blood draws in my life for my sickle cell," he continued, adding credibility to his case. "I could do it myself—with my eyes closed."

"It's a deal," I replied. In truth, I would have been willing to bring the man a five-course meal; it would have been a small price to avoid any future retribution for the pain I would undoubtedly cause him. Having calmed down a bit, I finished arranging the supplies, and the man began his lesson.

"There, the big vein," he directed me. "Yeah, that one."

I tapped the vein and it swelled in response, then I moved to pick up the needle.

"No, no—slow down," he corrected me, "You have to hold the vein in place or you'll lose it."

Pinning his bulging vein beneath several of my fingers, I readied the needle.

"Good," he continued. "Now, with steady pressure, push the needle into the vein."

I sunk the needle into his arm. He winced and I noticed that, with both of his hands, he had grasped the hospital blanket beneath them; his knuckles were white. Immediately, I pulled the needle out, defeated.

"I'll go get my resident," I mumbled, resigned.

"No. You're going to learn this," he ordered. "You have to hold the needle at more of an angle, or—like you just did—it's going to go right through the vein and into my arm."

Already, a small pocket of blood had begun to collect under the man's skin.

Reluctantly, I opened another needle, wiped his forearm off with an alcohol swab, and then prepared for my next attempt.

"Aim the needle more shallow this time."

Still shaking, I placed the needle next to his skin.

“Slow and steady pressure.”

I pushed.

“Stop,” he instructed, “there, good.”

Attaching a small tube to the needle, we then watched as the man’s maroon blood squirted against the bottom of the vial, swirling, gathering, and miraculously filling the tube. I let out an audible sigh of relief and the man—my new teacher—smiled.

“I’ll put in a good word for you,” he praised me. “You’ve got the touch now.”

The following morning, after making a quick stop at the vending machine, I went back to the man’s room with his Snickers bar in my hand. After greeting both him and the police officer, I checked with the guard to see if it was okay to give the man his candy bar. The guard eyed me up and down and then made a “Sure, why not?” expression with his face. I lay the candy bar across my teacher’s tray table.

“Thanks, man,” he said.

“No, thank you,” I countered, continuing to thank him profusely and feeling a bit upset with myself that I had initially stereotyped the man as a dangerous, cold-blooded convict. Who knows, maybe he was dangerous, maybe he wasn’t; even so, he’d treated me with nothing but respect the entire time; it angered me that I hadn’t treated him with an equal respect right at the outset. After all, he’d been the first person patient enough to help me get over my fear of drawing blood—an unlikely teacher, but a kind, generous, and skilled one, nevertheless.

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