

Light at the End

Elijah had been in Natchez for four days and had yet to visit the hospital. He considered calling Miss Addie and seeing if she might want to accompany him. The thought of being alone with any lifeless body didn't exactly thrill him. What would he say? What would he do? He was certain Miss Addie could fill the silence. What he didn't know was how he might react after all these years. What if he *did* feel something? What if he felt nothing at all? No, it was definitely best he go alone, at least until he got a feel for things. As for when? He was getting nothing accomplished at the easel as long as his mind was consumed by self-pity for having to endure this guilt. So he decided to not think about it anymore and just go.

There was very little traffic until he got off the interstate. But even downtown Natchez was nothing like New York City. He quickly arrived at the hospital with little time to reconsider. The place was exactly what he expected from a municipal hospital - a dump - as were the people he passed in the lobby - poor, ragged and either desperate or threatening looking. A kindly old lady manning the chaotic receptionist's desk suggested he try the ICU on the third floor just before her position was completely overrun by impatient degenerates.

One was broken and someone had thrown up in a second, leaving a long line in front of the remaining elevator. So he took the stairs. At the upper landing, he paused to allow his heart rate to return to normal. Was he really winded from three flights of stairs? If that didn't compel him to start exercising again then maybe the likelihood that many of Lionel's health issues were hereditary would.

His breathing never quite returned to normal. *Don't overthink this thing,* he cautioned himself. *It's not like you have to say or do anything.* Despite what Miss Addie had suggested, his visit to the lawyer's office had confirmed that all brain activity had ceased. He was in no uncertain terms "brain dead."

Just get in there and get it over with.

There was a high counter in a cutout of the long hallway. Two younger looking nurses, one shuffling papers and the other filing folders, were busy behind it. He stopped there and waited for either to look up. The closest one, who was pale and anemic looking, sighed as though his presence was another inconvenience.

"How can I..." she began before making eye contact, "...help you?" she completed as a smile replaced her previous scowl. She set down her can of Pepsi as he casually noted the name Chandra on her nametag.

The other more heavyset young lady with big hair immediately recognized the change in her coworker's inflection and glanced away from the file cabinet. Her nametag read Gwen. Both women stood and moved side-by-side with their shoulders touching directly in front of Elijah.

"I'm looking for Lionel Buckner," he answered.

They all heard the lively humming coming toward them from one of the attached hallways. Both nurses stared in the direction of the disruption and frowned.

"Elijah," the familiar voice called out.

He turned from the counter and Miss Addie was hastening toward him. She placed a clipboard on the countertop then wrapped him up in another friendly hug.

"I'm so happy you made it," she continued while affectionately patting his back. "Your poppa will be so excited that you're here." She took his hand and started walking him by the desk and down the hall.

Both of the younger nurses waved once her back was turned to them.

“That paperwork ain’t gonna complete itself,” Miss Addie barked at the pair over her shoulder.

“They keep sendin’ me these youngsters that don’t know an otoscope from a stethoscope. The big one’s pregnant and she ain’t sure how. And the pale one faints at the sight of blood,” she complained in a loud whisper.

“I didn’t realize you were a nurse,” Elijah confessed.

“For over 35 years. I been lookin’ after for your poppa since he came to the ICU. They wanted to move him to Long Term Care but I wouldn’t let them. That place ain’t nothin’ more than a morgue.”

She abruptly stopped in front of room number 334. Then she turned to face him while holding both his hands. “Now, he’s gonna be connected to some machines you understand.”

Elijah nodded.

“And even if he doesn’t respond, just remember that his spirit hears everythin’ you say. So just talk to him just like you were at the dinner table.”

She likely didn’t realize that they hadn’t had dinner together in 15 years? And even back then, there wasn’t much conversation going on.

She then looked him directly in the eyes with a serious but empathetic expression on her face. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

He nodded again.

“Just you bein’ here is a good start. Just relax and visit with him about New York.” She smiled a warm smile, shook his hands up and down twice then let them go. “Now give me a second to tell him you’re here,” she directed then disappeared into the room.

Her voice was loud enough that he could hear her talking through the closed door. The moment he heard his name he stopped processing her words. His palms were sweaty, his face was warm and his stomach was unsettled. It was good that she was here after all.

Miss Addie held the door open after she reappeared. Her smile had turned eager suggesting she was expecting something significant to occur. He wished she hadn’t placed that kind of pressure on the situation since he was struggling enough with his own uncertain expectations.

The room was small but clean. The blinds were mostly shut and a table lamp softly lit the area near the bed. There were a few flowers and a small plant on a sill below the window and lots of machines on either side of the bed with wires and tubes connecting them. He felt Miss Addie’s hand on the small of his back easing him forward.

“Didn’t I tell you how handsome he was?” she initiated. As he stopped at Lionel’s feet, she continued by him to the bedside. She grabbed the closest lifeless hand and affectionately held it between hers. Then she attempted to engage Elijah. “You must have gotten your height from your momma.”

He searched his empty brain for something to say. While Miss Addie was pretending neither was comatose, it was beginning to feel more like they both were.

She decided to make it even easier for him. “I told your poppa that you moved some of your things into the studio.”

“I hope that was alright?” Elijah questioned as though Lionel might object.

“Of course it was alright. When’s the last time you used it? At least three months,” she said as her eyes went back and forth between father and son as though she was listening to their conversation.

Elijah was staring at the fuzzy green socks on the feet that stuck out the end of the sheets.

“We couldn’t get him to keep still so I had to put socks on his feet so his toes wouldn’t get cold,” she said to give purpose to his staring. “They keep this place nearly frozen this time of year.”

“It is a little chilly,” he agreed, as he felt a bead roll down his temple. His eyes hesitantly worked their way up the motionless body, which was thinner than he remembered.

Miss Addie anticipated his thoughts as she rubbed on his skinny arm. “Keep losing weight and they may take you back in the Army,” she joked.

Elijah noticed a cross pendent atop his gown.

“You should tell him about how you decided to get baptized,” she prompted as though he was just being coy. “The cross was a gift from some of his friends,” she excused when he said nothing - because he was in a coma.

Elijah didn’t remember Lionel having friends. And while they routinely went to church, he didn’t think of him as particularly religious. The man also hated jewelry and wouldn’t even wear a watch. But it had been 15 years. People change.

Thankfully, Lionel’s eyes were closed as he finally made it up to his face. *Of course they were.* His ordinarily round cheeks were gaunt and his skin seemed as thin as pork casings. His face was cleanly shaven except that Miss Addie had missed a small patch beneath his chin. His head was entirely bald and Elijah humorously recalled a time when Lionel had let his sideburns grow for months down to the bottom of his ear. He looked completely ridiculous and had the “pork chops” removed the next time he went to the barbershop. The traces of a smile had discreetly snuck up on Elijah’s cautious face.

Lionel’s lips were parted enough to allow a thick plastic tube to pass through. There was another thicker tube secured by a heavily taped band around his head and a third thinner one attached to his arm. Several other wires extended from beneath the V-neck of his gown and all were bound together as they dangled from the bed up to several machines on a rolling cart. A green line in a small display window rhythmically pulsed the moment one of the machines beeped. Suddenly he realized that those peaks and beeps were the difference between this being a hospital visit or a casket viewing. And somewhere behind that stack of machines was an electrical plug that kept them powered and him alive. The smile from before discreetly disappeared.

“The electrocardiogram monitors his heart,” Miss Addie explained pointing to the wires coming from his chest. “The electroencephalogram monitors brain activity and the ventilator regulates breathin’,” she added while adjusting the tube in his mouth. “It looks worse than it is.”

“I’m sure you’re used to seeing this,” Elijah presumed. He certainly wasn’t. And he was reasonably sure that things were exactly as hopeless as they looked.

She smiled sympathetically. It occurred to him that if he had any compassion at all, he would be the one smiling sympathetically at her. After all, she was far more emotionally invested in this situation than he was.

Miss Addie resumed trying to stimulate conversation. “Bernie was tellin’ your poppa about the painting you was workin’ on.”

Elijah cleared his dry throat. “It’s the latest in a series that I’m calling *Perspectives*. The one she saw...” he began then hesitated. After all, the piece was a commentary on the differing views of what happened after death. And although he deliberately tried not to convey his own opinions through his works, he personally sided with the less eternally optimistic camp on this one. That viewpoint seemed particularly awkward given these circumstances. “...is a work in progress,” he altered.

He decided to change the subject. "I've been driving his truck," he directed at Miss Addie as though she was required to translate for him.

She nodded toward the expressionless man lying on the bed instead.

"I hope you don't mind," he grudgingly addressed to Lionel.

"Of course that's fine. It needs to be run every once in a while. Bernie said you was fixin' somethin' under the hood?" she then answered.

Lionel knew that his son was about as mechanical as his father was artistic. He would recognize immediately that it was a lie - *if he weren't a vegetable*, he reminded himself.

"I was just poking around a bit. I fired up the old tractor and mowed the grass," he told them instead.

Miss Addie nodded approvingly.

"I also trimmed a branch that was scratching at the roof," he added.

She nudged the patient as though his attention had just drifted. "Did you hear that? You been complainin' about that branch for how long? For months I been hearin' about that branch," she responded.

There was a moment of pause, which Elijah immediately took advantage of. "Well I'm sure I've interrupted your resting long enough."

"He gets plenty of rest," Miss Addie immediately rejected.

"Even so. I better get back to my painting. I've got a deadline coming up," he persisted.

Miss Addie frowned but then immediately turned to Lionel and leaned down to his ear. "Elijah is leaving now. Wasn't it nice of him to drop by though? Maybe next time he could tell you more about his work. Wouldn't that be interestin'?"

Elijah properly understood it to be advice for him to come more prepared next time.

"And there's so many things you were wantin' to tell him about what you been up to as well," she encouraged Lionel this time. "I know you mentioned them in your letters but you two are both too modest. Family loves to hear every little detail about what those we love are up to."

She clearly viewed this as a progression that was going to require much patience. A progression toward what was the question? The lawyer had been clear. There was no brain activity. He couldn't hear, think or feel anything. The chance of recovery was zero! Yet, if he were to sit up right now as though waking from a nap, he imagined Miss Addie wouldn't be the least bit surprised. Of course, she'd then have to tend to the son who'd just passed out.

He turned for the door and once out in the hallway, he could hear her footsteps rapidly closing on him. That she hadn't said anything yet meant that she was probably suppressing her disappointment. After all, that was his father lying there in that bed. A father that he had ignored for 15 years. A father that he could only spare 15 minutes for now. He waited for her to overtake him after which he fully expected a scolding.

As he passed the nurses station, the nurses smiled and waved again. He nodded back at them. It was making him nervous that Miss Addie was remaining a step behind. *Just get it over with*, he silently urged her as he slowed for the elevator. At least now she'd have no choice.

Instead, he felt her hand rest tenderly on his back. "Thanks for comin'," she said in an unexpectedly soft voice. "It really does mean so much to him that you're here."

"I just didn't know what to say," he confessed.

"It's been a while. It's normal for things to be a little uncomfortable." Finally, she stepped around him and they locked eyes "Just promise me you'll keep tryin'?"

It occurred to him that she was placing all her faith in him and some hopeful notion that there actually was light at the end. It was a toss-up which reality would disappoint her the most.

He pressed the elevator button then waited as the silent pressure felt like it was squeezing his head. "You said there were some things he wanted to tell me," he mumbled.

"There are. But that's between you two," she replied.

The more he recognized her sincerity the more his contempt turned to pity. On one hand, she was so optimistic, so genuinely thoughtful. But on the other, so naïve, so trusting, so willing to place her faith in a mirage.

"You're a sweet lady," he patronizingly offered. "But I think we need to be realistic here. I met with the lawyers on Monday and they say there's nothing that can be done."

Tears immediately filled her eyes. She brought both his hands together and clasped hers tightly around them. "You can't sign them papers yet," she said firmly. "I know the science better than most. And I ain't expectin' him to just wake up like nothin' happened. But things ain't run their course yet. You just gotta give it some time. Promise me you'll give it some time."

"Give what time?" he sincerely posed. "What is it I'm waiting for?"

"I don't know what either. I just feel Him workin'," she earnestly expressed.

"Him" was God no doubt. And this was exactly how he worked - in silent ambiguity. "I promise," he replied followed by a long pause. "Looks like they're still having issues with the elevator," he eventually noted. "Maybe I should take the stairs."

"That's probably a good idea. So, I'll see you here next time?" she left open-ended.

"I look forward to it," he replied as he headed toward the exit.

"Call if you need anythin'."

"I sure will," he said as the door shut behind him. He paused again on the landing. "Well at least that's over with," he muttered. He thought about the legal papers he had scanned. They did indeed include provisions to "remove all forms of artificial life-support," to allow Lionel Elijah Buckner Senior to peacefully pass into whatever darkness or light awaited. Suddenly he felt a compelling urge to paint.

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It had been dark outside for several hours before he stopped for the evening. His mind wanted to continue, though his hands were starting to get less precise. He leaned back in his chair and looked up at the single light bulb dangling from an extension cord above him. The plug at this end of the cord had been sliced off, and the connecting wires bundled in electric tape were visible. The four long fluorescent fixtures were plenty to light up the room which meant that this one had been added to supplement something in this very spot. Lionel's handyman work didn't necessarily require detail and precision. It was ideal for painting however.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on regenerating the studio in his mind. It was an exercise that taught a painter to be more observant of the details of their environment so that they could be retrieved later. But he'd always been less interested in copying an actual scene than he was in creating the suggestion of some important detail that ultimately expressed more about the subject matter. He could still see the image of the light bulb through his eyelid. It reminded him of his painting beyond the obvious contrast between light and darkness. He mashed his eyelids shut and still somehow a speck of light remained.

