

PULSUS PARADOXUS

By Daly Walker

The snow began in the morning and continued into the afternoon. It was Saturday and I was the surgeon on trauma call. As was my habit when I was tethered to the telephone, I decided to listen to opera. I wanted nothing but a little time to myself so I could lie on the couch and let the music drain me of loneliness and allow me to escape the sadnesses of my life—my estrangement from my troubled daughter, Polly, and the recent and unexpected death of my wife. The opera I chose was a favorite of mine, Mozart’s “Magic Flute.” The overture began, its heavy chords sounding like knocks on a door. Through the window, I watched the snow fall and let the orchestra’s glistening shimmer of sounds flow through me. The music did as I wanted it to. It transported me into a state of reverie where I became the heroic Prince Tamino rescuing my love, Pamina, from the forces of evil. But then phone rang.

“Damn it,” I said.

Medicine is a fickle and inconsiderate mistress who holds no regard for her lover’s other life, and I knew it would be the emergency room and that the music was over. I muted the sound system and picked up the receiver. The ER nurse’s voice was high-pitched with excitement. I was needed stat to attend to a young man who had been shot in the chest. She said he was in shock when he came in, but his blood pressure rose with a rapid infusion on intravenous fluids. I told her to call the OR and to have six units of type specific blood available. I was on my way. I hung up the phone and

took a deep breath, thinking of what lay ahead. As I rose from the couch, I felt like Sisyphus must have felt at the bottom of the mountain preparing to roll the stone again.

I pulled on a pair of snow boots and a parka and hurried through the house to the garage. I passed the open door of Polly's room and saw her empty bed. A feeling of abandonment and failure chilled me. I pictured Polly there asleep with her hair loose on the pillow. I thought, *what if it was my daughter on that gurney in the emergency room*. I knew that the young man, however good or bad he was, was someone's child, someone's Polly. Age was beginning to take its toll on my surgical skills. My fingers weren't as nimble as they once were, and operations were harder for me. I wondered if I still had the power to save him. I wished for a magic flute.

I backed my Land Rover out into the falling snow. The radio was playing bad repetitious rock, the kind of music that Polly would listen to. I turned it off and tried to not let myself think of her in the grimy motel apartment where she lived with Wes Mitchell. I tried not to let myself think of the checks she forged or her mother's jewelry she sold to buy their drugs.

I wanted to remember her the way she was in the days before Wes Mitchell, when her mother was alive and Polly was a high-spirited and utterly happy child who filled my heart with gladness. I wanted to remember her as a willowy high school girl with wonderful pale blue eyes and a sense of humor that hit me just right. I wanted to remember the dance of her long brown ponytail as she loped over grassy hills with her cross-country team. I wanted to hear the sound of her voice reciting French vocabulary. I wanted to laugh with her and feel together and blameless. It stopped my heart to think how Wes Mitchell had ruined her life, and mine, too. I could never escape the pain and hatred. The thought of him nearly drove me mad.

On the slick street to the hospital, the urgency in the nurse's voice over the phone came back to me, and my thoughts returned to the man who had been shot. I blew my horn and skated the Land Rover through a red light. The fishtailing of my rear wheels heightened my excitement. Big

flakes splattered on the windshield. A swirling cloud of white surrounded me with a sense of duty and uncertainty.

Ahead under the ER's canopy, a cone of red light from an ambulance circled in a white gloom. My heart pounded harder. As I had first done thirty years ago as an intern working the Saturday night knife and gun club in the Cook County ER, and later as a battalion surgeon with the infantry in the Mekong Delta, I recited to myself the ABCs of trauma resuscitation. A for airway. B for breathing. Would I have to trach the guy? C for circulation. I told myself to watch for cardiac tamponade or a tension pneumothorax. Bullets bounce off of bones and pinball, boring unpredictable paths through the body. I cautioned myself not to get trapped into assuming that the obvious chest wound was his only significant injury.

I turned on to the plowed obsidian surface of the parking lot, thinking of all the nights I'd spent at the hospital. The stabbings. The shootings. I'd seen pretty much everything and tried not to harden my heart against it. In Nam, it was Pungi sticks, AK 47s, Claymores. Here it was Glockes, switchblades, shotguns, even assault rifles. You thought you lived in a civilized country, but it seemed as if I had spent my life working in a war zone. I knew ballistics, had seen what guns do to people. I detested them and the wounds their bullets created—the lives they destroyed.

I parked in a space next to a police car. Through the windows of the emergency room, I could see a woman pushing an x-ray machine. Nurses flitted about like a covey of white birds in flight. Everyone was moving in fast-forward. I had the feeling that comes from watching disaster from a distance. It was the same way I had felt in Nam hovering above a fire in a helicopter. I climbed out of the Land Rover and hurried through a dense white snowfall. My breath condensed in little puffs like smoke. From somewhere in the distance came the howl of an anguished dog. Metal doors sprung open, and I burst into the ER. Angie, a tall gangly nurse with ash-blond hair and wearing blue scrubs, raised her hand in greeting.

“Look what the cat drug in,” she said feigning cheerfulness.

“What you see is what you get,” I said, stomping snow from my boots and casting my parka aside. “Okay. Where’s this denizen of our fine city?”

She thrust an x-ray at me and pointed down the corridor.

“Trauma two. He’s rocky. Can’t keep his pressure up.”

For a second, I held the chest film with its smoky images up to the ceiling light. I saw the boot-like shape of his heart and the bullet, a white button superimposed on a gray sternal shadow. My adrenal surged, heating me up.

“What can you tell me about him?” I asked as I hustled behind Angie toward trauma two.

“He’s nineteen. Otherwise healthy. Shot with a twenty-two revolver. An accident, of course.”

“I’ll bet his best friend did it. Just slipped cleaning his gun.”

“Doctor, so cynical.” She shook her head and sighed. “Actually it’s a shame. He’s a nice looking kid.”

“A real choir-boy I’ll bet.”

I grabbed the stethoscope that was draped around her neck, and I stepped into the trauma cubical where a burr-headed policeman with a pistol on his belt bent over the stretcher trying to restrain a thrashing, moaning young man. As I approached them, I glanced up at a cardiac monitor that was beeping in a rapid staccato. His QRS complex looked good, and he was in a *sinus tachycardia*, but I didn’t like the digital printout that said his blood pressure was only seventy over forty.

I stepped up to the gurney across from the policeman to begin my examination. I lowered my eyes to the patient’s ashen gray face. Long lashes. An aquiline nose. A little blond mustache. His features were delicate, almost pretty. In disbelief, I recognized Wes Mitchell, and my heart

constricted. I felt as if the blood puddled on the floor was mine, that it had suddenly drained from me.

I gathered myself and made a quick assessment of his wound. His shirt had been ripped open, and over his left nipple there was a tattoo of a little blue and red devil wearing a cape. On the right, there was a small blood-crusted hole in the skin below the clavicle where the bullet had entered. I tried to put his identity out of my mind, but it was impossible to do. I wondered what I had done wrong to cause my daughter to be with someone like him.

Wes jerked his arm away from the policeman and swung it wildly. I grabbed his wrist.

“Lie still, Wes,” I said.

“You know him, Doc,” the policeman said.

“Yeah. Unfortunately, I do.”

Wes flung his head from side to side. He raised up from the gurney and screamed, “Help me! Help me!”

His plea blew through the room like a cold wind. I started to grab him by the hair and jerk his head down, but before I could, the policeman reached up with his big hand and pinned Wes’s head to the stretcher.

“Easy, son,” he said.

“Let me up.” Wes flailed his arms like a drowning man. “Let go. I can’t breathe.”

“Lie still, goddamn it,” I said. “Don’t talk.”

I wondered who shot him and if Polly was there. I wondered where she was now and if she was safe.

Suddenly Wes quit struggling. His body went limp. I knew if I didn’t act he was going to die.

The last time I saw Polly was a month ago at the Candlelight Motel where she lived with Wes. The run-down motor inn's blue neon sign advertised apartments, efficiencies, rooms—by the day, the week, or the month. Inside unit ten Polly sat at Formica-top table, sipping a can of Mountain Dew and smoking a cigarette. Her eyes were a beautiful cornflower blue and haggard. Her skin was pale as paste. In the corner, the coils of a space heater glowed orange, but the room was cold. The air smelled like singed paper.

For a moment, I scanned the linoleum-floored efficiency. There was a sofa, a television set with rabbit ears, a kitchenette with a sink, a hot plate, and a small fridge. In the corner was Wes' electric bass guitar. Through a door, I could see the metal bed where Polly slept with him. The starkness of the place, the poverty of her life made me want to cry.

“You look thin, honey,” I said. “I wish you didn't smoke. Have you been sick?”

I reached across the table and touched her forehead to feel for fever. She pushed my hand away.

“Where's Wes?” I said.

She eyed me suspiciously.

“At work,” she said. “He works at a music store. Why do you want to know?”

“I just wondered.”

“Why are you here?”

“I want you to come home.”

I said it gently. My voice seemed thin. I inhaled deeply. I felt as if there wasn't enough air to breathe. I rose from my chair. I moved around the table and laid my hands on her shoulders.

“Don't touch me,” she said.

I stepped away from her and looked down through her tangled hair at her slim back. Her shoulders were as narrow as little girl's.

“Come home, Polly,” I said. “We can make a new start. You can get off drugs and go to college.”

“I’m off drugs,” she said. “I’m with Wes.” She looked at me with icy blue eyes. “You don’t like Wes because he is different from you. Well, I love it that he is different. He’s not like you think. He’s off of drugs. He has a job. He’s playing in a band and writing music. He wants me to go back to school.”

“Polly,” I said, “please come home.”

“Why should I come home? When I was home, you were hardly ever around, and when you were, nothing I did suited you. My grades were never good enough. I wasn’t dressed right. My friends weren’t good enough.” She stuffed her cigarette into the Mountain Dew can. It sizzled and smoke spun out of the hole in the top. “Nothing I do will ever be good enough for you. Why should I come home?”

Suddenly, I was aware of my age and that I might not have long to live. I dreaded nothing more than dying alone. A feeling of desperation came over me. It was as if time were running out.

“I’m sorry,” I said, fighting back tears, swallowing to get the words out. “It’ll be different now. I’ve made mistakes. We can learn from our mistakes. We can start over. It’s not too late to turn things around.”

“I’m not coming home.” She lit another cigarette.

“Polly, you can’t stay here. This isn’t the way to live. You need to come home and get your life together.”

“I’m not coming home. Now leave me alone.”

She turned from me and walked into the bedroom. I looked through the door at her sitting on the metal bed, backlit by the neon candlelight of the motel sign winking through a window. We remained lost to each other.

I plugged the stethoscope into my ears and put the bell against Wes Mitchell's chest, over his heart. The lub-dub of its beat was muffled, a distant and sinister sound, as if played softly on a kettledrum.

I glanced up at the monitor with my left hand resting on his chest while I felt his pulse with my right. When his ribs rose under my touch, my fingers on his wrist could feel his blood pressure dampening. It was an ominous sign, something called *Pulsus Paradoxus*, a rare physiological phenomena that I had learned in medical school. I had seen it in Vietnam with frag wounds to the chest and once when a cardiologist perforated a heart during cardiac catheterization. The paradox of his pulse told me there was blood in the pericardial sack that was tamponading his heart and restricting its beat. He needed to have needle stuck into the pericardium and the blood aspirated. He needed it now or he would die. I looked at his eyes. His pupils were big black tunnels to the brain. They seemed to be staring at me, and I stared back.

“Doctor,” Angie said. “His pressure’s dropping.”

I stood feeling his pulse fade under my fingers. Each beat became weaker. The intervals between the green blips of his heart tracing were a lengthening green line. As if paralyzed, I felt the rise and fall of his chest. His respirations were slowing. Each breath was a labored gasp. Then his chest stopped moving.

When I was a resident, I was part of a surgical team that severed Siamese twins who were joined at the chest. We knew that we were killing one twin to save the other. As I watched Wes with his heart drowning in its own blood, I told myself that if I let him die, I would be sacrificing him to save my daughter. The power of the idea twisted around me like a rope.

A spasm passed through Wes. His body jerked like a condemned man in an electric chair. Through the window over the sink, I could see that it was snowing harder. I sensed that my wife, wherever she was, was watching me through the murky light.

“Oh, God,” Angie gasped. “We’re going to lose him. He’s about to arrest.”

“Crash cart.” I barked.

Frantically, she rattled a red metal cart on rollers to the bedside. From it I grabbed a long eighteen gauge spinal needle attached to a 50cc syringe. I plunged the needle into Wes’s chest just below his sternum and directed its tip toward his left shoulder. I advanced the needle slowly at a forty-five degree angle toward the heart while applying suction on the syringe. I kept my eye on a flurry of agonal blips on the heart monitor. My own heart was pounding. Tiny beads of sweat clung to my forehead. Suddenly, I felt the suction pressure give way. I looked down at the syringe. Dark blood flowed into the glass cylinder. As the syringe filled and the pericardial sack was emptied of blood, the ECG waveform returned to normal and Wes’s blood pressure rose to eighty millimeters of mercury. It was magical. Sleight of hand. A white dove appearing out of a silk handkerchief. The work of a magic flute. Or maybe it was Biblical. Lazarus rising from the dead.

I stabilized the needle against Wes’s chest with my hand. His skin was sticky and moist, like clay. I detached the syringe from the needle and emptied the blood into a metal basin that Angie held in her trembling hands. I repeated the aspiration three times. On the fourth attempt no blood filled the syringe. I felt Wes’s heart tapping the tip of the needle. The ECG waveform changed to an injury pattern, telling me I was touching the heart. I quickly withdrew the needle from Wes’s chest. I watched the tracing return to normal. I let out a great sigh. *Was it one of relief? Or was it the resignation of defeat?*

“Praise the Lord,” Angie said.

With the syringe still in my hand, I stepped back from the gurney and waited to see if his vital signs would hold. When I saw his pulse and blood pressure were stable, I laid the glass syringe on the crash cart. I turned to Angie and told her to notify surgery that we were on the way with the gunshot wound. Then I asked the policeman who shot Wes.

“Some guy who was trying to rob the music store where he works,” he said. “They’ve got him downtown.” He cocked head and looked at me. “How’d you know him?”

I hesitated a moment, and then I answered, “When you’ve been around as long as I have, you get to know a lot of people.”

The surgery was anticlimactic. A second year surgery resident could have preformed the operation with a little supervision. The bullet had only creased the left ventricle of Wes’s heart, sparing his coronary arteries and the electrical conducting system. I quickly repaired the lacerated cardiac muscle with three simple sutures tied over felt plegettes. In my hand, his heart was heavy and rubbery. It rhythmically clenched and unclenched like a determined fist. Its beat felt like forgiveness. Before I closed the chest incision, I cut a small window in the pericardium to prevent tamponade if bleeding reoccurred.

After I changed from my scrubs into street clothes, I stopped by the recovery room and looked at Wes still asleep on the gurney. He was breathing on his own. His slight body was pale as the snow falling outside the window. His eyes were closed and his mouth was set in almost a smile, as if he possessed some secret knowledge. Bathed in fluorescent light, he seemed to glow with a kind innocence. I pictured my daughter held tight in Wes’ thin arms. In the dizziness of the moment, I suddenly felt tired. I had a strange urge to lie down beside him.

For a long while, I stood there with my fingers on his pulse and thinking. The green blips of his heart monitor that marched across the screen above him seemed to be spelling out a coded message. It said what brought Wes and I together was more destiny than coincidence. Something told me things would be different now.

When I left the hospital, I stepped out into the silence of a snowy night. It was as if I had entered a large cold white room. A freezing wind made my eyes water. Big flakes were falling. Illuminated by a streetlight, they crisscrossed in the wind like yellow ashes. Everything was blanketed in snow: the winter trees, the roofs of houses where families were eating supper, the police cars in the parking lot, the deserted street. I pictured the snow falling on my wife's lonely and windswept grave. I envisioned it falling, too, on the Candle Light's blue neon sign with its flickering flame. I turned up the fur collar of my parka against the cold and headed to the motel to tell Polly Wes was alive and all was well.