

## **Chapter 1: Impulse**

What I *can* do for Mr. Cheung and what I *should* do for Mr. Cheung could be entirely different.

Before I met him during my first year of medical residency, Mr. Cheung survived an aggressive cancer that arose from the lining of nose and pharynx. But the chemotherapy and radiation that cured his cancer left him vulnerable to a fungal infection, which eventually found its way to the base of his skull and to the lining of an artery feeding his brain, adhering stubbornly. Periodically, pieces of this infection broke away from the wall of the artery, lodging in the blood vessels of his brain and causing unpredictable strokes that had already robbed him of his ability to walk independently, swallow food, and speak.

“There’s no surgery to remove the fungal infection,” our hospital’s neurosurgeon told me when I consulted him, wondering if a surgery could perhaps remove or reduce the size of the infection. “It’s just a matter of time before another piece of the fungus breaks off and he has another stroke. All you can do is continue the anti-fungal medications he’s taking and try to prevent another clot, but bottom line, this guy isn’t going to do well.”

I sat in the residents’ room on the ninth floor of the university hospital in San Francisco, reading and re-reading Mr. Cheung’s electronic chart. The room itself was a workspace lined with computers and lockers for the resident physicians in the internal medicine residency training program, which I began six months ago. From this windowed room on the ninth floor of the university hospital, I could catch the first glimpses of the evening fog’s gray fingers stretching forth from the San Francisco bay, grasping the city in its powdery embrace. During overnight calls spent seeing and admitting new patients to the hospital, I wrote my patient notes in this

same room, pausing to watch the sun spill slowly across the city like liquid gold against the rust and pink of the day's earliest sky.

Between my four years in medical school, two years doing research, and the start of my residency, I had been living in the Bay Area for seven years but I'd never found a view of San Francisco as incredible as the one from inside the walls of this hospital. The reliability of the sunrise and sunset over the city's bridges and hills and unexpected vast patches of greenery contrasted sharply with the controlled but unpredictable atmosphere of the hospital. I pressed my palm against this window most mornings, its surface bejeweled with the day's earliest dew, watching condensation collect around the edges of my fingers. I pressed my palm against this window while on call at night, wishing I could reach through to the wisps of low clouds, the mess of stars exquisitely visible overhead. This window, the thin barrier between the order of nature and the chaos of the hospital.

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I'm not sure whether I became a doctor because I loved medicine or because I wanted to be just like my mother. The daughter of refugees, she grew up in Bombay after my grandparents fled the city of Rawalpindi amidst extreme religious violence that marked India's independence. She had wanted to be a doctor ever since she was seven years old, when she met the family practitioner who came to their home with a shiny black bag whenever someone fell ill. The bag had a copper clasp that snapped open shut with a professional *click*. She imagined it was a magic bag, full of pills and potions and roots that scared away the bugs that made people sick. She sat next to him as he sewed up her brother's chin after he fell, and watched from the doorway as he applied cool compresses and gave a bottle of bright blue pills to her mother when her face burned with fever and her throat swelled. He had soft hands and a quiet manner. Just being

around him made her feel better. She often peeked into his black bag and found it hard to tell where it ended. Maybe when he put his hand in, she told me years later, he actually reached into secret worlds. Once, she almost put her hand in to see what would happen, but heard his footsteps and stopped. My mother wanted a magic bag of her own. She wanted to comfort people with her presence, to scare away bugs and fevers and to sew up people's accidents.

In my child's mind, my mother and medicine were inextricably intertwined, sometimes indistinguishable, each shaping and shaped by the other. Medicine lived in our hallway closet, where my mother stored her sky blue scrubs that I occasionally used as pajamas. Medicine carpeted my mother's car, long strands of her black hair stuck to the wispy blue operating room caps and shoe coverings consistently underfoot in the passenger seat. In elementary school, the hospital became my second home as she brought my brother and me to the hospital with her on school holidays. I napped in her call room, my arms around an anesthesiology textbook that smelled like her. I helped her to pack suitcases full of sterile gloves and needles and operating room equipment to donate to Indian hospitals where she volunteered as an anesthesiologist every year, seeing patients who lived amidst the poverty she escaped. Medicine hovered over my shoulder when my mother and I sat together studying biology and physiology when I was in middle school, reviewing what I then considered to be the magical mechanisms of the heart pumping, the kidneys filtering, the liver cleaning, the brain commanding.

In high school, when I shared with her what I was learning in biology, she told me I finally knew enough for her to tell me what she did every day at work. She traced her finger along an indentation in the lowest part of my neck, showing me where she placed large IVs to give powerful blood pressure medications to patients.