

THE ROCK STAR

} by Frank Huyler

“He won’t tell us what band he was in,” my colleague said, at shift change. “The nurses think they were big though.”

We were on rounds in the ER. I was picking up his patients, so he was doing most of the talking. Cube 2 — we’re waiting for the ultrasound, probable gallstones. Cube 4, 88, pneumonia, admitted. Antibiotics? I ask. Yes, she got them. And so on. I made notes on a clipboard as we walked.

At Cube 6, he paused outside the curtain.

“Here he is,” my colleague whispered. “He’s sick and needs to come in.”

Then, instead of continuing on as we had for the others, he parted the curtain.

“This is the doctor who is taking over for me,” he said formally, in his white coat, to the figure on the bed. “I wanted to introduce you.”

The figure on the bed was tanned a golden brown, with shoulder-length blond hair and piercing blue eyes. He looked up at me and smiled, his teeth perfect and white. A small man, I realized as I studied him, hardly larger than a child. The deep blue of his irises leapt out of a yellow background — his sclera, his face and hair. I could see his pulse in his neck. He extended a hot, stick-thin hand, and I shook it.

“Nice to meet you,” I said. “If there’s anything you need, please let me know.”

“Thank you,” he said, softly. “Some ice chips would be great.”

“Tell me what you find out,” my colleague said on his way out the door.

A few minutes later, I brought him his cup of ice. Small talk — how are you feeling? When did this all start? Would you want to be resuscitated if anything unexpected happened? What band were you in?

He looked away.

“I’d rather not say,” he said. “If that’s alright. It was a long time ago.”

“In the eighties?”

A reluctant nod. A moment passed.

“I’m paying for it now,” he said.

“What instrument did you play?” I persisted, though I knew I should have left it alone.

“Guitar,” he said. “Mostly rhythm. Sometimes a little lead.”

He had a faint accent. British, or possibly Australian. His neck pulsed. When he turned his head a tiny diamond earring flashed in the light.

As he spoke I could picture him effortlessly as a young man, floodlit at the edge of the stage as the crowd held up lighters in the dark. So I looked at him carefully, long enough to be certain I didn’t know him.

The residents, for the most part, were kids in the eighties, but I asked them anyway.

“See that guy? What eighties band did he play for?”

So they’d eagerly walk past, and glance casually into the cubicle before circling back. How about Journey?

“Journey was too big,” I said. “Definitely not Journey. Plus I think they were American.”

The medicine attending thought about it too.

“Definitely not country,” he said, looking at the figure on the bed from across the ER. “But not heavy metal, either. Pop-rock, I’d say. Something like Air Supply.”

A good guess, I thought — a big enough band in their day, but now pretty much entirely forgotten.

“Did you look him up on the internet?” he asked.

“Nothing under his name,” I said. “But he could be using a pseudonym. He doesn’t want to talk about it.”

The medicine attending was in Cube 6 for a long time, much longer than usual. I could see him answering questions at length, with care. I saw him shake the man’s hand, and smile, and gesture to his resident.

“Did you find out?” I asked, when he was back at the doctor’s station.

“He won’t tell me either,” he said. “Maybe the nurses upstairs can get it out of him. I’ll let you know. He looks familiar, though, don’t you think?”

I checked on him several times during the shift. He rose out against the background; he had significance. I looked up his labs, and wrote them down carefully on the chart. I called the medicine resident again and asked her when his bed would be ready upstairs. Through it all he lay still, under the bags of saline and antibiotics, without complaint, his blue and yellow eyes open to the ceiling.

Hours later an old woman appeared. She stood next to the bed, and held the man's hand, and when I went into the cubicle I was surprised to find her there. I asked who she was.

"I'm his mother," she said.

I didn't expect that. I didn't think of rock stars as having mothers. They had children, of course — lots of them. But not mothers, and certainly not an old woman like this, blinking in the fluorescent lights through thick glasses, clutching her purse. She was a tiny woman, barely five feet tall, thin also, and when she looked up at me I suddenly saw the resemblance between them.

"Oh," I said. "Well then, do you mind if I talk to you in private?"

She patted her son's hand, and followed me down the hall.

I asked all the usual questions — how much he still drank, and whether he lived alone, and whether there was anything he wasn't telling me. And I asked her what band he was in.

She sighed.

"He played in some bands a long time ago," she said. "But he was never a big rock star. He just likes to say that. He says it makes people treat him better."

"You mean it's not true?" I said, harshly, before I could help it.

"Well...." she said, looking down. "He exaggerates."

"So he isn't British, either?"

She shook her head.

"I'm sorry," I said, regaining myself. But it was too late. My face flushed. I felt betrayed, and I felt like a fool. He looked the part exactly. He was the part.

It must have been his life's dream, of course, but that only occurred to me later.

"He's not a rock star," I told the medicine resident sometime later. "He just says that because people treat him better."

"Well," she said, looking up from the orders she was writing. "It works, doesn't it?"

She was right. I hadn't just treated him a little better, I'd treated him a lot better. And I wasn't alone; my colleague, the residents, the medicine attending, the nurses; all of us had fluttered around him like sparrows, brought him ice chips, listened with care and concern to his questions and answered each in turn, when all along he was just like the rest, no different from the others who lay around him, or waited in the lobby, or lay in the hall on their stretchers.

Then my shift was over, and it was my turn to sign out.

“End stage liver disease,” I said, when we reached Cube 11. “Not a transplant candidate. Febrile. Admitted to medicine.”

“Antibiotics?” my colleague asked, taking notes.

“Yes,” I said. “He got them.”

THE ACCOUNTANT

} by Frank Huyler

I met him in the doorway with the rest of the family. He was in his sixties, with long, carefully combed gray hair. He wore a white dress shirt, a silver and turquoise bolo tie. His fingernails were clean, and he shook my hand firmly, looking right at me. His eyes and face were almost exactly the same color, a light, flecked brown, like a trout.

“I am Juan Trujillo, the brother-in-law,” he said, and gestured, the palm of his hand open. “This is my family.”

The family stood slumped, angled in different ways. The two daughters were looking down at their feet. The son, wearing a mechanic’s blue shirt, holding a boy on his hip, looked small and unshaven. Their grief seemed somehow magnified by Mr. Trujillo, who alone faced me and appeared unmoved.

“He’s not doing well, I’m afraid,” I said, trying my best to meet his eye. “We need to sit down and talk about how much more we should do.”

“We’ll talk here,” Mr. Trujillo said.

We stood just outside the entrance of the ICU. Nurses and doctors passed by, the doors opening and closing roughly.

“All right,” I said. “His heart is failing. We had to put him on the ventilator last night, and right now we’re giving him medications to keep his blood pressure up.”

Mr. Trujillo nodded.

“He knew he’d never come out of there,” he said, inclining his head toward the doors. “He said it right here, as they were wheeling him in.”

Mr. Garcia, the patient, was an enormous man in his sixties who’d had a pulmonary embolism two days earlier. A blood clot, formed in one of his legs, had broken loose, risen up, and blocked off most of one lung. His heart had failed almost immediately: fluid built up in him, leaking into his tissues, filling his good lung until he could no longer breathe without the machine.

“There is one thing we can try,” I said. “We can give him a powerful blood thinner, and it may dissolve the clot. It will be dangerous, though.”

“Why is it dangerous?” his daughter asked, looking away from the wall.

“He has an ulcer,” I said. “He has a good chance of bleeding. If he starts to bleed we probably won’t be able to stop it.”

She nodded, looked at the wall again. Both daughters were small, dark, and round. They looked remarkably like their father, and stood awkwardly, full of sadness and confusion. They turned to Mr. Trujillo.

“It’s really your decision,” I said, watching them.

“They will do what I say,” Mr. Trujillo said, still looking intently at me, as if he could discern some truth, detect some secret weakness into which he could insert himself. “I’ve known him for fifty years.”

“Why don’t you think about it,” I said, to break the long silence that followed. “I’ll come back in a few minutes.”

I felt strangely breathless as I walked away from them, as if I’d been climbing stairs, and somehow wanting, as if Mr. Trujillo, with his flat expressionless face and gray eyebrows, had just interrogated me. I felt as if I’d been alone in a room with him, and he had whispered, “No, that is not it. That is incorrect.”

Back in the ICU the nurses were talking.

“His wife died here last year,” she said, nodding toward Mr. Garcia’s room. “He came every day to see her. But he wouldn’t come the last day. Only that guy with the long gray hair came. She was his sister. He sat there all night, writing down her blood pressure. It gave me the creeps.”

I imagined Mr. Garcia, enormous, tentative, coming down the hall to see his wife, sitting at the foot of her bed twisting his hands, looking down at his thighs before getting up to go. Now he was here again.

A few minutes later I found the family in the waiting room.

“Give him the medicine,” Mr. Trujillo said, “if it’s his only chance.”

So I wrote the order in the chart.

Early the next morning Mr. Garcia began to bleed. It began slowly at first, in his nostrils, and then in earnest, easing in pools from his intestines into the hollows his weight made on the bed. His blood pressure fell, the nurses changed his sheets again and again, his bed was a sea of red and yellow flags — unit after unit of packed cells and plasma. By sunrise it was nearly over.

I found Mr. Trujillo alone in the room.

“Where is the rest of your family?” I asked, as gently as I could. “It won’t be long, I don’t think. They might want to be here.”

“I’ve sent them away,” he said. “They don’t need to be here for this.”

“I see,” I replied. “Do you think he might want a priest?”

“No priest. He doesn’t need a damn priest.”

The vehemence of his voice, raised in anger, shocked me. We looked at each other in the dim light of the room. I had no idea what to say.

Then:

“Can you transplant any of his organs?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, somehow shocked again. “I can call the transplant nurse. It’s possible his eyes could be used, maybe some bone. I think his other organs are too badly damaged, but I’ll find out.”

Mr. Trujillo looked at me impassively as I rambled — a dark figure at the foot of the bed, stern in his vigil.

Then he nodded, dismissing me, and turned back to Mr. Garcia. He opened a small black notebook in his lap, and picked up the gold ballpoint pen that lay inside it like a bookmark. As I turned to go I saw the page, empty except for rows of numbers in a thin, exact hand — blood pressure readings, the time inscribed beside each one.