

Compelling medical memoir contrasting family versus doctors when individuals die.

Cherubs in the Land of Lucifer

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Cherubs in the Land of Lucifer

**Personal and Professional Encounters with
Death**

Chapter 1: The Sin of the Serpent

The Yadkin River rolls through Rowan County like a great serpent, lashing its way from the northern border to the southeast corner. It carries vast quantities of water, mud, and catfish as it churns its way past my family's land. The waterway's course is telling. It harbors one of North America's most abundant collections of serpents in its backwaters. Most of these are harmless water snakes, but the river is also home for several species of vipers. Water moccasins and copper heads are especially common in August, when the river runs drier, but it's the rattlesnakes that are most dangerous.

A canebrake rattler, also known as a widow-maker, is a deadly predator. Unlike the diamond-backs of the nearby Uwharrie Mountains, widow-makers do not shake their tails in warning. Instead they wait until the moment just before they strike, startling their prey. The sound is paralyzing. It's a violent, high frequency explosion that comes blasting up out of the ground.

* * * * *

The red and white float was sucked under the surface and an instant later my pole leapt after it. I screamed in delight as I heaved my seven-year old body backwards.

"I got one! Daddy! I got a big one!"

"Hang on to it! Drop the tip of your pole...that's it!"

I gripped the pole so hard that its ridges cut into my palms. My father had just cut it that morning. Each spring we would go to the bamboo patch and cut a new pole, one just the right size for a boy who was a whole year taller. The patch we got it from was a dense jungle. Overgrown for longer than my father could remember, it was an ever-expanding reminder of agriculture gone bad. My uncle had planted a few shoots when he was young, so he would always have a fresh fishing pole. The patch had long since grown itself into an endless supply and a perpetual nuisance.

On a good day, we could jerk a fish out of the water every couple of minutes. Sometimes we would take along a bag of stale white

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bread and roll it into little balls. That was our secret for pulling up catfish. The big ones came off the bottom and practically crawled up the bank for a piece of my grandmother's white bread. Every once in a while we'd pull in a five- or six-pounder, if we could keep it from snapping the pole. A fish that size was almost more than I could handle. For a really big one, I would have to run along the bank until it got tired. Then, when I felt the line go slack, I would run backwards and try to land it before it caught its breath.

I felt the line go slack and heaved the pole back with a burst of energy but, at the same time, the behemoth swam for the depths. The pole snapped about two thirds of the way up and suddenly I was falling backwards. My butt hit the ground hard.

The dirt around me shook with sound. I turned and looked up into the eyes of a widow-maker. Its greenish-yellow, slit-shaped orbs stared at me. I felt my heart beat skip as it rose and towered above me. I held my breath, knowing that breathing was no longer important. The two of us, predator and prey, slipped into a stillness. Its forked tongue stretched out towards me in slow motion. The pink flesh encasing the fangs was pulled up to expose sharp white sabers. Droplets of venom hung precariously from their tips, looking as if they should have fallen already.

My father heard the rattler's thunder. In one fluid motion, he grabbed the bottom half of my pole and swung a sweeping arc towards the neck of the viper. It struck at the cane and missed; over-shooting and getting swatted in the gullet. My father launched himself into the air as the serpent fell back onto the ground.

"Phillip! Get away from here!"

I was frozen; my eyes riveted on the rattler.

My father landed on top of it. He stomped his boot on its head and began jabbing its neck with the sharp end of the cane. The viper's body coiled forward to protect itself from the assault. Its great loops boiled and thrashed around my father's leg, trying to lift him off the ground. My father was a madman. Saliva dripped from his mouth as he grabbed at the beast's tail and tried to unravel it. Finally, with a great heave, he managed to pull the bulk of the rattler's body away from the bleeding neck and stabbed the pole into it again.

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The serpent's body convulsed with such a spasm that my father lost his balance and stepped backwards. The snake's head was free, but my father still had the tail in his grip. He pulled back, building momentum, and swung the serpent's heavy body through the air. My father screamed his fury as he put everything into the motion. Its head smacked against the trunk of a tree and popped off, bouncing onto the ground. The beast's jaws continued to open and close, as if it were still trying to chew its way through the crushing boot leather. The headless body coiled around itself, instinctively forming a blood-spraying ball. My father flung it to the ground and glared at it for a second (as if it might yet rise up and attack again) then he rushed over and dropped to his knees.

"Are you bitten?"

I saw blood spurting out of the headless thrasher, pacing my own heart beat.

"Did it bite you?!"

I couldn't answer him. I watched the crimson dribbles ebb and then staunch, as if it were healing itself before my eyes. I remembered one of my uncles telling me that all bleeding stops...eventually.

"Phillip! Did it bite you?"

He looked into my face for a second then pulled my t-shirt up over my head and began looking for bite marks. He searched my torso and then he yanked down my pants. When he saw there wasn't any bleeding, he paused and looked me in the eyes.

"Phillip? Can't you tell me if it bit you?"

He waited for an eternity.

"What's wrong, son? Can't you say something?"

As much as I wanted to, I couldn't answer him. All I could do was stare at those coils, watching them roll around, one loop after another, like the wheels of a locomotive. After he had undressed me completely and assured himself that I wasn't bitten, my father grabbed me into his arms and held me there. I felt his body shudder and his tears wetting my neck as he released his fears. It was the first time I had ever known him to weep.

As he held me, I felt the weight of it all: my father's fear, the burden of his love, the fragility of my life. The widow-maker's body

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kept dragging its loops around, writhing and reeling in a dance that was getting progressively slower. Like me, it seemed not to understand that life could end suddenly. It was a primal lesson, one driven home by the corpse's stubborn refusal to accept death.

I stared at the snake until my father recovered his composure. When he finally realized that I couldn't stop watching it, he picked me up and carried me out of its sight. Deep in the woods he stopped and redressed me. Then he picked me up again and carried me all the way to my grandmother's house. Neither of us said another word, but I held him tight and he held me tighter as we trudged through the woods.

Chapter 14 - Tale of the Tally-whacker

The fourth year of medical school is the first chance you get to actually do something in the medical profession. Prior to that it's all books and discussion, essays and tests, or it's "do this – do that" medicine. I was chomping at the bit by the time and beginning to feel like it was past time to do something other than study and goof off. At the same time, I was nervous about my up-and-coming role as a physician. The weight of that responsibility dropped out of the sky like an anchor. It yanked me out of the current and pointed me in a new direction. Rather than the "What do I need to do to get through this?" attitude that had successfully served me for two and half decades, I quickly adopted a new motto: "What do I need to do keep from killing someone?"

Medicine can be very sobering. All of a sudden you're out of the classroom and some 68 year-old woman is asking you about her chest pain with complete and absolute faith in your ability as a doctor. I had enough sense to know that no fourth year medical student was a competent physician. Unfortunately, there were those who had to learn the hard way. Medical lore is filled with true stories about doses that were written for a 100 times the normal amount, sutures that were pulled too early, and procedures that were done to the wrong side or wrong organ. Consequently, I developed a healthy fear of my new role. I decided that even if I didn't turn out to be the best, I wasn't going to be the worst, and I wasn't going to do something that ended up killing one of my patients.

Near the end of my fourth year, I found myself working at an inner city hospital. It was an outpatient pediatrics rotation; so most of my responsibilities consisted of daily clinics filled with well kids who needed vaccinations and sports physicals or sick kids with runny noses or runny bowels. Once a week I spent the day at the hospital in the newborn nursery. This was the most enjoyable part of the rotation for me because this was where I was supposed to learn how to do circumcisions.

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I have always gravitated towards procedures and interventions. As a fourth year medical student, doing a circumcision was like getting to do open heart surgery. Back at the University, they would never have let me touch a newborn baby with a scalpel. But there were fewer house-staff physicians to do the work at the inner city hospital, so creative solutions were required to get things done. This translated to allowing medical students to do circumcisions. I still don't know how they got that policy by the hospital administrators. In those days, the medical community was all a twitter about a couple of cases where baby boys' got their man-hood rearranged when their routine circumcisions went wrong. In part, this was because the remedy for a lopped off penis was to do a radical sex change and raise the child as a girl. Unfortunately, the few children who had been raised this way had become adults by the time I went to medical school and they were all saying the same thing: "I'm a man trapped in a woman's body!" Needless to say, radical sex changes fell out of favor.

There were usually twenty to thirty baby boys who needed their foreskins removed each week. In those days, babies were allowed to stay in the hospital for 3 or 4 days before they went home. This allowed physicians to just do circumcisions twice a week and still give every boy an opportunity to have his penis retooled before going out into the world. Each physician seemed to have his or her own preferred method for doing a circumcision, but there were really only three methods that were widely utilized. There were little plastic bells that slipped under the foreskin and allowed you to tie it off with thread so that the excess shriveled up and fell off a few days later. There were clamps that fit over metal bells of a similar shape and, when tightened down by a screw mechanism, would pinch off the excess foreskin. Finally there was the traditional Jewish method, which basically used a guillotine-like device that allowed the foreskin to be lopped off with a scalpel.

The last of these methods was actually the one that I found to be the most effective. The guillotine was just big enough to allow passage of the foreskin but would not permit entry of the penis proper. Once the foreskin was pulled through as far as it could go, you clamped down the device until the foreskin was essentially pinched off. Then to clean things up, you took a scalpel and slid it along the divide between the

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two blades and cut the skin away. When you were done, you had a nicely circumcised penis that didn't bleed because the exposed ends had been sealed shut. The whole process took about thirty seconds once you got used to it.

By my fourth week on rotation, I was fairly sure I had mastered the art of circumcision. It only takes a hundred or so and you've pretty much seen all the shapes and sizes you're going to encounter. My supervisor, George, was in his third year of residency. George had done thousands of circumcisions by the time I came along, and he made it clear that he wasn't planning on doing any more unless it was absolutely necessary. Consequently, I found myself working solo on my last circumcision day. There were only a dozen to be done that morning, so I took out the guillotine and got down to business.

Slowly but surely I worked my way down the line. I injected numbing medicine into the base of the penis in three boys at a time, then went back and performed the circumcision after they had a few minutes to go numb. Most of my patients slept through the procedure once they got past the injection part of the process. Finally, after several hours of this, I came to my last patient. It was one o'clock and I was starting to get hungry for lunch. I placed the guillotine against the penis and pulled the foreskin through. The blades clamped together and I slid the scalpel along the divide, paring the foreskin away in one fluid motion. I unfastened the device and surveyed the last of the modified penises with a critical eye.

My stomach began to growl as I gazed down. Then it began to dawn on me; one of the penises was not like the others. The last one, rather than looking like the usual circumcised penis-head with a residual collar of foreskin, looked more like a chicken neck with the skin pulled up and sealed off where the head should have attached. It looked like I had taken a little too much off the top.

I stared down at the guillotine in my hand and realized that it had been on backwards. Rather than the smooth surface on the front, which was usually formed when the blades met, the back came together to form a groove, where the tip of the penis was meant to rest.

I felt the floor rushing up to meet me. I stumbled and staggered along the edge of the procedure table as the realization of what had just

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happened washed over me. I yelled for George. He had been out in the hallway talking, but he rushed in to see what was wrong.

“What’s the matter?”

“I... I think I’ve cut off the head of his penis.”

“... You what?”

“I used this thing and.... I think I put it on backward.... Do you think I cut off part of his...” I gulped, “penis?”

The floor was still trying to reach up to me. I grappled with the edge of the table, holding on and letting myself down into a sitting position. Little meteors of light streamed their way into my sight. I felt the world going black as I lay down flat onto the linoleum floor. My thoughts slowed but never quite stopped. I became aware of the cold sweat that was drenching my scrubs. I heard George asking me if I was all right and thought that it was a stupid question. For several seconds I lay there, floating in the miasma of shock, aware but inanimate....

Inside myself, I felt a void open up and envelop me with its cold embrace. It was a frigid penetration, a violation so shocking and sudden that I would have caught my breath, but then I sensed my consciousness dribbling out into the emptiness. It seemed the death of the mind, only not dead but lost. It was simply the momentary loss of one’s thoughts, a dip into the subconscious realm. I fought as though it was death itself, but still felt my mind fading. Then a commanding voice split the silence and snapped me back into the nursery.

“Phil! Are you all right?” George called out from the procedure table. He was trying to examine the child’s groin but was worried that I had somehow injured myself.

“I’m not feeling so good. I’ll be all right. I...I’m just afraid that I’ve done something terrible.... How bad is it?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen one look like this before. I’m going to try and see if I can get the skin to come apart.... Then we can see what happened to it.”

I lay there and stared up at the ceiling tiles. I was afraid to close my eyes, afraid to drift off again. I listened carefully as George began pulling the fused portions of the foreskin apart. I could hear his heavy, deliberate breathing. I looked over to see him biting his lip as he teased the edges with a pair of forceps. My heart “lub-dubed” it’s way up into

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my throat as I waited for him to declare my fate (and that of the little boy).

“I think it’s all right.”

“Now George, tell me the truth! How bad is it... really?”

“No really, I think it looks fine. You didn’t hurt the penis at all. You just sealed it shut by having this thing on backwards.”

All of a sudden I felt better. I started to jump up and realized I wasn’t that much better. Slowly, I pulled myself up into a standing position. After a few moments the room stopped spinning and I was able to step over to the table. There I saw a sleeping baby boy with a penis that any man could have been proud of. Once George had peeled apart the foreskin, everything looked just like it was supposed to. I gulped with relief. George and I began to laugh out loud.

I was so happy there were tears in my eyes. Of all the dumb things I have managed to do in my career, nothing has stunned me or scared me anymore than that moment. The potential loss of that child’s manhood touched me in places that any man could envision but would rather not. Fortunately, it taught me a lesson that I have never forgotten. Whenever I find myself being nonchalant about a medical procedure, I think about that little boy’s penis. That’s all it takes. A sense of humility overwhelms me and I redouble my attention to the task at hand.

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