

Opium, the tale, weaves the history of man's misuse of narcotics with a modern medical mystery, a fatal epidemic on California. The CIA's Med team finds the common denominator. The tales thread together in the end.

Opium

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Opium

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Opium

Michael Pauszek

Prologue

Matthew 27:48

30 AD Jerusalem, the far eastern reaches of the Roman Empire

One hundred Roman troops were garrisoned in Jerusalem. In addition to being a deterrent to political uprisings amongst the locals, they were the vehicles for enforcement of orders of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. So it was that nineteen-year-old Calvar from Pisa, now serving as one of those one hundred, was assigned this afternoon to oversee an execution.

In his letters home to his mother he had complained about how different Judea was from home. Today was no exception. He had never seen an execution. As they walked to their assignment, he complained to his companion, Demien.

“At home, we pray to many gods but none of them interfere with the governing of Rome. Here in Jerusalem, the Jews only have one god, but the rules of their faith are also the rules of the state.”

“You’re right, Calvar. I heard the commander say that what they call the Laws of Moses and state law were one.”

“And their Herod, a puppet, rules at the direction of Rome only with the consent of the priests of this god.”

“I don’t know, Calvar. It does seem simpler to have only a single set of laws and one god.”

“You may be right, Demien, but it maybe more dangerous. I heard that Governor Pilate said that one of the men being executed today hadn’t committed any crime against Rome or Judea. It’s the priests that want him killed. Antonio told me that Pilate tried to appease the priests by having the man scourged. But they still demanded his death. I believe him because Antonio carried the order and watched Governor Pilate sign it. He said the governor said something about crazy religious zealots under his breath as he signed.”

“We’re just soldiers, Calvar.”

“You are right, Demien. We follow orders.”

This fateful afternoon, Calvar and Demien were assigned to guard the execution site for three crucifixions. Crucifixion was the preferred Roman method of mortal punishment for crimes against the state. Hanging suspended from a crossbeam, the victim slowly suffocated and dehydrated. It wasn’t that the Judeans minded the suffering, the Judeans themselves were accustomed to gruesomely stoning their convicted to death. The problem was after death. The Romans left the corpses hanging on their crosses for the carrion eaters to devour. This was dehumanizing and contrary to the Laws of Moses. Calvar and Demien were at the execution site to prevent the bodies from being taken down and buried in accordance with the laws of Judea.

All that afternoon the pair stood guard.

“Why is the one in the middle nailed instead of being tied up, Calvar?”

Michael Pauszek

“I don’t know, Demien, the other two are thieves. He’s the one the priests wanted crucified.” Calvar was referring to the two men that had been brought to Golgatha, the place of crucifixions, and tied to crossed beams. They were then raised and suspended. But the third, the one in the middle, had been beaten until the flesh of his back hung in shreds. That man had been forced to carry his own rough-hewed crossbeam through the city. He had stumbled all the way to the top of the rock that looks like a skull. Then, once on the top of Golgatha, he was nailed to his cross instead of being tied like the two others.

“Have you ever seen anyone carry their beam and then be nailed up before, Calvar?”

“No. Antonio told me it was a local Judean enhancement. The priests had asked for it because he is an enemy of the Jewish faith.”

The two thieves tied to their crosses screamed for an hour and then finally whimpered, the third victim nailed in the middle hung without making a sound. As Calvar and Demien watched as a group of women came and stood weeping at his feet.

“Look, Demien, he is speaking to the women. He’s comforting them. Let’s go closer and listen to what he is saying.”

They moved forward and stood behind the women to hear what the man was saying.

“Don’t weep for me, mother and Mary, I go soon to my Father. I will prepare a place for you in his house.”

The women stayed at the foot of the cross and prayed.

The poor dying man’s demeanor impressed Calvar. Finally, after three hours, the man hanging nailed to the cross turned his face skyward and cried out. The women’s weeping increased to screams.

Calvar was overcome with sympathy. Taking a piece of cloth, he soaked it with the wine saturated with opium from his flask. He offered it to the dying man, held up on the stem of a reed. The dying man, familiar with opium and its use by the Romans, refused the wine saturated with gall, the Greek word for poppy resin (Matthew 27:48). The biblical account never explained why Jesus rejected the analgesic. Instead, he endured his fate.

Chapter 1

Man meets *Papaver somniferum*

3900 BC

Seven million years ago, with a great ripping of rock and rumble of falling waters of Biblical proportion, the Strait of Gibraltar burst before the force of the Atlantic Ocean. The waters of the Atlantic roared into the Mediterranean basin, creating the Mediterranean Sea. This newly created body of water, between the African and European continents, would attract ancient hominids north out of Africa. It would provide the stage upon which western civilization would develop, but not this day.

Despite the importance of this natural event in the history of the naked ape, it was unheeded. Though this flood was the most spectacular in the planet's history, only a much later and much lesser flood, through the Bosphorus, would be remembered in tale of an ark. Hominids hadn't yet emerged.

Cyprus, a rock-strewn mountain, became an island when that Mediterranean basin was filled. It stood, isolated and unknown in the middle of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea for the next six million, nine hundred and ninety-six thousand years. For all that time, Cyprus was visited only by sea birds and populated only by its resident rodents. Over those eons of isolation, its porous surface eroded, incessantly washed by both wave and wind. It was worn down to only a series of hilly outcroppings. Barely fertile, shallow soiled valleys separated them. In the pale soils of those hills and vales, the native flora survived unimpeded by grazing mammals and the hand of man.

It was the year 5000 BC; humans living along the Mediterranean began to ply the sea's coastal waters in sturdy little wooden boats. They never ventured out of site of the shore. For a thousand years, as they took nourishment from its waters, these peoples were students of the sea, learning to read its currents and winds. Eventually, using those skills, they predicted that a land laid to the southeast of the Greek peninsula, beyond the limits of their vision.

Then in the year 3909 BC, armed with the cumulative knowledge of centuries of study of the sea, a company of brave souls sailed south into the open water of the sea. They were the antecedents of the Polynesians and Vikings who, five thousand years later, would also strike out across open seas in open boats searching for new lands. These early Mediterranean adventurers took their families and domesticated stock and left forever behind them the warring states of the Greek peninsula.

They found the land that they sought to be a large island. They named the island Cyprus. Its location was much to their liking. They came in peace to colonize.

Michael Pauszek

These first residents of Cyprus cultivated grains, raised ruminants, and continued to harvest protein from the sea, just as they had in Greece. They thrived and their descendants spread out over the island.

They also supplemented their diet with the island's flora. That was how they first came to know *Papaver somniferum*, the wild poppy that thrived on the island's thin soil. When they arrived, it grew everywhere on Cyprus.

Those first human settlers on Cyprus tasted the wild poppy pods and found them unpalatably bitter. Normally that would have ended any interspecies relationship. But the unusual plant wasn't without benefit. When the poppy's bitter green pod was chewed, it induced in the chewer a sensation of sedation and inhibition. By 3854 BC, despite the bitter taste, it became quite popular and a common practice of the residents of Cyprus to sit for hours, placidly chewing the swollen dark pods. The chewers were lost in a state of unproductive addiction, neglecting family and field.

Under the stress of this use, the poppy plant that had originally grown abundantly on the island, now survived only in areas most remote from the human settlements.

Had it not been for the intervention of the village shamans, the island's holy men, both the human population and the poppy might not have survived on Cyprus. In 3799 BC, the shamans called a gathering to deal with the overuse of the pods. After the gathering, the shamans decreed that poppy-pod chewing would be restricted to communal rituals. Those holy men convinced the majority of the people of Cyprus that the poppy was a gift from Dalah, the harvest god, to be used only to honor Dalah. It was the only time in the history of narcotic use that a prohibition was successful.

Of course, the occasional death from excessive chewing of the poppy pods helped the holy men in the enforcement of this restriction. Those deaths were blamed on the overuse of the sacred plant, thus an offense to Dalah.

The imposed limitation of its consumption saved the poppy plant. It was left to grow wild in the hills above the heavily worked fields and pastures. Since the poppy was revered as a gift from Dalah, it was never cultivated on Cyprus.

Through his village's oral traditions, Bala had learned of his ancestral history and the social taboos. He knew the ritual use of the poppy pods. But none of that concerned young Bala this morning as he walked up the path. Instead, he was thinking of his own problems and fantasizing about his future. He didn't really want to be a tiller of the soil, like his father. But he didn't yet have an alternative plan. He and his father frequently argued about Bala's future. Living in one of the inland valleys of Cyprus, his only real choices were herding or soil tilling. Neither of the choices appealed to the young man.

His thoughts were far away this morning as he trudged up the rock-strewn trail on the gently rising hillside above his village. His tanned goatskin sandals played an important role in protecting his feet, for he was paying so little attention to the path.

Opium

Bala had already lived sixteen harvest seasons. The last harvest celebration had been his time of ritual passage to manhood. But now it would be three more seasons before he would be old enough to take a mate. During these years, he was supposed to establish his own home and secure a livelihood. Instead, he still lived in the communal hut of the bachelors.

Today, like many days since his manhood ritual, the hormones surging through his veins drove his thought and actions. Today, like many days, he was more fascinated by the changes in his body than his surroundings, like the path underfoot. He enjoyed the feel of his growing muscle mass as he flowed smoothly up the trail. He liked the hang of his waistcloth. As he walked, thoughts of the unwed young women of the next valley occupied his mind.

“Ouch!” He stepped on a large rock, twisting his right ankle and bruising the bottom of his right heel. He bent down and slowly felt his foot and ankle. Content that it was all right, he continued on, now favoring that limb with a limp. The pain brought his thought back briefly to the present. He now was at least looking down at the trail.

He was nearing the top of the hill. Here the path turned to the left, winding around a bare rock outcropping. That outcropping formed a ledge that was a great place to sit and look down to the village. Less than a year ago, Bala and his friends had sat there and laughed at the adults down in the village. Today he was uncomfortable at the thought of what they had done. *Why the change in my feelings?* He wondered.

Before passing those rocks, he stopped to look back down at the village and fields. How inviting and orderly it looked from above today. The familiarity was reassuring. *I wonder why I never noticed that when I was younger?* He continued up the path. The rocky mass blocked the view back down to his village below.

Now, finally out of all visual contact with the village, he was on his own. As a child, when he had climbed this trail with his father, he had always feared this point where he could no longer see home. It was the same fear he had felt back then in the dark on his sleeping mat. He laughed silently now, thinking back to when he had been too frightened as a child to continue up this trail. He was now a man of the village. He had completed the ritual of passage. He had grown to enjoy solitude, not fear it.

In preparation for this fall’s celebration, Bala, as the youngest man in the village, had been sent to gather the poppy flower pods for the ceremony. The poppy still grew on the hillside above his village’s cultivated valley. Though the village pastured their goats and sheep on this hillside, they were never allowed above the outcropping. The browsing goats would have eaten the poppy plants and the sheep stupidly trampled them. The hillside above that rock outcropping was left for the sacred poppy.

Bala was in no hurry this morning; today he had no other chores since the fall harvest was complete. After climbing the well-worn path, now at the hillcrest, he sat down and rubbed his sore heel and ankle. As he rubbed, he gazed out over the

hills of his island home. From this high spot he could see all the way to the sea. Here there was a cool breeze blowing in from the sea.

Bala sat and as he looked out, he thought about the sea. He could detect a slight salty scent on the morning air. He loved to go to the seacoast where he could swim and dive for shellfish. It made him think about the village's boats. Though his village was in an inland valley, they kept two fishing crafts on the shore. Bala didn't know it, but they were just like the crafts that had carried his ancestors to Cyprus three hundred years earlier. He also didn't give any thought to the shallow salt pond that the village men maintained above the tide level, for the evaporation of seawater for salt.

He stopped rubbing the limb and relaxed. It was a nice time to anticipate the next few weeks. With the harvest completed for at least a few weeks, life would be easier. Two days after the harvest ritual, the village men would leave the valley and go down to the sea to swim, fish and gather salt. This year, since he had gone through the ritual, he would be going too. *This is a good time of the year.*

He got up. His foot now seemed a little less sore. Here on top of his world, he stood like Gulliver in a miniature forest of poppies.

"Aba gonnua abbar. Aba gonnua abbar," Baga recited the mantra of the poppy harvest. It was meant to protect the gatherer as he cut the sacred plant. It had been recited during the harvest of the pods since the time of the shaman gathering.

Then he started working, cutting pods. "Aba gonnua abbar. Aba gonnua abbar."

For the first few minutes, he carefully cut poppy pods, setting them in one of the two baskets the village shaman had given him. But then it changed.

Though he had taken a few minutes to enjoy the view while he rubbed his limb, like all young men, he was spurred on by testosterone. Bala wasn't patient. "Aba gonnua abbar. Aba gonnua abbar." Now, rather than moving the basket as he gathered the pods, he started tossing the pods into the basket from many steps away, saving himself a few steps. Then he forgot and stopped chanting. Bala continued to cut the pods with his flint blade.

It was inevitable. His inattention begot an accident. As he moved the flint blade ever more rapidly, he slit a pod. Gasping, he stopped. Bala looked up to the sky, expecting to be struck down by Dalah from on high. Nothing happened. He looked back down at the pod he had cut. A milky substance oozed from within the pod onto its surface. Never before had he heard of anyone damaging one of the pods in the harvest. He looked about. Had anyone seen him? *How foolish*, he thought. *I'm here alone. But Dalah has seen me. What do I do now?*

He didn't cut the damaged poppy pod from its plant; it couldn't be used in the ceremony honoring the harvest god, Dalah. He didn't even touch the cut pod again. But several times, as he gathered more pods, he glanced back at the damaged plant. The milk-colored substance hung on the pod over the cut surface. He cut the rest of the pods from their stems much more cautiously.

Opium

Bala filled his two reed baskets full of unblemished pods. Securing his knife back to his waist with its leather strap, he picked up the baskets and limped back down to his village. While he walked, it suddenly grew darker. He took a mental inventory of all his appendages; they appeared to be intact. Would his damage to the sacred plant endanger his chance to find and bond with a mate? Would he be an outcast? Would he father children? He cautiously looked up to the sky. It was only a cloud passing before the sun. It soon passed. But Bala still feared reprisal from Dalah from damaging the poppy pod.

He didn't tell anyone back in the village about the pod.

Two days later, one day after having honored Dalah at the harvest ceremony, Bala returned up the hill to the place where he had gathered the poppy pods. If someone in the village had asked why he went back up the hill, he wouldn't have been willing to voice a reason for returning. Fortunately for Bala, no one asked. Nothing bad had befallen him. *Was it all just a dream?* He felt drawn back to the site. But he saw the plant and knew. He just sat down next to it.

Gently, he touched the damaged pod. The milky substance that had leaked from the pod when he cut it two days earlier had now dried to a sticky resin. The pod was green, and except for the dried substance, it seemed unaffected. This intrigued Bala.

With his index fingernail, he scraped some of the dried resin from the pod's surface.

Bala knew the village taboos. He would never put a pod in his mouth except in the ritual. He feared the wrath of Dalah. To offend Dalah would bring ruin to the next crop and cause starvation of his village.

But this was different. It wasn't the pod, just a substance on its surface. He put his finger in his mouth. The substance was rubbery and without flavor. It had none of the pungency of the pods. He swallowed. Nothing happened. Having suffering no ill effect, he scraped the rest of the resin from the pod and ate it. Then he went back down the hill as far as the outcrop of rock and sat down. Within a few minutes he was beset with a change. He felt very calm and more relaxed than at any time since his coming of age. A few minutes later he was a little intoxicated and impaired. He began to laugh. Time stood still for Bala.

Three hours later, two young men from his village, Coma and Tang, climbed the hill path looking for Bala. They had seen him leave the village and decided to follow him when he had failed to return. They found him still laughing, sitting on the rock.

Tang questioned him.

"What is wrong with you, Bala? Why do you sit here when we have been looking for you? Didn't you hear us calling your name? Have you lost your mind?" Bala pointed back up the hill in the direction of the damaged pod and just continued to smile.

Coma and Tang were shocked by Bala's behavior. Coma grabbed Bala's shoulder and shook him.

Michael Pauszek

“You must come with us now back to the village.” Bala still sat and smiled. After another shaking by Coma, he rose slowly to his feet. Then without saying a single word, he slowly trailed them down the hill, home to the village.

The pair took him before Darmud, the shaman of his village. Darmud, the most respected shaman on Cyprus, was sitting on a log in front of his hut. While they stood behind Bala, shifting and uncomfortable in Darmud’s presence, Bala just smiled.

Darmud, old and very wise, continued to sit, silently waiting for the young man before him to speak. It was a very effective technique he had used throughout his professional career. Finally, after many minutes of the silent treatment by Darmud, despite the relaxing effect of the resin, Bala grew uneasy.

“While cutting flower pods two days ago, I accidentally cut one of the pods. I couldn’t bring it back to you for the harvest celebration because it was damaged. Today, when I went back, I tasted the fluid that dried on the pod.”

Darmud sat and listened, still expressionless. Bala continued, still somewhat uninhibited since his ingestion of the resin. “All I have been able to do since eating it is sit and laugh.” After just a few minutes, Darmud motioned for Tang and Coma to leave. They sat and spoke for an hour.

Eventually Darmud stood and motioned for Bala to follow him. He had gotten stiff and needed to walk.

The effect of the resin was finally beginning to wane. As it dissipated, he began to feel some concern for both having damaged the pod and of having concealed it for two days. He started to mention it but Darmud held up his hand to stop the young man from apologizing.

Darmud, who was bent with age and stood a whole head shorter than the young man, simply smiled at Bala. Darmud wasn’t judgmental. That was a part of his wisdom. He was now at the end of his life. He didn’t fear death or the gods. Fear of the future was for the young and the foolish. Unlike Bala and the rest of the village, the damage to the pod didn’t concern him. He didn’t think the god would strike down the village.

Seeing the expression on Bala’s face, he reached up and placed his hand on Bala’s shoulder to reassure the young man. They walked together around the whole village and then stopped, again in front of Darmud’s hut.

“Tomorrow you will show me this amazing resin you have discovered that leaks from the sacred poppy.” With that, he sat back down in front of his hut and said no more. Without a word, Bala was dismissed from the old man’s presence.

The next day, accompanied by five other elder members of his village and Darmud, Bala returned to the wild-poppy area. Bala again explained what had happened.

“Here, as I was cutting the pods for the ceremony, I grew careless and cut a pod.” He showed them the damaged pod and demonstrated on it with an empty hand what had happened as a result of his carelessness.

Darmud was standing and watching with the other elders.

Opium

“Bala, cut a pod for each of us just as you did before by accident.”

“Aba gonnua abbar. Aba gonnua abbar.” Bala slit six of the flower pods. Darmud didn’t seem concerned. He stood and watched closely. The other five elders also watched, but they stood ready to run if necessary.

Darmud had told the five what Bala had said, but they were skeptical of Bala’s claim. Now that Bala was actually doing what he said he had done three days earlier, they were apprehensive. Only the presence of Darmud, whose social status was unquestionable, kept them from racing back down the hill.

As they were cut, each of the pods oozed a milky resin. When Bala was finished, the group returned to the village. For the next two days the village was eerily quiet as if everyone waited for something to happen.

Then, two sun cycles later, Bala and the same group of village elders, led by Darmud, returned to the top of the hill. Bala gathered the exuded dry resin in a seashell. Darmud motioned for Bala to take the first taste. He placed some in his mouth and began to chew. Then he handed the shell to Darmud. He also touched a small amount of the resin to his tongue. Darmud then passed it amongst the elders. Four of them ate the resin.

Bala waited and watched, fearful that he would bring shame upon himself. But it wasn’t to happen. In a few minutes, the four who had the courage to eat the resin had the same experience as Bala. They smiled and then giggled. The giggling led to uncontrolled laughing. Bala, Darmud and the fifth elder who hadn’t eaten the resin had to lead the other four back to the village. As they followed along, they continued to laugh and intermittently sang.

Not until a few hours later, when the effect had passed, did the four village elders that ate the resin become fearful that some horrible fate would befall them. They all went to sit with Darmud with the same question.

“Have we angered Dalah?”

His answer was the same four times. “Dalah is at peace.”

The whole village looked for any foreboding sign. But Dalah truly was at peace. The winter season was uneventful. In the spring, the lambs were born. That summer the crops grew. It was again time of the harvest celebration.

Darmud stood before the people. A hush fell over the entire village.

“My life is at end. It’s time I choose a replacement. Bala will be your next holy man.” He then sat down and as was his habit, he said no more. Bala was honored. No one in the village objected. Bala’s future was set. He wouldn’t tend a flock or till the soil.

All the next year, Bala sat with Darmud and learned all the old man had to teach. Late one afternoon, Darmud leaned back against the wall of his hut. “There is much more for you to know, my student. But I can teach you no more.”

“Teach me, Darmud. Teach me all I need to know.”

“I cannot. You have all that you need from me. The rest will come to you in time from the gods.”

Michael Pauszek

Darmud died as the first shoots of new grass grew in the spring. Bala became the shaman.

At the end of the next harvest season, Bala returned to the hillside for the poppy harvest, accompanied by Coma and Tang.

“Coma, cut a line across the body of the pod, about halfway across.”

Coma chanted, “Aba gonnua abbar. Aba gonnua abbar.” He cut the pod. Tang then took his turn. Content that they were doing fine, Bala joined them. The three continued to chant as they cut the pods. Two days later, they returned to the hillside. Again using their flint knives, they scraped the pods, collecting the dried resin. Bala carried the resin back to the village.

Late in his life, Bala made a final discovery about the poppy. He placed resin not used in a clay jar. Then he set it aside. At the time of the next ritual, he found the jar. Using that resin at the ritual, he found it had not lost its potency. It could be stored. This allowed Bala to expand the use of the resin to religious ceremonies throughout the year.

Knowledge of Bala’s use of the poppy resin and the poppy resin preservation spread rapidly across the island.

Chapter 2

At home on the Potomac

Langley, Virginia, September 5, 2004

Born in the Appalachian Mountains in West Virginia, the Potomac River flows 460 kilometers, ending its life in the Chesapeake Bay. It is a wild river and only navigable for its final eighteen miles. This makes it a most unlikely site to establish a city. But it was on the shore of this river, in a political compromise to gain support for Hamilton's central banking system, that George Washington brought the capitol for the new United States of America.

The U.S. Constitution contained a provision calling for the establishment of a federal district. President George Washington personally chose the site, a swampy area on the north shore of the Potomac, eighteen miles from the Chesapeake Bay. There the federal capitol was laid out during his presidency. While being built, it was referred to as Washington's city and the name stuck.

Just above the new capitol, the Potomac River became treacherous. Was the transition of the river at that site, near the new capitol, symbolic for George Washington of the transition of the country from wilderness to a mighty nation? Maybe. This untamed river with its wild water would become emblematic of the tumultuous life of the world's greatest and oldest democracy. Just like the Potomac River, which at its end calmly flows into the rest of the world at the Chesapeake Bay, the nation's political life eventually sets aside argumentative debate and moves forward with resolve. In the end, like its river, the strength of the United States resides in the calm of compromise and acceptance that follows the rapids of debate.

The urban sprawl of Washington D.C. long ago bridged the river and extended into the rolling Virginian countryside. There, leaving behind the shifting current of policy-making on the river's northern bank, the daily business of the nation's bureaucracy is conducted in the facilities with names like Walter Reed Medical Center and the CIA. Just as the river's banks contain and define the river, here south of the Potomac, the nation's daily business is contained and defined by the stalwart character of the dedicated, professional individuals it employs.

"Three points! Big Don is on his game this morning!" Donovan York, M.D., a member of the CIA's Med Team, had come into the office of his boss, Curtis Kolber, M.D. He scooted in carrying the Washington Post, summoned by Curt to discuss a medical problem at the U.S. embassy in Brussels. They were back at the CIA for the day, their project at the N.I.H. no longer pressing. While listening to Curt describe the problem in Brussels, Don entertained himself by wadding up pieces of the Post. As Curt continued to talk, he punctuated Curt's concerns by tossing the wads of paper over Curt's head at the wastebasket behind Curt's desk. The wads of newspaper cluttered about the wastebasket measured Don's minimal success. The outcry marked his solitary successful toss.

Michael Pauszek

Curt had continued through Don's one-on-one game knowing that despite outward appearances, he really had Don's attention. But with Don's sudden outcry, Curt stopped talking about Brussels.

"Don, we need to get through this. Do you need to have a CT scan or something?"

Without changing his focus on the next shot, Don responded, "Had one, remember? Go ahead, Curt. I'm listening. You know I think best when I'm moving. I don't need another CT; I'm getting better and better every day in every way." Don twitched his left cheek and eye like the character Dreyfus of the Pink Panther movies and continued to trash the newspaper.

Curt shook his head and finished reading the report from Brussels aloud, finally adding his own commentary. *Why is it I tolerate Don? Oh yes, I think I remember. I need him and only I understand him.* He glanced again up from the report in his hand to Don.

As if aware of Curt's glance, Don responded on cue. "Go on, Curt. I'm still listening."

Curt smiled as he thought, *Don must be having a flashback of his adolescence.* Curt knew that they had both cut their teeth and chins on Indiana high school basketball courts. But Don had never looked like a round ball player. Don was built more like a tank, short with wide, powerful shoulders. He looked like he should be wearing a helmet and shoulder pads. *I bet he scared the hell out of thin opponents when he played point guard.* Don had told him that he did get rebounds though his jump was immeasurable. Curt knew the reason he was successful. The other team surely feared falling on him and hurting themselves as they came off the boards.

"Don, we need to deal with this."

"Okay, I'm listening. But why? Let them take care of it themselves. I don't have any maternal instinct and I'm not feeling codependent."

"Fine." Curt looked again at the report from Brussels. "I think that you're more concerned with trashing my office than Brussels."

"Right on."

Curt thought, *Maybe Don is right. How did we ever get here? Why are we doing this? I really don't care about this.*

"You know what? I think I'll just send this back to Brussels and let them solve it themselves." He knew the answer but it was a long story.

"Do you want to take a shot, Curt?"

"No thanks."

Curt's office, along with those of the rest of his Med Team staff, was tucked away on a lower hall of the George Bush Center for Intelligence in Langley, Virginia. Nestled into the hills and trees of northeastern Virginia, the center looked more like a college campus or better, a think tank site, than home of espionage. Together with Curt and Donovan York, the Med Team included two nurses, Sandra West and Fred

Opium

Brown. Their group title at the CIA was Support Group for the Embassy Medical Service.

Officially, they provided backup for the medical officers posted to the U.S. Embassies all over the world. Unofficially, few in the CIA or outside the White House knew what they actually did at the pleasure of the President. That was the fun part of their job. As Don slammed another wad home, Curt recalled the first time he and Don had met with President James Brantley. It was in 1997. They had been called to the White House to meet with the president. Though there was an air of urgency in the summons and they were escorted right into the oval office, President Brantley had taken the time to stand as if next to a lectern and lectured them about the history of Langley, Virginia. Brantley had been a history professor at the University of Wisconsin in Madison before entering politics. It was a calling that he couldn't abandon. Curt remembered what he had said that day.

“Langley, Virginia, is an important site in the history of our country. During the siege and burning of Washington in the War of 1812, James Madison escaped to Langley. It was his wife, Dolly, that was responsible for preserving the early treasures of our country by taking them with her and James to Langley. After that war we built a fort on the site to protect Washington, D.C. But the attack came from within. In the Civil War, Virginia ceded from the union leaving Washington, D.C. only the width of the Potomac from the enemy. Federal troops occupied the fort at Langley throughout that war. The name Langley was so entrenched in the site's history that even though it became a part of McLean, Virginia, in the early 1900s, it's still called Langley.

“Then after World War II, the world changed. The fort had rotted away but the US was still at war. The war was now cold. That required a change in tactics for our government, and that change required espionage. The CIA was created in 1947. Langley was chosen as the site for the agency because of the historic connection. Just a few years later, the embassy medical services became the responsibility of the newly created CIA. Superficially it seems like a strange marriage, but physicians are privileged to the most intimate information. The State Department didn't want foreign nationals to have that sort of information about U.S. diplomats.

“As you know better than me, medicine has got much more complicated. That's of course where you enter the picture. We created the Medical Support Team in 1993. But now I need your help. I have a special project for you, if you are willing to help.”

Curt Kolber knew that he and his team were perfect for their support role. His and Don's academic training in Internal Medicine, together with their years of clinical experience, made them knowledgeable but still practical. Sandra West and Fred Brown, who completed the team, complimented them well. They were both registered nurses and proficient in both medical-data gathering and research review. Both Fred and Sandy were motivated and were working on their Master of Public

Michael Pauszek

Health degrees. The team had taken embassy health care from good to excellent. Yet without direct patient care, at times their work was uninspiring. With the challenge from the president in 1997, all that changed.

Then newly elected president, James Brantley, had a moment of international inspiration. He had pledged improved relations within the Nations of the Americas as one of his administration's priorities in his campaign. Seeing an opportunity with little downside, he called upon Curt's team to lend support.

The president continued. "The reason I asked you two here this afternoon was to discuss a problem I think you can help solve. Argentinean President, Jesus Aguler, is sick. The word from our embassy in Buenos Aires is that no one knows what is wrong with him. I asked you here to see if I could convince you to go to Buenos Aires and solve this mystery."

There in the oval office in 1997, Curt and Don just stood, looking puzzled.

"I want you to go to Argentina and help in any way you can."

Curt remembered what he had said. "We will be happy to try, sir."

Back then, using what Curt called simple good medical sense; he and Don went to Buenos Aires. Along with his stethoscope, Curt took a pill identification program with him. The afternoon they arrived, they went to the presidential residence. The pair examined President Aguler's medications. He was taking colchicine instead of his usual antihypertensive medication. They looked similar. President Jesus Aguler was being poisoned with colchicine, a drug used to treat gout. Without ever laying on their hands or using their stethoscopes, they solved the diagnostic dilemma.

Later that day they met with President Aguler. After exchanging greetings, Don, in his usual succinct manner, explained their findings.

"Mister President, you are being poisoned!" Aguler looked confused. Julio Sanchez, President Aguler's physician, then explained to President Aguler about the switching of the medication. The colchicine was stopped. President Aguler's symptoms cleared in a day. The Chilean administration and its President's abdomen were grateful. Now, aware of the poisoning, they identified a rebel group member, an Antiperonist, on the local drug store's staff. Confronted, he confessed and was imprisoned.

"They should give him the rest of the colchicine, Curt; they would probably get some real answers to their questions!"

Curt smiled at the memory. Don and he had been invited back to the White House when they returned to Washington. It was to be the second of many trips. At least that time they didn't get another dissertation on the history of Langley and the CIA. What the president wanted that day was an answer.

"How did you know?"

Curt just shook his head. "We were just lucky. The physicians caring for President Aguler had already done all the hard work. We just reminded them of what was left."

Opium

“So which of you is Holmes and who is Watson?”

They pointed at each other, stood for the obligatory oval office Kodak moment, and then went back to work.

Suddenly, then in 1997, the Med Team had a new and interesting role. Being very politically savvy, President Brantley saw it as a new foreign diplomacy tool. In sending them to assist, he had neither interfered in the governing of another nation nor had he specifically supported any regime. The U.S. had simply provided humanitarian aid. It was a righteous position that required no defending at home or abroad, and it returned political spoils of logarithmic magnitude.

The only media release about the illness back in 1997 had been a statement from the Argentinean government thanking an American medical consulting team for assisting in resolving the president’s illness. Since it was international in origin, it was picked up by the wire services. When a reporter from a national magazine broached the subject at the daily White House news briefing, the official W.H. comment was simply to confirm it to be true.

Curt knew that what they had done in 1997 for President Brantley had led to their most intellectually challenging responsibility. But now Don was running out of newspaper, Curt knew he would have to get back to the day’s business.

Except for the problem in Brussels, this morning had proven to be especially long and boring. It was no real surprise to Curt that Don wasn’t focused. He was having the same problem. He, too, was more interested in anticipating the evening than the day. Gina, Curt’s wife, had taken the day off. She was home enjoying a rare weekday break from her work as a field officer with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and she was preparing a special dinner for company. Don and Curt’s work at the NIH was completed. Don and Xung Xia would be joining Gina and Curt for dinner. In the year that Xia had spent working in Bethesda at the NIH, they had all become good friends.

“What are we having for dinner? Have you called Gina to ask?” Don asked again, like the child in the back seat asking, “when will we be there.”

“I don’t know and no, Don, but whatever it is will surely be delicious.”

Having answered the same questions so many times today, Curt was now responding as a reflex.

The remaining workday passed as slowly as Christmas Eve night. Don had won his one-on-none basketball game, but just barely. While they sat there back in their CIA offices, no new crisis arose to entertain, challenge or plague the team. Like all of life, the pendulum of work swings with its highs and lows. This was a low day. They caught up on reading reports that piled up during their time at the NIH and finished reviewing an educational piece that Sandy had written for the embassies about vaccination. Then they called it a day. They didn’t punch a clock. It was time to go home.

For Curt, the drive to Lincoln Park was filled with the expectation of a great evening. As he ran through the gears and listened to the engine hum on his 1985

Michael Pauszek

Mercedes, he thought about his life. He and Gina had been lucky to find just the kind of home they wanted. Their traditional two-story brick house was sixty years old and looked like it had grown on its lot, just like the mature trees. It was a fortunate find. Gina had suggested that it was still on the market because so many people seemed to prefer a new house on a tiny tree-bare lot. Their combined government salaries were adequate to afford the 1800 square feet of their home. It was more space than the two of them really needed, but was perfect for when his daughters were visiting.

His black 1985 Mercedes purred through its five gears as he guided it toward home. The old car, which Curt meticulously maintained, was as close to an extravagance that he would ever muster. It had already been old when he bought it. For some reason, he enjoyed doing the maintenance himself. Anyone pulling down the sun visor would know the car was an extension of Curt's life. There was the photo gallery of the three women in his life, Gina flanked by his two daughters. The drive held the promise of an enjoyable night; it was a perfect time to enjoy a little Pink Floyd and think about the coming evening.

Curt remembered when he and Don had met Gina and Xia. It had been on the team's trip to China. Then, all of the Med Team, comprised of Don, Fred, Sandy and he, along with Gina and Dwayne from NRC, had gone to China under the auspices of studying a nuclear leak. On that trip his team had uncovered evidence of a virus that effected human intelligence. Then, in an adventure to rival the movie "The Great Escape," they had brought the virus back to the NIH for study. All that, and Gina and he still had time to fall in love.

Chapter 3

A memorable dinner

Curt was home. Slowly and silently he opened the backdoor. Gina was standing at the counter cutting carrots. She was turned away from the door. The kitchen was small, as were all kitchens in houses of this vintage. The room was alive with the heady scent of freshly baked bread and roasted garlic. Without making a sound, he moved to her and pressed his form to Gina's back, pinning her gently against the tile covering the counter. She turned, never losing the physical contact with Curt. They pressed their lips together. He had arrived. After the kiss, he lingered in the kitchen to talk. But when he started sampling the night's fare, she pulled a beer from a bucket full of ice and handed it to him, pointing the knife she was using to cut the vegetables toward the back door, indicating that it was time for him to exit.

"I've got to finish this before our company arrives and I don't need an attractive distraction."

"Okay, I know when I'm not needed." He retreated, twisting the top off his beer. As he moved toward the door, he stuck a slice of lime in the bottleneck. The bottle was icy and rapidly frosted in his hand.

He didn't really mind. But for show, he cowered like a hurt puppy. With that feigned offense, he retreated to the backyard with his drink, taking the bucket with him. It was his fortress of solitude. And it was best enjoyed in silent thought.

For a few minutes he stood there outside the door, looking out over the backyard. Then he stepped off the deck and walked the few steps over to a small fishpond. The pond was elevated above grade, formed from retention-wall blocks. At the back of the pond, a falls cascaded over a rock ledge, dropping twelve inches to the pond's surface. The water striking the pond's surface created a cool soothing sound. He sat down on the raised edge of the pond and enjoyed the radiant warmth of the fading evening sun. The dripping water of the pond's waterfall was a pleasant contrast to the warm air just like the cold beer bottle was to his right hand. *Did the sound of moving water seem so pleasant for humans because it echoed back to conception and the months spent in utero before birth? Or was it the random nature of the sound being so much like fall leaves rustling in a gentle breeze?* Whichever it might be, the sound of water falling onto the surface of the little pond permeated the backyard tranquilly like a Mozart concerto.

He could see the golden backs of fish move just below the pond's surface. That surface's tranquil calm broken only by the trickle of the dropping water and foliage of lily pads. A single water lily bloom emerged among the pad's leaves. It was the flower's second sun and it was preparing that night to slip back into the shallow pond's depth forever. After watching the fish, flower and the falling water for a few minutes, Curt moved back to the deck, returning the pond to the nature of suburban Virginia. As if on cue at that moment, a male Cardinal visited the falls. He

lighted on the rocks of the falls and drank from the water before it could fall back into the pond.

That evening the air was clear and the temperature a comfortable 76 degrees. The fire and water of summer that soaked the skin and sapped energy were gone, but it was still comfortable outside. The first chill of fall, with its heralding of winter, was still more than a month away. Somewhere down the street a lawnmower could be heard. It was the only unnatural sound to breach the ambience of the water and yard.

Don and Xung Xia arrived half a beer later. They were like family at the Kolber house. Don parked behind Curt's car and they joined Curt on the deck.

"The yard looks good, Curt."

"Yeah, because of your help."

"I was just brawn. This is all your design."

"While you boys play outside, I'll go see Gina. Try not to get dirty before dinner." Xia went in the house. Xia, who had come from China to assist in the NIH virus project, had forgotten to say no when first approached for a date by Don. She and Don had become romantically linked. They had met like Curt and Gina while the group had been in China. In fact, it had been apparent to Curt while they were in Kunming that Don was smitten with Xia.

After Xia went in, Don stepped down off the deck and walked about the yard. When he rejoined Curt on the deck, his only comment was, "It looks good."

There they sat on metal spring chairs and rocked. Don helped himself to one of the Coronas from the bucket. They sipped beer and talked, the little waterfall providing background music. Despite spending endless hours together at work, they never seemed to tire of each other's company. Tonight their conversation wandered widely over topics like politics and religion, like a boat adrift, never setting anchor anywhere. It was a discussion between friends who held similar views, which embraced and solved all of mankind's problems.

"Curt, do you ever think about college, medical school and our residency?"

"Sure but it's difficult without also thinking about my practice and marriage in South Bend. Then I think about how my first marriage failed, the one real failure in my life. The only good to come from that time in my life were my daughters, Madyson and Avery."

"I know what you mean, Curt. I hated working for the HMO. All they were interested in was controlling costs, always doing things on the cheap. But at least that time in our lives led us both here. We're back together and we have Gina and Xia."

"It is fate or divine destiny that we should have both answered an advertisement in the New England Journal of Medicine by the CIA for doctors. It was a shock to see you in Washington. I don't think I ever told you that I wanted to be posted in a foreign city, kind of like joining the French Foreign Legion. When they offered me the job on the team in Washington, I was disappointed. But then you called and told me you were also hired for the team. That made my day."

Opium

“I even remember exactly what I said to you, Curt. I said, ‘Old buddy, the CIA gods have offered me a position on something they are calling a support group for the embassies.’ When you said that they had asked you to head that group I jumped for joy.”

They sat and sipped their beers, conversation moving on to more practical matters. Curt explained the pond’s filter system to a disinterested Don. Xia and Gina were still in the house.

Don sat back and scanned the yard. “What are you going to do next back here?”

“We need a garage. I’d liked to build it before winter. I hate scraping windows. But I don’t think it’ll happen. This winter we’ll still have to scrape.”

“Where are you going to put it?”

“Right there.” He pointed to an open area just beyond the little pond, about twenty-five feet from the backdoor. “There used to be a little model-A garage there.

“You are ambitious. So tell me, with all this work, how do you find time for sex?”

Curt smiled, the glow of his facial expression already answering the question. “That’s never a problem. If I’m out here, Gina will come out after I have worked for a while and say its time to come in. A quick shower and I’m ready.”

Don took another sip of his beer and looked out across the rest of the backyard. “Your yard had a natural beauty when you bought it. But now, compared to the area by the house that you have been working on, it seems plain. What are you going to do with the rest of it?”

Curt pointed at the origin of the tranquil sound of falling water. “I really like what the pond did for this area. It’s convenient as a site, but I’m a little worried about its surface being so high out of the ground. I’d like to put a bigger one back there as a focal point and then landscape around it.” He pointed to an area about eighty feet further back in the yard.

“Sounds ambitious.”

Curt just smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “What about you? What are your plans? You look pretty content with Xia.”

“I am. Its time to settle down.”

As they spoke, Gina, followed by Xia, came out onto the deck. Xia smiled at Don. Curt noticed that he seemed to glow with that glance. Xia and Gina crossed the deck and walked down the two steps to the raised pond. Gina led Xia over near the falls at the back of the pond. She sat down on the pond edge next to one of her Bonsai trees. Xia sat opposite her, the pair flanking the little tree. For what seemed like a long time, Xia examined the miniature spruce between them and then the others sitting on the rocks that formed the falls. Now, as she did with her patients, she carefully studied the trees’ symmetry. She had the keen eye of someone very knowledgeable about Bonsai horticulture. She then looked back from the trees to Gina who was carefully watching her friend, only breathing when necessary.

“You’ve done very well; all of your Bonsai are quite lovely.”

“Thank you. When we moved here and Curt built the pond and falls, I thought it would be a perfect place to display my trees.”

“It is perfect. What is that tree to the left of the falls?”

“It is a Dogwood. I potted it this year to see if it would do as well as the conifers. So far it has survived. Those other three are Flowering Plum, Boxwood and a Red Maple.” She pointed at three other trees. “The Dogwood so far has done much better than the others, but at least they are all still alive. Just getting them to survive has been my goal for their first year. If they survive this winter, I’ll work on shaping them.”

“Even if some don’t survive you’ve done very well. I have never seen Bonsai of Dogwood or Boxwood. It would’ve been a pleasure to see how they progress.” Those few words hung like a fog over the pond area, chilling the lovely evening.

Donovan York, very much smitten with Xia and quite attentive to her, stood and walked down off the deck to stand before his beloved Xia.

“Don’t you mean ‘it will be a pleasure to see how they progress?’”

She stood up and looked into his eyes. “No, I mean would’ve been. Our work at the NIH is done. I don’t need to stay any longer. I’m eager to see my home before the end of the harvest. My dear Donovan, I must go home to Kunming!”

Don’s face twisted in agony, like he had been kicked in the groin. His face got pale, drained of all blood-borne vitality because his romantic heart had just stopped beating. “I want you to stay Xia, I love you. I know you don’t want to talk about it, but I want to marry you!”

“I know and I love you too, Don, but I need to smell the pine forest and see the fields of home. I need to visit the sites where Ningxia and Huqin’s ashes were spread and make my peace with their spirits. A part of me is still back there, wandering, looking for an answer. I don’t even know the question. I have to go back home. My heart will always remain burdened unless I make peace with their deaths. Then if we’re meant to be together, it will happen.”

Curt understood exactly what Xia was feeling. She had faced the loss of her beloved teacher Ningxia and her ex-husband Huqin. Before she had time to deal with that loss, she had left China to work at the NIH. Her year in Washington had just postponed her finding closure, not resolved it. If asked, he would’ve agreed that Xia should return home. It was necessary for her. Still, he was concerned about Donovan who hadn’t seemed to breathe since Xia had said ‘Kunming.’ It wasn’t natural for Don to be speechless.

Curt was relieved when Don finally turned and climbed back up on the deck. He returned to the seat near Curt. His face was drawn and as vacant of emotion as a Nantucket fog. Just like the parent who wished he could turn back the clock and prevent the pain of a fall for his child, Curt wished he had the power to take away the pain of his two friends. The garden, with the sound of the little waterfall, had suddenly lost its inviting quality. It was going to be hard to salvage the spirit of the evening.

Opium

Curt sort of choked as he spoke. "Is dinner ready, Gina?"

"Yes." Unlike Curt's voice, Gina's response was calm and lacked any element of surprise. Xia had confided her plan to return to Kunming to Gina while they were still in the house. Unlike Curt and Don, she had already had a few minutes to digest the significance. Still, she too thought that Xia might have chosen a better time to break and therefore soften the news for Don.

For Xia, this moment was perfect. She and Don were with the only family she had in the U.S. For her, the extremes of life had always been family affairs.

"Good, lets go in and eat, I'm hungry." Curt led the way back into the house, the sound of the falls, now all that was left in the backyard, to wash away the pain. *I wish we could leave it all behind in the garden.*

The mood at the dinner table was better than that in the garden, but just barely. Gina offered a toast to her husband and dear friends. Donovan, the consummate consumer of Gina's cooking, had nothing to say and little appetite. The evening ended right after dinner. Don wasn't in the mood to sit around and exchange pleasantries. Xia and Don said goodbye and left.

After they had cleaned up the dishes and finally lay in each other's arms, Curt asked Gina the questions that had been forming in his mind since dinner. "Did Xia say anything to you in the house before the two of you came out into the garden? Did she say why she is doing this now?"

"She said she was very fond of all of us and felt she loved Don, but was unsure if her feelings were real as long as she was in this foreign environment and hadn't dealt with the loss of her country and loved ones. I think she feels guilty for finding happiness when her two friends had so recently died."

"She is not comfortable here?"

"I think she is very comfortable here and happy with Don, but Xia is very wise. We all know that things are always brighter upon first glance compared to the stark reality after the glitter is gone. It's just like the day we came back to look at our house the second time. Only then could we see the problems, like the small driveway. I believe she really loves Don, but is afraid that her unresolved bond to her dead ex-husband and old teacher will interfere with moving forward and being a good life partner. But it'll work out. Don is unhappy now, but this is even more distressing for Xia. In a way, this could be very good for Don. If Xia comes back, she will be ready to be his mate."

"You may be right." They snuggled closer.

While Curt and Gina cleaned up after dinner, Donovan and Xia drove in silence. Xia, aware of what she had precipitated and what he was now feeling, respected his silence as he drove. It was a credit to Don's character that he reacted as he had, surprised and dismayed, not angry. As he pulled into a parking space outside her apartment building, he finally broke the silence.

“Why now, why tonight, Xia? Why have you never mentioned this before tonight? If you weren’t going to stay here you could’ve told me long ago.”

“Don, I’m in love with you, and I have to be sure. Love is something I have only felt for my son, grandson and parents, never for Ningxia. I didn’t have the courage to tell you before tonight. If I’d waited any longer I might never again had that courage. I want always to be honest with you.” She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. He turned toward her and kissed her passionately. Without another word, she opened the door and got out of the car. She didn’t look back as she walked into the building. She didn’t want him to see her crying. It would’ve weakened her resolve. Don normally would’ve gone in with her. Tonight, the both needed time to think. Don sat for a few minutes with only the soft idling of his car’s engine and then drove home.

The next morning, Don dropped into a chair in Curt’s office. He was so pale he looked like he had leaned his face against Tom Sawyer’s fence. He slumped there across the desk from his boss and friend. He wasn’t in the mood for wastebasket basketball today. “Life is a bitch,” was all he said.

Curt eyed his friend. Don had lines and dark streaks under his eyes. He looked like he hadn’t slept. Curt sat in silence, looking from Don to pictures of Gina, Madyson and Avery on his desk. He knew how much losing any of his three girls would mean. There was nothing he could say that would ease his friend’s pain. Don looked like he might melt to tears if Curt said anything.

Finally, he broke the silence. “Don, I spoke with President Brantley’s secretary this morning. He asked for our help. The White House is finally interested in learning about the growing problem of abuse of narcotic analgesics.” He watched for any response from his friend; there was none. Curt went on. “I know that we have talked about it for years. The president may not be able to solve the problem, but at least he is interested in understanding.”

That was finally enough to engage Don. “Does he know that we’d recommend the elimination of the Department of Health and Human Services and burn all of its bureaucratic rules in effigy? That would be a good start!”

Curt thought that at least he could sense that the old Don was still in the beleaguered shell sitting before him. “No, he wants us to explain what is happening and make suggestions.”

“All he would have to do is send his daughter out on the streets of Washington and let her buy some hydrocodone or that hillbilly heroin, oxy-whatever, and he would have his answer. The liberal policy of the Joint Commission has taken on a life of its own. The new vital sign, pain. What a pile of dog crap! It’s a prescription for providing drugs for drug abuse. Narcotics were never the answer to making life less painful.”

All Don needed was a soapbox and an audience and his personality had now reemerged.

Opium

“You’re right, Don. And I think President Brantley realizes there is a problem. Narcotic use has grown exponentially.”

“You mean abuse, Curt, not use. It is totally out of control. Anyone, even without any real disease, can get narcotics. All they have to do is complain of pain. ‘Oh doctor, my back hurts so much.’... ‘But Mrs. X, your back looks so very normal.’... ‘It hurts so much! I need something stronger.’... ‘But you are already taking hydrocodone.’... ‘Doctor, it’s not helping! If you don’t help me I’ll have to see someone else!’... But Mrs. X, it isn’t a good idea to take that much medication.’... ‘It doesn’t help doctor.’... ‘Fine. Try this oxycodone’... ‘Thank you, doctor.’

“Then she walks out of the office and pulls out her cell phone. ‘Yeah, I got it. The fool wrote a prescription for a hundred tablets! All I had to do is threaten to go somewhere else. How much did you say we could get for each tablet? Great. Yeah.’”

Don was on a role. “Curt, we’ve got to tell the President that doctors are afraid not to provide the narcotic prescription. So many doctors work for hospitals now and as employees, they are pressured to avoid patient complaints. Hospitals are so focused on patient satisfaction surveys. Since when did a damn survey ever measure quality! It’s just a damn popularity contest! Give out narcotics like candy and keep your job! It’s a world gone crazy! It would be different if drugs were a panacea. But narcotics don’t get people back to productive lives. In fact, they make people less functional.”

“Don, maybe it’s time for some tough choices. For too long we as a society have taken the easy route, bending to the interests of the squeaky wheel. Do what’s right, not what is easy is good medicine. Treatment should be based upon both complaints and findings. Heroin and methamphetamine are problems, but they are nothing compared to the abuse of prescription drugs. The war on drugs must finally include the drug store.”

“I hope that we aren’t contributing to another law that just puts more demands on doctors. Remember the COBRA law? It was like using a cannon to kill a mosquito.”

“Pretty much, Don. There is little wonder that the number of applicants to medical schools is down. ”

“So what are we going to do, Boss?”

“We’re going to get the information that President Brantley wants and interpret it for him. It’s our chance to give something back to our medical colleagues still in the trenches. Maybe something can be done to improve the practice of medicine.”

“We have to, Curt. The amount of hydrocodone on the street has ballooned. We need to make the streets safer for your daughters.”

Curt knew that Don was again engaged.

Chapter 4

They call the last in the class “doctor” just like the first

1986

John Tron had gone to medical school for the wrong reason. He had no desire to be a doctor. He really had no desire to do anything. He had emigrated with his parents from Vietnam in 1973 in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. When they settled in San Diego they opened a Vietnamese restaurant. His parents, eager to succeed in their new country, worked hard. John, however, hadn't inherited their work ethic.

After arriving in California, they changed their son's name to John from Han. They hoped the change would ease his transition in America.

His parents had been professionals in Saigon. There, his father had been a lawyer and his mother a medical assistant. When they came to San Diego their goal was for John to have a better life. “You be a doctor, Son.”

“Yes, father.” John knew his parents wanted him to succeed. But he lacked any personal goal; he always believed that his parents had enough for him. In college at UCLA, he put forth just enough effort to pass his classes. He couldn't, after all, overtly reject his parents or their wishes. That would have been contrary to his cultural heritage. To appease them, he filled out the application form to a single medical school.

It was enough. In the 1980s, the competition for positions in medical school classes had begun to ease. John Tron's minority status and the easing of applicant numbers got him admission to UCSD Medical School, despite his unimpressive college GPA. There, the uninspired student studied little.

When his parents queried him about his schoolwork, he responded. “Don't they call the last member of the class ‘doctor,’ just like the first?” They never said another word. Thereafter, that expression became his medical school mantra.

His lackluster medical career almost died at the end of his junior year at UCSD Medical School. It was time to apply for a residency program through the national match. Since in the U.S. medical school is but a stepping-stone, every doctor needs advanced training in a residency program. John applied to multiple anesthesia residency programs, foolishly believing that anesthesiologists had an easy life. He didn't fair well. He didn't get a residency match. But even then he brushed it off; after all, they call the last member of the class “doctor,” just like the first.

Still uninvested and unengaged in his own future, he waited for a week after the match before walking into the counselor's office at UCSD Medical School. The counselor made a number of inquiries on John's behalf; after all it reflected poorly on the medical school's record not to have a hundred-percent student placement. It was the counselor's role to protect the school's reputation. If they didn't have a hundred-percent postgraduate placement, it could adversely affect future applications. But the counselor also had little success. All the anesthesia programs had filled. Then she tried broadening her search.

Opium

That same year, a university-based family practice program opened on the UCSD campus. Being unknown, it hadn't filled in the student match. Two of its four available positions remained open. The counselor arranged for one of the unfilled positions to be offered to John. He accepted.

Though he didn't get into anesthesiology, none of this bothered John Tron. In fact, staying in San Diego worked well with John's plans. During his senior year he had already begun capitalizing on his future medical degree. He was already moonlighting as an extern in the San Diego bedroom community ERs when the position in San Diego was offered to him. When he should have been studying, preparing himself to be competent in a future practice, he was already working and earning a good income.

After graduation, John continued to moonlight in the smaller ERs around San Diego though his residency program expressly banned the activity. But his staff chose a "don't ask, don't tell" policy. They were grateful to have at least three first-year residents.

John organized the other family practice residents into a moonlighting group. He ran the group, assigning his fellow residents to ER shifts and collecting a management fee.

But there was a personal cost. He wasn't growing as a physician. He wasn't learning. His medical skill development was very limited. Working in single coverage ERs, he had no mentor. Without a mentor to oversee and advise him, there was no opportunity to learn. Education was not, however, a high priority for Doctor John Tron.

When Tron finished the three years of his residency in 1995, he went to work in one of the ERs as a staff physician. While he was a resident, his educational shortcomings were simply overlooked. Now as a staff physician, it became all too apparent that John wasn't well-prepared. Twice in the first two months, John had diagnosed pneumonia in patients who actually were in heart failure. After complaints by their two attending physicians, Doctors Hale and Paul, the medical director of the ER was forced to deal with John's limitations. But Kenny Josephson M.D., the ER Medical Director, needed John; it wasn't that easy to find physicians to work ERs. The burnout rate for ER doctors was excessive.

Near the end of one of John's shifts, Kenny Josephson visited him. "John, can we go back in the office and talk for a few minutes?"

"Sure, Ken." He followed Josephson back off the floor of the ER.

"What's up, Ken?"

"John, you've got to do something. We can't have all these complaints. You've got to get up to speed."

"You're right, Ken. What do you think I should do?"

"Right here in San Diego, we have a world-class medical education facility. You were a student and resident there for seven years. They offer three separate, week long, continuing education classes in emergency care. I'm going to give you a month off the schedule to take those three classes. I expect that to protect your

position here, during that month, you won't be working anywhere and will study. See you in a month. I'll finish your shift today. Goodbye, John."

Now with his income in jeopardy, John's hand was forced. He took the three courses. They did improve his mechanical skills and ability to interpret lab data. But his clinical skill, the ability to do a history and physical exam, still remained weak. There is no substitute for working hard in med school and during residency. Three weeks couldn't replace seven years.

Yet, John was as bright as he was lazy. A month after he left, when he returned to work, he worked harder at trying to con the ER nursing staff than he did doing patient care. "It's good to be back to work, I missed you guys." John brought a meal for the staff from his parent's restaurant. He could put on appearances even if it was only epidermal.

John was back. He may have been off for a month taking the classes, but he'd also used the time to refine a plan for his own project. He may not have had a mentor while moonlighting in ERs, but he did get another kind of education. He was introduced to the alternative economy. It was a time to plan his next moneymaking scheme.

While moonlighting, John had learned that emergency rooms provided health care for the uninsured. He saw a lot of people claiming to be unemployed. But they were well-dressed, clean and carried cell phones. They made their living on the streets. They lived in a cash economy.

They always came complaining of terrible, unrelenting pain. There was never any objective finding to support the complaint. It was always toothache, headache, lifting a couch or falling off a ladder. John remembered slipping off a ladder a few years earlier in his parent's garage. Though his feet had been only two feet above the floor when he fell, he got an ugly bruise on his backside. None of the "victims" of falls that he saw in the ER had any such marks to support their complaints.

Listed allergies always included all nonnarcotics and "acetaminophen and ibuprofen never help my pain, doctor." The common denominator was the desire for a narcotic injection and more importantly, a narcotic prescription. After the first few such patients, Tron was convinced that either their brains were fried from watching Springer or these patients thought he had just fallen off the boat from Vietnam. If he didn't give them the narcotics they wanted, they would call him repeatedly back into their ER room. "Please help me, doctor."

Doctor Josephson had told him when he first started working as an extern, "Those are the patients that suck the gray matter from the ER staff's brain. They eat time, the one thing most valuable to the ER doctor and the thing they have the most of. They chip away at him by taking time, eroding his resolve. It is the most successful con in modern history. Either the doc precipitates a confrontation or he caves like a Florida sinkhole after a spring flood."

John remembered what Josephson had then said. "They prey upon the system and the caring emotions of the health care providers. They prey upon a

Opium

system that has been told it is a personal right in America not to have pain. Most of the oral narcotics that are sold on the street come from ER prescriptions through just such a ploy.”

John Tron saw it all first hand. They were shopping for narcotics. Unlike other more caring physicians, he didn't let his brain suffer or get frustrated. There demands didn't prey upon him. Rather, the whole idea of a parallel economy intrigued him. Was this an untapped opportunity? John thought it was an “in God we trust” opportunity. He was ready to capitalize.

During his month off, he formulated his plan. Unlike the seekers he saw in the ER, with a medical license, he wouldn't be in the shadows. He could be legal. All he needed was start-up capital. It would soon be time to hang out his shingle.

Opium, the tale, weaves the history of man's misuse of narcotics with a modern medical mystery, a fatal epidemic on California. The CIA's Med team finds the common denominator. The tales thread together in the end.

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