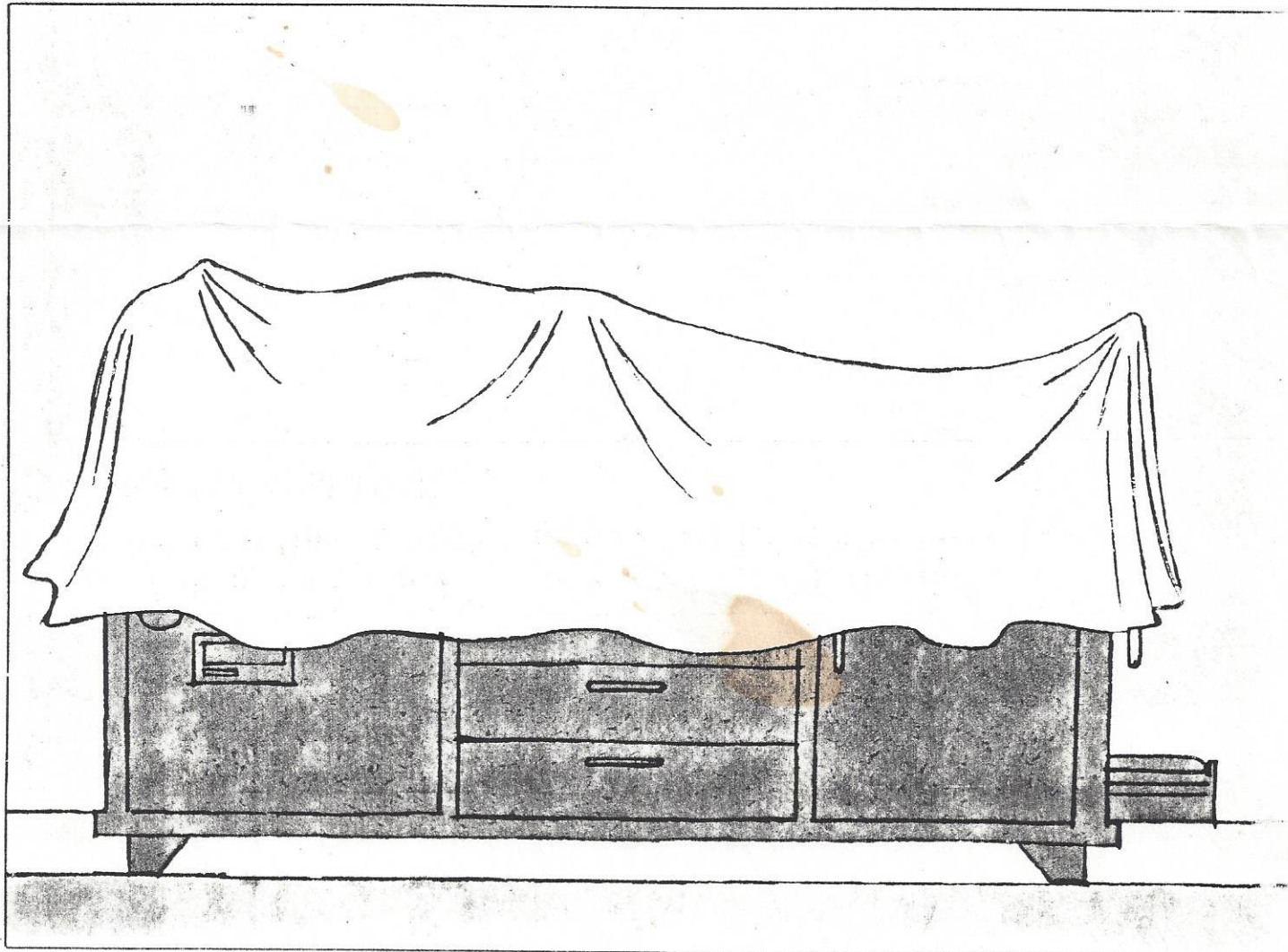

THE PATIENT I JUST COULDN'T PART WITH

You can't always avoid a death in your office. But this doctor prays that next time it won't happen on a Friday afternoon.

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It hurts a lot to have a patient die in your office at any time. But when it occurs on a Friday afternoon just as the local bureaucracy is shutting down for the weekend, the trauma is on a level all its own.

That's what happened to me. For hours I wondered whether the corpse and I would ever part company.

Mr. J.K. came into our office around 3 o'clock that Friday—staggering. His daughter, who brought him in, was a regular patient of mine and had made the appointment for him. I'd never seen him before.



When I entered the examining room. I found him sitting on the table, shaky and incoherent. After a couple of minutes of meandering conversation with him, I decided to get what history I could from his daughter instead. He was 67, she told me. He'd been smoking and drinking heavily and coughing more than usual.

At that point I realized that Mr. K. looked far worse than when he'd first wobbled in. He was shaking violently. The shaking became clonic, then stopped suddenly, and he was rigid and incontinent. I caught him as he fell back on the examining table.

A quick check revealed no pulse, no blood pressure, and no heart sounds. "I think he's sicker than we realized," I muttered to the daughter. "In fact—" I quit muttering, banged the patient on the chest, and yelled for help.

No chest sounds materialized, but my partner and our two nurses did. We went through the standard resuscitative procedures—oropharyngeal intubation, mouth-to-mouth respiration, external cardiac compression, defibrillation—while a horrified daughter looked on. After 12 minutes, we gave up.

It took me a while to collect myself. Then I spoke to the daughter in my office. "He's dead," I told her. "I really don't know why, but he's dead."

While she cried, I had time to worry. This isn't a hospital ER, I told myself; it's my office. This body is my responsibility until I can get it into someone else's hands. And that won't be easy because it's 4 p.m. on a Friday and the county offices are already closing. All I said to the daughter, though, was, "You know, we're going to have to make some kind of arrangements."

"What do we do?" she asked.

I wasn't quite sure. I assumed it was a case for the coroner, since I hadn't seen the man before and didn't know the cause of his death. The first thing, I told her, was to choose a mortuary and arrange for someone from there to pick up the body. Then the coroner's office would have to be notified. She'd already telephoned her husband and wanted to wait for him to arrive and help her decide on a mortuary.

Meanwhile, I excused myself to see two patients whose appointments my nurse felt she couldn't post-

pone. "Busy office!" one of them commented.

I attempted a smile. "Fridays are like that," I replied.

The son-in-law arrived, and a mortuary was soon selected. Mr. K. had been divorced, so at least I was dealing with the next of kin.

I called the mortuary and explained the situation to the pleasant-voiced woman who answered. "I'll let you talk with Mr. Davis, our service representative," she said. I recited the events to the solemn-voiced but sympathetic Davis. He assured me that he understood perfectly but thought I'd better talk with the manager, Mr. Harwood.

A more jovial voice came on the line. "Certainly, Doctor," said Harwood after I'd explained my plight. "We'll be very happy to pick up the remains. But you really don't feel that you can sign the death certificate? Well, that does make it a bit more complicated. It's just a formality, but you'll have to notify the coroner's office first. The minute we hear from them, a car will be on its way for the remains." He gave me the phone number of the local coroner's office and expressed his regret about the formalities.

When I called the number he'd given me, a female voice answered. It turned out to be impossible to get past her without an explanation, so I settled for: "I've got a dead person in my office, and it's a coroner's case."

She immediately connected me with Deputy Assistant Coroner Hoffman. As I retold the story to him, I noticed that through repetition it was taking on a degree of organization. When I came to the end, there was a long pause, followed by a drawn-out sigh from Hoffman. "Yes, Doctor," he said, "it does sound like a coroner's case. However, under these circumstances, it will have to be cleared with the *central* coroner's office. Shall I have them contact you?"

I glanced at the office clock. It said 4:55. "Mr. Hoffman, wouldn't it be quicker if I called them myself?"

"Much better, much better, Doctor," he replied. "That will save both time and red tape." He gave me the central-office number and extension.

I dialed the number, and again a pleasant-voiced woman answered. In my haste, I forgot to ask her for the extension. Instead, I found myself reciting the

narrative all over again like an automaton. Partway through, I stopped myself and began looking for my note with the extension number on it. Too late! "Hold on, please, and I'll connect you with your party," the sweet voice said—and I was put on "hold" before I could protest that I knew the extension number.

Periodically over the next 20 minutes, my silent telephone vigil was punctuated by a voice repeating "Hold on, please" and then clicking off while I sputtered. Exasperated at the delay, I hung up, dialed again, and asked for the extension without even saying hello. This time a man answered. "Bertelli, coroner's office," he announced. I gratefully introduced myself and explained my problem once more.

Bertelli sighed—which seemed to be the initial reaction of everyone I talked with. "Have you notified the police?" he asked. I said I hadn't. "Oh, well, that's certainly the thing to do," he replied with more animation. "Notify the police. After they've completed their investigation—which is merely a formality, you understand—they'll notify us, and we'll notify the mortuary."

As far as Bertelli was concerned, the matter was closed. But it was now 6:30, and I was getting desperate. "Why should the police be involved?" I demanded. "When this sort of thing happens in the hospital emergency room, the police are never called in."

"Ah, that's different," Bertelli explained patiently. "You see, when a death occurs on a public premise, the police must report to us before we can do anything."

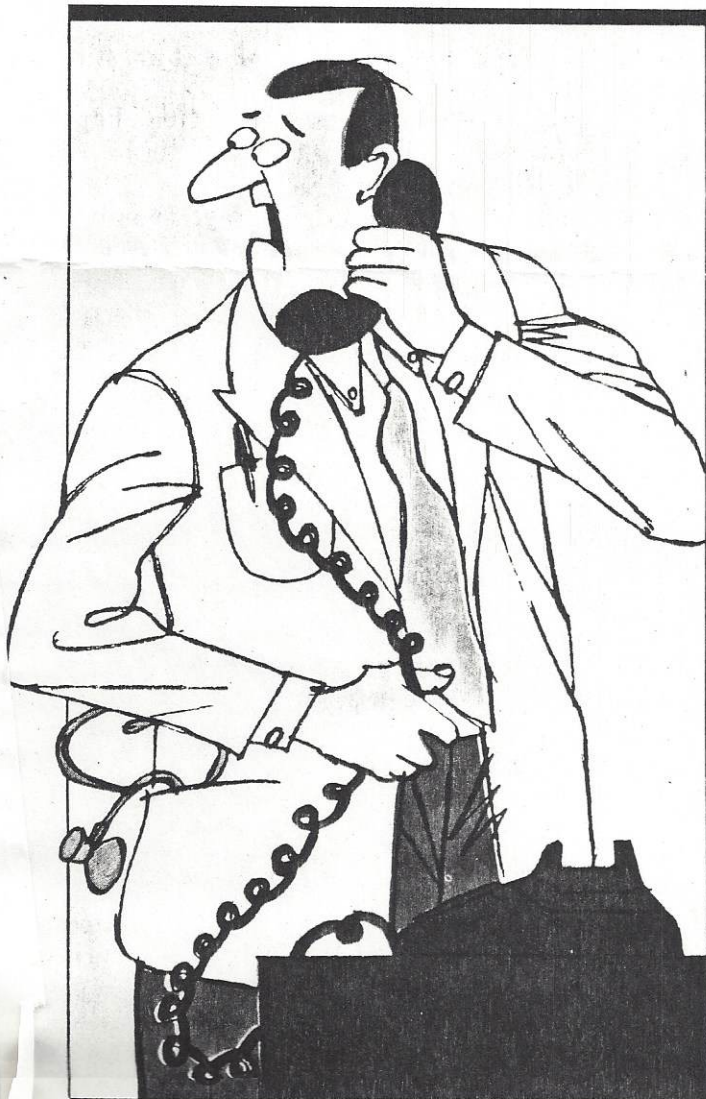
"But this is a doctor's office," I objected. "And I'm the doctor! This patient died right before my eyes! He was given artificial respiration, cardiac massage, and ECG monitoring. Doesn't that make this a medical facility?"

"Just a minute, Doctor," Bertelli said. "I'd better talk this over with my superior."

By now I felt completely drained, but I hung on. Finally I got a decision: "My superior says we *must* have a report from the police before we can arrange for disposal of the body." I hung up without thanking him.

I then dialed the police for our area and got Sgt. Petroff. He let me get halfway through my routine

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before interrupting: "I think you want the detectives. They're in the central valley, but I can connect you."

I reached Detective Slagel, who listened to my story from beginning to end. The usual long pause followed. Then: "I think the thing to do is to notify the coroner's office. I'll give you the number."

At that, my resignation finally deserted me. "Damn it," I screamed, "I've just *talked* to coroner's, and they told me to call *you!*"

"Yes, certainly," he replied. "Just a formality. It's up to detectives to check it out. One second." I held on while he left the phone. "Someone will be there in a few minutes," he finally assured me.

Another hour passed. By now it was pitch-black outside. The building seemed to be deserted except for the corpse, the daughter, her husband, and me. Then in walked a man with the build of an athlete, crew-cut red hair, and a startling handlebar mustache to match. "I'm Conroy," he said.

I wasn't sure whether his title was officer, detective, or sergeant, so I called him Mr. Conroy, and he didn't object. After shaking hands all around, we all tramped into the examining room where the corpse lay.

"This was Mr. J.K.," I told Conroy. For a second it looked as though he was going to shake hands with the dead man, but he merely lifted one hand and let it fall to the table with a slap.

"Already kind of stiff," the detective observed. "It must have taken you awhile to call us."

Wearily I explained that I'd been busy talking to virtually every department of the county government before he arrived.

"Hmm," said Conroy. He then relaxed at my desk and scribbled notes while I mechanically recited the background for him.

"What do you think he died of?" Conroy asked when I'd finished.

"I haven't the least idea," I replied. "But the terminal convulsive event was a cardiac arrest."

After taking down further details from the daughter and son-in-law, Conroy told them they wouldn't be needed any longer. "Are you sure you wouldn't like us to stay?" the daughter asked me. With some

“Well, I guess that about winds it up,” the detective said as he headed for the door. I dashed after him. “But how do I get rid of the body?” I demanded.

reluctance I assured her that I could manage alone, and the couple left.

Conroy got Bertelli's phone number and extension from me and called him at the coroner's office. “Hi there, Lou,” the detective said. “Yeah, Maggie's fine. She just got back from the ranch . . . Right . . . Well, this one's been dead a while. The doc here says it must have been a coronary . . . No, he won't sign. Says he hadn't been taking care of the guy . . . Okay, Lou. Say hello to Harriet for me . . . Talk to you again, Lou.”

“Well, I guess that about winds it up,” Conroy commented as he hung up. He grabbed his coat and headed for the door.

“Look, I'm very happy to hear that,” I said, dashing after him, “but how am I supposed to get rid of the body?”

“Oh, the coroner will take it from here,” he replied. “He'll call the mortuary and give the okay, and they'll send someone.”

“You're welcome to wait with me,” I offered.

“Hell, no!” he replied. “It's already midnight, and I've got a lot of other things to do.” The door closed behind him.

I sat down alone in a still, quiet office. I thumbed through several medical journals, paced the floor, drank some water, and then called the mortuary again.

A youthful male voice answered. “It's Dr. Spies,” I

said. “I just thought I'd check on when you expect your hearse to pick up Mr. K.”

“Who?”

With a sinking feeling, I explained still another time. “Oh, yes,” the young voice said hesitantly. “I have a note here. You mean the remains are still in your office?”

“You've got it! Is a car on the way to pick him—the remains—up?”

“I don't know.”

“Well, will you find out?”

“Just a minute.” A few seconds later, he was back. “I guess not, Doctor,” he said. “Both our cars are still in the garage.”

I struggled to keep my voice from trembling. “Please send one over now. I've been here with the . . . remains all evening.”

“Yes, we'll send a driver out right away,” he promised.

A half-hour later I called him back. “I know, Doctor, I know,” he said. “It was just that I couldn't release the car until I heard from the coroner's office. They just called, and the car is on its way.”

I could no longer control my trembling. “I'm going to call you back again in 30 minutes,” I warned him.

It had been almost that long when there was a knock on the door. I opened it to two sad-faced young men dressed in black. “You're with Mr. J.K.?” one of them inquired lugubriously.

“I'm the doctor!”

Their expressions lightened instantly. They assured me that they'd come to pick up the remains, but they'd need a history first. They knew, of course, that I'd already explained everything to the coroner's office, but they'd still have to complete their report before they could remove the body. Wasn't it a shame, the amount of paperwork required?

So I told the whole damned story again.

It was another half-hour before our strange procession finally left the office: the two black-suited young men, the draped cart, and me. Driving wearily home along deserted streets in the early morning, I reflected that I should have learned a valuable lesson from this experience.

But I couldn't figure out what it was. ■