

The Good Doctor

I was a 22-year-old medical student just starting my clinical rotations when I first met Dr. Jack Brennan. There had been no time for formal introductions. Barely five minutes into rounds a Code Blue was called on one of our patients, Stella Hennessy.

Stella had already been a fixture on the service for more than three months by the time I started working there. She was too sick to leave the hospital—so sick that no one believed there was any reasonable chance that she might eventually get better enough to be discharged. As a result, Stella became a medical wayfarer, moving back and forth between the ICU and the ward as the need arose. She had coded and been resuscitated at least three times. After each of her near death encounters, she came back to life without any fanfare—no bullshit about seeing a light, or meeting up with dead relatives, or having some sort of spooky out-of-body experience. She simply woke up, took a look around, and then commented rather matter-of-factly that she sure could use a drink.

Stella Hennessy was Jack's patient. Every morning on rounds he'd snatch a flower from a bouquet sitting on the bedside table of some nearby patient and gallantly offer it to her. If Stella was conscious that day, she'd pluck the flower from his hands and blow him a kiss. If she was too out of it to accept his gift, he'd simply leave the flower on her pillow after checking her vital signs and making an entry in her record.

To me, a medical novice learning how to become a doctor, Jack was a phenomenon. He had a way with patients. They called him Dr. Jack or Doc or sometimes just plain Jack. He usually called them by their first names, asking how their favorite sports team might be doing, admiring a photo of a cherished grandchild, or commiserating on a near winning lotto number. Jack was a good doctor—maybe even a great one. More important, he was a real doctor. Sure, he knew about diseases, but he also knew about people.

Jack was smart. I enjoyed listening in during rounds as our senior resident or one of the attending physicians would quiz him about some obscure syndrome or rare drug interaction. Jack always seemed to come up with the correct answer. Even better, he responded in just the right way, never coming across as too cocky or self-assured. And he

had this real talent for answering a question with another question, allowing his inquisitors to show off their superior knowledge, so they wouldn't resent him as being just another clever prick who thought he knew more than they did.

The patients all seemed to like Jack. His colleagues admired him. The higher-ups in the medical hierarchy respected him. Me, I adored him. He was simply the best. And Jack always seemed to be at the top of his game when dealing with Stella. I remember tagging along when he went to check on her one morning. She'd kept us both up most of the night before, as we tried to control a run of nearly uncontrollable seizures. For a while it had been touch-and-go whether she would make it through the night, but Stella surprised us again. She'd been pumped up with enough anticonvulsants and sedatives to knock out an elephant, but when we parted the curtains around her bed, there she was, sitting up, breakfasting on tea and toast.

"Ya look like the cat dragged ya in, Doc. Had a bad night, did ya?"

Jack never missed a beat. He threw his head back, and, in his very best Marlon Brando imitation, let out a heart-wrenching "S-T-E-L-L-A!" Just like in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I don't know if Stella got his joke, but I sure did, as I doubled over in a fit of laughter despite my exhaustion.

That was how it was. I worked hard. He worked hard. We worked hard. But it never actually seemed hard; in fact, it hardly seemed like work. And all because of Jack. He had that way about him. Sometimes Jack crossed over the line in his various shenanigans, both with his patients and with his colleagues, but I generally forgave him such lapses in medical good taste because he was such a great doctor, and because I firmly believed that behind the jokes and the pranks was a man who not only cared *for* his patients, but genuinely cared *about* them. Take Stella, for example. She had to be one of his most exasperating cases. She didn't have cancer or leukemia or some other hard-luck-of-the-draw disease bestowed on her by the left hand of fate. Stella had brought on her own problems through years of hard drinking. She had cirrhosis, her liver shrunken and shriveled and no longer able to do what it was supposed to do. The resultant ascites had led to a massive accumulation of fluid in her belly making her resemble a pregnant woman in her final trimester. Her legs were so swollen and her muscles so atrophied that she could barely stand, much less walk. The excess bilirubin that her sick liver wasn't able to

metabolize circulated around in her veins and arteries, leaking out to stain her skin yellow. She was anemic and her blood could no longer clot normally, making her bruise easily so that her skin came to resemble a bizarre Sam Francis canvas, splattered with dotted purple-blue ecchymoses. Her mind was going as well; she drifted in and out of hepatic coma, her thoughts only temporarily clearing when dialysis purged her body of the poisons that were destroying her brain. Stella had good days and bad days, but as I continued my rotation on the service, there were more and more of the bad ones.

Stella was becoming a hell of a lot of work for Jack. After a while, I noticed that he began forgetting her daily flower. I think Stella noticed, too. She was still friendly and playful with him, when conscious and alert enough to interact with us at all, but something had changed. I could see it in her eyes. Was there a questioning in them perhaps? An uneasiness? I couldn't put my finger on it exactly, but the situation was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. In the past I'd enjoyed our visits with Stella. It had been fun listening to the sometimes raucous banter between her and Jack. Suddenly it all seemed strained and artificial. The banter was just banter. That undertone of warmth and affection was no longer there, or so it seemed to me. Perhaps it was just my realization that Stella wasn't going to make it. Even with all his considerable medical prowess, Jack simply couldn't save her. She was slowly slipping away on us. I knew it. Stella knew it too, I believed. And Jack must have known it. But he never admitted as much.

I recall coming by to see her on one of her better days. Jack had asked me to draw blood for liver function tests. The curtains around her bed were drawn. I poked my head in to say hello and let her know I was there. Stella shifted around in her bed, stuffing something under her mattress, all the while giving me the look of the cat who'd just swallowed the family canary. She averted her eyes and held out her arm for the venipuncture. She didn't flinch or complain when I repeatedly stuck the needle in, finally locating a vein on my third try. When I finished taking the sample, she grabbed my hand nervously and looked me straight in the eye.

"Ya won't tell him ya saw it, will ya? Please. You're a good girl now, ain't ya? Ya know how ta keep a secret, don't ya, Dearie?" she implored me.

"Saw what?" I asked innocently.

“Ya know. Me bottle.” She retrieved a half-full pint of Thunderbird from under her mattress.

“How did you get that?”

“Never you mind. Just don’t let him know I’ve been drinkin’. He’d kill me if he found out!”

“Who, Jack? He wouldn’t have to. You’re doing it yourself. Come on, Stella, you should know better.”

“He’d kill me, I tell ya.” There were tears in her eyes. “I’m dyin’ anyway. Don’t ya think I know it? Please, let me go in peace. Not with them shakes.”

Stella was worried about DTs. She must have been having someone bring her the booze for a while now to prevent withdrawal. I wondered if Jack had any clue as to what was going on.

“He’s a mean one, that one,” she was telling me now.

“He’s hardly mean for trying to keep you from hurting yourself,” I began, stopping suddenly when she froze in her bed, her eyes opening wide and her pupils dilating, like those of a frightened deer caught in the crosshairs of a hunter’s rifle. Jack was on his way over. I could hear his voice, as he joked with another patient on the far side of the ward.

I took the bottle from Stella and hid it in the pocket of my white jacket. “I won’t tell. But only if you promise not to do it again.”

“Thanks, Sweetie. I promise. You’re a doll.” She reached quickly to grab my hand, then kissed it.

Jack appeared at the edge of the curtain and yanked it open. “Were you able to find a vein?” he asked me, ignoring Stella at first.

“Piece of cake,” I fibbed.

“Rum cake?” He attempted a joke.

Stella and I both laughed nervously.

“I’m no rummy anymore, Doc. Ya know that. I changed me evil ways. No more o’ that drinkin’. Ya made an honest woman out o’ me,” Stella corrected him.

“Ah, Stella, if only you and I had met earlier,” Jack replied in mock seriousness, taking her hand in his and gazing off theatrically into the distance. “In some other time, some other place ...”

“Don’t be pullin’ that soap opera shit on me now, Doc. I’m old enough ta be ya mother!” She pulled her hand away. “And come ta think o’ it, where’s me posy?”

Jack abruptly turned on his heels and darted down the corridor, heading in the direction of the nurse’s station. He deftly snatched a flower from a vase sitting on the counter, then hurried back to Stella’s bedside, bowed, and handed her a red rose that had seen better days.

“It’s wilted,” Stella observed, accepting his offering nonetheless.

“I’m getting a little wilted myself,” he admonished her. “You’ve been keeping me up too many nights lately. Try to get that old liver of yours to work a little better, will you?”

“I’ll try, Doc. An thanks fo’ tha posy.”

Jack nodded and moved toward our next patient. I started to follow him, my progress suddenly impeded by a firm tug on my coat sleeve. Stella was holding her finger over her closed lips, cautioning me to silence. I smiled and nodded.

“Thanks, Dearie. Ya saved me!”

Stella’s condition worsened day by day. She slipped in and out of consciousness, with runs of seizures punctuating her waking hours. I was sure she was still sneaking the booze, when she was alert enough to try. I’d even caught her once, but was too softhearted to let on. One of the orderlies whom she’d befriended would bring her a bottle now and then, adding a shot to her orange juice to keep her from getting those shakes she feared so much. One afternoon I’d actually seen him mixing her drink, leaving it at her bedside while she was asleep. I kept quiet about it. What the hell, was all I could think. Stella was right. She was dying. What difference would it make anyway?

Not very long afterwards when I was on night call, I was paged to come to the ward in the wee hours of the morning to check an IV that had gotten clogged. Most of the patients were still sleeping, with the hisses of respirators and the bleeping of monitors and the squeaky wheels of the medicine carts and the distant squishes of the nurses’ vibram-soled shoes providing a lullaby for the weary sick. I’d flushed the line and started to leave, when I noticed a rustling of the curtains around Stella’s bed. Curious, I walked over. There was a slit opening, and I peeked in to see Jack holding a half-empty cup containing what was left of a screwdriver the orderly had left for Stella. He was sniffing it suspiciously.

“You fucking piece of low-life trash! Look at you! What have you done to yourself!” he growled at her. “And still boozing it up!” Stella did not respond. She remained as still as a statue. That seemed to make Jack even angrier. He threw the cup down in a fury, leaned over the bed, and began shaking Stella. It appeared that he was trying to rouse her, but he had to know better; she was clearly unconscious. Next thing I knew he was actually roughing her up, pummeling her limp helpless body, slapping her bloated yellowed face. I backed away from the curtains, horrified at what I was witnessing. I realized I should do something to help her, but found my feet stuck to the floor, my body as paralyzed and out of control in my shock as Stella’s was in her coma. Then suddenly there was a crash, the sound of glass breaking. It was loud enough to bring Jack back to his senses, to make him stop the terrible thing he was doing. It was also enough to mobilize my frozen limbs and allow me to hurry away before he’d notice me.

I hid in a far corner, out of sight, until he’d left the ward. Once I was sure he was gone, I tiptoed over to Stella’s bedside to check on her. She was lying peacefully, not visibly the worse for her beating. I made sure her IV was still running, reattached the monitor leads that had loosened, and smoothed over the bed linens. There were shards of broken glass and a sticky residue on the floor, the remnants of her bootleg booze. I went to the nurses’ station, asked for an orderly to clean up the mess, and left.

I kept to myself the next morning, begging off rounds with the excuse that I had some scut work to catch up on. I retreated to the stacks in the medical library where I could avoid running into Jack and tried reading up on hepatic failure, but I found myself unable to concentrate, my mind wandering and my vision blurred from my tears. My hands clenched the pages of the textbook so hard that my joints began to ache. After more than an hour, I’d barely gotten through one or two paragraphs. All I could think about was the scene I’d witnessed between Jack and Stella. I felt confused and angry at the same time. Above all I felt deeply ashamed of myself for being too cowardly to intervene on my patient’s behalf. And what about Jack? That good doctor, that great doctor whom I’d idolized ... how could he have turned into such a monster? My own personal Dr. Jekyll had turned into Mr. Hyde right before my eyes.

I couldn’t stay away forever, so the next day I joined my group at the tail end of rounds. Jack looked at me curiously, sensing that something might be wrong, but saying

nothing. He'd already seen Stella, and was moving on to another patient, a middle-aged man with a disease named after one of the heroes of his favorite sport. Frank Dombrowski had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, otherwise known as ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease. Frank appeared to be in his late forties. He was a former sandlot baseball star, married, with a couple of kids. Now he was nearly totally immobilized, with a hole in his neck for a trach, which allowed him to breathe.

I liked Frank. The muscles of his face were paralyzed, so he couldn't actually smile, but the friendly hello he grunted between puffs of air from the breathing machine belied the tragedy his life had become. His wife visited him most days, but, at his insistence, the kids stayed away. He didn't want them to see him this way, I guessed. But there were snapshots of the three of them—two blonde, blue-eyed girls, aged seven and ten, and a freckled, tow-headed boy of five—covering up every available surface around his bed.

Frank liked Jack. It was obvious. And it was equally obvious that Jack liked Frank. They talked sports most of the time—baseball primarily—and bullshitted together, except for a time when I found myself eavesdropping on a conversation the two were having about life support. It had happened late one night, when I was technically off duty, but had hung around, as I often did, trailing Jack in the hope that I might get the chance to try some new procedure. It had been a lucky night for me; he'd actually let me pass a nasogastric tube on a lady with acute pancreatitis. I was basking in the afterglow of this newly learned medical skill, cleaning up the mess I'd made before calling it a day. I'd thought Jack had left, and I headed toward the nurses' station when I heard muffled noises inside Frank's cubicle. The curtains were partially drawn. I was about to go inside when the sound of sobbing made me stop. Frank was crying. Despite the hard luck of his illness, I'd never heard him complain. I'd surely never seen him cry. He was bawling now and talking to Jack in that halting, gasping-for-air voice that he had because of the trach. I listened in.

"Never should have done it. Promised myself—promised my wife—that I never would. Told her right after they let us know what I had and what was in store for me that once I couldn't breathe on my own, that would be it. Never wanted to be only part-alive, kept going by some machine." He paused to take a breath, choked a bit, then went on between sobs in his raspy mechanical voice. "But I panicked. When I found I couldn't get

my breath, I lost it. I can remember my wife looking at me hard when they asked if I wanted to go on the ventilator. She and I had already talked about it. I'd made up my mind. I'd decided. I'd told her what I wanted. She'd agreed. We'd agreed. But when the time came, I chickened out. I just didn't have the balls to say no. My wife stood there and waited for me to say it. She couldn't say it herself. I believe she wanted me to say it. Part of me wanted to, but another part of me was scared shitless. So I didn't say no. I was too ashamed of myself to say yes, so I shook my head yes instead. Yeah, I shook my head to say yes, while the look on my wife's face was saying no. She closed her eyes, then I closed mine. The docs did what they had to and hooked me up to this fucking machine. Every day now I'm sorry I did it, but I can't help but wonder if I had a second chance if I wouldn't get frightened again and do the same damn thing. What have I done?"

I peeked in as Jack sat down on the edge of the bed and reached over to the machine that was breathing for Frank. Jack poised his finger over the on-off switch. "It wouldn't be any big deal for me to do it. Just the flick of a switch. The flick of a switch, and it could all be over," he told Frank. "And I'd do it for you. In a heartbeat. You know I would. You're my buddy. You'd just have to ask me." Abruptly Jack moved his hand away from the machine and reached over to pull down one of the photos of Frank's kids that decorated the walls. "This picture of your son playing ball—is it new? When was it taken? Didn't notice it before. Great looking kid. Bet he's a good ball player, too. You know, if I hit that switch, there won't be any more pictures. Hey, wouldn't it be a major bummer if we—you and I—decided to do it and then they came up with a cure?" Jack pointed to the picture. "How would he feel if he knew he could have had you watch him hit a home run some day, if you'd only stayed around?" He put the picture back on the wall. "It's better this way, Franky, my man. Your kids still have a dad, and maybe someday you'll be okay. Who knows? I think you did the right thing, and I believe it was a brave thing to do. It might not have been easy, but I'm sure it was right, and I bet deep down you think so too." Jack stood up. He gave Frank a playful jab in the shoulder. "Hang in there, buddy. Hey, d'ya know there's a Mets game on the tube tonight? I'm on call. (*He wasn't.*) How's about my stopping by and taking it in with you? Might even be convinced to put a little wager on it. Care to risk a ten-spot on the hometown boys?"

“You’re even crazier than me,” Frank said between breaths. “Those guys don’t have a chance in hell!”

“Yeah? We’ll see. Catch you later. And get your money ready. I’m feeling lucky tonight.”

I was still standing outside the cubicle when Jack came out. He looked at me strangely when he noticed I was there, but said nothing and walked away.

It was not until a few days later, when Jack and I were sitting together at the nurses’ station, checking lab results on the computer, that I brought up his conversation with Frank. “Why did you tell him that? There’s no cure for ALS. There’s not even anything remotely on the horizon. He’s going to stay on that respirator until he dies. There’s nothing you—or anybody else for that matter—can do for him.” I suppose I thought I was reprimanding Jack. Or perhaps I was hoping that maybe he knew something I didn’t.

He didn’t answer right away. “You know, Kiddo, there’s always something you can do for your patients,” he finally began. “Maybe you can’t actually make them better. Believe it or not, they know that. And most of them understand. But there is something you can always do for them: give them hope. That’s what they really want ... and need. Without hope, they’re already dead, even though they’re still alive. There’s no living when living only means waiting to die. When someone is sick—really sick—living is all about hope. The hope of getting better. And hope is easy to give—even when there really isn’t any.”

“But that’s just it. There is no hope for Frank. You know that. I know that. And I think he knows as well. What you’re telling him simply isn’t true. It’s a lie,” I added indignantly.

Jack looked thoughtful. “Sometimes a lie is the truth that someone wants to be told.” He half-smiled. “And, what the hell, who knows, sometimes the lie might even turn out to be true after all. And nobody gets hurt that way, my buddy Frank included.”

“And your buddy Stella?” I asked.

The expression on Jack’s face suddenly changed. He hesitated, then nodded and slowly repeated her name.

I remembered what Jack had said every time we went to see Frank after that. Jack would check all the things he was supposed to check: see that the vent was working properly, make sure the oxygen saturation was high enough, listen that Frank's lungs were clear, turn him over and look for decubiti. But it was only after he'd done all of these doctor things that he actually became a doctor. He doctored Frank by talking to him, kidding about the foibles of his favorite teams, bringing him up to date on gossip about the players, admiring the photos of his girls and warning him he'd better watch out, guys did prefer blondes, after all. He might bring him the sports section of the daily paper or remind him about some game that was being televised that night. Frank was no better after Jack left, but yet he was a whole lot better off. And it was all because of Jack.

After having witnessed that horrible scene between Jack and Stella, I had a hard time watching Jack interact with Frank or our other patients. How could the same man be such a good doctor—such a good man—one minute, then transform into a mean-spirited bully who abused a poor defenseless dying woman the next?

Stella, for her part, continued to deteriorate. Her liver enzymes were climbing off the scale and her bilirubin getting so high that it effectively shut down her brain. Her periods of lucidity were becoming fewer and farther between, finally nearly ceasing. Jack and I still went to see her every day, dutifully examined her, and made notes in her record. Sometimes he would leave her a flower.

Stella coded again one night soon after. I was late coming. I'd been in the ER suturing a facial laceration on some college kid who'd gotten hit with a beer bottle at a frat party. By the time I arrived, the crash team had been working on Stella for a while already. Jack was at the head of the bed, bagging her furiously with an Ambu. One of the interns assigned to the ICU was performing CPR, but it was clear he was getting tired, with the excursions he was producing in her chest becoming weaker and weaker. Jack gestured for me to take over.

"Call it already, Jacko," the intern advised Jack. "What's the use anyway? She's a goner."

Jack ignored him and kept breathing for Stella. "Count with me, Kiddo," he instructed me. "Four compressions per breath. Over the sternum. That's the ticket."

The intern shrugged his shoulders and walked away, muttering something about having better things to do than trying to revive some dead old drunk.

The head nurse, who was manning the crash cart, looked over at Jack. "It's been five minutes. Time to call it quits?"

"Let's give her another minute or two. She's come through for us before," Jack answered.

We gave her another minute. Then another. Then another still. Everyone else on the team had decided it was time to stop. One by one, they began to leave, going off to tend to more promising chores. I was getting tired, but I kept pumping Stella's chest, following Jack's lead, not daring to stop or slacken. Between compressions, I glanced up at Jack's face. It was flushed from his efforts, but remained fierce and determined. One of the senior nurses squeezed his arm and whispered softly, "Jack, it's time." He ignored her and bagged Stella even harder. "Keep counting with me," he ordered. "One, two, three, four ..." The nurse shook her head and moved away.

By now Jack and I were the only members of the team left. A porter had come in and was starting to clean up. Someone in the background asked if there was any family to notify.

Then we heard it, Jack and I. A faint blip that gradually became stronger and regular. Everyone seemed to turn at the same instant to stare at the monitor, their eyes following the thin green fluorescent line that had been flat and was now rising and falling rhythmically with the sound. Stella's heart was beating again! She'd been brought back one more time!

Jack was smiling broadly. "See, Kiddo. We did it!" He leaned over and planted a kiss on Stella's forehead. "Yep, she came through for me again."

I stuck around with Jack for a while until Stella stabilized. He invited me for a cup of coffee, but I begged off, blaming fatigue, but in truth reluctant to join him because I was no longer sure how I felt about him, and even less sure what to think about Stella and the code. He told me to go home and get some sleep. It had been a long day, and I was happy to take him up on his offer.

I met Jack outside the ward bright and early the next morning for rounds. He was carrying a big bouquet.

“Thought after last night my old girl deserved her own flowers, not some I lifted from somebody else,” he explained a bit sheepishly.

When we arrived at her cubicle, we found no Stella, just an empty bed, freshly made up and ready to receive some new occupant. Apparently, she had coded again after we’d left and couldn’t be brought back.

Jack said nothing, pausing only for a split second, then unceremoniously tossing the bouquet into the garbage can next to what had been Stella’s bed. He barely glanced at me as he motioned silently for us to move on to our next patient.

More than a half-century later, I still sometimes think about Jack and Frank and Stella. And I’ve yet to find a satisfactory answer to the question of what makes a good doctor.