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Daily Bread

Andrew C. Nosti

Gettysburg College, nostan01@gettysburg.edu

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Daily Bread

Author Bio

Andrew studies History and English with a Writing Concentration at Gettysburg College.

Daily Bread

The news anchor's voice buzzed from the television: "Twenty-six-year-old Clarice Thompson and her son, three-year-old Kenneth Thompson, were found dead yesterday morning in their home on the fourth block of Hazlett Street. Police have ruled their deaths a homicide. Neighbors report hearing shouts the prior evening, and at least one witness claims to have seen a car drive off sometime around midnight. After noticing a car still in the driveway, next-door neighbor Karen Heller went to the house to check and see if everything was okay. Mrs. Heller found the front door open and walked in, only to discover the bodies of Clarice and Kenneth Thompson lying in pools of blood on their living room floor. We go to Nate Jarrett at the scene of the crime for more on this story."

I let the reporter's voice turn to a dull hum. This segment aired this morning—domestic affair, the usual suspect, suspicion of the victim's on-and-off-again boyfriend and her son's father. The guy never showed up for work, probably skipped town. Family members of the deceased plastered "Wanted" photos of the fleeing lover-turned-killer across Main Street, desperately holding them out for passersby to look at.

Six others people sat in the waiting room. Four stared over at the TV. A man with a growing bald patch on the crown of his head he kept lightly patting, as if he could smooch hair onto it, his gold watch glinting out from his buttoned sleeve as he did so, sat three seats toward my left, at the edge of the row of seats and directly across from the TV. A short, thick man in a flannel, light wash jeans, and concrete-crustrusted work boots, whose thin mouth and deep-set eyes gave a somber air, sat diagonally to my right, close to the receptionist desk, so he had to crane his neck to peer at the screen. A woman, whose age could have ranged anywhere from thirty-five to forty-five, with a dirty-blonde bob and high-set rim glasses, and, presumably, her daughter, who had her mother's face and either her father's or her mother's (natural) hair, sat close to the TV, across from the balding man. The only two people who didn't gaze at the screen were myself and an elderly man directly across from me, who buried his face inside a newspaper with the front-page headline "Terror in Syria—Aleppo Street Turned to Rubble," underlined by a photo of dust-coated silhouettes standing around a collapsed building.

The door to the back hallway swung open. "Hunter Everett," called out a young nurse, glancing down at her clipboard through a pair of glasses perched on the edge of her nose. I stood up and strode over to the door. "Follow me," she instructed with a friendly smile. Her mahogany curls bounced as I trailed behind her.

The nurse—whose nametag read Mary—took me down the cream-colored hallway with linoleum tiles, past a few doors, and through the usual introductory process of taking my height and weight. Then I followed her again, around a corner which led to more hallway and more doors, stopping at the second on the right. The room looked like all doctor's offices: cabinets and a small

counter lining the wall opposite the door, a couple of customary office chairs scattered around the room, a navy exam table topped with a thin roll of paper, and health-related posters plastered along the walls.

"I have to take your blood pressure. Could you please roll up your sleeve?" I obeyed and then sat silently as Mary squeezed the air pump until the velcroed wrap tightly constricted my arm. Pen scratched as she made another note on her clipboard.

Mary announced, "Okay, all set," and swung open the door. "Could you please remove your shirt? The doctor will be with you in a minute."

After waiting, shirtless, for a few moments, mindlessly swinging my legs over the edge of the exam table, the door opened. "How are we today?" asked Dr. Robinson, her brown ponytail swinging as she shut the door behind her.

"Okay, I guess," I answered. "How are you?"

With a slight grin, she replied, "About the same." She sidled into the rolling chair next to the counter, grabbed the clipboard, and slid over across from me. "So what brings you in today, Mr. Everett?"

"I've been having chest pains." I put my hand against my chest, directly over my heart. "Right around here."

Dr. Robinson pulled her stethoscope from around her neck. "What kind of pains?"

"Maybe 'pains' isn't the right word. More like a tightness, sometimes with an intense pounding. That pounding can get pretty strong, like my heart might beat outta my chest."

Dr. Robinson nodded and rolled over to me. "Okay, can you take deep breaths for me?" My skin broke out in goosebumps around the cold metal of the stethoscope. "In. Out," she repeated as she placed the instrument against my chest, back, sides.

She finished and flipped through the clipboard notes. "Your blood pressure looks normal, and your breathing sounds fine." She glanced up at me. "Do you experience this tightness at any particular time or while doing anything in particular?"

"No, not that I can think of." I shrugged. "It seems pretty random." Trying to think back, I mused, "Maybe most often while sitting and watching TV."

"Do you eat anything beforehand?"

"Sometimes, but not always."

Dr. Robinson put the clipboard back down. "Do you exercise regularly?"

"No, not really."

"I suggest monitoring your pains over the next two weeks or so. Pay attention to what you ate beforehand, if you ate at all—perhaps keep a food log. Also, do some very limited aerobic exercises, maybe even just stretching, the first couple times you feel the pain. See how that affects how you feel. If it makes you feel worse, stop right away. You may want to buy some antacids if you don't already have any at home." The chair rolled backward a bit as Dr. Robinson stood up. "If you keep experiencing this pain, schedule a follow-up visit and we'll discuss where to go from there. You might need to see a specialist at that point, but, with luck, we won't get to that point. Small adjustments to your diet and exercise habits may fix the issue." She held out her hand and grasped mine. "I'll see you in a couple weeks, or hopefully not!" she chuckled.

“Have a nice day!”

“Yeah, you, too!” I reciprocated, sliding my shirt back on.

I trailed Dr. Robinson out the door and strode back to the door to the reception room. After relaying to the receptionist what Dr. Robinson told me, I left. I swung my car door open, slid the key into the ignition, revved the engine to life, and drove off toward the local dollar store to pick up the antacids.

Bells chimed as I walked into the store. Other shoppers slowly wandered around, glancing up and down aisles. A sign directed my way as I ambled over toward the medication and hygiene section. I scanned the shelves for the antacids and, with a shrug, picked out the cheapest bottle and headed back toward the cash register near the entrance.

A family stood in front of me in line, waiting for the elderly couple checking out to finish their slow process. The dad, a squat man with a head so smooth the artificial light gleamed off it like polished marble, wore a pair of sports sunglasses, a blue booster club football t-shirt, and a pair of gray shorts. The mom, with her chestnut curls, dressed a bit more sensibly for the autumn weather: a crewneck sweatshirt, also blue and sporting booster club football type, and khaki capris. Their son, around nine or ten, stood between them, still in his grass-stained padded pants and undershirt, cleats clacking every time he shifted his weight.

The dad spoke on the phone while his son stared fixedly at the boxed television behind the cashier counter. Music of a popular detective show theme song quietly hummed as panoramic views of New York City flashed across the screen, partially covered by names.

“Yeah, I can’t believe it either,” the dad said, waiting for the voice on the other end of the line. “A new shooting every week, every day almost.” He shook his Mr. Clean head. “I don’t know what this world is coming to.” He fingered a magazine cover with photos of schoolchildren filing out of a brick building, hands over their heads, led by young adults. In bold, plain script, a title proclaimed, “CHAOS IN WEST NORTON: ANOTHER SCHOOL SHOOTING.”

My chest tightened a little bit. I hadn’t eaten anything since this morning, so I made a mental note of that. I tried my best to ignore it.

The boy tugged on his mom’s sleeve and pointed at the television. “Hey, isn’t this the one where the girl’s brother kills her over their dad’s money? The one we watched last night at dinner?”

The mom followed his finger and nodded. “Yeah, I think so.”

“I wish they would play different ones. It feels like we’ve seen them all,” the boy whined, the clack clack of his cleats echoing off the high ceilings as he stepped forward with his parents, the elderly couple grabbing their bags to leave.

My chest grew tighter and a dull throbbing began. A noise, like distant drums of war or rushing water, pounded in my ears. I had the sense of getting swept downstream.

My mind turned inward to focus on my breathing—in through my nose, out through my mouth—and I didn’t hear the cashier call, “Next,” until the second, slightly impatient time.

I placed the antacid bottle on the counter, pulling a crumpled five from

my pocket. “That’ll be \$3.89,” the cashier announced in the graveled tone of adolescence, hints of breaks cracking through. I handed him the bill, got my change, and went on my way.

As soon as I got in my car my chest loosened up. Sucking in an unlabored breath, this time through my mouth, I drove home.

I slung the single-item plastic bag onto the couch and plopped down beside it. I reached for the remote and clicked the TV on. A golden H underlined by red reminded me that I left the History Channel on last night. On the screen, an older man sat in a wooden armchair in a darkened room, surrounded by bookshelves on every side. His glasses slipped a little down his nose as he leaned forward with extended hands. “After around eight years, construction of the Colosseum ended in 80CE after Titus inherited the project from Vespasian.” The screen fluctuated between old paintings of the enormous monument and modern film. “The brutal gladiator contests and battle reenactments that took place at the Colosseum comprised one part of the ‘bread and circuses’ tactic. Roman leaders figured that the spectacle of death carried out in the center of the Colosseum would, through entertainment, provide a venue of escape from daily life. This ‘circus’ portion combined with the public bestowments showered upon the people to pacify them with prosperity, and served the political purpose of placating the masses.” Gory images popped up on the screen as modern day actors dressed in gold-colored armor swung swords and spears at each other in dramatic reenactments. The historian in his office reappeared. “Of course, we have moved beyond these barbaric forms of distraction, but some would claim that contemporary sporting events serve a very similar purpose.” A narrator’s deep, movie trailer voice filled the void left after the historian’s exposition, describing the fights that went on in the arena as actors continued their reenactments.

My chest tightened up again, so I reached over and popped open the antacid bottle. I grabbed a glass and ran the faucet to fill it with water. After swallowing the tab, I went back over to the couch and grabbed my laptop, intent on once again searching through my symptoms.

I flipped open my laptop and plugged in my password. My Facebook feed, left up when I last closed it, stared back at me. The first post was a photo, with a caption that read, “POLICE SHOOT UNARMED MAN IN GRAND RAPIDS!” The grainy image made it hard to make out details, but I could see a heavysset black man sprawled on the pavement. A dark puddle pooled around his torso.

My chest constricted harder. My heart beat as if it wanted to burst through my ribs and leap from my body.

I typed “chest pain” into my search bar. I glanced through the results, clicking the next page button till I arrived at links not already purple. After I read through a few sites, most unhelpful, all repetitive, I stood up to make a sandwich. I grabbed two slices of bread, a plate, a knife, jelly, and the peanut butter. I sat back down, plate next to me, and clicked on “images.” With one hand wrapped around my sandwich, I scrolled through the photos – some of hearts, some of people; some fake, some not.

My heart’s pounding slowly grew to a ferocity that drowned out the background noise from the TV, the rush of blood sounding in my ears like a small

river just beyond sight.

Grabbing the remote, I stood up to do some stretching. After flipping through a few channels, I stopped on some action movie, an explosion on the screen grabbing my attention. Fleeing people poured out from the rubble as screams filled the screen. A famous Hollywood actor, bright-eyed, cut-jawed, and thick-framed, kneeled over the body of a young woman, unconscious with a trickle of blood running from her temple. He stared at her as the anarchic scene rolled around him.

My hands above my head, my chest constricted even harder. I put my arms down and stopped stretching, per Dr. Robinson's suggestion. But did the stretching make it worse, or something else?

Confused again, I sat back down and grabbed the laptop and my sandwich, scrolling through the images again as my heart beat harder.