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Dominici Requiem

What makes a better headline: “Dr. Jones Fails!” or “Miracle Healer Abandons Dying Brother”? What’s the best option to tell the masses here? What’s going to hurt my career less?

I love my brother the way you love a memory: wholeheartedly, with a twinge of regret that the moment is too far gone. And if I could help my brother, I would. But I can’t fix a problem that only exists in the theoretical.

Dominick is uncharacteristically still, lying in his hospital bed. He looks skinny. Not I-went-on-a-juice-cleanse skinny, more of a I’m-so-depressed-I-don’t-eat-for-days skinny. Three of his limbs are covered in cast plaster and he’ll probably lose his right eye based on the amount of seeping blood on that bandage. Of course, you can’t forget the angry burn damage and hidden internal bleeding from his fateful car “accident.” I can see why my father called me frantically, once again asking for my help.

“Vivian, you know I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t serious. Your mother is hysterical. She needs you...Dom needs you. Come home.”

And I’m sitting on a cheap armchair in a room that reeks of antiseptic a thousand miles away from the very lucrative Vivian Jones Practice for Biological Manipulation. Instead of performing miracles, I am reexplaining to Central Hospital’s brightest (akin to low-battery flashlight) why Dominick’s issues aren’t compatible with autonomous cellular alteration.

“Ms. Jones,” a gangly resident stumbles into Dominick’s room, tripping over his own feet on the way. “Sorry to interrupt, but Dr. Alvarez wants to know-”

“It’s Dr. Jones. I went to medical school.”

This takes him by surprise, causing him to fumble his pencil and nearly drop his diagnosis binder. “My apologies Dr. Jones, I just assumed...” His voice trails off.

“You just assumed I was more like Dr. Phil than Dr. Alvarez?”

To his credit, Clumsy doesn't blush. “Yes ma'am. My mistake. It won't happen again.”

I am a real doctor. I never attempted residency or set foot in an OR, but why would I? I can heal your scab by concentrating on epidermis cell growth; a broken femur requires mental visualization of knitting the bones together. Medical school simply strengthened my gift and earned me the title. But this kid's an overworked intern who doesn't need my misdirected ire.

“I appreciate that, Doctor,” I quickly glance at his lab coat, “Cardin. I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess that Dr. Alvarez is unhappy that I haven't cured my brother yet, no?”

“Yes ma'am. He can't adjust the dosages until you try, so he's getting a little antsy.”

“I suggest you tell Dr. Alvarez to meet with me himself, Dr. Cardin.” With this, he rushes out of the room, leaving me alone again with Dominick.

I'll inevitably be interrupted by Alvarez or my parents interrupt me, but for the time being I turn my attention back to my brother. They put his IV on his left forearm, bisecting his tattoo of my own name. A tattoo born of gratitude, thanking me for expediting the recovery time of a broken arm. That was the first time I saved him. He didn't feel as grateful for the now-unsevered vein in his right arm, which is hidden by my mother's favorite flower, peonies.

For three decades, I have lovingly soothed his every wound. And yet, he doesn't get better. Dominick hasn't lived a drug-free day since he started growing a beard. He can't hold a job or a girlfriend; he lives alone in a crummy apartment above my parents' garage, smoking non-medical marijuana every few hours to float above reality. And when the high dissipates and his stash is empty, he swallows a whole bottle of meds. All the cellular coaxing in the world can't fix the root problem, not when he's this far gone.

Right on schedule, my mother graces the room. A word on the esteemed Evelyn Gray Jones: she was small town royalty, the only daughter of the beloved-mayor in the middle of nowhere. Unfortunately, small towns don't teach adequate sex ed for fresh-off-the-bus college freshman and Evelyn Gray dropped out of school one month before the end of her first spring semester. She would go on to miscarry, move back home, and run into her one true love at the state fair. My father proposed nine months later, and the two of them spent the next fifteen years trying to get pregnant again. Her luck changed at 35, and then again at 40 with two rainbow babies. Evelyn Jones buries that backstory under manicured nails and plum lipstick. She is the epitome of class and precision; a diamond in a sea of plastic pearls.

I never liked diamonds. They're so precision-oriented. My mother hasn't seen me in a year and her first words to me are, "Vivian, how is Dom? Have you done anything yet?"

"Nice to see you too, Mom. Smooth flight – I know you were worried about me."

"Vivian. Tone. You should recognize that there are bigger things at stake here."

"Nothing would've changed in the ten seconds it takes to be polite."

"If you were trying hard enough it could have." Unphased by my insubordination, my mother sits on the edge of an armchair, right next to Dom's good hand. She gestures for me to sit on a chair on Dom's other side, but I've been keeping my distance from him.

This is going to be excruciating. "He's got a lot of internal damage, broken bones, second- and third-degree burns, and his right eye is a sight for sore eyes." She frowns at my pun. Say what you want, Dominick would've loved a corny joke at his own expense.

She gently clasps his hand and kisses it. I've seen her do this a thousand times for him, trying to soothe his scraped knee, sore throat, or broken heart. "What are you going to do?"

“I don’t know if I can do anything for him.” This grabs her attention. She’s still holding his hand, but she’s tense now. “Mom, he’s very badly hurt. Even if I could heal it all, that’s still a lot of stress for the body to endure. There’s no promising he would ever make a full recovery.”

“Are you saying you can’t do it? Because I thought you specialized in high stakes, higher profile cases.” Her voice is a lemon, seemingly harmless but full of sour intention.

“I’m saying that I don’t know if this is the best option for Dominick. Biological manipulation is scientifically capable of this, yes, but the holistic evaluation every patient undergoes is intense. If I’m considering Dominick as a patient, I’m hesitant to give the go-ahead” There. A kind, vague way to guide my mother back to the real world.

She looks at me for the first time since entering the room. It’s terrifying, like she’s fusing my past and present into this façade I couldn’t possibly pretend to be. “This is not just another patient. This is your brother; this is my son. Why did you come if you won’t even try to help?”

I don’t have an answer, not one that I can tell her. We sit deadlocked for a moment before Dr. Alvarez mercifully appears, oblivious to the familial erosion happening before his eyes.

“Ms. Jones, *Dr. Jones*,” he winks at me as he breezes through Dominick’s chart. “Dr. Cardin warned me about you.”

My mother, who’s gone back to gazing at Dominick, snips at me in response. “My apologies, Dr. Alvarez. I don’t know where my daughter’s manners have disappeared to since she left Cardinal Falls. Those Hollywood types are a bad influence, aren’t they?”

“Oh, is that where your practice is located at Dr. Jones? I was under the impression you were based in New York.” He seems generally curious, though I can’t imagine why.

Still, I’m grateful for change in topics. “My first practice is still open in Brooklyn, but I’m actually in the first year of my new location in Santa Monica. It’s going very well – ”

“Vivian, it’s tacky to discuss business in a hospital.”

Dr. Alvarez finally clues into the tension and rustles through his papers a moment. “Well, I’ll assume you’re both updated on Dominick’s condition?”

“To an extent,” my mother says, “Are there any updates? My husband, Dom’s father, he just getting his prescription filled at the second-floor pharmacy. Should we wait for Ken?”

“Actually Mrs. Jones, I was going to suggest you talk with Marcia just down the hall. She has some insurance forms for you to fill out.” Dr. Alvarez has failed to satisfy my mother.

“When your husband gets back, we can all debrief together, if that sounds alright?”

This does the trick. My mother gives Dominick another kiss before grabbing her purse and trudging out of the room. Dr. Alvarez doesn’t look like he’s going anywhere, though.

“Assuming his condition stays stable, what’s your plan?”

He glances at me briefly. “Well, Dr. Jones, I think a lot of that depends on you.”

“How so?”

“Look,” he sighs. “I’m not your family. I’m another medical professional; I understand your concerns. They are valid, for what it’s worth. How do we most responsibly allocate resources, whether it’s medication or OR time?”

“So what do you suggest I do?”

“Have you talked with your family?” He correctly interprets my silence. “I don’t envy you, Dr. Jones. I don’t think I could tell my parents that my brother wasn’t worth saving.”

Oh, that was the wrong thing to say. “Excuse you,” I practically spit. “That is not the issue I’m having. My brother is very much worth saving. Everyone is *worth* saving.”

Dr. Alvarez backtracks with an eyebrow raise. “I completely agree Dr. Jones, that was poor word choice on my part. I only meant to say that you’re struggling with the ethics or the morals of the situation. Of saving someone who doesn’t want to be saved.”

He’s right. The emotional turmoil of the past few days finally seeps out. “He’s attempted suicide a dozen times over the past decade,” I whisper. “All the money, all the magic in the world hasn’t helped. Isn’t it selfish to wave my hands and force him to keep getting up and living a life that he doesn’t want? But it’s inhuman to give up on family. To believe that there is no getting better. It’s impossible, Dr. Alvarez. Just. Impossible.”

Without noticing, I’ve moved closer to him. A few more inches and I’d be standing on his toes, but Alvarez doesn’t flinch. “It isn’t fair, Dr. Jones, to force you to make this decision. Unfortunately...” His voice trails off for a beat, as he heads towards the door.

“Dr. Alvarez.” I’m pleading with him to give me something, anything that could help.

Alvarez stops at the doorframe, eyes full of empathy. “Does Dominick have the resources – the familial support, the therapeutic access, the financial stability? Triage the situation, Dr. Jones. Allocate the resource accordingly. Inhumane? Maybe. Necessary? Absolutely.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I’ll let you go now.” Impulsively, I add, “You can call me Vivian.”

This makes him smile. “I’m Ben. Good luck Vivian. Let me know when you’ve made your decision.” Ben leaves, and I am once again lost in thought.

With the rhythmic beep of Dominick’s machines and the familiar hub of a hospital around me, I exhale for the first time since before the fated phone call. A few days ago, my life revolved around two things: my business and my boyfriend, Ian. He’d just gotten a very lucrative offer to join the writer’s room of a long-standing late night talk show; I had a flourishing Biological Manipulation medical practice. Two still-kind-of-young, rising professionals, flying

to the moon. Then Dad called me. I spent hours debating the merits of Ian flying home with me. Obviously, I was booking a red-eye to Cardinal Falls, and I wanted Ian to come with me. Serious boyfriends provide emotional support when their girlfriends are processing family tragedies. But Ian already had *plans* and it would be so very inconvenient for him to change them this late.

“Sorry, Vi, I don’t see it happening in my schedule this week,” he shrugged. “But you’ll be back soon! It’ll only take, like, two days of hand-holding for Dom to get better?”

That was when I decided to break up with him. Granted, it’s only been a few days, but I don’t miss him. I miss the familiar comfort of having a person that is *your person* whether it be a spouse or friend or sibling. Ian just wasn’t mine (or anybody else’s) person.

I want a person like my parents. As frustrating as my mother can be, she and my father are perfect. Kenneth “Ken” Jones was the all-American dream boy, like starting-point-guard-for-the-basketball-team all-American. He knew his calling in life was teaching, but he had this passion for globalism too. He got offered his dream job to be a visiting professor, and traveled the world lecturing on social class, returning each time with light and love and amazement. That came to a screeching halt the first time Dominick got sick. There were too many close calls to have both adults out of the house at the same time, let alone in a different country. Dad resigned from his position and accepted an offer from Cardinal Hills Community College.

Bad things come in threes: Dad’s last hit was a Parkinson’s Disease diagnosis. I haven’t figured out an application for autonomous cellular alteration to brain chemistry yet, not without completely changing the subject’s personality, so...we’re in a holding pattern. He’s still teaching, I’m still researching, but everyday he’s a little more his diagnosis and a little less himself.

Speak of the devil, my father shuffles into the room, using his lucky cane. “Hey Dad,” I get up to give him a hug.

“Vivi! How’s my number one girl?” He’s the only one who can call me that nickname.

“Tired. Stressed. How about you? How are you feeling?”

Dad can sense what I’m actually asking. “I’m still feeling like myself, and that’s the important part.” Still, I can see his hands are trembling a bit after he sits by Dominick. He ignores me staring, and whispers something to Dominick, softly enough that I won’t hear.

My dad is one of my best friends in the world. There’s not much I wouldn’t speak to him about, which is why I’m surprised at how difficult it is to start this conversation. “So,” I hesitate. “Have you spoken to Mom recently?”

He chuckles, eyes twinkling. “Oh yes, I am updated on the events of this morning. Vivi, you have a special knack for getting on your mother’s nerves, you know that?”

“Not helpful Dad.”

“I know.” He shifts a bit in his seat. “You ever think about moving back here?”

I didn’t expect that. “Not really. I mean, I’m not vehemently opposed to it, but my life isn’t really here anymore. Not since high school, actually.”

“That’s a good point, good point. You’ve got your practices and Ian to keep you busy.”

Dad gives me a sly smile.

Feeling a bit huffy, I add, “Ian is not in the picture anymore.”

This elicits a full-fledged grin. “Good riddance to bad writing.”

“Dad!” I’m shocked at the brazenness. “Why do ask? It’s not like I talk about moving.”

Dad’s pretty quiet for a moment. He takes a deep breath. “I’m getting old, Vivi. It’s been ten years since my diagnosis and I’m at the end of the moderate stage. In a few months I’ll be trading the cane for a wheelchair. Dom needs a more support than that.”

“No, yeah, I understand.”

“There’s more.” He looks sheepish, almost guilty. “Would you think I was terrible if I wanted to have one last adventure with Evelyn before the end? That there’s a six-month cruise for seniors that travels the globe? That your mother and I stumbled onto some discount tickets?”

“That’s a lot of hypothetical questions, Dad.”

“We haven’t committed to it yet, Vivi,” he adds hastily. “It’s just an idea we were kicking around. But now, with Dom in this position...we should stick around and help rebuild, no?”

“No, Dad,” I’m unexpectedly decisive on this. “You and mom should go. Have an adventure. You’ve put three decades of your life on hold to raise kids. If this is- if this is the end, then you absolutely deserve your once-in-a-lifetime journey. We’ll figure it out.”

“Good parents don’t put themselves ahead of their children.”

“Hey,” I get up and kneel in front of him. “You’ve redefined what good parenting is. You don’t get to feel guilty about living your life.”

Dad places a shaky hand on my cheek. “When did my Vivi grow up and get so wise? Do you even need a tired old, pseudo-philosopher like me anymore?”

“Actually,” I begin, “do you think Dominick has all the resources he needs to truly, authentically get better? Mentally, I mean.”

He gathers his thoughts a moment. “Theoretically, yes. I think we have all the puzzle pieces, it’s just a matter of seeing the bigger picture. Of making progress. But Vivi,” his tone becomes warning. “Don’t let perfection be the enemy of progress.”

“What do I need to do to make forward progress? To make him happy?”

“Vivi if I knew the answer to that, we wouldn’t be here. Honestly,” he adds. “I think you being around helps. Dom’s always better when you’re in town. You’re his big sister, you’re his favorite person in the world. Tell me that doesn’t make a difference Dr. Jones.”

We spend the next hour catching up before a nurse informs us that Dominick will be taken to get a new CT scan soon. This is Dad’s cue to rescue Mom from insurance paperwork, and my cue to head back to the hotel and make my final decision.

“Call me when you get to the hotel Vivi,” Dad says as he kisses Dominick goodbye.

“I will. I’m just going to spend another minute with Dominick before I leave.”

He smiles. “Even as kids, he was always ‘Dominick’ to you, and you were always ‘Vivian’ to him.”

And as the thumps of my father’s cane disappear down the hallway, I’m suddenly halfway in a memory. I’m ten years old; Dominick is five. We’re walking home after the first day of school and I’m complaining that the kids in my class call me ‘Vivi.’

“It’s such a little kid name, Dom,” I whined. “Who wants to be called ‘Vivi?’”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Vivi.” Dominick’s race car backpack is practically bigger than he is. “I like it when people say ‘Dom.’ It’s faster, anyways.”

“Okay but what happens when you’re like, a grown-up and everyone calls you ‘Dom?’ Wouldn’t that just make you feel like a kid?”

He mulls over this while his Sketchers light up the pavement. “I guess so,” Dominick agreed slowly. “How ‘bout this? I’ll call you ‘Vivian’ instead of ‘Vivi’ so people will get used to you having that name and you can call me Dominick too. That way, we can pick whichever name we like best when we’re super old.” He’s very satisfied with his plan.

“Deal.” We shook on it. “C’mon *Dominick*, last one home’s a rotten egg!”

We took off running, laughing, yelling at the top of our lungs. So content, so happy. A perfect memory.

I look at present-day Dominick, still unconscious and still in the bed beside me. I love my brother the way you love a memory: nostalgically, with a bittersweet 'what if?' If I could undo the hurt my brother's been through I would.

It's what we owe to each other.