

OVERTURE / *THE LAST DANCE*

With one last reverberating yelp of its siren, the ambulance lurches to a stop in the giant concrete hospital parking structure. The blast is gratuitous, more announcement than alarm. Quickly, by muscle memory, the paramedics deploy the gurney wheels and roll their patient toward the ER doors already sliding open as they approach. For a brief moment there is a hollow silence, like in a cave, the only sound the tick, tick, tick of the still-flashing lights atop the ambulance; a metronome keeping time until an approaching motor changes the tempo. Tires squeak like sneakers on a basketball court, then the synchronized percussion of four slamming car doors cues the entrance of the patient's wife and dinner companions. High heels clack as they practically sprint from the showroom-new Bentley. The key fob double-chirps the door locks. "You can't leave it there!", admonishes someone. "Fuck that!", shouts the male driver with finality.

"Where is he?", the wife barks at a pharmacy technician catching a smoke next to an overflowing trash receptacle. Exhaling a plume of carcinogens, she nods toward the emergency room doors.

It happens ten thousand times a day. A great personal drama collides with institutional boredom, the collective ho-hum of professionals who, by necessity, have become numb to the panic, fear and grief that accompanies every new emergency. It's not that the doctors and nurses lack empathy. Insouciance is their shield, the only protection they have against the avalanche of emotions that threatens to crush everyone who enters this line of work. And they are tired, always tired, and look forward to the end of their shifts.

Then everything changes.

As the buffed female first responder excitedly waits for a signature to release her patient into the hospital's care, her eyes dance. She can't stop saying his name. A famous name. A very famous name. This run-of-the-mill myocardial infarction will soon be headline news ricocheting off satellites as it makes its way around the globe. Suddenly, everyone is grateful they haven't taken a personal day. An ordinary Thursday night is now extraordinary. A fluke of the schedule has provided the entire staff of Cedars-Sinai Medical Center with a cocktail party story they'll tell for the rest of their lives.

An orderly shoves the gurney through the swinging saloon-style doors and out of view of the gawking stomach aches, flus, broken femurs and magazine readers cooling their heels in the waiting area. Now it's their turn to say his name again and again. With a flip of his wrist, a nurse swooshes the curtain around a cubicle offering the Famous Man a measure of privacy.

The appropriate tubes and monitors are attached, lights are dimmed or brightened, tones are hushed or heightened until a young doctor arrives. "He's just a kid!", says the Bentley driver. The optimists offer hope. There have been so many false alarms, surely this is another? But the young doctor knows better and tries to explain. The famous man's wife objects. So too do the dinner companions which irritates the doctor. They are accidental actors in this drama and their presence is an intrusion. He considers clearing the room but given the magnitude of the Famous Man's power, he assumes these trespassers have clout as well. Why ruffle feathers? Why make enemies?

The Famous Man's health has been failing for months, years really, and his company has become oppressive. The wife had mansion-fever and was dining out for the fourth night in a row when her cell phone rang. Her face told the story, ending the chit-chat at her favored table at Morton's. Salad forks dropped as she fled the table, knocking over a water glass as she rushed to

valet, her companions close behind. The other diners notice the commotion. A waiter quietly slips into a phone booth and calls a local newsroom. He gets a regular monthly stipend for moments exactly like this.

The wait for the car is interminable, almost two minutes. They talk over each other, words of encouragement, positive energy, a squeeze of the wife's hand for strength. Truthfully, her dinner companions are giddy the old man's heart has failed on their watch. The space they now occupy in the tiny ER cubicle should be filled by the Famous Man's children but no one had thought to call them. Indifference has cast them in the role of a lifetime.

Impromptu conferences break out; wife and doctor, dinner companions and nurses, nurses and doctor. All the while, the patient gasps and gurgles and squirms in his restraints, as ignored as a pitcher who gives up a game-tying homer when the manager brings the hook. The young doctor tries to become invisible, hoping he won't be asked to continue the fiction of recovery. But the famous man's wife pulls rank and he reluctantly obliges with a syringe-full of stimulants.

The heart monitor blips faster as the old man arches his back. Just a slight arch of the spine, just enough to tilt his head back and slacken his jaw. His dry, gray tongue flops to the side of his mouth as he pulls in the gratuitous breaths that have been imposed upon him. His puffy little sausage fingers clench into a balled-up fist, his wedding band a platinum tourniquet strangling its captive digit. A protest? The old man is a fighter, a stubborn, bull-headed, periodically cruel, pain-in-the-ass, but millions love him and more importantly, he is the center of his people's universe and they aren't about to let him go without putting up a fight of their own. But the end comes anyway, vindicating the young doctor, which earns him zero points with the freshly-minted widow.

“No!”, wails the wife, her cry of grief carrying with it the sting of betrayal. He had always given her everything she wanted, why not this?

Instinctively, someone checks their watch. The world will demand the details. Who was at his bedside? What were his final words? Which, for the record, were, "I'm losing", a poignant coda that proves the old man still had it to the very end. All the necrotrivia is duly noted. What the witnesses miss a publicist will invent.

Frank Sinatra is dead.