

A Not So Simple Mistake

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EXT. ST. LUKE'S HOSPITAL - OUTSIDE EMERGENCY ROOM - 1:18 AM

DR. JAMES ALLBRIGHT, 43, general surgeon on duty, is pacing back and forth on the sidewalk, talking on his cell phone. He is bleary-eyed, haggard, and clearly agitated.

CLOSEUP - JAMES' HAND holding the phone to his ear. It shows a fresh tan line on his ring finger.

JAMES

I don't know when I'll be home.

(beat)

Well, I'm sorry people get sick!

(beat)

What? No, of course there's no one else! We've been through this! I am at WORK!

James is interrupted by the arrival of an ambulance with lights flashing and SIRENS BLARING. The E.R. staff starts unloading a patient.

JAMES

Aaagh! I can't talk about this now.

I gotta go!

James slams his phone shut and stomps into the E.R.

INT. ST. LUKE'S HOSPITAL - EMERGENCY ROOM - 1:23 AM

SIRENS BLARE. Doctors and nurses scurry back and forth. AN OVERHEAD PAGING SYSTEM SQUAWKS something in the background.

The E.R. doors burst open and CHRIS PETERSON, 35, is being wheeled into the E.R. on a stretcher, flanked by hospital staff. He moans and writhes in pain.

NURSE GRETA yells over her shoulder to the nurse's station as she helps guide the stretcher into an E.R. bay.

NURSE GRETA

Get Doctor Allbright!

James rushes into the E.R. bay.

JAMES

What do we have here?

The INTERN hands James medical charts.

INTERN

Thirty-five-year-old male with acute onset right lower quadrant

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

INTERN (cont'd)
abdominal pain, white count of 17
with left shift and elevated E.S.R.

JAMES
(scanning charts)
Uh-huh.

James nods to Chris as he uncovers Chris' swollen abdomen.
James squeezes Chris' belly, and Chris howls in pain.

JAMES
(to intern)
Order a C.T. to confirm, but this
is a text book appendicitis. Prep
him for the O.R.

James turns and starts walking down the hallway.

INTERN
(whispers to Nurse Greta)
Dag! He looks wrecked! How long's
he been on for?

Nurse Greta runs after and catches up with James.

NURSE GRETA
Doctor Allbright, are you sure
you're up for this surgery? You've
been here for thirty-six hours. We
can call in Doctor Secondi. He can
be here in thirty minutes, and the
patient is stable...enough.

JAMES
What? Who needs sleep when you're
saving lives? Besides, we both know
Doctor Secondi couldn't cut himself
out of a paper bag.

NURSE GRETA
Doctor Allbright...
(beat)

Nurse Greta places a hand on James' shoulder.

NURSE GRETA
James. What about your wife?

JAMES
I can do more good here, believe
me. I got this.

James takes a swig of Red Bull, turns, and exits.

INT. ST. LUKE'S HOSPITAL - OPERATING ROOM - 4:09 AM

MACHINES BEEP as James is finishing up surgery on Chris. Fighting fatigue, James blinks his bloodshot eyes purposefully to keep them open. NURSE SARAH and Nurse Greta are assisting.

NURSE SARAH
 (to Nurse Greta)
 I only counted nine sponges. I think we're missing one!

JAMES
 (to Nurse Greta)
 Cut.

Nurse Greta hesitates and looks nervously at Nurse Sarah.

JAMES
 I said cut!

NURSE GRETA
 Doctor Allbright, the sponge count is wrong. We're missing one.

JAMES
 The count is your problem, now cut the damn suture!

Nurse Greta looks shocked as James grabs the scissor out of her hand and cuts the suture himself.

INT. ST. LUKE'S - OUTSIDE CHRIS' ROOM - 2 DAYS LATER

James and intern are on rounds.

James looks at a set of medical charts quizzically.

JAMES
 Chris Peterson? What's this guy still doing here?

INTERN
 (stammering)
 He um, still has stomach pains.

Intern hesitantly hands James an X-ray film.

JAMES
 What? Who ordered an X-ray?

(CONTINUED)

INTERN

Doctor Mortimer. What do you think?

James holds up the X-ray to the light and sees a metallic string inside the abdomen. His eyes widen momentarily, then he stuffs the X-ray back into the folder.

James pushes past the intern and enters the patient's room.

INT. ST. LUKE'S HOSPITAL - CHRIS' ROOM

Chris is reclining on his bed with a grimace on his face.

He looks up with a pained smile as James enters the room.

CHRIS

(weakly)

Hey, Doctor Allbright.

JAMES

Good afternoon, Mister Peterson. I understand you're still not feeling well after the appendectomy?

CHRIS

Yeah...It still hurts a lot.

JAMES

We need to perform another surgery to find out what's going on. I'll schedule it for sometime this week, hopefully tomorrow.

CHRIS

Oh? Uh, is everything all right? Did the X-ray show something?

JAMES

Everything is fine. Nothing to worry about. We'll be in and out and have you home in no time.

CHRIS

Okay, Doc. You're the expert.

James turns to leave.

CHRIS

Doc?

James looks at Chris.

(CONTINUED)

CHRIS
Thanks for saving my life.

James half smiles and nods.

JAMES
Hey, that's what I do, saving the
world, one appendix at a time!

James turns and exits.

INT. ST. LUKE'S HOSPITAL - HALLWAY OUTSIDE CHRIS' ROOM

Nurse Sarah is waiting anxiously outside Chris' room. She matches pace with James as he walks down the hall.

NURSE SARAH
Doctor Allbright, uh...what about
the X-ray?

James stops abruptly, turns, and puts a finger in her face.

JAMES
Look, the image on that X-ray could
be anything, so how about you just
do your job and I'll do mine?!

James stomps off down the hall, leaving Nurse Sarah stunned.

INT. ST. LUKE'S HOSPITAL - JAMES' OFFICE - 2 HOURS LATER

James is sitting at his desk, talking on his cell phone.

JAMES
How many times do we have to go
over this?
(beat)
You knew this when we got
married! I'm a surgeon, it's not a
nine-to-five job!
(beat)
You know what? Maybe I should have
an affair!

James' PAGER CHIMES obnoxiously. He looks down at it and reads the message:

"911 C. Peterson 1407 SEPTIC"

James' face is panic stricken.

(CONTINUED)

JAMES

I gotta go, there's an emergency...

(beat)

Yes, another one and no, it can't wait! Give me a friggin' break!

James slams his phone shut and races out the door.

INT. ST. LUKE'S HOSPITAL - CHRIS' ROOM - 5 MINUTES LATER

MONITORS BEEP erratically. Chris lies feverish, mumbling incoherently as the intern shakes his shoulder.

INTERN

Mr. Peterson! Mr. Peterson!

James bursts through the door.

JAMES

What's going on?

INTERN

Fever of one oh five, and now he's becoming unresponsive!

James pulls back the sheet covering Chris to reveal a swollen and red abdomen. Pus oozes from the sutures.

JAMES

(gasps)

Prep him for the O.R., stat!

INT. ST. LUKE'S HOSPITAL - OPERATING ROOM - LATER THAT DAY

James is in the middle of surgery on Chris again. His eyes widen as he looks down into Chris' open abdomen.

JAMES' POV

His hand pulls out a bloody, pus-soaked surgical sponge. He crumples and conceals it in the palm of his hand.

INT. ST. LUKE'S HOSPITAL - CAFETERIA - LATER THAT NIGHT

James is staring down at a plate of food. DR. HUGO MORTIMER, Chief of Surgery at St. Luke's, sits down at the table.

HUGO

Hey, James. Another late night?

(CONTINUED)

JAMES

Hey, Chief. Yeah. Same as usual.

HUGO

How's that appi patient doing?

JAMES

Uh, fine.

HUGO

Huh? How'd he take the news about what happened?

JAMES

Fine.

HUGO

Fine? Really? A surgical sponge was left behind, making him septic, you had to open him up a second time, and he was "fine" with that?

James looks away, avoiding eye contact.

HUGO

James, I saw the X-ray. You didn't tell him, did you?

JAMES

Look!

(lowering his voice, leaning across the table toward Hugo)
I save lives every day! This was a minor oversight that could have happened to anyone. It doesn't need to be blown out of proportion.

HUGO

A man almost died because of your "minor oversight!"

JAMES

Well, I took care of it. He didn't die, so every thing is fine, okay?

HUGO

He deserves to know the truth. I'm telling you as a friend, covering it up will not make it go away. This is a malpractice nightmare waiting to happen! Or worse, you could lose your license!

James stands up abruptly.

(CONTINUED)

JAMES

What? Are you threatening to report me?

HUGO

Should I?

James turns and storms off.

INT. ST. LUKE'S HOSPITAL - OUTSIDE CHRIS' ROOM - NEXT DAY

James lowers his head, looking dejected.

He puts his hand on the door handle to Chris's room, pauses, then takes a deep breath before stepping through the door.

INT. ST. LUKE'S HOSPITAL - CHRIS' ROOM

James enters and Chris looks up, smiling. His wife, JESSICA, 31, is sitting at the bedside, and his son, MATTHEW, 5, is sitting on the bed, doodling in a coloring book.

CHRIS

Hey, there's my hero!

JAMES

(looking surprised)
Uh, hey. You're looking better.

CHRIS

Yeah, thanks to you!

JAMES

Just doing my job. You had a moderate infection, but we took care of it with the second surgery. Everything is fine now.

CHRIS

That's wonderful.

(beat)

Hey, Doc, this is my wife, Jessica, and my son, Matthew.

(to his son)

Matty, this is Doctor Allbright, the man who God sent to save daddy's life!

Matthew and James exchange awkward smiles.

Jessica stands up, teary eyed, approaches James as if to hug him, then extends her hand out instead.

(CONTINUED)

JESSICA
Thank you so much for saving Chris'
life. You are an angel.

James shakes her hand and looks at her, speechless.

JESSICA
(to Matthew)
Why don't you show Doctor Allbright
what you made for him?

Matthew hands James a card made of red construction paper.

James opens the card.

INSERT - CARD

Inside are pictures of a stick-figure family. A tall, male stick figure has a bandage across its mid-section. Another male stick figure with a cape stands next to the family.

Scrawled in a child's handwriting in multi-colored crayon, the card reads:

"To the best doctor in the world! Thank you for giving daddy a new belly! Love, Matty."

BACK TO SCENE

James looks up, fighting back tears, unable to speak.

There is an uncomfortable pause. James adjusts his collar.

CHRIS
Are you okay, Doc?

JAMES
You have a beautiful family.

CHRIS
They're a blessing. Your family
must be very proud of you, too.

James looks around the room and notices that it is adorned with colorful balloons and cards addressed to, "Daddy," "Pastor Chris," and "Pastor Peterson."

JAMES
Actually, things haven't been so
good between me and my wife lately.
(beat)
Never mind. I'm sorry. You're a
lucky man, Mister Peterson. Cherish
what you have.

(CONTINUED)

James turns to leave.

CHRIS

Doc, wait. Before you go, would you mind if we pray with you?

JAMES

(tentatively)

Uh, sure, I guess.

James approaches the bed, and Matthew extends his small palm out for James to take hold of.

James pauses for a second and then takes Matty's hand.

They all bow their heads as Chris begins to pray.

CHRIS

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Doctor Allbright. Thank You for giving him the skills necessary to save me and countless other people. We pray, Lord, that You would bless him. Treat him, Lord, with the same care and kindness that he has shown me. Give his wife and him peace, Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen.

JESSICA

Yes, thank You, Father. Amen.

MATTHEW

Thank you, Jesus, for sending Doctaw Aw-right to save my daddy. Aaaay-men!

They open their eyes. James is in tears.

CHRIS

Doctor...?

James quickly turns and exits the room.

INT. ST. LUKE'S HOSPITAL - HALLWAY OUTSIDE CHRIS' ROOM

James slumps against the hallway wall. He lets out a deep sigh as he wipes tears from his eyes. Jessica stands in the doorway, looks at James hesitantly, and speaks softly.

JESSICA

Doctor, is everything okay?

He looks at her, shakes his head, and re-enters the room.

INT. ST. LUKE'S HOSPITAL - CHRIS' ROOM

Chris and Matty watch, concerned and puzzled, as James approaches the bed. Jessica follows behind slowly.

JAMES

(takes deep breath)

I, uh,...I have to come clean with you, Mister Peterson.

(beat)

During the first surgery, I left a surgical sponge behind in your abdomen.

James pulls out a clear plastic specimen bag containing the bloody surgical sponge from his pocket and places it on the bed-side tray table in front of Chris. Chris looks at it, confused, then looks up at James.

JAMES

What should have been a simple, routine procedure almost killed you because of my mistake.

(beat)

You have rights as a patient and should you wish to file a formal complaint against me with the hospital, I understand. I am deeply sorry for the pain I caused you and your family.

Chris is shocked and speechless. He and his family watch dumbfounded as James exits.

INT. ST. LUKE'S - OUTSIDE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE - 2 WEEKS LATER

James sits nervously fidgeting in a chair.

The office door opens, and Chris emerges, dressed in full pastoral regalia, complete with black suit and white collar.

James looks up, speechless.

Chris pauses, nods knowingly at James, and walks out.

The office door opens again, and DR. MARJORIE MILFORD, the hospital president, gestures for James to enter.

INT. ST. LUKE'S - HOSPITAL PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

James enters and sits across from Marjorie's desk.

MARJORIE

James, the accusations against you
are severe. What were you thinking?
I find your actions inexcusable...

James shifts in his chair uncomfortably and sighs deeply.

MARJORIE

However, given that Pastor
Christopher is not pressing
charges, I have no basis to pursue
disciplinary actions against you.

JAMES

(surprised and stammering)
Uh, what? He's not pressing
charges? Th-thank you!

MARJORIE

Don't thank me. Thank Pastor
Christopher. He was the one who
came to your defense. He told me
how you admitted your mistake. That
took a lot of guts, and I respect
that. Few in your position have
been as brave as you.

They both stand up and shake hands. James turns and exits.

INT. ST. LUKE'S - OUTSIDE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

James exits the office. Waiting outside is James' wife. She
stands up as she sees James. They embrace lovingly.

They turn and begin to walk down the hall, holding hands.

CLOSEUP - JAMES AND HIS WIFE'S INTERTWINED HANDS

A gold wedding band can now be seen prominently on James'
once-empty ring finger.

FADE TO BLACK.