

## Tap Dance

By Devika Rao

The 10 day-old baby was asleep on the sterilized drape in the procedure room of the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. The baby sucked on a green pacifier and was not aware that an intern was about to insert a needle into his back. The parents had consented to the procedure and were waiting somewhere else. It was just the intern Patricia, me the senior resident, and the attending Dr. Cassius Jones. Patricia needed to get this lumbar puncture on the first try. My pride depended on it. I needed to show Jones I knew how to supervise an intern.

A nurse came in to hold the baby.

"It's all in the hold," I said to Patricia.

"Holding the needle?" she asked. Her eyeliner was smudged from a full day of admitting and discharging.

"No, holding the baby," I said.

"How do you know you're putting the needle in the right place?" Patricia asked.

"I'll guide you through the whole thing," I said. I looked over at Jones. His arms were crossed in silence. This was not characteristic of him. Jones always had something to say. Just this morning, I heard him give his anal stirring talk for the umpteenth time.

"Constipated baby? No sweat," he started the talk as usual. "Put some lube on a Q-tip. Insert into the anus and making a *stirrrrring* motion," he said, making small circles in the air with his index finger. "Stir that soup, slowly, and then watch out or the shit'll get ya."

"You guys ready for this tap?" Jones asked.

"We're ready." I answered for the both of us. But inside, I wasn't sure. I had fucked up multiple times in front of him. And everyone knew it but Patricia.

The first time I fucked up was when I was an intern. The antibiotic orders I wrote for a kid with pneumonia were crossed off. ERROR, Jones had written beside them. I had calculated meningitic dosing, when it was not necessary. It was a dumb mistake. I didn't take the extra few minutes to open Harriet Lane and check the dosing.

The second time I fucked up was with the baby I admitted with breath holding spells. The mom said the baby stopped breathing many times over the last few days. One episode lasted 20 seconds and scared her.

"Any color changes," Jones asked me. I had no idea but was afraid to admit it.

"No color changes," I said. He knew I was lying. I'm a terrible liar. He reviewed the whole history again with the mother. Apparently, the kid had turned purple and blue. The baby ended up getting diagnosed with an arrhythmia.

He hadn't trusted me since. He was always double checking my work, entrusting things like talking to families to other residents, but not me. He would treat other residents to coffee downstairs, but not me. So I fought back. I became more meticulous. I learned to be thorough. I got great evals from other attendings. But when you break one attending's trust, it's hard to earn it back, and it drives you mad.

Today, all I wanted to do was to help Patricia nail her first tap. I didn't even care if it was a champagne tap – zero red blood cells, the spinal fluid the golden color of champagne with all the glory and celebration of champagne.

But with the way Jones's chin was glued to his Bugs Bunny bowtie and his eyes were wide and fixed, I knew he was watching me closely. I wondered why he was even letting me do all the talking when I knew he still didn't trust me. But the thing about us residents – sometimes we fuck up and we learn and get better. We're not all born awesome, with the latest scientific evidence on novel treatments for Henoch-Schonlein purpura tucked into our white coat pockets.

I adjusted the nurses hold. The baby needed to be held more tightly.

"Nancy, don't let the baby shit on the intern," I told the nurse, trying a little humor.

"Won't that contaminate the sterile field?" Patricia asked, her voice shaky.

"Nah. Just go slow. You'll feel a pop. The baby will relax when you're in the right space."

"What if I don't feel a pop."

"Pause, remove the stylus. If you get fluid, you'll know. If you don't get fluid, keep advancing. Just do it slowly. The nurse has a perfect hold, and I'm right here."

Patricia felt in between spinal processes and marked her target. She looked at me for approval.

"You got this," I said, words I had always wanted to hear, but never did, not even from my parents. Maybe a boyfriend, someday...

As Patricia plucked the needle from the lumbar puncture tray, I felt the weight of Patricia's intern year. This was the beginning. Patricia would need confidence for 2 AM admissions, parents who thought she looked too young, and placing her first umbilical lines. And what about the gash in an 8 year-old's arm needing sutures after an entire bus of school children crashed. The attendings would be tending to head bleeds and the real trauma, while Patricia wouldn't have supervision but would know she'd be ok.

Patricia inserted the needle. The baby began to cry.

"You got this," I repeated. Patricia kept going.

"Stop. Withdraw the stylus. See if there's flow." No fluid emerged from the needle.

"Keep going. Baby is ok." More crying. I heard shifting feet behind me, but didn't I turn around.

Patricia advanced the needle. Then, the baby stopped crying and let out a deep sigh. Patricia had done it. And in that moment, when I saw Patricia's face open up like a bright pink evening sky, I forgot about Jones. I thought about the baby who would someday grow up healthy, never remembering the intern who stuck a needle in his back for her first lumbar puncture. I was too busy helping Patricia collect that golden fluid to look back.