

*Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC*

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**- CHAPTER ONE -  
THE ELECTROCARDIOGRAM**

*February 24, 2021  
Hospital Santé Réunion  
Château-la-Vallière  
Region of Indre et Loire,  
France.*

I just can't do it.

Not complicated, not devious, I am often said to be a colleague with whom it is easy to work, whatever the situation. And God knows that in these troubled times, we need flexibility.

But with her, I can't do it.

Margaret has been for a month now. As a backup in our emergency ward, first as a caregiver. And soon, in view of her competence, management allowed her to take on nursing responsibilities. It's not her American accent that bothers me: on the contrary, it reminds me of our year in Los Angeles, when my wife and I went to do research. And I always liked, on occasion, to exchange in English. Nor is it her incessant initiatives in terms of care: she is statutorily a nurse, but takes it upon herself to read electrocardiograms, prescribe check-ups or send patients to the scanner, without prior medical advice. Usual medical decisions. And it must be admitted that up to now, she has never been taken in default.



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Personally, that's fine by me: we need initiative, skills and oil in the wheels right now. Certainly not postures. Caregivers are scarce, general competence is exhausted and I am relieved to see it shared. You come to the hospital, you work with a vague idea of your time frame, and then you leave, like hard-working ghosts. We come back for the same thing. So, the important thing is to get the job done.

But we also need some points of reference, and some teams, working in rotation with Margaret, don't appreciate her initiatives in these divisive times.

No. It's not that.

What I don't like about her is that I can't figure her out. Medicine is years in the intimacy and suffering of people, teaching you to pierce personalities in a matter of seconds.

And with Margaret, I just can't do it.

I can't do it.

She's waving at me from down the hall in the ER. She obviously needs to see me. I nod my head and walk past the stalls.

It's a quiet day. I'm working in the non-Covid ER. Before the epidemic, the emergency rooms were full of "bobology", in a system that worked upside down: full of small medical emergencies, sometimes simple consultations at odd hours, people came for trifles, in the early morning to "avoid queuing". But as this "Activity", as we used to say, was remunerative, we took it. Why not? But reality forced us to make the activity of care meaningful.

Nowadays, we see far fewer patients, but those who come through the hospital doors do so for a hell of an emergency. Real ones. Situations that used to excite hospital freaks, far removed from reality. And emergencies that are often treated late. Patients who take the risk of coming in are often very sick.

At least we're back to our core business.

Not to mine, though.



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A year ago, I was a young interventional cardiologist just settled in the Paris region, who had finally constituted his patient base and was repaying his loans. And a happy family man. Today, like many others, I have been redeployed by the General System of Reunited Health, or in French "Système Général de Santé Réunie", to which I did not join cheerfully. I only do cardio when a situation arises, and I'm needed. But otherwise, on a day-to-day basis, I do what everyone else does: everything during a month, when I'm deployed in the "non-Covid" sector. And Covid, when I'm assigned to the eponymous sector.

Covid 21.

I'm tired of pronouncing the name of this virus in every sentence, which has become the corollary conditioning the slightest movement in our existence.

Margaret.

The closer I get the more I find her even less decipherable than usual. I don't know what's wrong. Yes, I do. Usually this 50-year-old woman with a strong character is restless, speaks loudly. In her defence, she's not really doing her job anymore either.

Eight weeks ago, she was chief visceral surgeon at one of Boston's largest hospitals.

Like hundreds of thousands of Americans with the means, she took the lead and left the United States for Europe: fleeing the war settling *de facto* at the Canadian border, when the trigger-happy people considered, in the face of the virus, that their cherished and absolute freedom required them to rebuild themselves by annexing their neighbour. That was around November. A few weeks before the start of SW2, just after the White House officially declared "impossible to hold the presidential election".

Margaret went by sea, managing like a few clever people to make her way up the east coast to Maine, to embark for Iceland and Scotland.



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SW2.

A sanitized acronym for "Secession War 2". Like NUSA, another term that violates the daily life of our language: the "Non United States Of America".

I get to her level, Margaret points to an empty box with her head. Yes, there's something wrong and I finally understand, she grinned. Obviously, she wants us to talk alone. I raise my eyebrows, and, on the doorstep, I almost make a big mistake. Almost mechanically raising the visor of my protective mask. I can't take it anymore, but I get my act together. However invasive it may be, this accessory is nothing but my best friend.

I'm going for a spray of hydro-alcoholic solution before entering the stall, spreading it on my hands as much as the door handle I'm pushing.

Hospitals without handles. One more thing to make up...

As I enter, a quick glance at the clock: 6:07 p.m.. The relief will arrive, and I'll leave on time. I have two days to myself, with the weekend it makes four. Blessed time with the children and my wife: confined, but in the garden. And 45 minutes to run some errands, 3 times a week.

I hadn't understood why the date of the day obsesses me, embarrassing me since this morning without understanding why. Today is the first anniversary of the death of patient number 1, who died on Covid-19. At first, it went as planned. There was a first wave. There was a second wave. Weaker, but there it was. But to imagine, a year ago, that we would be here was unthinkable.

After a third, fourth, fifth wave to reopen and close the resuscitation beds, we realized that there would be no more waves. The World realized it and it would be the same for years to come. And that life will be made of permanent waves until an effective vaccine is developed. To date, four vaccines have been tried and failed, poor immunization of



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infected patients, two new strains of Covid 20 and 21, transmission by pets, and ineffective or dangerous drugs. Apart from barrier measures, containment, and patience, nothing works.

Humanity's gonna be down on one knee for a long time. Perhaps this position will finally teach us some humility.

— Dr. Lafaye, I need your help now. I'm not well and I need your cardiological skills.

— Stop calling me that, Margaret. Call me "Guy" like I've asked you a hundred times.

— Can't do it. Sounds like I'm calling a random guy... Thinking of it... You're French, so why not call your "Frogy"?

Sigh.

— What's the matter with you, Margaret, get to the... It's not good. She's got a hand on her chest.

— But what's wrong? Are you okay?

Margaret's falling on the gurney.

— Frogy... Please, check your texts, it's my EKG. No more paper in the machine, I've done my electro and sent you the picture. It hurts. It's coronary artery pain. Typical. And it's permanent! It's been hurting for 30 minutes.

I run out, flabbergasted, and lift my smartphone. I open her message and watch the electrical wave patterns on the paper.

— Margaret... it's... you're having an anterior coronary. Spread.

— Okay... Was sure of that... Really great, fucking cigarette.

I'm motionless instead of going off on my own, like I usually do. This woman still radiates amazing authority. I feel like it's blocking me, waiting for instructions.



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— Okay Froggy... last week you ran out of stent, right? You were “naked”, you said, no more heart attack meds... Did you get your delivery?

— No. We've got nothing left... we have to transfer you. There are stents left to unclog your arteries in Tours only. And we've used up all of our thrombolysis kits...

Which means we've got nothing. Damn it! We'll start with the bare minimum.

— I'm already going to give you an aspirin injection...

— Thank you Froggy... And please, give me some morphine, it hurts to die.

— Okay, we'll do that. Just, I think we're out of nitrates. I'll see if we have any spray left.

— Froggy... you know as well as I do we won't get far. Do you think you can... transfer me?

We're both looking out the window, staring at the dark.

Winter.

Night.

Tours.

And it's not good news at all. Not good news at all.



**- CHAPTER TWO -  
CONGRESSMAN THOMASSON, SPEAKER**

*Two months earlier,  
November 1, 2020  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW,  
Washington, DC 20500  
White House*

— What right does she have to make me come to the White House again? And on what grounds? What does she want, again, huh? I wasn't even informed!

The man screaming through his protective mask, making the visor fly off, has just gotten out of his armoured car and is now on the White House steps, followed at a run by the Capitol Police, in charge of his protection. Rushing through the north portico towards the lobby, walking fast, he is approached by a man who follows with difficulty and stammers:

— Thomasson, by your position as Speaker of the House of Representatives, I... I'm not going to tell you that you're the third person in the state, after the Speaker...

Stanley Thomasson is ranting. The Speaker of the House of Representatives, a Democrat who has sat in the House for more than 27 years, is fed up with going back and forth to the White House under false pretences. Yesterday, it was to formally oppose Internet voting. The day before



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yesterday, it was the opposite, followed by a press conference which explained the opposite.

— You do not understand anything about social distancing, and I am fed up with it! We have to set an example, you idiot! I'm fed up with making myself look like a moron to my constituents by going back and forth! Five days it's been going on! You hear that, Mac Coy?!

Warren Mac Coy, a 32-year-old pure white trash meathead as the Republican Party knows how to spawn, is trying to calm the Congressman. Moreover, the young chief of staff of the President of the United States is less arrogant than usual: the Washington-boy has lost his self-importance and doesn't look good:

— Thomasson, you... you're the third character after...

It's too much for the latter who stops his race and points a threatening index at his interlocutor's mask.

— Listen to me, brat... First of all, it's been two hours since I'm the second person in the state after President Warner-Lee, because two hours ago, unless you haven't been following the news, the Vice President died on Covid-19, for Christ's sake!

The two men leave again under the angry impulse of Thomasson, who slants to the right towards the west wing, running down the corridor towards the Oval Office.

—... we're on the brink of civil war! We're on the brink of war, and we're going to take over Canada, because of your dumb-ass voters and that dumb-ass Warner-Lee! Who dares to tell us, just like that, that she was throwing away the presidential election?! Postponed *Sine Die*? Maybe for years? That's what we're gonna talk about. Here! It's no problem. Dictatorship! It's easy to invoke the 1.5 million dead we're banging, after dealing the situation like shit, to get us there!

— Congressman Thomasson, please, we need to talk to you about something. But quietly, come on.



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— Nothing, dickhead! I'll only talk to her! And I hope she's wearing her mask! And by the way, who did she put on as Vice President, huh? Conneary? Martinez, huh? A stuntman, or a freakin' maniac? What about the health minister, are we gonna get a third one this week or what the fuck? Some guy who, I don't know, maybe shits us up with some Covid holy water? Nothing surprises me with you guys anymore!

It's going too fast: at the end of the corridor, before turning left towards the Oval Office, they're stopped dead in their tracks by the Secret Service protecting the President. In the background, a medical team, wearing protective suits from head to toe, watches them silently.

— Ah no, fuck! You're gonna destroy my nose again!?! You tested me yesterday, damn it! Right here, I've been waiting 3 hours for the result! I'm negative!

— No, we're not going to test you and calm down, says a deep voice.

A man from the Presidential Secret Service approaches the Speaker. His face is deep. Thomasson doesn't even notice.

— So what the hell are your nostrils cosmonauts doing here ?

— They're not here... for you, Mr. President. They must be looking after... your office, Mac Coy stammers.

— My office? My office is fine, thank you! And it's in congress ,and...and they call me speaker!

— Please come to me, the officer says.

A heavy silence slowly descends over everyone's shoulders. Thomasson begins to realize something is wrong. Secret Service on the Presidency side, Capitol Police on the Speaker side, the two protection teams talk to each other with their eyes and understand each other. They bring a Bible, but young Mac Coy, undone, raises a hand.



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— Before we do that... I think Congressman Thomasson should realize on his own. Sir, once you see what's behind that door, you'll let me know if you want me to join your cabinet.

— Stop calling him "President," says the head of the Secret Service. He has to take an oath first, hand on the bible.

— All right, you gonna show me, or what? Cause, as I understand it, it's in the Oval Office, right?

Ten seconds. That's how long men spend in the famous office. Frightened, greenish, soon-to-be NUSA president walks out of the office and pukes on the floor. He asks for a second, waves that he's got it, and puts his hand on the Bible. Haggard, his eyes in the haze, he is inattentive to the litany of the oath that slides over him. Passively, he pronounces the consecrated formula, which he has repeated hundreds of times before, envisaging this day under different circumstances. He realizes that the team of cosmonauts is not there to detect, but to clean the sheaves of blood.

— Before you move in, we'll also need to test Madam President's corpse to make sure she wasn't carrying the virus.

— Of course! I was just planning to sit at the office in ten minutes to read the paper. Can I be briefed on what happened instead of hearing some bullshit? How did she die? Who did this to her?

— It was one of my agents, the head of the Secret Service replied. Leila Noswitz. She was the most dedicated. Guarding the President, she put an explosive bullet in her head in a split second an hour ago after hearing the election was going to be called off.

— Aren't you guys still sorting through your stuff? Cause if you are, get out of here, leave me a gun, and I'll have Capitol Hill police take your place.



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— Mr. President, Agent Noswitz's husband died on Covid-21 two months ago. He got it from his wife, probably caught at a presidential town hall meeting. She had been thoroughly re-evaluated before she took over, but...

Stanley Thomasson, 46th President of the United States, raises one hand. He looks to his phone where a message just came in. A news clip, which he watches for a minute. In shock, he holds his head in his hands, desperate, whispering:

— Fuck fuck... where the fuck are we going? And I'm in charge of this shit...

— Mr. President?

— All right, I get it, you stay on duty. I just have one question. Do you have video footage of the scene? Of the killing? In the office?

— Yes. But... it's not meant to go public. I don't think you...

— Yes, I do. You've got ten minutes. Five would be better. Mac Coy, you're joining my firm as... "Republican staff liaison." Take it or leave it, I need someone as inept as them to understand them. Get Yellis, my communications director, in here. Tell her I'm making her Vice President and she's bringing her butt home. I suck at Facebook and all that crap, but we're gonna need it.

The lost agent looks like he's ready to run, but he needs clarification. The president nods his head, rubs his eyes, and holds out his phone to show everyone.

— Okay, I understand," Thomasson says. That's fair enough, and anyway you'll find out for yourself in five minutes... Come on! Come on everybody, watch this, cry, and get me the fucking Warner-Lee murder video before it all blows up!



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*Barking news: We're getting word as we speak, that the governor of New Mexico, Enrique Camacho, Republican, claims that President Warner-Lee has just been assassinated in the Oval Office. He claims her murder occurred moments after the Vice President died two hours ago on Covid-21... Governor Enrique calls it a coup. I'll let you watch a clip from his press conference... There! Governor Dennis Enrique Camacho of New Mexico.*

*"The murder was carried out by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, who is seen in these images, arriving at the White House, and storming out of his vehicle accompanied by the Capitol police, who are running alongside him. It is obvious! Speaker Thomasson organized this coup in response to the cancellation of the presidential elections. What madness! Our country has suffered enough, organizing these elections was impossible, and now the death of our leader? He killed the first woman elected to lead the United States! My dear compatriots! This felony signals the arrival of dark hours for our great country. I am announcing that the state of New Mexico, under my leadership, is declaring secession from the rest of the United States of America. The National Guard has just been ordered to deploy and declare a state of emergency under my command. I invite everyone else..."*

