I began like any other Friday evening. I was on the neurology service, just finishing up late rounds. I stuck around to get some constructive criticism on my patient notes from the attending physician.

I just have a couple of things to finish up. You’re welcome to tag along, or you can go home...

Yeah. Like I actually had a choice.

In medical school, there really is no “optional” clinical activity.
The eager smile stayed plastered on my face as he told me what was left to be done.

He had to see two new patients and begin the process of declaring them brain dead.

I wanted to run.

I wanted to hide.

But I had a duty.

I would have to deal with this one day.

Better now when I'm just a medical student. Right?

Okay. Let's go!
Our first patient was in the medical ICU. She was only 19. She had arrived by helicopter after her grandparents found her unconscious in severe diabetic ketoacidosis. They told us that she started to rebel when she turned 14. She stopped taking her insulin regularly. She just wanted to fit in.

We went through the steps of the neurological exam.

It was tragically clear that she was already brain dead.

As we left quietly, I turned around and saw her grandmother standing over her.

Mourning.
Our last patient was in the surgical ICU. She was about 40 years old.

There were so many tubes and lines, so many machines.
All beeping.
The sucking sound of the ventilator.
It felt chaotic.

As we performed the exam, I caught bits of her story from the resident that had come in to observe. Early this morning she felt a little short of breath, a slight twinge in her chest. She went to the emergency department at another hospital. They thought she may be having a heart attack, and they wanted to do a cardiac catheterization to try and remove any blockage before there was too much damage.

During the procedure something went horribly wrong. She was rushed to the OR. Now she lay here, in our hospital, lifeless, exposed.
Later that night, I struggled to clear the images from my mind...

If I closed my eyes, I saw them. I heard the beeping. The rhythmic swishing of the ventilator. Cacophony.
On Saturday morning, I reported for patient rounds. We were told by the medical ICU residents that the 19 year old girl had passed away overnight. Her heart finally gave out and her grandparents did not want extraordinary measures. She had already suffered enough.

After seeing all of our other patients, we went to see the woman in the surgical ICU.

Our patient was still in the same place, amidst the wires and tubes, all of the beeping machines.

We repeated the exam in silence.

The chief resident popped his head in the room and asked the attending if he would mind speaking to the family.

They were not coping well. They were not grasping the situation.

They still had hope in the face of a hopeless state.

We went to gather the family in a private room adjacent to the SICU.

I could not imagine a GOOD situation in which these rooms would ever be used.

The patient’s family followed us inside and tried to get comfortable on the various chairs and couches.
I settled into a corner behind the attending while he began to explain to the family. Their trepidation hung in the air like the stench of manure.

The patient's daughter, who was about 20, years old was being held tightly by her cousin.

As I watched the daughter crumble, I tried to distract myself.

How could I manage to not burst into tears?

How could I stop myself from running out of the room?

I had to find strength. I had to fight the villainous emotions overtaking me.

I WANT MY MOMMY!
When his daughter demanded to be allowed to lay in bed with her mother, he broke down for the first time.

As she crawled into the hospital bed oblivious to the constant beeping, the daughter closed her eyes and tried to find comfort in more peaceful times.

I sat in the work area just outside the patient's room, listening to our group discussing the next steps.

Someone would need to contact the Gift of Life people.

Has anyone called pastoral care? The social worker?
After all of the business of the living dead was finished, we left the SICU. The hallway seemed impossibly long. I excused myself and headed for the only private place I could think of.

The loss I had witnessed finally overcame me.

I stayed there for almost an hour trying to gather myself for the walk to my parking lot. I would have to pass people... patients...

...and God no, maybe even colleagues.
I lay awake again on Saturday night. I enjoyed some family time on Sunday. It was hard to look at my mom without hearing the girl's screams for her mother. There would be no answer.

Monday morning came in a flash.

The sun was just starting to rise as I walked in to the hospital to begin a new week. I sighed and thought, 'Vita perseverat.' Life goes on.