

## **You're Going to Die**

A Short Story by Phillip Levin

"I'm Doctor Phillips," I said, with offered hand.

"Arthur Miller." A healthy appearing African-American grandfather, he pointed to the handsome young man next to him. "This is my son, Jason."

We shook hands and Jason stepped back, respectfully quiet. Arthur pointed to a bulge in his neck. I reached to touch it, jerking back when it pulsed, a snake preparing to strike. I studied Mr. Miller's face. What could he know of his pending calamity?

"How long has this been here?" I asked.

"An hour. It seems to be growing."

I glanced back at the serpent, watching it slither on his neck.

Jason asked, "What is it?"

I looked him over, wondering if he'd be strong enough to stand by his father when death came knocking.

I turned back to Arthur to explain. "There's a weakness in the main artery in your neck, called an aneurysm. When it bursts, you'll die."

A nurse came into the emergency room cubicle in response to my summons. "Set up two IVs," I ordered. "Draw a surgical panel. Page the vascular surgeon stat. Oh, and better get me an intubation tray."

She scurried towards the door on way to her assignments.

"Wait!" We froze at Arthur's command. "You're saying I'm about to die?" he demanded.

I studied him, his mouth gripped in determination. My nod came slowly, my hand offered open palm.

He took that hand and pulled me down into a hug. His heartbeat pulsed hard against my chest, boom, boom, each push another particle of sand falling from his life's nearly empty hourglass. He released and I backed away.

His eyes pleaded for a reprieve that wasn't to come. "How long?"

Softly. "Soon. Very soon."

Jason broke the ensuing silence. "What are his chances if you do everything you're about to start?"

I looked again at the asp, its pulsations edging a bit higher. Unable to loosen my gaze from the ballooning, I said, "None. This is going to rupture no matter what I do."

Arthur settled back on his pillow, staring at the ceiling. "Please do nothing further. I'd like to spend my last minutes in contemplation."

The nurse looked at me, and I looked at Jason. He bent close to his father, holding his gaze, taking both of his hands in his own. "Are you sure about this, Dad?"

The old man gave his son a loving smile. "Yes, Jake. God's calling me." He turned to face me. "Dr. Phillips, could you

perform this last request for a condemned man? Allow me to die in peace.”

I looked again at Jason. He nodded and smiled, a glimmer clouded over by tears. “Please, Dr. Phillips.”

I placed a hand on Arthur’s shoulder. “I’ll do my best. Allow the nurse to start an IV and we’ll hold off on everything else.”

Arthur nodded. “What about the vascular surgeon you mentioned?” Jason asked. “Can he help?”

“If he’s available, we’ll get his opinion.”

“What was that about a tubing tray?” from Jason again.

I watched the snake bite off another millimeter of Arthur’s neck. “When this bursts your father will suffocate unless I’ve already placed a tube down his throat.”

“Would it save his life?” I shook my head and turned to my patient. “It might save your heart and lungs, but not your brain. All blood supply to and from your head will be shut off.”

Arthur spoke up from his hush. “No intubation. I want what any man desires; that my passing be respectful.”

The nurse started the I.V., and bowed out gracefully. The patriarch settled back onto his deathbed. His son reached down and helped tuck him in. I watched the serpent sliding on its slow search upward, straining to find that weak point, the spot where the artery would burst open in his neck. He couldn’t be stopped. Not in time.

“I’d like to stay,” I offered.

## Coastlines

Arthur smiled. "Thank you Dr. Phillips. I'll appreciate your company."

The beeps and echoes of the emergency room pervaded the deathwatch as Arthur lay with eyes closed. Jason's voice came softly. "What are you thinking about, Dad?"

"I'm reminiscing. Had my share of troubles, and triumphs. It's been scary at times, but now that I'm facing death, I'm not frightened."

The two gazed into each other's eyes. Jason bent down, and they hugged. A few more pebbles dribbled from that dwindling hourglass. They resumed positions, the father, now laid in funeral shroud, stared at the ceiling. His son stood against the wall, watching.

"I'd recommend some morphine," I suggested. Arthur didn't move, so I looked to Jason for guidance.

"Is it going to hurt?"

"It will be terrifying."

Arthur grunted and I stepped out momentarily to tell the nurse. In moments we were back, she holding the treasured dose securely.

"The vascular surgeon is tied up," she reported.

Arthur's neck began ballooning. "Any last words?" I asked. He shook his head. His son turned to the wall, respectful to the end.

### Issue III, Spring 2014

The viper bit. The vessel burst. The nurse pushed in the morphine. Arthur's neck swelled shut and he choked to death. So quick. So inevitable. So terrifying.

"It's over," I said quietly.

Jason twisted to take one last look at his father's bloated purple head. He murmured, "Good-bye Dad. I love you." The nurse covered Arthur and left. I waited. Jason took a few deep breaths. He looked at me with calm, reddened eyes.

"Thank you Dr. Phillips. Thank you for letting him pass in peace." I came around the stretcher and we hugged.