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## The Show

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Jean: I just can't get over it!

Berenger: Yes, I can see you can't. Well, it was a rhinoceros—all right, so it was a rhinoceros. It's miles away by now—miles away.

Jean: But you must see it's fantastic! A rhinoceros loose in the town, and you don't bat an eyelid. It shouldn't be allowed. *Berenger yawns.*<sup>1</sup>

My mother loves to tell this story: as a two-year-old, I fixated on the scene in *Snow White* where the protagonist eats the poisoned apple proffered by the witch; I made her read it over and over again, pretending to be the witch and then the princess. To my mother, the story portends the actress I later grew into, whose performances she never missed—not even the weird ones, not even



Ionesco's absurdist play *Rhinoceros*, in which ordinary citizens sequentially turn into pachyderms. By the end, the entire town has transformed except for Berenger, the lone human holdout, whose initial blasé response to the madness gives way to a hypochondriac's nightmare that never manifests.

My father, by contrast, viewed my acting as a terrifying hobby that would hopefully burn itself out before it precluded more legitimate career prospects. Ever competitive, he loves to tell this story: in eleventh grade, I beat out a now-famous actress for the leading role in a high school production of *Romeo and Juliet*. I was a new student, and she was a popular and beautiful senior who would go on to Hollywood, nabbing a role in the hit show *House MD*. My father often finishes this story with the kicker, "Well, she got to be a doctor on TV, but my daughter gets to be a real doctor," lest anyone be confused as to his personal taxonomy of acceptable professions. (He also loyally asserts that her first season is when the show really started to go downhill.)

*The rhinoceros continues its trumpeting. For a few moments, Mrs. Boeuf stares fixedly, then suddenly she lets out a terrible cry.*

Mrs. Boeuf: My God! It can't be true!

Berenger: What's the matter?

Mrs. Boeuf: It's my husband! Oh Boeuf, my poor Boeuf, what's happened to you?



Daisy: Are you positive?

Mrs. Boeuf: I recognize him, I recognize him.

The rhinoceros responds with a violent but tender trumpeting.

Papillon: Well, that's the last straw!  
This time he's fired for good.

Eventually, and for many reasons, my burgeoning acting career gave way to medical school. I found ways to sneak in performances here and there, but the trajectory was clear; and though I devoted myself eagerly to the study of medicine, I mourned the loss of the stage. But the beginning of my intern year felt oddly familiar, as though I'd been cast in another surrealist play. It started at orientation, with the debacle of my name: I've always used a foreshortened version of my middle name, and wanted it on my identification badge. "Nope," said the photo ID guy, sitting in front of a queue of bright-eyed new doctors. "This is a legal document here. Can't have anything but your name on it." "But it *is* my name," I insisted, "Look, here it is on my driver's license." "Sorry," he said gruffly, waving the next person forward. And that was that; I literally wasn't who I said I was.

This deceit wasn't so far from the truth. In a matter of weeks, I'd gone from the blithe existence of a fourth year medical student to the harsh, militaristic life of an intern in general surgery, covering the trauma neurosurgery service. My alarm chirped at four in the morning, nurses introduced me to pa-



tients as “the doctor,” and I stuck big needles into people without supervision. Something about the rapidity of the change and the all-encompassing nature of the role I was newly assuming made me feel as though I was, once again, on stage. The costumes and scenery— hospital gowns (here called, bafflingly, “johnnys”), poorly lit labyrinthine corridors, spotless operating rooms—all of it felt like some set designer’s idea of what a hospital should look like.

Jean: Today’s the same as any other day.

Berenger: Oh, not quite as much.

I’ve heard of “impostor syndrome,” but my angst went well beyond theoretical worries of personal inadequacy: I felt I was merely impersonating a doctor in this gigantic, storied hospital, going through the motions. Everyone had to be in on the joke: I’d had my degree for all of three weeks, and now experienced nurses were asking me to give them orders for critically ill patients. “Can you come administer this medication?” one nurse paged me, her eyes rolling heavenward, “It has to be pushed by an MD.” Another nurse saw me scurrying down the unit hallway and came running. “Hey,” she said, “You’re a doctor, right? I think the patient in room thirty-six just died. Do you mind pronouncing him?” Not knowing much about the patient, never having pronounced much of anything, and not feeling at all doctorly, I walked into the room where a dozen family members stood in various postures of grief, put my stethoscope on his chest, and closed his eyes. “I’m so sorry, he’s gone,” I said quietly, as the family started to wail. I’d



nearly gagged watching identical scenes in medical dramas, yet there I was, playing it out in real life.

The trauma neurosurgery service was an extreme version of this alternate reality, where people who had been functional one day were comatose the next, with half their skulls sawed off and locked in a freezer in the basement. Our patients had suffered a smorgasbord of horrific accidents requiring neurosurgical intervention in the form of the incongruously cute-sounding “hemisrani,” otherwise known as a hemisraniectomy (or more crudely, to my etymologically oriented mind, “half-skull-gone”). Their charts read like a series of obvious public service advertisements. Don’t clean your gutters on a rainy day. Don’t use a Segway on the stairs. Definitely don’t drink a pint of whiskey before you trim the branches of the tallest tree in your yard. Their families sat dazed at their bedsides, trying to make sense of the unbearable new reality, asking impossible questions. I worried that they could see right through me—or worse, that pretending to know the answers would transform me into one of those burned-out, cynical residents I was so terrified of becoming. After all, I didn’t want to *play* a doctor—I wanted to *be* a doctor, a healer, someone who could legitimately treat patients and answer their questions, ideally without sweating through my scrubs.

Berenger: *Worried*. Yes, it did make me cough. How did I cough?

Dudard: Like everyone coughs when they drink something a bit strong.



Berenger: There wasn't anything odd about it, was there? It *was* a real human cough?

Dudard: What are you getting at? It was an ordinary human cough. What other sort of cough could it have been?

Berenger: I don't know. Perhaps an animal's cough. Do rhinoceroses cough?

I was thrust into scenarios that felt staged because of how emotionally laden they were, and how absurd it was that they were tasked to someone as novice as I. As my superiors were always operating, it often fell to me to represent the neurosurgery service at the family meetings held to discuss patients' dire prognoses. I hid behind "we," as in, "we were able to reduce the pressure on his brain, but we're not sure about the amount of damage that he sustained before the surgery," and awkwardly accepted gratitude from families though I'd barely glimpsed the inside of an operating room since graduation. After these meetings, I would slink out, red-faced, ashamed to have spoken up as though I had anything to add in a room full of experienced doctors.

One of them, a psychiatrist with a gentle demeanor with whom I'd worked a few times, caught me lurking outside the conference room before a particularly dreaded family meeting. "You're doing fine," he said, unbidden.

"I hate this," I replied, the words tumbling out of my mouth. "I feel so unprepared. I feel like a fraud."



“Nothing really prepares you for this,” he said, opening the door and ushering me in, “you just have to do it.”

*The show must go on.* Of course. Rehearsal was over; the lights were on, the stage was set, and it was time to perform. And of course, I realized, with a jolt at my own idiocy, I had been preparing for years in medical school, through slews of examinations, rehearsed conversations, hours upon hours of study. Though the stage was new, that feeling of being underprepared, of abject terror, was something I had felt before every performance, every night, for every play I’d ever been cast in. Part of the beauty of live performance—and of caring for patients—is that you don’t know exactly what will happen on stage. You trust that your hours of work and careful training will help you through. You keep yourself open to learning and discovering new things throughout the run of the show. You stay true to yourself, and you recognize your own limitations, and that keeps your performance honest. You stay honest even, as Berenger does in the final scene of *Rhinoceros*, when it feels like you’re the only one. And, eventually, you recognize that terror as the thrill that drew you to your craft in the first place.

Berenger: *Sobbing, he falls on his face, his shoulders heaving.* I’m so ugly. People who try to hang on to their individuality always come to a bad end. *He pauses, then suddenly snaps out of it, rises, grabs the bottle of brandy and a*



*glass and sits on the chair.* Oh, well, too bad. I'll take on all of them. I'll put up a fight against the lot of them, the whole lot of them. I'm the last man left, and I'm staying that way until the end. I'm not capitulating.

A year or so later, I was rounding at the children's hospital. Approaching one patient's room, I heard voices singing: "Ten little monkeys, jumping on the bed. One fell off and bumped his head." Cautiously, I opened the door; the privacy curtain was drawn, hiding the singers. They continued: "Mama called the doctor and the doctor said..."

I couldn't hold back—it was too perfect. I threw open the curtain and gleefully all-but-shouted, "No more monkeys jumping on the bed!"

The parents smiled, and the two older kids flanking the bed giggled. But the three-year-old patient sat back, a quizzical look on his upturned face. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm the doctor!" I laughed. Behind me, the curtain closed.

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#### Note

1. Embedded excerpts are from the play *Rhinoceros: A Play in Three Acts* (Ionesco, Eugene, 1960).

#### Reference

Ionesco, Eugene. (1960). *Rhinoceros: A play in three acts* (Derek Prouse, Trans.). New York, NY: Samuel French Inc.