

Little Black Box

Cleveland wasn't always a beautiful place. The construction of several new buildings fell upon the lakeside city in more recent times, enhancing the barren skyline of mediocrity. A mixture of old and new gives forth to a unique character that is the heart of the old town. Old in origin, but renewed with the style and contrast of any other modern metropolis. At night, this is even more evident, as the lights from the tallest structures cast colorful hues of white, gold and blue in definitive patterns marking the thoughtfulness and creativity of their designers. From Lake Erie, the reflections off the placid water create a surrealistic effect reminiscent of an abstract watercolor painting with an unnatural spattering of light and shadows.

Just east of the heart of Cleveland lies a complex maze of buildings that constitute Lake Erie Medical Center—an unparalleled conglomeration of hospital buildings, research centers and educational facilities spanning several city blocks. Similar to the city in which it resides, the Center has a mixture of old and new structures with a magnificent monolith of architectural achievement placed directly in the center of it all.

Yet, for all of its grandness and diversity, up until recently the Center had one major Achilles' heel: a disparaging lack of emergency services. With the onset of industrial improvements, economic growth and increasing population, there

was an urgent need for improved emergency medical care. Thus came forth a newly fashioned emergency center—the final crowning achievement for this multifaceted medical complex.

In stark contrast to its beneficial functions, the exterior of the emergency building was somewhat unspectacular. Several brick laden pillars stood beneath each side of the structure as if they had been cut from a cardboard stencil and the windows were merely square cavities devoid of any style. The lack of lines and aesthetic adornments were painfully obvious and functionality over form must have been the architect's overall mindset whilst creating the final blueprints.

On this particular night, the sky was visibly torn by a jagged grayness that quickly engulfed the remains of the star-laden backdrop. A single raindrop toppled to the ground, signaling the advent of further bombardment and soon after others followed. One by one they left their marks upon the ground until the frequency of the drops saturated the entire area.

In the distance the alternating tones of an ambulance could be heard. Several silhouettes flashed by the windows of the emergency entrance. The tones grew louder as the vehicle approached and the pulsating crimson light became visible from the west. Reaching the entrance to the parking area, the ambulance driver disengaged the sirens. The rain was now coming down in sheets and sounded like a timpani pounding frantically upon the roof of the ambulance.

Two figures emerged from the emergency entrance covered with bright yellow raincoats. The doors from the ambulance swung open and a tall athletic man quickly stepped out. The two coated figures stood apart waiting to receive the dying patient as another paramedic emerged

from the ambulance cradling an intravenous packet in one hand while holding several layers of blood-saturated gauze on the patient's chest. The man on the gurney had sustained a gunshot wound. As the second paramedic stepped out of the ambulance, the gurney cleared the vehicle floor and a set of retractable wheels eased down and locked into place.

Rushing through the hallway, the paramedics and the two emergency staff conferred about the particulars of the injury. The first staff member, an aspiring young intern named Jerrod Brighton, was diligently monitoring the patient's heart rate. Brighton was a tall, lanky man with short curly blond hair and a boyish face.

"His vitals are borderline," Brighton remarked.

"We almost lost him on the way in," retorted one of the paramedics. "Had to defibrillate him twice."

The second staff member, a middle-aged nurse named Gayle Hardcourt, responded sarcastically. "Another drug deal gone wrong?"

The two paramedics eyed one another, slightly hastening their pace. In contrast, seeming to anticipate the inappropriate comment, Brighton continued to monitor the patient's vital signs.

With twenty-five years of unyielding service, Hardcourt had seen it all. Thus, the platform for a very cynical attitude had developed. It was even more blatantly apparent toward individuals with dark skin.

Physically, she was very lovely, but time had taken its toll on her hands and face. Her eyes were unusually gray, almond shaped and slightly sunken. Her lips were full, but with several wrinkles developing above her mouth. Tightly wrapped into a neat pile, her hair was unnaturally blonde with hints of darker roots. As for the rest of her body, it was

curvy and well maintained. Hence, she still possessed the ability to turn a head from time to time.

They reached the emergency room and made a hard right. The emergency medical team was already standing by. The room was approximately twenty-feet square with a large linen-dressed table standing in the center. A myriad of electronic devices and monitors encompassed the area and several shelves, laden with medical paraphernalia, lined the walls. It was a typical emergency room, with one exception. A man stood quietly in the far corner holding a small black device. His attention was focused not on the emergency at hand, but instead on the device. Yet, no one seemed to notice or even care about his presence.

The patient was wheeled next to the examination table and with the assistance of all was lifted from one platform to the other. With their work complete, Hardcourt abruptly directed the two paramedics out of the room. Brighton carefully removed the dressings on the patient's chest to reveal a gaping hole. Examining the wound he raised his eyes to the doctor.

“This doesn't look good Chris.”

The doctor nodded and fired several orders at the nurses and assistants. The emergency crew responded, swarming around the table supplying the doctor with surgical instruments, dressings and verbal reports of the patient's vital signs.

“He's cyanotic. BP's dropping—88 over 53, pulse increasing to 150,” uttered one of the nurses.

Over all this commotion, the man in the corner was still affixed to the small black device, tapping on it as if entering numbers into a calculator. A faint beep could be heard with each tap. Although he was dressed in the traditional medical

clothing and wore a mask, it was becoming obvious that he was not going to participate in the prevailing activities.

The condition of the patient began to deteriorate. The nurse reported the vitals signs again. “His BP’s still dropping—pulse at 165.” There was a discernible urgency in her voice this time.

“We’re losing him!” the doctor shouted. The periodic tones of the cardiograph began to increase and the doctor fired a rapid series of orders at each team member.

As the critical nature of the situation escalated, the man in the corner reacted with a rapid series of taps on the small black device. Its distinctive beeps now became one continuous tone. For the first time his presence was acknowledged as he momentarily paused to look up and found Hardcourt scornfully leering at him. He casually dismissed her disapproving stare and continued to focus on his own activities.

The cardiograph flat-lined. The emergency team scurried to prepare the victim for defibrillation. The doctor received a paddle in each hand and pressed them firmly upon the patient’s chest.

“Clear!” the doctor shouted and pressed the buttons on the paddles. The patient convulsed as his torso lifted off the table and then came back down with an audible thud. The cardiograph continued to emit a monotonous tone.

The man in the corner was now frantically tapping on the hand-held device. He was becoming visibly frustrated with it, but still made no verbal remarks. It was obvious that whatever he was attempting to do was reaching a critical point.

The defibrillator was fully charged again and the doctor yelled, “Clear!” for the second time. This time the patient convulsed a little more violently, but the monitor continued to

display a flat unaltered trace. The doctor instructed Hardcourt to administer a dose of epinephrine. Several minutes passed as the emergency team extended their attempt to resuscitate the victim. The man in the corner discontinued his activities and dropped his arms to his sides, gripping the small black device in his right hand. He sighed slightly as the emergency team continued to work desperately on the dying patient. Clearly, the man on the table was not going to survive, but the doctor was too tenacious to give up so easily.

With one last futile attempt the doctor yelled, “Clear!” The charge from the paddles surged through the patient’s lifeless body and it convulsed in response, but the cardiograph continued to flat-line. A deadening silence filled the room. The only sound that could be heard was the incessant tone of the cardiograph.

The Doctor pulled down his mask and turned to a large analog clock hanging on the wall.

“Note the time of death—11:20 p.m.” And with that he turned and exited the room. Shortly after, the man in the corner followed.

Doctor Christopher Merritt was an excellent surgeon with ten years of ER experience, but even he knew there were limitations in his profession. Still, he took no solace in this knowledge.

In appearance, Merritt was a tall slender man with short dusty-blond hair and cobalt blue eyes. He wore a thin well-groomed mustache with a cleanly-shaven face, and his sideburns were closely trimmed to the tops of his ears. The medical jersey he wore revealed toned muscular biceps and a well-proportioned upper torso. All in all, he was in excellent shape.

Merritt stopped at a nearby water fountain and allowed the cool clean water to run over his lips. He captured a small amount of water in his mouth, but did not swallow it. Instead, he swished it from cheek to cheek and then spit it out, attempting to rinse the putrid taste of death from his mouth.

He grasped the fountain with both hands for a moment and then slowly rose. Just then a figure appeared from behind and startled him. It was the man in the operating room. He was still cradling the small black device in his hand. The man was not a stranger to Merritt. In fact, they had been good friends for many years. The man's name was Jackson Wright.

"Sorry Chris. Didn't mean to startle you," Wright uttered kindly.

"That's alright. You know how I am after losing a patient."

"Yeah, I know it's not easy for you. I'm sorry..."

Merritt, glancing down at the small black device, interceded before Wright could complete his sentence. "Yeah—well—anyway, did you get anything?" Merritt made an inquisitive gesture.

Wright offered the device and pointed to a small glowing display, illustrating its deficiencies as he spoke. There was a noticeable irritation in his voice.

"No! I kept getting these damn phase shifts every time I took a reading. I even tried locking into the carrier several times, but it was hopeless."

Merritt had a difficult time expressing sympathy for his friend, considering what had just occurred, but he still managed to express a sincere apology for the wasted effort.

“I appreciate the support Chris. I know what I need to do now. Next time I should be able to compensate for the phase shifts. I think we’re getting close!”

Merritt was agitated by the comment. He glanced away momentarily and then spoke. “Look Jack. I’ve been very cooperative with your little experiment, but people are starting to ask questions. I don’t think we can keep this thing under wraps much longer. Bradford’s getting suspicious and I’ve been receiving a lot of flack from Nurse Hardcourt about your presence in the ER.”

“Yeah, I noticed.” There was a hint of sarcasm in his voice. “She gave me a couple of dirty looks, but I really don’t care what she thinks and neither do you. She’s just an ER nurse who needs to mind her own business.”

“Perhaps, but she can still make things difficult and Bradford can suspend your activities altogether. Don’t forget. He was the one who gave you the green light on this project in the first place.”

Wright rolled his eyes in disgust. “Bradford is a pretentious, narrow-minded egotist who thinks his research and theories are the sole foundation for modern neurology. He doesn’t accept my ideas because they’re too radical for his one-dimensional little brain and he feels threatened by me because my theories would completely alter the way we perceive the field of neurology. I detest the fact that I have to disguise my research just to appease him!”

Merritt motioned to Wright, placing a hand on his shoulder. “I understand Jack, but you have to realize that not everyone shares your enthusiasm.”

Wright looked away as he spoke. “What about you Chris?” Wright brought his eyes back to meet Merritt’s.

Merritt could feel Wright's eyes burning through the back of his skull like a pair of laser beams.

"You know damn well that I fully support what you're trying to accomplish," Merritt barked back, "but I still have a job to do here. Don't forget that! A man just died and you're acting like, oh well, better luck next time."

"Come on Chris, you know I don't look at it like that."

"Yeah, well please just try and consider the ramifications of what we're doing here and more importantly try to maintain a low profile. I think someone's reporting directly to Bradford. I don't know who, but I have my suspicions."

"A spy among us?" Wright jeered. The tension broke slightly as Merritt cracked a partial smile.

"Very funny, but seriously, you really need to watch your back from this point on."

"I will," Wright gave him a reassuring grin. "And by the way—thanks again for all your help," he said in a sincere tone.

Merritt acknowledged him with a gentle nod.

"Don't worry Chris. I'll have a little chat with Bradford in the morning to see if I can smooth things over a bit."

"Don't forget what I said," Merritt replied. Wright nodded and the two parted in opposite directions.

Back in the ER room Brighton and Hardcourt were having an intense debate. He was confused by Hardcourt's obvious condemnation of the now deceased patient and was trying to understand her dubious point of view.

"What I don't understand is why you insist on judging someone solely on the color of their skin," Brighton quipped.

"For twenty five years I have worked in this city and in that twenty five years I have watched thousands of victims pass through the doors of the ER. Nine times out of ten,

when criminal activities were involved, it was a black male. And more often than not it was drug related. So when one drug dealer murders another, I simply view it as one less burden on our society. I hardly think that qualifies me as a racist!” Hardcourt snapped, vehemently defending her position.

“Well, I haven’t been around nearly as long as you,” Brighton smirked, “but I was brought up to believe that everyone’s a unique individual and deserves a fair chance. You’re assuming this man was a drug dealer and got what was coming to him, but how can you be so sure that this was the case?”

Hardcourt smiled confidently. “Intuition kiddo. I can smell a drug dealer from a mile away and I’ll tell you right now, that guy was a bad egg.”

Just as she finished speaking, a nurse walked in with a solemn look on her face. It was a look of sympathy and regret and Hardcourt knew it.

“Well, what is it nurse?” Hardcourt prodded impatiently.

“That John Doe you just worked on?” The nurse paused momentarily for an acknowledgment. “He was an undercover detective for the Cleveland Heights Police Department. Apparently, he was attempting to make a drug buy and the deal went sour. The dealer who shot him escaped.”

Hardcourt displayed no emotion. “That’s a shame,” she remarked coldly and then gave a customary moment of silence. “Thank you for the report nurse,” she uttered forcefully and dismissed the nurse.

Brighton stood there with a look of irony on his face. Under any other circumstance he might’ve been gloating, but this was not the appropriate time. Instead, he just stared at her.

Hardcourt knew what he was thinking, but wasn’t about to indulge him. “Well, even I miss one once in a while.”

And with that she turned and exited the room. Brighton simply shook his head in disgust.

Wright had driven to a small rented house about four blocks from the hospital. The paint was cracked and chipping and several overgrown bushes obstructed the windows. As he turned into the driveway, the headlights of his vehicle only further revealed the neglect plaguing this humble abode.

Passing through the main entryway, he quickly turned and latched the locks behind him. He groped for a moment and finally flipped on a switch. The light from a solitary bulb, hanging from the ceiling, flooded the room with a warm yellow glow. Computer monitors, oscilloscopes and other electronic equipment sat upon three large foldable tables with a mass of cables dangling below. The dull hardwood floor exhibited a worn crescent-shaped area tracing the path of a single office chair. In the center of the room stood a small card table, covered with various electronic components, soldering equipment and a large magnifying lamp.

Wright tapped rapidly several times on a keypad parallel to the light switch. A flashing red light changed over to green. He removed the small black device from the inside of his coat and, pushing a few items aside, placed it on the card table. He then placed his hands upon his head, interlocked his fingers and just stood there for a moment with his eyes closed, appearing to be in some deep state of concentration.

Wright was of average height and build, but had a very masculine look. His jaw was roughly chiseled and dotted with thick brown whiskers. His eyes were dark and penetrating, but the areas below were gray and swollen. His lips were full and well defined with a pinkish hue and the surrounding skin was only slightly more tanned. His hair was dark brown

with a rough parting down the middle and traces of gray were beginning to show especially within his sideburns.

There were only two other doors in this tiny dwelling and Wright chose the one leading to the bedroom. The bed was a tousled mess with a mass of pillows at the headboard and several articles of clothing were strewn across the floor. A single dresser was the only other piece of furniture in the room. He removed his clothes and laid them upon the bed. A small bathroom door connecting to the bedroom stood in the far wall adjacent to the bedroom entrance.

He stepped into a cold brisk shower, gritting his teeth as the icy liquid struck his body. His eyes opened wide and he began vigorously scouring with a small sliver of soap. Rinsing his body of the residue, he paused momentarily, allowing the frigid water to drench his face.

Wright re-entered the main room, clothed in a pair of sweat pants and a university T-shirt. He positioned the chair in front of the card table and captured the device between his palms.

“Alright, the next time you’re going to work,” he spoke at the device as if giving it a command.

Turning the device face down, he removed four small screws. The back lifted off to reveal a complex series of small printed circuit boards mounted perpendicularly to a larger circuit board. He gently detached one of the boards and turned it over to reveal hundreds of components tightly populating an area half the size of a business card. Carefully, he transported the single board to a nearby computer. With the flick of a switch, the light overhead momentarily dimmed and every piece of equipment in the room crackled to life.

He positioned himself in front of a computer monitor and began keying a series of commands. The computer screen

flashed with each entry. He placed the small board on the bench and plugged in a makeshift interface cable. Automatically the monitor blinked, displaying several lines of text and a graphical simulation of the board.

Keying in several more commands, the small board came to life as a row of tiny lights, mounted to the board, flashed and flickered. The text on the screen began to scroll upward and several sections of the graphical image blinked. He was attempting to analyze the problems that had caused his experiment in the emergency room to fail.

The screen continued to scroll and blink until finally, all at once, it stopped. The image on the screen identified two components in red that were creating instability in his measurements. He tried modifying the program, but the two highlighted components had suffered irreparable damage.

“That’s curious,” he thought to himself.

Removing the small board from the test station, he rolled over to the center table and skillfully replaced the two damaged components. Within ten minutes, he was back at the test station. Following the same sequence of events, he ran several more diagnostics on the board. This time a curious anomaly appeared. The two components represented by the graphical display now flashed in yellow. He tapped out a few more commands and began to see a pattern. On a sheer whim he decided to touch one of the two identified components. He snapped his hand back violently, blurting out an obscenity. A small square blister began to form on the tip of his finger.

“This never happened before,” he spoke with a discernible perplexity and disengaged the interface.

The problem was becoming obvious as he scrolled through the code. Each of these small boards performed a critical function within the main device and each board was

designed to self learn. Unfortunately, this particular board was trying to exceed its own physical limits.

Wright spent the next few hours modifying and reprogramming the small board to incorporate its newly found functions. With that complete, knowing he could only test these changes with the next trial, he decided to make an attempt at sleep. He powered down the equipment as quickly as he powered it up and walked into the bedroom.

An hour passed and Wright was lying on the bed, eyes wide open, trying to forget about the events of the past day. A large digital clock rested on the dresser. It was a quarter to five. He removed one of the pillows from under his head and placed it between his knees. Struggling to find a comfortable spot he shifted the pillows several more times, beating them down with his fist. After a few minutes, he found an acceptable position. Exhaustion finally caught up and he managed to close his eyes long enough to drift off into a shallow slumber.

Another hour passed and Wright had completely altered his sleeping position. Most of the pillows were now at the foot of the bed and the covers were hanging off the side. Wright was sprawled out and mumbling softly in his sleep. Within his mind an entirely different world was unfolding.

The sky was unusually bright as the sun gleamed overhead. A gentle breeze was graciously pushing the clouds along, casting huge shadows down upon the plush green countryside. Dozens of trees marked the landscape, creating vibrant pastels of orange, yellow and red, and the birds were singing like a sweet symphony of flutes.

Wright had seen this place, but had no recollection of ever being here. He spoke of it many times with his wife,

Cassandra, promising that someday he would bring her here for a picnic. That day never came. Nevertheless, he was here now and wanted to make the best of whatever was to come.

He felt a bit strange, because Cassandra was sitting across from him. At first, her words seemed muted as she spoke and he strained to hear what she was saying. He had almost forgotten how beautiful she really was as he gazed into her warm glowing eyes.

“Would you like your sandwich now?” Her words were finally discernible to him. He nodded and she handed him the sandwich.

Everything around him seemed so real. The breeze upon his face, the sound of the birds, the scent of her perfume—but he knew this could not be real.

“I’ve really missed you. There were so many things I wanted to tell you,” his voice wavered. “But I never got a chance.”

She responded with a look of confusion. Obviously, she was unaware that she had been dead for nearly four years. He tried to play off the comment.

“I mean—we just never spend quality time together anymore and I think it’s great that we can share this time together now.”

“Me too,” she replied lovingly and smiled.

Wright decided that it was best to play along with the fantasy, and continued to act as if they had never been apart. He sat quietly grinning as Cassandra talked about the most trivial things. The birds were now singing even more energetically than before and the leaves on the trees were fluttering gently in the breeze.

“Jack... Jack! Are you listening to a word I’m saying?” She waved a hand in front of his face.

“Yes. You were just talking about how beautiful the trees are this time of year and how they look like they’re on fire.”

The breeze surged slightly, causing a few leaves to fall from the trees.

“That’s right,” she uttered with a trace of suspicion in her voice. Wright was becoming visibly uncomfortable. He glanced around momentarily, noticing the slight changes.

“What’s the matter my darling?” Cassandra intervened, attempting to recapture his attention.

“Nothing—nothing at all,” Wright responded abruptly. “Please, continue.”

She began talking again, but after a few minutes, Wright could no longer hear her words. He tried reading her lips, but it was no use. She stopped again and snapped at him, but she almost looked foolish as the movements of her lips made no sound. The wind began to pick up again, tossing a few items from their picnic.

Wright was becoming angry. He motioned to his ears and shouted, “I can’t hear you!”

Suddenly, a mass of dark clouds filled the sky. The trees, which had been so colorful, were now barren and the once gentle breeze had become a strong blustery wind.

“You never listened to me Jack!” Cassandra yelled, her eyes now black and empty.

Wright turned away in horror. He couldn’t understand why things had become so dismal.

“What are you talking about?” He responded angrily.

“You know damn well what I’m talking about. Your research! It was always your research! You never had time for the things that were important, and now you want to take it back. Well, you can’t take it back. What’s done is done and

you have to let me go. Stop living in a fantasy world and just leave it alone!”

Just then, a large vortex began to form off in the distance. Her eyes returned to their previous soulful state.

“Jack, please help me,” she pleaded with Wright, extending her hand. He tried to take it, but she began to move away from him. The sky was now completely black. Trees were being violently uprooted and the ground began to twist and buckle as the vortex grew.

Wright ran desperately trying to catch Cassandra, but their distance was growing.

“Jack,” she screamed, “please don’t let it take me!”

The entire landscape was being engulfed and pulverized. Wright watched in horror as a large tree, sucked into the swirling vortex, shattered into tiny splinters.

Running with every ounce of strength left in his body, the gap between them finally began to close.

“Hang on Cass, I’m coming,” he shouted over the deafening howl of the vortex.

“Please Jack, don’t let it take me,” she screamed once again.

Closer and closer, he approached, arms extended, trying to grab on to her. With one last surge of energy he leaped into the air, coming within inches of her, but his momentum sent him crashing to the ground. Wright looked up helplessly. Cassandra shrieked one last time as she entered the vortex.

Wright awoke screaming. His body was drenched with perspiration and the pillows and covers were now lying on the floor. Wright sat up, gazed at the clock, and decided that he had enough sleep for one night.