My first patient died. In the critical care all year, many of the patients I've cared for are dead now. But this one died with my hand on his forehead. I was in with him and saw on the monitor the minute his heart quit, its rate dropping from 130 to 90, then 70, 40, 30, asystole. And it was peaceful and he was DNR/DNI and the family was expecting it so as far as dying in an ICU it was good.

The first day of assessment class we learned the term "professional hands." As in you have to put on your professional hands when you examine a patient. No trembling insecure fingers. Hands that say I am competent, you are safe. We got to try out our professional hands on each other as we paired off and stripped down to shorts and bras and palpated livers, percussed abdomens, looked deep into ears and eyes, felt necks and shoulders, chests and axilla for nodes, moved breasts aside to place a stethoscope on the apex of the heart. I am proud of my professional hands. Marry intimacy to utility and all of a sudden I'm in my comfort zone. If you're watching a movie with me and I reach over and hold your wrist please be cool. I'm just curious about your heart rate.

So I put my professional hands on this man's forehead and he died. Then I turned off the monitors, removed the wires, brought in some chairs, and pulled a clean white sheet up to his chest. His family sat with him. They soon left. I pulled out all his IVs and bandaged up the many holes we'd made in him and placed a tag on his big toe. I rolled him, surprised by his warmth, left to right to situate him in a body bag. I used my professional hands to zip from feet to shoulders. I looked at his face for a long second. I’m not sure which hands pulled the zipper from neck to close.