Without warning, the man's heart would beat dangerously fast and irregularly. Could his sister's autopsy help explain why?

"Listen, I've got to call you back," the 48-year-old man said to his client when the now-familiar but still-terrifying feeling started. He felt dizzy and lightheaded, as if he were about to faint. He hung up the phone in his Manhattan office and headed toward the nurse. He took no more than a dozen steps when he realized he wasn't going to make it. He lurched to his knees, then tried to lower himself to the ground, because he knew he wouldn't stay upright for long. There was a sound like a firecracker, then another, as he slumped onto the ground. When he opened his eyes, half a dozen colleagues were there. Hands rolled him over and loosened his tie. "Stay down," a voice instructed. "Help is on the way."

↓

Healthy, and Then Not

The man had been active and healthy, until five years earlier when he started to feel tired. His doctor sent him to a cardiologist, who took one look at his EKG and said he needed a pacemaker, right away. He got one the next day. He was fine for a year, and then, on a business trip to Atlanta, he suddenly felt lightheaded, and his heart fluttered wildly in his chest. In the E.R. they told him his heart was beating 220 beats a minute. You should be dead, one doctor said. They took out his pacemaker and replaced it with an implantable cardioverter-defibrillator (I.C.D.) — a device to shock his heart back into a regular rhythm if it ever took off as it had earlier that day.

Again, he was fine for about a year. Then, after boarding a plane in Los Angeles, he felt the dreaded lightheadedness. He grabbed his computer bag and made for the aircraft exit. He found the nearest airline employee and said he needed medical attention. At a nearby hospital, a doctor told him that his heart was losing its strength. A normal heart pumps out 60 to 70 percent of the blood that fills it. His managed barely 10 percent. He needed a stronger internal defibrillator. He was given more medications to support his heart and a new I.C.D. that, when needed, could deliver a more powerful jolt to his heart. After that, everything was good. Until the incident at his office.

↓

Rushed to the Hospital

The ambulance ride from his office in Midtown to NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill