Playing God

Why she called me first I never figured out. Maybe she had more brains than I gave her credit for. All she had said was,

*My husband has passed away, Doctor. Can you come over?*

That was it: flat monotone, no emotion, just matter-of-fact. Now I'm one of those old-fashioned doctors who still makes house calls on certain occasions, and this was definitely one of those occasions. I could feel it in the pit of my stomach. I grabbed my clothes, got dressed in the bathroom so as not to wake my wife, brushed the snow from the car, and headed over to their farm. A storm had passed through unannounced, leaving snow everywhere. It was the kind of night where, once you get out into it, you're glad you're there—everything blanketed in rolling white, not a rift in the cover—so cold and clear the stars hang down out of the sky just above the snow. On a night like that, you had trouble believing there could be any evil in the world.

From the bend in the road I could see the light from their kitchen far off, sparkling down the crystals of snow. I pulled the car in at the barest suggestion of a driveway, turned off the motor, and pushed through the drifts up to the porch. I let myself in. The house was quiet as a tomb. The kitchen clock gave off a quiet hum. On the face of the refrigerator were plastered the kids' school papers: spelling tests and arithmetic, maps colored in Crayola, and the minimal artwork of the early grades. There was a "Mom-Dad-and-Me" family portrait—"Mom" about a quarter the size of "Dad," who occupied center stage, and "Me" off to the side, a stick figure without arms—no mouth drawn in. I stepped through the kitchen and found Kitty sitting in the darkened living room in a straight-backed chair, staring off, trance-like, in shock maybe. What appeared to be small marbles lay scattered on the carpet. I picked one up. It was a pearl.

"Where's Earl?" I asked her.

"In the bedroom?" said Kitty. She always said everything as though it were a question. She motioned with her head.

"Where are the kids?"

"At my sister's?" she answered.

"You all right?" I asked.

She nodded.

I took a deep breath and headed into the bedroom, expecting the worst. I wasn't disappointed. Earl lay flat on the bed, a bullet hole above his right ear. The left half of his cranium and its contents were splattered next to him on the bedroom wall. I began to run a cold sweat. Even after all the years of small-town practice, being called in for mangled bodies and auto wrecks, botched amateur abortions, deceased elderly pensioners not found for days, and—worst of all—the abused children—that, worst of all—despite all of that hardening

up, a scene like this still could weaken you at the knees. I swallowed against the sweat, looked away, looked back again, and had to look away. It was hard to stay clinical. Doctors have trouble with violent death. Disease we learn to accept. But not this.

I surveyed the scene. Earl's .30-.30 Winchester lay on the floor just inside the door. A half-empty bottle of Schenley's stood next to the bed, within easy reach. Earl lay on the bed fully dressed, shoes on, with that eternal gaze that can make your skin crawl.

The rest of the room was precise and neat. The top of the bureau was uncluttered: a brush, a comb, a mirror, all arranged just so, and an ash tray full of change. A wedding picture of Kitty and Earl stood off to the side. The bedside table held a small reading lamp, the shade a shocking white against the dark streaks of Earl's blood on the wall. There was a Bible and an old cloth-bound book, its title faded, and a pair of woman's reading glasses folded on top. There were no clothes lying about. The closet doors were closed. The window drapes hung just so. All this tidiness framing the mess of Earl's body.

I went back out to the living room to Kitty. She hadn't moved a muscle, except that her eyes had the look of a cornered mouse.

"What happened?" I asked her.

"He shot himself?" Kitty answered.

"Shot himself," I said.

She nodded.

"Kitty..." my voice trailed off. I sat down in a chair opposite her and looked at her for a long minute. "Kitty, we go way back don't we?"

She nodded again.

Some thirty years ago I had brought her into this world, supported her through her mother's premature death, and twenty years later, delivered babies of her own. I had seen her boy through a bad case of spinal meningitis, and harped at her father's cigarette smoking, in the end burying him because of it.

But, through the most of it there had been Kitty. She held the record for most abused woman in Taylor County. There had been the time I had hospitalized her for a hairline fracture of the mandibular ramus, a both-bones fracture of the left forearm, and God knows how many internal injuries, for the better part of a week. We had Earl all wrapped up and ready to send down to the state prison. And then Kitty wouldn't sign the papers. The night I hospitalized her from that episode I stopped by her father's house just to check on things. Al was in a murderous rage. I could hardly blame him.

"I'm going to kill the son of a bitch. I'm going to kill the son of a bitch," was all he kept muttering. He'd look at me with his reddened, burning eyes, and I knew he meant it.

"Al," I said, "you do that and you'll wind up in prison yourself."
"I don’t give a damn," he said.
"And Earl will get off."
"Earl will be dead," he answered.
"And your grandchildren will hate you for the rest of their lives," I said, "for killing their father."

At that, the hardness left him and he gave it up.
"I’m going to tell you something else, Al," I said.
"In two weeks Kitty will be right back with him and there isn’t a damn thing you can do about it."

Soon Kitty did go back with Earl. You had trouble saying whose sickness was worse. But there was no question about Kitty’s suffering. Or her father’s. It was the same scenario for some ten years, Kitty coming into there isn’t a damn thing you can do about it."

"For killing their father." I said, "for killing their father."

"It can eat at you. There had never been a question about Kitty’s suffering. Or her father’s. It was the same scenario for some ten years, Kitty coming into the emergency room, badly beaten, meekly asking to see me. Al flying into a rage, and, in the early years, loading up his gun, resolving to put Earl away, later resigning himself to this terrible disease that both Earl and Kitty were torturing him with. Two other times Kitty had been so severely beaten that she required hospitalization. Each time we got the town police involved, had Earl arrested, had the complaint papers all filled out. All sealed, and delivered, except that Kitty would never sign the papers. And she always went back to him.

"You know, Doc," said the Chief of Police one day. "some day one of these two is going to wind up dead."

Kitty shifted in her chair and brought me back to the darkened living room. I turned to look at her. I was her doctor, her family’s doctor. She’d level with me.

"What really happened?" I asked her.

"I heard the gun go off?" she said. "I went in. And he was dead."

"I didn’t see a suicide note, Kitty," I said, pressing her. "Did he leave a note? People usually leave a note in these situations."

"No," she said. "There wasn’t any note." Her voice fell. As tentative as she was, Kitty wouldn’t budge. I thought later, looking back on it, that this was probably the first time in her life she had made up her mind and stuck to it.

"Kitty. . . ." I didn’t know what else to say to her. She shifted nervously in the chair and I saw her wince. She held her left arm close to her body.

There she was, Al’s little girl—everybody’s little girl. I could remember Kitty skipping into my office at five full of happiness and life, for her preschool shots, and then shooting for the police chiefs head and small-time entrepreneurs were getting rich selling T-shirts that read:

Come to Herkimer and get away with murder.

I looked at Kitty, and then into the bedroom, then back at Kitty again. I nodded to myself. Yes indeed, I thought, the Chief would dearly love to get his hands on this one. He needed this one.

One time back along, I had a bad baby on my hands, a newborn with hydrocephalus and a big cyst at the base of the neck—the crippled-for-life kind of baby you see once in a lifetime. I watched that baby struggle and watched and didn’t do a damn thing to save it and apologized to the family afterwards, explaining it was a stillborn, lying to them. That was the one time I played God and it aggravated me, I can tell you. I went home that night and yelled at my wife, kicked the dog, and drank too much—brooded for weeks and never talked about it. It can eat at you. There had never been a second time until Kitty.

I grabbed one of the kitchen chairs and a dish towel and went back into the bedroom. In a few minutes I was on the phone and had the dispatcher get hold of the Chief. Shortly he was at the other end of the line, sleepy, gruff, trying to be important.

"Chief," I said, "I’m at Earl Staples’ house. He’s finally done himself in. He got drunk and shot himself with his deer rifle . . . yeah, I’m at the house now . . . well, it looks to me like he rested the gun on a chair next to the bed, and then lay himself down and shot himself in the temple. Clear suicide in my book. I’ll be signing it out that way. . . . Yeah, she’s here with me. I’ll drive her over to her sister’s. I’d sure appreciate it if you’d send one of your men over here to clean things up. . . . Thanks Chief."

I put the phone down and turned back to Kitty. She was staring at the floor. She hadn’t moved. I sighed, slapped my thighs, and got up to go.

"Where’s your coat, Kitty? I’ll drive you over to Kate’s, and in the morning," I said, nodding to her left arm, "you come over to the office so I can set that fracture for you one last time."

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