

Three Close Shaves

David pulled his Volvo into the parking lot behind the hospice and cut the engine. These visits to his dying father were always unsettling, and he was grateful for Willie's company.

Though she hadn't seen Lester in over a year, Willie had known him almost as long as she'd known David himself, David having invited her to dinner several times when they'd been students at Cal. Lester had already been ill then, though his condition had been far less advanced and he'd still been able to live at home with only a little help.

Willie liked Lester from the first; his charm, wit and generosity of spirit were qualities he'd passed along to his son, but he was also less self-centered than David could be. Myra, David's mother had walked out on her family years before Willie had met them, but Willie would have bet that the narcissism she sometimes saw in David came from Myra. Still, he'd inherited most of Lester's good looks, including the adorable dimple in his chin, and though David was rather short at 5'7", women seemed drawn to him, even though his shyness made him a bit unapproachable at times.

They got out of the car and walked toward the back entrance of the building, making their way around a few oil-slicked puddles from last night's rain. "Oh ... a couple of things I should warn you about," David said. "First of all, he'll look like he's aged a lot since you last saw him, so don't be shocked. Also, he's started saying ... well, weird shit. I mean things that never used to come out of his mouth."

"Like what?"

"Well, he's in some kind of 'dirty old man' phase. Doctor Bellows says it's not unusual at this point. So, if he says something, you know ... vulgar, just cut him some slack, okay?"

Willie shrugged. "I'm a big girl, David, I can handle it."

They checked in at the desk, took the elevator to the third floor and walked down the fluorescent lit corridor to Lester's room. But even though she thought she was ready for anything, Willie was stunned by his appearance. Though David's father had never been powerfully built, he'd always kept himself in shape and been quite handsome. But the man she saw now had wasted away to almost nothing in the past year; scrawny and frail, what was left of his once lustrous auburn hair was totally white, and he looked more like a man of eighty than one just shy of his sixtieth birthday.

"It's mostly the emphysema that's killing him," David whispered. "And he's had at least one stroke. It's the ... *other* thing that's wasting his mind, though." Sometimes David had a problem even naming his father's disease. *Don't say the thing that terrifies you and it can't happen*, Willie thought.

Lester was propped up in bed in the room he shared with a terminal cancer patient, named Lindt. The two were separated by a thin curtain that hung from the ceiling and Lindt seemed comatose, probably heavily drugged, his breathing ominously ragged. The air smelled stale and the room was oppressive with the aura of hopelessness and approaching death. It made Willie want to flee, but she kept her composure as they approached Lester's bed.

"Hey, Dad," David said, laying a hand on his father's shoulder. "How's my buddy?" Lester turned a blank expression to David but after a few moments, his eyes lit up.

"Hello, Davy," he said, giving David a big smile. "How's my sonny boy?"

'Sonny boy' was what Lester had called him as a child, and the obvious affection made Willie a bit jealous. David breathed a sigh of relief because he could never be certain if his father would even recognize him. "Just fine, Dad. How've they been treating you?"

The light in Lester's eyes seemed to waver then return. He didn't answer but gestured to the water glass beside his bed; David picked it up and held it steady while his father took a few sips through the plastic straw. Lester stared at Willie, finally noticing her. At first there was no recognition in his gaze, but suddenly his face lit up. "Myra!" he said, reaching for her hand. "Oh, honey ... I'm so glad you're back."

David and Willie gave each other a troubled look. "Dad," David said. "This isn't Mom. It's Willie. You remember her, don't you? She used to have Thanksgiving with us. And she came to a Passover Seder at Aunt Hilda's too. Remember the time she gobbled a whole spoonful of horseradish thinking it was something sweet? That expression on her face? We laughed about it for weeks."

Lester grew more confused as he tried to place Willie. "Dad?" David asked. "Can you say hello to Willie? She left work early to come and visit."

"Hello, Willie" Lester said, extending his hand without a trace of recognition. "Thanks for coming."

Willie gave him a smile, half-repulsed by the bony hand and its tissue paper skin. "Hi, Lester, it's so nice to see you again." But it wasn't nice at all. She was no good at seeing death close up, had not been good at it since she'd watched her mother take nearly a year to die of cancer. She was beginning to feel claustrophobic and wished she'd declined David's offer to accompany him.

"Have you been eating, Dad?" David asked. "Are they feeding you okay?" He knew they were feeding his father, or at least trying to. The problem was he simply refused most food, almost as if wanting to hasten his death. "Look what we got you." David reached into his coat pocket, pulling out a ripe avocado, which was about the only thing Lester still liked to eat, but his father barely glanced at it. This place was morbidly depressing; but at least it was clean, the level of care was good; and seeing after a dying man while working a fulltime job as a software engineer was beyond David's ability.

A few minutes later, Doctor Bellows, a silver-haired woman with a harried expression, strode into the room. She'd been both David and Lester's physician for over fifteen years, and she'd agreed to reschedule her bi-weekly call on Lester to this afternoon, when David could be here. She shook hands with David and then with Willie when he introduced them.

David watched as the doctor checked Lester's vitals, and then joined her when she called him aside. "As you can see," Bellows said. "He's not doing very well. The immediate problem is more his lungs and heart than the Huntington's. We could do another full workup at Saint Francis, but I don't see much point. I'm sorry, David, but your father's probably got four months at most."

"Right, and you've been saying that for over a year now."

Bellows offered a sympathetic shrug. "An extended death watch is hard, but we can't predict the course of respiratory failure with certainty. Right now it's mostly guesswork; but if you'd like to get another opinion ..." Her words carried a hint of reproach, and David said he didn't think it was necessary. Anyway, he'd already had a pulmonary specialist check Lester and his opinion was no different.

"What concerns me now," Bellows added, tapping David's chest with a forefinger, "is that you haven't had a checkup in over a year and since you're at risk for Huntington's yourself we should ... Oh, I forgot, you've already had the screening. Those inconclusive results were unfortunate."

David laughed. "Sorry I disappointed you."

The doctor gave him a speculative look, wondering if he was being sarcastic, but she let it pass. "There are some new measures we can take to slow the progress of the disease if we know what's coming, so given that you're entering the typical onset age, you should be getting complete physicals three times a year. I suggest you call my office for an appointment as soon as possible."

David said he would do that on Monday, but had no plans to and Bellows knew it. "Are you still on the antidepressants?" she asked.

He shook his head. "They were ruining my sex life; but I'm doing fine, really."

Willie was standing a couple of feet away, following the conversation attentively, and she felt her anger flare. *You are not doing fine,* she thought. *You are going off the deep end, and your doctor needs to know about the idiocy you're up to with that bitch dominatrix of yours.*

For one precarious moment, a demon nearly possessed her and she bit back words saying that David was debasing himself at a BDSM parlor. She came within a hair's breadth of spilling his 'dirty secret' to Bellows and committing what would have been a serious betrayal. Even as a compassionate intervention to get him professional help, it might have been the end of their fifteen-year friendship and she breathed a sigh of relief that she'd kept her big mouth shut.

“Well that was uplifting,” David grumbled, walking back to his father’s bed after the doctor left. Lester was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling and taking no notice of them.

“It’s hard to see, isn’t it?” Willie said, putting a hand on David’s shoulder. “I remember him being so full of life.”

“Yeah, me too,” David said, trying to fluff the pillow under Lester’s head. “I wonder where he goes when he checks out like this.”

Suddenly Lester reached out and seized Willie’s hand. “Myra, honey,” he said. “I haven’t forgotten you promised me a blowjob the last time you were here.”

Willie’s jaw dropped and she leapt back a couple of feet.

“Steady, girl,” David whispered. “This is what I tried to warn you about ... Dad, this is not Mom. It’s Willie, and it’s very rude of you to talk to her like that.”

“How the hell can he think I’m your mother?” Willie hissed. “And even if I was, he has no right to say that in public.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Willie; just relax. You’re not Myra, and he’s not your stepfather. I need at least one of you sharing the real world with me right now.”

Willie felt her face redden, knowing she’d overreacted. “Sorry,” she said. “It’s just that I’ve been having these flashbacks lately. It’s not Lester’s fault. It’s mine.”

David sighed. “Okay, look. We’ll be done in a few minutes and then we can go have a drink.”

Willie nodded, turned back to the bed and looked at Lester, who seemed to understand he’d done something wrong without knowing what it was. She touched his face gently, drawing a sweet smile from him. “Hey, David, your dad could use a shave. I’ll go to the nurse’s station and get some gear.”

“Thanks, Willie,” David said. “That would be great.”

After she left, David sat down on the edge of the bed beside his father, taking his hand. “I’ve got such a wonderful wife, David,” Lester said softly. “I’m a lucky man.”

David stared at the floor, then at the doorway through which Willie had disappeared; finally he looked back at his father. “Dad, you know Mom’s been gone for ...” He hesitated and changed his mind. There was nothing to gain by dragging Lester back into this sad world. “I know,” he said. Mom’s a peach.” The words almost made him gag, but his father nodded and smiled again.

It took Willie a good ten minutes to find the shaving gear but she finally came back, carrying a safety razor, a small can of shaving foam, a towel and a large bowl, which she filled with warm water at the sink in the little bathroom.

The two of them sat Lester up in bed and, using a washcloth, Willie wet his face with water from the bowl; then she applied some of the foam and began to shave him carefully and gently. He smiled, enjoying the sensation, but even more the attention he was getting from the woman he believed was his wife.

“Don’t worry, Lester,” Willie crooned. “We’ll soon have you looking like a stud.”

“Not bad,” David said. “You’ve obviously had some practice at this.”

“I used to shave Harry every day,” she said evenly.

“That old fuck? Really?”

“Yup. But he always insisted I use a straight razor; it was the only way to get the shave close enough for him.” There was more irony than bitterness in her voice.

“Jesus,” David said. “Did you ever feel like ... you know, ‘accidentally’ slitting his throat?”

“Only every other day,” Willie said matter-of-factly, focusing on Lester.

When she was done, she rinsed his face and patted it dry with the towel. “There you go, Big Boy. The pretty young nurses won’t be able to keep their hands off you now.”

Visiting hours were soon over, and they said their goodbyes to Lester, each giving him a little kiss on the cheek.

As they turned toward the door, Lester reached out and gently grasped Willie’s arm, pulling her close. “Take care of our son, Myra” he whispered. “And don’t forget, you still owe me a blowjob.”

When she got home, Willie fed the cat, went into the bathroom and turned on the shower, which needed a minute to get as hot as she liked. Walking back into the bedroom, she undressed, hung the business suit in the closet and threw the items that needed laundering into the hamper. Willie always wore business attire at work and the suit might have marked her as a dyke back in Orlando, where she’d have been harassed; but here in San Francisco, no one gave a shit, and few even noticed.

Naked, she stood before the full length mirror and studied herself, pleased that she was holding up so well at thirty-three. Her face had always been freckled, but it was still free of lines, even though it had grown a bit rounder than she liked. Her recently bobbed red hair softened her rather flat features too much, she decided, resolving to let it grow out again.

As to her body, her trim, five-foot-two frame hadn’t widened at all since college. That was partly the result of good genes, though three hours a week at the gym didn’t hurt either. No one

would ever call her beautiful; but she had well-shaped legs, a tight tummy, pert breasts and a scrumptious ass, even if she did say so herself.

But now she tilted her head and frowned as she ran the tips of her fingers over the ten mottled scars just below her belly button, feeling the insult of those ridges like the plagues of Egypt. When he'd punished her with lit cigarettes, Harry had actually named those burns for the Ten Plagues. This one, he'd called 'darkness,' that one 'blood.' And there at the bottom, just above her bush was—appropriately enough—'the slaying of the first born. But that was in the past now—the long distant past. Wasn't it?

She walked into the bathroom and rummaged in the drawer below the sink until she found the small pair of cuticle scissors, placing the sharp point against her right index finger. as she thought again about the infant daughter she'd had to abandon when she'd run away from home nearly seventeen years ago. It had been years since she'd drawn her own blood to atone for that.

Willie made an impatient sound when she realized she was falling into exactly the kind of self-pity she'd come to hate, so she dropped the scissors back into the drawer without jabbing and went to luxuriate in the steaming shower.