

## **Memory of a Medical Examiner**

The body came in the previous afternoon. The man had committed suicide. It was late and I told the morgue men to put it in the cooler and I'd examine it in the morning. Something about the address struck me, but I didn't think about it then. Nobody mentioned the name. They reported that he shot his dog first and they had brought in the dog as well.

I picked up the papers from the autopsy room desk, looked at the name and went cold. No wonder the address sounded familiar. A shiver passed through me but was quickly followed by saying, "Of course."

"His wife died of cancer six months ago and he'd been depressed ever since," the investigator said as I looked from the papers to the body on the table to the dog, a handsome German shepherd, on a gurney near the door of the storage room.

Once upon a time, and a very bad time it was, I graduated from the Nursing School of Pilgrim State Hospital in West Brentwood, New York. I graduated a month late because I had to make up a suspension for drinking myself into a blackout once too often. After I graduated I went to work on the male medical ward of Pilgrim State Hospital. The head nurse was Dick Murphy, who now lay on the autopsy table with a contact gunshot wound of the head.

Dick became my mentor in a number of ways. He was a bright guy but lazy. He should have gone to medical school and his wife, Julia, a Nursing Supervisor at Pilgrim, would have supported him. Instead he settled into a comfortable rut and kept his medical education to reading drug manuals. His clinical observation was keen and he knew an incredible number of off-color jokes—and he was a drunk.

I came to Pilgrim State Hospital Nursing School after dropping out of Duke University and working for a year as a kitchen helper in the hospital. It was cheap, offered 42 college credits and a profession and it beat mopping basement floors and loading food trucks. While taking those credits, some of the instructors suggested I should become a doctor instead of a nurse. My mother insisted I finish the Nursing School and then go on if I still felt like doing so. I finished the program and acquired my RN diploma and a really big drinking capacity.

Dick was my inspiration to take on the challenge of getting into and through medical school. I looked at him back then and thought “If I don’t do it, this is my future—this is what I will become.”

I suppose I could have passed the case off to one of the other examiners but I didn’t. Looking back now, I think doing that autopsy was just another step in trying to learn not to care. I was still trying to learn how to keep from letting other people hurt me. That started back in my childhood, when my mother ventilated her frustrations at my father by whipping me with a dog leash. I broke her of that habit, when I was twelve years old by laughing at her while she flailed away at my bare behind. It still hurt, but I’d be damned if I’d give her the satisfaction of admitting it.

I asked the technician to x-ray the dog to see if the bullet was still in it. If it had been, I probably would have autopsied the dog to retrieve the bullet. To my relief, there were only fragments and I didn’t have to. I remember having more qualms about autopsying the dog than a man who had once been one of my best friends.

“This is the unembalmed body of an adult white male,” I intoned as I started the tape recorder. There followed the usual list of height, weight, hair color, eye color and so

forth. Then I described the injury. Dick had used a .22 caliber rifle, placed against his head just above his nose. The hole was small and round, and there was black sooty material in the depth of the wound consistent with a contact entry wound. We had the rifle and a stick, found alongside it, with which he had depressed the trigger.

With the external description out of the way, I put in the knife, making the first incision. As the autopsy continued, I looked at the liver and found what I expected. The liver was large and yellow, with a rounded edge: *Foie gras*, fatty liver, the result of ongoing communion with Jim Beam, Jack Daniels and other potent spirits. I thought back to a night in nursing school when I had downed a quart of bourbon in about an hour and passed out. I knew now that I could have died then. I could have wound up on the very table I was standing by and been on the other end of the knife.

There but for the grace of ---- but was it grace? Many times I've wondered about that as I beheld the dead and dying and thought that they were, or soon would be, beyond the pain that afflicted them. They were beyond all those voices telling them just how utterly unworthy they really were. But each time I thought that, something kept me from joining them and it wasn't always the same thing, or it didn't seem to be.

The rest of the autopsy was unremarkable. The heart and lungs were in decent shape considering that Dick had been a smoker. The bladder was full, as it frequently is in people who've been drinking prior to their death. The track of the bullet crossed vital structures and it was a rapid death.

After the job was over, I remember saying to the morgue men and the investigators that it was a shame he killed the dog—it was a beautiful animal. I never mentioned my previous relationship.