

The West Point Syndrome

“So what happened? ” said the doctor, leaning over me, “Tell me once or twice from the top. Were you unconscious? ”

It was two thirty in the morning, and Doctor Vivian Westphal was interested in him. Peter Doyle sensed, maybe, he was in possession of an interesting problem that she might be able to talk about at rounds in the morning. “How can you sparkle this much this late at night, he wondered. She was slim and in her forties, dressed in a black silk blouse and swishy black pants with fancy sandals. Diamonds were dancing on her tassels. She had the makings of a real authentic medical bloodhound snapping out her questions like Inspector McGonigle. She was a hospitalist, whatever that was. She was in the employ of his health program and had come to him out of the dark night. She sprung him from an ordinary room downstairs and had the nurses wheel him over to critical care for some telemetry work. She thought he might

benefit from some neurological study. Pete didn't like the sounds of that. When he was an aide at the VA, neurological referrals never did his patients any good. They would vanish off to hospitals in Newington and White River Junction, and he would hear that they had died or were in long term custodial care.

Soon he was in the fourth floor of the critical care ward of the Burgess Point Hospital, all hooked up with cardiac monitors. He could see things for himself. He had been studying the lowest line on the monitor, and he had a feeling that he wouldn't last until the morning. His motions had a hypnotic splendor. The green lines danced away, sometimes in precision like the grim brooms in Fantasia. Out at the nurse's stations there were other monitors being ignored. Data was aggregated, 12 readouts, the Dow-Jones report from twelve darkened rooms where we lay with our saline dripping. He had been three quarts low, and the doctor wanted to know how he had gotten so dehydrated.

He told her he thought he had drank the normal amount of water that day. A glass of milk with lunch, tea and a glass of wine with dinner. How big a glass? she wanted to know. Oh, six inches? There was

nothing splendid or even interesting in his last day in normal existence. He had got home from work, moved some wood out into the back yard, had a glass of wine, a slice of quiche and a big salad for supper.

Doyle talked, half-hypnotized by the monitor, sleepy with the meds he had been given. There was nothing in the zigs and zags on the monitor that spoke of regularity or reassurance. They spoke of earthquakes, seaquakes, political upheavals, sudden Nebraska-style prairies, and then little blanknesses when nothing at all was happening. His heart was a winded old one-lunger ready to give a final wheeze and go clunk . Neurology. He didn't like the sound of that. He wondered what this monitor meant.

The doctor reached up and turned it off.

"Hold on, let me get some help. I'll be right back."

Soon a nurse came in, and with the doctor helping, they moved his bed so it faced the window. Outside heavy snow was falling on the half-empty parking lot. Maybe there would be no school tomorrow.

She moved her chair over by his bed, and sat there. She was watching something behind him.

"It was like this," he said.

"Hold it for another minute, Mr. Doyle."

He lay there watching the snow fall. The light down at the corner of Elm and Locust went from red to green, but had no audience. The streets were empty. It must be two or three in the morning. "OK" she finally said, "Tell me what happened."

He told her, apropos of nothing, maybe to entertain her, that this had been the night his regular doctor had a gig at the Bishops Lounge downtown. Henry played alto sax and belonged to a well-regarded group, the Radials. He and his wife had stayed home, were drinking wine and watching LOST on the DVD, episode three.

"Ah." she said, "More wine??"

"All right," he replied, irritated. There was all kinds of ancient history in his jacket, including all the alcoholism in his family history and yes, his own health history. He had kicked it in his twenties.

It was about nine fifteen pm. The doctor in the show was working feverishly on the security guard, who had barely survived the plane crash, when the quake began at 23 Argyle Street. His wife was on the couch, he was sitting on his daddy's arm chair. The whole room began to stagger around him. He sat there patiently waiting for his little episode of dizziness to go away.

"You didn't stand up and then get dizzy." she said.

No. It all began to gather some force and traction and became the eye of a storm. It lifted him up to his feet with a biblical promise that the end was near. He was going up to heaven. He tried to walk on his tippy-toes, light as a feather, and the floor fell away. Everything began to pitch dramatically, the floor suddenly came back up and smacked him a good one on his chin. The next thing he knew he was twenty feet away down on his knees in the stove room holding onto this spidery antique table and dragging it around, ready to throw it aside. His wife was on her feet and calling to him. "Pete, what's happening, Pete? what is going on?" She was scared and didn't know what to do.

He had no idea of what was going on. He didn't know why he was freaking her out. The perfect idiot. Who or what was he fighting and why couldn't he get a decent punch in? He tried to talk and had nothing to say. He found himself in the bathroom. He got his pants down and suddenly there was an awful mess. Twin accidents, pants that had to be gingerly stepped out of.

"Should I call 911, Pete?"

His wife's frightened voice now came from far away.

He tried to talk and the words all poured out and danced around him in a word-players jumble. The lord of incontinence with works of great import lying at his feet. He concentrated comically, the good Lord trying to concentrate on what to do. The fecal matter had import. Something was wrong. He thought he needed help. "The phone, get me the phone," he said, managing to grab a hold of some words and wring them out and post them up on the wall, one by one. "Get me the phone." he said. Let me dial 911. The phone was in his hand and he managed not to drop it. Soon he was talking to someone who was calm, oh Lord in heaven how he needed people who were calm and friendly and were doing nothing but sitting quietly by the phone having a cup of coffee and maybe doing their crossword puzzle. Pete burbled

something in code and he understood. Help was on the way. The first to arrive was a policeman. He saw the mess on the floor, saw him and his alien pallor, and took out his notebook.

"They are on their way, Pete." he said.

After a while a whole crew of people arrived. A cuff was on his arm, the chief helper whistled when he had a twenty point drop from the next-to nothing reading he had when Pete was sitting down. That was an impressive stunt, the first of many he was to perform.

'Were you unconscious?' asked the doctor. "Would your wife know?"

She had a small red leather notebook out and a matching pen ready.

"She's asleep now." Pete said, "Don't bother her. He knitted his brows extensively, and thought about it some more.

He looked over at her and shook his head sheepishly and shrugged. "I think I might have been out of it for a while. I remember being in the living room; then I was in the stove room. No connective tissue? A couple minutes?"

He shut up. No spinning of dramatic fiction for the doctor, who was trying to help him. No exaggerations. He had to think clearly. Had he

been unconscious? It had happened only a couple hours ago, but there were gaps in the tape or were there? He couldn't trace his movements accurately between the living room and the bathroom. He couldn't say for certain that he hadn't been unconscious at some point. He could remember with great clarity and precision what happened later, the neighbors heads at the window watching him go out the front door, the glaring whites inside of the ambulance and the rapid-fire adult talk between the ambulance and the ER, the regular movie-star of a young doctor who awaited him and who told him that he had been over-medicated. Too many pills. He would be ok, but he should stay here until his pressure came up and he was stabilized.

The lady doctor didn't like the ER diagnosis. Here she was, a free unsolicited second opinion who arrived wearing silk and looking glamorous. There was class-based envy from a plump RN who grumbled to him that she didn't understand why Doctor Westphal could keep her figure with so little effort. The news didn't seem relevant, her news that she was gay was. The doctor wondered why the ER doctor hadn't noted that this explosion of fecal matter was more consistent with a stroke.

Pete couldn't grip the doctor's finger with his right hand as hard as she thought he should. "Try it again."

He followed her finger as she held it up and moved it from far right to far left. Her clear eyes saw a lot.

"You might have had a seizure or a minor stroke," she said. "There are certain things that are not consistent with a fainting spell caused by an overdose of blood pressure meds."

"What?"

"Oh, things that were in the ambulance report. Your readings. Your difficulty in talking, fecal and urinary incontinence coming on suddenly that way. Were you on the way to the bathroom in the first place?"

"No"

"But you ended up there. Why?"

"I don't know."

"It reminds me of the West Point syndrome."

"What?"

"Prolonged periods of extremely low blood pressure can bring on seizures and, in some cases, strokes."

A stroke, I thought, as she concentrated her penlight into my left eye, and then the right.

His father had died of a stroke.

"Why West Point?"

"Oh" she laughed, "You know West Point. Cadets stand at attention in the boiling sun for hours for inspection. The blood pools in their legs, they often faint. But in West Point, being it's that kind of place, the men on either side of the guy hold him up to save his honor. Falling is a good thing, they wake right up and no damage is done. Standing when you are unconscious means that the low blood pressure is prolonged, and you get seizures or strokes."

"Oh"

He had his stroke in the junior high school gym, three days before his retirement day. It was sudden and lethal. His ruddy good-natured Irish alkies glow gradually faded away in the weeks before he died, but Pete's family just watched him come and go, grey and pasty and resigned. On Thursday March 23rd he was going to come home for good, and then he would have nothing to stay sober for. Pete had talked to one of his co-workers and he said that Phil had let loose an awful yell and the buffer sprang free as he fell, banging against the walls

and crashing about until it finally yanked its cord out and died. Later they would mop up the blood and when Pete got there, the next day, there was nothing to see. The gym floor shone malignantly, the bleachers and the score board were all rigged up for the big game that night with North Quincy. Life went on.

"I noticed something, " said the Doctor. "When I got here you were watching the monitor. I sometimes think we would be better off having them turned off when they are not needed. We turned your bed toward the window. There was a really, and I mean really dramatic drop in your blood pressure in a couple minutes. Here we are pumping the saline into you to get your pressures back up, and now its back down to eighty over 50. If we let you get up, I think you'd keel over again. "

"Really?" Pete said, "What does that mean?"

"I don't know." she said, "What were you thinking when you were watching those monitors?"

He looked out at the snow falling and tried to think. A delicious lassitude was creeping over him; he was warm and on the verge of sleep. Had the nurses come and microwaved one of those special heat blankets for him? He tried to concentrate. The doctor was still there, looking at

him. No one else was near. Out on the distant streets the lights had gone red again. Everyone stop.

"I was worried," he said. "I was looking at that monitor and I was scared to death. My lines were all over the map. My old man died of a stroke."

"Ah," she said. "I'll be right back. Think peaceful thoughts. You'll be here a couple days, I think, until some tests come in. Think about snow. No school tomorrow, I guess. Even the high school is going to be out. 12 to 18 inches Tom Bavaqua said."

In a few minutes she came back with the nurse and they moved his bed around again so it faced the line of monitors.

"What do you see?" she said, "You are number three."

He was confused. Number three didn't look anything like the monitor he had been watching. No jagged peaks, no cliff-side drops, just a peaceful sine wave, a slow surge, a smooth drop then building toward another hilltop. Like a peaceful sea seen from a hilltop. He looked at the doctor confusedly.

"You see it then." she said. "I went back and looked at the tape to make sure. The good news is your heart is ok. No signs of coronary

disease. But you have all these adrenalin-type surges. You're emotional, and I think it is affecting your heart. I looked at your history and you would come into the clinic with these stroke-level readings, and your regular doctor kept cranking up your dosage. Anxiety-related pressures I think. You were taking all the medicine in the morning, and by late in the day they all were working hard, and you weren't. You weren't slaying dragons or fighting injustice or whatever it is you do for a living. You're a journalist, it says here. You were at home, you were relaxed. It was starting to snow, and you were watching TV and bango. You get dizzy and tried to get up. So relax. Let's wheel him around again, Jennie. And let Mr. Doyle here get some sleep. "

The two women were unfolding and shaking out a sheet, One fold in long way, two folds the long way, soon it was a long slender band that they lay across him, and they tied the ends to the bed frame. He found himself unable to move.

The doctor looked at him with a slight smile.

"Yes," she said, "We want you to stay put for awhile."