

BIOPSY

(4174 words)

By the time Shelby recognized him, Dinesh was already inches from her naked breasts, examining the dark spot next to her left nipple.

“Aren't you the guy who lives in 127?” she said, staring at the top of his head and the crisscross design of the halogen headlamp squashing his hair.

Dinesh raised an eyebrow, and pushed the question aside. Gingerly, he pressed at the edges of the node. He would need to take a biopsy.

“You can button up,” he said, lifting his head and giving her the practiced, professional smile he reserved for patients in various stages of undress. He rolled backwards on his stool, pulled off the lamp, and brushed a hand through his hair.

“It is you,” she said, doing up her blouse. “I thought I’d seen you before.”

“Yes,” he said.

“You should step off your patio sometime,” she said, matter of factly. “You’re paying for that pool. You might as well put it to good use.”

Dinesh smiled. Of course, he’d recognized her the moment he stepped into the examining room. She was hard to miss, her lithe body lying poolside every Saturday, soaking up the sun, drinking beer with the bevy of muscle-bound men she seemed to attract. The fact that her breasts

had been exposed at the moment of her neighborly epiphany just confirmed the unabashed persona he'd expected from someone who looked like she did. He'd never been to a strip club, but he imagined they were full of Shelby's.

It's why he'd never stepped off his patio to join them, ultraviolet rays notwithstanding. Tanning was for narcissists. He had no patience for self-obsession. But listening to her speak, here in his office, so self-possessed, he was taken aback with her. Of course, he would have to refuse her invitation. Thanks, but no. But what a revelation she was.

"So," she said, "what do you think?"

Dinesh was lost in thought, suddenly caught off guard between the doctor and the man. He stared at her with confusion. She smiled again, her lips parted, and he saw the whiteness of her teeth.

"I can't swim," he blurted out.

Shelby turned her head; her lips thinning over her closed mouth, and laughed out loud. "No, Doc," she said, cupping her breasts. "What's the prognosis?"

"Right," Dinesh said. "They look...well...I think we ought to take a biopsy to be sure. You said there's no tenderness or itching?"

"Nope," she said. "But, better safe than sorry." She reached for her buttons again, but Dinesh held up his hands.

"You can stay dressed for the moment. We have some things to set up first. Nurses, local anesthetic, all that." He could feel the red creeping up his neck. Flustered as he was, he felt his bedside manner falter, and he tried to keep from saying something he would regret. "I must say; you are handling this rather well."

“It’s the cop in me, Doc. Nice on the outside, but with a plan to kill everyone I meet. Cancer’s no exception.”

Dinesh blanched, and she laughed.

“Don’t worry, Doc. I won’t shoot the messenger.”

“No. It’s not that,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief. “I just didn’t picture you as a police officer,”

“Said the profiling dermatologist,” she responded.

“Excuse me?”

She smiled and pointed two imaginary guns at him. “Cop? Profiling?”

“Oh, right,” he said, smiling awkwardly.

“Most people guess stripper,” she added.

“No,” he stuttered. “I didn’t-”

“It’s okay, Doc. I’m used to it.” She put her hand on her waist and uttered a condescending drawl. “What’s a pretty little *thang* like you doing carrying a gun?”

“Of course,” he said, not knowing how else to respond. He wiped at a newly formed bead of sweat on his forehead.

“As for the pool, we can probably get you some lessons. You know, just to be safe.”

When he got home that evening, Dinesh realized he’d never told her no to the pool invitation. Did it even matter? He shook his head and tried to put the thought of her out of his mind. Standing in his kitchen, peering into the abyss of Whole Foods ingredients that was his refrigerator, he was suddenly overcome by how lonely he was. Hadn’t he started shopping there as a way to meet women? He had every intention of bumping into his next date while scooping

steel-cut oats into an eco-friendly, reusable bag. He would apologize for being clumsy, and she would smile at his earnestness, and they would end up taste-testing soups from the hot bar inside before making plans for dinner some time later that week. Juvenile dreams, he thought. Instead, he wandered the aisles filling his cart with food he would never have time to prepare, and averting his eyes away from anything more than a casual glance. The only human contact he ever had was under the halogen glow in his doctor's office.

Staring at the unopened cartons of alfalfa sprouts and Kale salad on the verge of wilting, Dinesh gave up and pulled his phone out of his pocket to order Chinese food. Perhaps the delivery person would be a woman.

The next morning, as he pushed the button on his key fob to unlock his car, the whoop of a quick siren filled the air causing him to jump slightly and duck his head. When he turned to see what had caused the noise, he was surprised to see a police car pulling up to him. He was even more surprised when the driver's side window rolled down and Shelby's blue eyes greeted him.

"Sorry about that, Doc," she said, smiling. "I just couldn't resist."

Dinesh smiled sheepishly and shook his head. "No problem," he said. "I always bring a change of underwear to work so..." His voice trailed off, and suddenly, he was acutely aware of the words coming out of his mouth.

"Luck favors the prepared," she said, smiling back. "Just wanted to say hi, seeing as how we've already been to second base and all."

"Oh. Well," Dinesh said, stumbling over his words before he saw her pointing her fingers at him again.

"Gotcha," she said, and then the radio mic on her shoulder crackled to life. She put a finger up and grabbed a hand mic in the car to answer back. "Copy, dispatch. 20-alpha enroute." She put the mic back and flashed a smile out the window. "Duty calls."

"Oh?" He said. "Be safe, I suppose," and he lifted his hand to his head in a pseudo salute.

"Right back at ya, doc," she said. "Maybe we'll see you by the pool later, yeah?" But before he could answer, she had turned on her overhead lights and was speeding away. He pulled his hand down and shook his head at himself. What was he doing? He pressed the key fob again and got into his car.

As he drove, Dinesh tried hard to shake the image of Shelby from his mind, but the frenzy of her siren, her sudden appearance, and quick departure, bombarded his mind with conflicting images. Shelby in uniform. Shelby relaxing in the sun. Shelby half naked in his office. Everything about her fascinated him, but he couldn't reconcile the police persona from the bikinied bombshell, or the small node just to the left of her nipple. He needed to clear his head. He needed to work.

Stepping into his office, he grabbed a folder with a rundown of his appointments for the day. He was happy to see a full schedule well into the afternoon. Certainly, this would get his mind right. He smiled at his office manager as she stepped into the office from the waiting room, but the look on her face was anything was happy.

"Is everything okay, Janice," he said. She pulled a remote control out of the pocket of her blue smock and shook it at him in frustration.

"Something's wrong with the clicker," she said. "I can't get the darned thing to turn on." Dinesh smiled as she handed him the remote and made his way into the waiting area. He removed the batteries, rubbed the positive ends together, and then replaced them again. When he

pushed the power button, the television came to life playing a preview of some detective show, cops and robbers in high definition.

"Ooh, I love that show," Janice said. "It always keeps me guessing until the end." She was smiling again, her hand out waiting for him to return the remote. "Do you watch the police shows, Dr. Daswani?"

Dinesh stared at the television, picturing Shelby in her police car, kidding him with her trigger fingers, piercing him with a penetrating glance of her blue eyes. He pointed the remote at the screen and switched the station over to The Travel Channel. "No, Janice," he said, turning back towards the office. "Can't say that I do." He picked up his schedule again and read the first one on the list. "I'll be ready in a few minutes, so you can go ahead and call in the sebaceous cyst."

That night, he emptied his refrigerator, and set about writing a list of foods that would last longer than the biweekly visit to the grocery store. Once he was satisfied, he decided to organize his dvd collection by title and genre in his entertainment center. Glowing lines of light reflected in the television screen from the sliding door blinds, and when he went to look outside, all he saw were kids playing in the shallow end of the pool. He stood there watching them for a few minutes, wondering at the ease of their interaction. He closed the blinds, grabbed the remote from the coffee table, and fell asleep watching an episode of Cops On Demand where his dreams converged poolside; gunbelts slung low on bikinied hips, unbuttoned uniforms, nipples and nodes. Her siren song kept calling to him, until he was jolted awake, his body covered in sweat.

Sitting up on the couch, Dinesh ran his hands over his face trying to wipe the flush from his cheeks. He looked at his watch. 2 am. He walked over to the blinds and saw the pool deck

was deserted; the children long gone, and a steam mist floating above in the empty jacuzzi. He wished he had a bathing suit because he wasn't getting back to sleep anytime soon. He made his way to his bedroom and dug through his dresser until he came up with an old pair of basketball shorts. Something was better than nothing.

"I thought you said you couldn't swim." Shelby's voice surprised Dinesh, who after soaking for ten minutes, was having trouble keeping his eyes open. She was standing by a lounge chair dressed in a blue robe with the word PINK stenciled across the front. She kicked her shoes off under the chair and pulled back the robe to reveal a shimmering, blue bikini. She laid a folded towel at the edge of the jacuzzi before returning to her robe to get something from the pocket.

"I don't," Dinesh said. "But I was having trouble sleeping so I thought sitting in the hot water would help." He watched Shelby as she stepped into the jacuzzi, shuffling over to make room for her to sit. She had a bottle of beer in her hand and she set it on the water's edge as she got herself into a comfortable sitting position.

"How very right you are, Doctor," she said, reaching back for the bottle and taking a sip of her beer. "I'm out here pretty much every night after my shift ends. Something about the steam that clears my head from the crap I deal with all day."

"I don't even have a bathing suit," Dinesh said, causing Shelby to raise her eyebrows. "What I mean is that I brought basketball shorts." Shelby smiled and raised her bottle to him. He nodded his head feeling foolish. "And you can call me Dinesh, if you'd like."

"Pleased to meet you, Dinesh. I'm Shelby," she said, setting the bottle down behind her. "But you already know that, I guess." Shelby slid deeper into her seat and Dinesh tried to maintain eye contact with her as she shifted into the more reclined position. The images he had

come to suppress now floated mere inches from him and he struggled to think of something to say.

"Hard day at work?" Was the best thing he could come up with.

"The usual. People calling the police to fix in ten minutes what took years to create. And then getting mad when we have to make an arrest. You know how it is," she said, still reclined with her eyes closed.

"Not really," he said. He stared at the sky and tried to picture her day. All he had to go on was television shows; drunken men fighting, drug addled kids driving, and Shelby, seemingly sewn into a tight fitting uniform and bulletproof vest trying to sort it all out. When he looked back at her, she was sitting up, staring at him.

"No. I guess you wouldn't think so," she said. "But I bet our jobs are similar in some ways."

"I doubt it," he said, smiling. He couldn't imagine doing what she did; going to work expecting to get in a fight, or heaven forbid, having to shoot someone.

"Maybe you just don't realize you do." Shelby reached back and took a swig of her beer. She set the bottle down and then stretched a leg out and massaged her calf. "You see patients all day, right? And they come in there with problems. Like me, right? But then, when you tell them that they have been in the sun too much, they act like it's some big revelation. Tanning can cause skin cancer? What? And not that they say anything to you, but I bet they blame you if you can't fix the problem they've created for themselves." She put her leg back in the water and rolled her neck. "I deal with domestic violence and theft and drug possession, which is different, sure. But when all is said and done, I arrest someone for something they did and they blame me for ruining

their life." Shelby smiled and took a deep breath. She set her head back on the folded up towel and exhaled loudly, closing her eyes again. "So like I said, not much different, you and I."

"But you carry a gun," Dinesh said. "That must be a lot of pressure."

"And you routinely cut pieces off of people. Either way you look at it, we both have equal power to hurt." Shelby put her hand over her face and slipped underneath the water. Her blonde hair swirled in the jet stream before she rose back out of the water and slicked it back on her head. "The difference between us and everyone else is that we want to do good. It just doesn't always work in our favor." She reached back and grabbed her beer. She looked at Dinesh as she finished it, and then as if realizing something, swallowed and said, "Geez, I didn't even think. Would you like a beer? I brought two."

"No thanks," Dinesh said, waving his hand. "I don't drink."

"Oh crap," Shelby said, covering her mouth. "Is it against your religion or something?" She set the empty bottle behind her towel, trying to erase its existence from view.

"No. It's not that. I just don't like the taste of it," he said, smiling for the first time. "Now if you had a pitcher of margaritas, then perhaps I might take you up on your offer." Dinesh tilted his head and raise his eyebrows and Shelby smiled. Standing up, she made her way up the steps and to her robe, pulling the second beer out. She twisted the cap off and made her way back to the jacuzzi. Rivulets of water dripped from her suit and streamed down her waist as she stepped down the stairs and back into her reclining position in the jacuzzi.

"Well, in that case," she said taking a long pull off the bottle, "we'll just have to go get some sometime." She lifted her knee out of the water and ran the end of the bottle in a circle around it, keeping her eyes off Dinesh. "I mean, if that isn't against your medical code or something."

"Excuse me?" He said.

She raised her head to look him in the eyes. "You know, the whole doctor-patient thing we got going on." The light of the jacuzzi refracted white and blue in her eyes and Dinesh felt his stomach tighten.

"Oh. Yes. That," he said. The conflicting images of Shelby sparked hard again in his mind, only this wasn't in his imagination this time. Drops of condensation shimmered on her collarbone and a wash of chlorine bubbles swirled between them. Her gaze seemed penetrating and vulnerable at the same time. He opened his mouth to answer when the clang of the pool gate caught their attention. She blinked and they looked up simultaneously, as an older couple made their way towards the jacuzzi.

"Got room for a few more in there," the man said as he dropped his towel on a chair. Thick gray hair covered his barrel chest and belly, and he slipped off his shoes and eased himself down the steps and into the water. Dinesh moved over quickly, accidentally knocking the beer out of Shelby's hand and into the water. She fumbled to save it, sitting up quickly, but the damage had already been done. "Sorry about that," the man said. Dinesh was standing now, looking at Shelby and then at his watch.

"We aren't interrupting anything, are we kids?" the lady asked with a concerned tone. When neither one answered, her face took on a dour look and she called out to her husband. "George, let's leave these kids to themselves." George looked at them, saying nothing. The look on his face was clear that he didn't want to leave.

"No. No," Dinesh said, to the woman. Then he looked at Shelby. "I need to get up early in the morning anyway."

"And I've been up too long myself," Shelby said, standing up with the empty bottle and grabbing her towel. "You folks have a good soak."

"Sorry about the beer," said George. "We'll make it up to you in the future, okay."

"Sure," Shelby said, stepping out of the jacuzzi. "I'm out here almost every night."

They both dried off in silence while the couple eased themselves into the jacuzzi. Dinesh wrapped a towel around his neck and waited for Shelby to put on her robe. He wanted to answer her. Tell her that he would love to take her out for drinks, but somehow he felt the moment had passed. Shelby tied her robe and grabbed the two empties and looked up at him smiling.

"I guess I'll see you later," she said.

"I would like that," he said.

Shelby waited for a second, taking a deep breath. Dinesh smiled at her and looked at the couple in the jacuzzi. Why did they have to show up at that exact moment?

"Alrighty, then," Shelby said, as she started towards the gate. Dinesh followed slowly after her. When she reached the gate, she turned and looked at him with a smile. "You should probably work on buying a suit," she said.

"Pardon?" He said.

She pointed at his dripping shorts. "You know, for swimming. We still need to get you trained." Dinesh nodded his head and Shelby lifted her hand to wave. "Later, Dr. Dinesh," she said, and then she walked down the sidewalk into the darkness.

When the biopsy results arrived on Friday, Dinesh instinctively reached for Shelby's file to dial her number. He was practicing what to say when he heard her voice answer.

"Hello," she said.

"Yes. Hello. This is-"

"I'm sorry I can't come to the phone right now," her voice continued. He had gotten her voicemail instead. He listened to her speak until the sound of the beep.

"Officer Parker, this is Dinesh, I mean Dr. Daswani." He paused, regained his composure, and hung up after asking her to call him back.

When he left the office at five, she had yet to return his call. He drove home going over whether or not he should knock on her door. Could he be both doctor and date? Was he breaking some Cardinal rule just by thinking about her that way? As he pulled into the complex, he looked for her marked patrol car, but didn't find it. That night, he stayed up until three, watching out the window, hoping to see her relaxing in the jacuzzi, but she never showed.

The next morning, he stopped by her apartment on his way to get breakfast, having decided that doing something was better than nothing. He knocked several times, but she never came to the door. Her car was still not in the parking lot and he wondered what hours she worked. He had assumed she worked the swing shift, but he'd never really asked and now he thought he was stupid for not having stayed when the older couple showed up. He got in his car, placing an order at a drive thru window five minutes away, and then drove to a sporting goods store to try on bathing suits. He rifled through the selection, coming up with a pair of red, white, and blue board shorts before racing back home, with the hopes of seeing her at the pool by the time he got there.

He spent the next two hours sitting in the shade of his patio watching his neighbors come and go, but she never showed. Around four, he recognized one of the men he'd seen her talking

too on Saturdays past. The man was throwing a little girl high in the air so she could dive into the deep end of the pool. Both of his arms were heavily tattooed and Dinesh could make out a silver shield imbedded in the artistry. He had always thought the man was a boyfriend, but seeing the police tattoo, he realized his mistake.

"Excuse me," Dinesh said to the man after his daughter had flown once again into the deepness. "You work with Shelby Parker from 221, right?"

The man shielded his eyes from the sun as he turned to look up to Dinesh. "Hold on," he said. His daughter came swimming back to him and he picked her up. "Sweetie, do me a favor. Let's see how long you can hold your breath under water." The little girl smiled and nodded her head vigorously. "Now swim under water to the other side." She jumped from his arms and began splashing away from them. The man returned his focus to Dinesh and his face hardened. "I didn't want her to hear us talking," he said. "Things like this give her nightmares."

"I'm sorry," Dinesh said. "Maybe you misunderstood me."

"You're talking about the accident, right?" the man said again. "Shelby was heading to a shots fired call when the other car ran the stop sign. They say she never even knew what hit her."

Dinesh felt his stomach drop and he took a step backwards, trying to regain his sense of bearing. Stop sign. Never knew what hit her. He saw her bright smile, the look in her eyes when she looked up him in the jacuzzi.

"She was great person," the man was saying as his little girl swam back up to him and launched herself into his arms. "And a really good cop."

"I'm sorry," Dinesh said, and his words sounded hollow. He stared around the pool at his neighbors sunning themselves. More children played in the shallow end, and the man picked his daughter up and threw her high into the air again. She laughed as she flew and Dinesh made his

way over to the ladder in the deep end. He wanted to reach out to them. Tell them all how much he thought of Shelby and how she might have changed his life. He knew in his heart that she would have beat Cancer, had she been given the chance. Instead, he slipped off his sandals by a chaise lounge and lowered himself into the pool one rung at a time. Holding tightly to the bars, he submerged his head under water, letting the water block out the noise of children laughing, screaming, and splashing overhead. He held his breath, gripping the smooth handrail, and feeling the bubbles rise from his nose. He opened his eyes and stared blearily into the underwater chlorine void. Releasing the grip of one of his hands, he considered the crowded isolation of his surroundings. What would happen if he just let go? Would anyone even hear him, if he started to scream?