

Serrated

Choking, Tim thought to himself, “*Don’t panic.*”

Something like this had happened to him before. More often, in fact, than he would be willing to admit. Tim reached up with his right hand and put his large, sausage like thumb and forefinger into his mouth. The forefinger barely reached the piece of meat but the thumb could not. He then used the forefinger and the middle finger like a pair of scissors and both fingers grazed the meat but found no grip.

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Timothy McAvoy was a registered nurse, single, over forty and fairly obese. He made good money, considering the hours that he worked, and put a large chunk of it into his small home. He had bought the house, a lovely Cape style, after saving since college and had lived there for almost ten years when he changed hospitals to be closer to home. Commuting to Boston from Leighton was well over an hour each way and, added to that, he worked an average of twelve hours a day. Timothy felt that it was time for a change. He had grown older, wiser but no more respected so it was easy for him to say goodbye to the only place he had worked at for such a long time.

Since Tim was a ‘larger man’, as his mother would put it, he found it difficult to date. That, and the hours he kept were his obstacles in finding love. He was handsome enough, and his thick beard hid his double chin well. Tim did have his passions; the first was the meticulous upkeep of the home. Tim would often pick home improvement projects for himself. His garden was stuff of legend and often compared to those in *Better Homes and Gardens*. Tim was handy with tools so he was able to do most of his own repairs. Tim did farm out some of the work where he either was too much a novice or his large hands and frame wouldn’t allow him to get close enough to the work. He had once gotten stuck under the sink while fixing a leak and couldn’t free himself for several hours into the night. Fortunately, no one but he knew about it.

Another passion was tools. The garage was neatly organized and full of tools including a sixty gallon air compressor, table saw, a collection of cordless tools and a full size Craftsman mechanic’s toolbox that had cost him a thousand dollars and many times that to fill. Chrome, wooden and stainless steel tools lined a wall on a pegboard; all were cleaned and returned to their original place when he was done with them. Tim would work on his own car even with the difficulty of getting down on the ground then back up again. There was no room for a car lift in the small, single car detached garage. There was room, however, for a 1970 Plymouth Duster that Tim had driven in high school. He had plans to restore it some day.

Tim also had a workbench in his cellar and it was also covered in tools. These were the stainless steel tools of his medical profession that he had collected over a lifetime of

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wanting to be a doctor. He had always thought that one day he would be a general practitioner in his home town and treat the locals like country doctors had done for generations before him. His father had been a dentist and Tim had hoped to hang his own shingle up some day as well. Though his parents were more than supportive Tim became lost somewhere along the way and ended his education where he was. He was happy, for sure, with nursing as he had an incredible bedside manner and a way with people. Tim's dream of going back to school and becoming a doctor was on hold but steadily fading as the years rolled by.

Tim also lacked many real friends. He kept no pets but was in touch with the guys from his childhood even though they had all moved around the country. Tim's neighbors were nice and he socialized with them from time to time, especially George Burns. George wasn't actually named after the comedian but had heard all the jokes about his name over a lifetime. As of late, the "Where's Gracie?" questions had all but disappeared. The younger crowd barely skipped a beat when he was introduced.

George fancied himself a kind of do-it-yourselfer and had taken to borrowing Tim's tools. George would always begin his conversation with, "Timmy, my boy..." and if George wanted something then it was, "So, how's my good neighbor Tim?" Tim was vigilant about getting the tools back but George was not as neat and organized so sometimes they were gone for good. George was good hearted, though; he would replace what he'd lost or simply give Tim the money.

Another passion and Tim's real love was food. He was a great cook and could have been a chef if he wanted to. He would have something defrosted and waiting in the refrigerator for himself when he returned home. He would try to wait and eat supper but he always grabbed something from the cafeteria to tie him over. Even after a big lunch Tim would be hungry again in the late afternoon and early evening.

Tim would arrive home, change and, no matter the time, he would begin working on one of his many recipes. He would daydream about what to make for supper or the nice cut of meat waiting for him. His cabinets and kitchen drawers looked much like the workbenches in the garage or cellar. Expensive cutlery, stainless pots and pans and all other types of accoutrement were arranged neatly and easy to find. Tim would don one of his many white aprons and begin the process like a seasoned professional, sampling many times along the way.

Tim loved to use his propane grill out on the patio year round. The patio was off the kitchen, through a sliding glass door, and had an awning that made it pleasant in the warm summer months as well as usable in the rain and snow. Tim's neighbors would always comment on the wonderful aromas emanating from his kitchen, more so in the summer when Tim used the grill most frequently. He kept extra tanks of propane in the

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shed and would give the grill a thorough cleaning every weekend; it looked new even after several years of use.

It was the end of summer, the Friday of the Labor Day weekend and long after dark when Tim returned home. It was his last day working in Boston and he had a three day weekend ahead of him. He had planned a full schedule of sleeping, puttering around the house, and, of course, eating. He had gourmet popcorn to make for his nightly movie, the other half of a Black Forest cake and a two pound Porterhouse with beautiful marbling all waiting for him when he walked in the door. Tim went to his bedroom on the first floor; the upstairs rooms were hardly used, and changed into something very comfortable. He then went to the wine rack in the corner of the kitchen and selected a Shiraz which he let breathe while he brought out the meat.

Once he had his utensils in place he poured himself a large glass, a goblet really, of wine and began working the side dishes. He had fresh asparagus and large russet potatoes for baking. Two russets went into the oven and then Tim started working on the hollandaise sauce. Out came the eggs, butter, cayenne, salt and a touch of lemon juice. Tim efficiently separated four of the eggs and after everything was mixed, Tim whisked the sauce while the asparagus was on a low heat. Tim had the meat on a wooden cutting board and he made his way to the patio. He turned on the light, placed the cutting board on the outside table and lit the grill. Soon the meat was over the fire and the warm, flavorful smell filled the air.

It had gotten cool after the sun had set, into the low sixties, and there were few bugs as company while the grill smoked. The sauce and asparagus were soon done, as was the glass of wine, and Tim went inside where he emptied the remainder of the bottle into his glass. With only a few minutes left for the potatoes Tim went outside to check on the Porterhouse. The meat was beautiful; a true piece of art. Tim put it on a tray and brought it inside. The bell on the oven dinged and the feast was on.

Tim chose his bone white china and his best silverware as he felt like celebrating. He had the long weekend and a small life change right in front of him; his happiness hadn't reached this high in years. He had a lot of wonderful things to look forward to, to be thankful for. He also had his feast, one that had kept him going throughout the day. Tim set the table and included a cloth napkin as well as a serrated steak knife. His place was set and Tim sat at the small kitchen table where he enjoyed all of his meals. He cut off the first piece of meat and brought it slowly to his mouth enjoying the aroma of it. He felt the warm, savory chunk of steak in his mouth and he chewed it purposefully; everything tasted better when cooked over a fire. His eyes rolled back in their sockets and he smiled like the Cheshire Cat.

"Absolutely delicious." Tim said aloud after he swallowed.

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He took a swig of wine and sampled the asparagus that dripped with the rich, yellow cream. More ecstasy as the flavor filled his mouth. Tim then cut open the potato and let the steam rise out like smoke from a small fire. He lathered on real butter and a large spoonful of sour cream. Tim reached for the salt, the thing he and his doctor argued about the most, and gave three good shakes over the steaming potato. Tim's doctor had been his primary care physician his whole adult life. Dr. Stigler had attempted many times to get Tim to take better care of himself but had secretly given up on him years before. Tim wasn't stupid and knew that he should do a better job about it but, with his work schedule being so tight, it was hard to exercise regularly – if at all. Tim's mother begged him to lose weight so he could find a nice girl and settle down. All of those things he wanted but he was weak and they seemed like a dream to him.

Tim dug in his fork and brought a large bite to his mouth; it was still too hot to eat right away but that had never deterred him before. He blew on the food twice then shoveled it in. It was still too hot in his mouth but the tasty potato was almost as wonderful as the steak. Another gulp of wine was in order and the fire in his mouth was quickly extinguished. Tim dabbed the sides of his mouth with the cloth napkin and then picked up the serrated knife and fork for another go at the Porterhouse.

Tim sank the fork into the meat to keep it in place and made gentle sawing motions with the knife. Tim habitually ate too fast and took large bites of food; he had done so ever since he could remember. The trouble was that he was always so terribly hungry at times that it was all he could do to stuff the food down his throat so that his stomach would stop arguing with him. He would sometimes feel woozy from hunger and as the frequency of those incidents picked up he knew that diabetes waited for him somewhere in his future like a wolf in the night. His blood pressure and sugar had been good up to now so his sense of urgency simply didn't exist.

Tim often breathed heavily through his nose, especially when he was eating or exerting himself in some way. He was sure that he snored though he had no one to confirm it for him. He was sad when he thought about it so he trained himself to think of other things instead; other things often included food. Deep down, Tim blamed his mother for it all. She was a good cook, that was certain, but she damned him early in life when he wanted to go with his childhood friends and do boy things. Instead she would bake him brownies or cookies to keep him home. "You'll break your legs or worse," She would tell him. Food became a familiar a comfortable friend that never laughed at him, lied to him or beat him up. It was something he turned to ever since.

Tim brought the chunk of meat to his mouth and put it in. It was so juicy and tender that he began to roll his eyes once more in enjoyment. The chunk was large, too large to chew effectively so he had to work on it for a while. As it began to break up in his mouth he reflexively swallowed. The smaller part of the chunk was at the top of the throat and easily found its way down. The large part of the chunk was not chewed well enough and it simply would not fit.

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Tim made an ‘aarrggh’ sound as the chunk of steak became lodged in his throat.

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“*OK, use a tool.*” His mind told him. He grabbed his fork and placed it tongs first into his mouth. He tried to swipe the meat to the side as he feared that if he drove the fork into the meat it would only push it deeper into his throat. The fork successfully reached the chunk of meat but it could not budge it to either side. He had been holding his breath for about fifteen seconds by then and his last breath wasn’t that large. It wasn’t as if he was going underwater and knew to take as deep a breath as possible. No, he was breathing normally as he ate and his non-athletic lungs had a minimal amount of air in them.

Out came the fork, Tim next chose the butter knife. It was long enough and slender, he would certainly get it in a position to dislodge the piece of Porterhouse. The butter knife reached the meat easily and Tim began to slowly apply pressure to one side. Once the knife could slide in a bit more he would be able to pry it outward. If it caused him to vomit then all the better; the force of the projectile should be enough to free the blockage.

He began pressing against the chunk of meat and, instead of sliding outward, it went in further. Tim began to feel the icy fingers of fear climb up his spine as his forehead broke out in sweat. He pulled out the knife and looked at the table in desperation; nothing else there could help him.

*Thirty seconds.* Tim’s lungs were ringing the bell frantically by then for air. Panic began to settle in. No one was around to help him; he could run to George’s but that would take more than a minute. In that precious time Tim could trip and fall or even worse; George might not be home. Then Tim would be completely out of air and would most likely pass out in George’s driveway or on the lawn between the two houses. His choked body would be found in the daylight by the paperboy.

“*Wait a minute!*” His mind screamed. He liked the option of vomiting as that should drive out the wedge in his throat. He needed CPR, how would he self administer the move? Tim stood and looked around.

*Forty five seconds.* A chair would work! Tim would have to drive his torso down onto the back of the chair and push against his diaphragm. Tim moved to the guest chair so not to disturb his place setting and flopped his torso down. He felt the hard wood slam into his ribcage and he knew that he missed. He tried again and the back of the chair sank into his great belly, this time beneath the ribcage but there wasn’t enough force to move through the layers of fat and flesh. Tim tried one more time with the same result.

*One minute.* The railing to the staircase on the patio. He would have to go outside and walking was already more difficult than it normally was. His lungs were screaming at him and panic had already let itself run freely throughout his large body. He rumbled to

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the open sliding glass door, thankful for the little favors, and picked up speed as he headed to the railing. He planted his torso perfectly but the wooden railing made a large cracking noise; the meat was still firmly lodged in his throat. He tried one more time but the railing was loose and useless to him.

*"No! Not like this!"* Tim wandered back into the house but was aimless; his lungs far past the need for air more than they had ever been in their four decades. Tim looked desperately around the kitchen. The counters were spotless, the pots and utensils already soaking in the sink. On the table were the fork, butter knife and the serrated steak knife guarding his large, mostly uneaten plate of food. *"The serrated knife!"* Tim thought. He was medically trained; he wanted to be a doctor. The only way to save his life was to *cut out* the blockage right there, right then. A tracheotomy. Tim grabbed the steak knife.

*"I need a tube."* Tim waddled to the junk drawer next to the refrigerator. Tim saw a Bic pen as soon as it was opened. He clutched the pen and made his way to the bathroom located next to the kitchen leaving the drawer open.

*A minute twenty.* Tim was feeling faint; he was unsure how he was still standing. As he went into the bathroom and turned on the light it dawned on him that not two minutes before he was enjoying a gorgeous Porterhouse steak dinner. Now he was going to perform a medical procedure on himself without anesthesia, in his bathroom with a serrated steak knife and a Bic pen for tools. If his life weren't on the line he would have found it comical, even laughable.

*Out of Time.* Tim saw his face in the very well lit mirror. He was the color of a ripe tomato, blue veins stuck out of his forehead and neck. Without wasting another moment he raised his head upward, exposing his shaved neck, and brought the knife to his own throat. *"It's not even sterilized."*

With time all but gone Tim jammed the knife into his own throat. The pain was sweetly excruciating. The bottle of wine he consumed earlier dulled the pain a bit and gave Tim the nerve to continue. The fat around his neck made the job more difficult so Tim pushed the knife even harder. The lights in the bathroom seemed to dim, Tim was losing consciousness. Instead of giving in, Tim worked harder and the knife penetrated his throat. Now he had to make the hole big enough for the white tube of the pen.

Tim began cutting his own throat using the same small sawing motions he had used to cut a piece of the delicious meat on his dinner plate. The serrated blade worked splendidly and the hole grew large enough rapidly. Blood, warm and dark, ran down from the new wound to his blue buttoned shirt. A dark stain grew at the opening around the collar; blood dripped in large droplets to the floor. The sink was splattered in red. Tim began to breathe through the new hole in his neck. The hole was not large enough and blood drooled down his windpipe so he began to cough, letting out the remaining air in his lungs in the process. New air found its way in, and Tim was able to continue clumsily.

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Tim's hand became slippery with the warm wetness and he dropped the knife into the designer vanity. He wiped his hand on his shirt and began to pull the ink shaft out of the Bic pen. The world was spinning as if he was terribly drunk and he gagged on the blood in his windpipe. The ink shaft was out and he let it drop to the floor. Tim brought the white shaft to his mouth and bit out the blue top. He then slid the tube into his throat with one hand as he gripped the vanity with the other. He continued to cough as blood still continued down his windpipe but air was finally on its way. The Bic pen whistled slightly with each breath.

The world went swimming and Tim felt himself drop to the floor.

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He wasn't sure how long he had lain there but his throat felt as if it were on fire. He fought the urge to pull the pen from the hole. Tim somehow found his feet and went to the living room where he picked up the phone and dialed 911. He couldn't speak but when he heard the operator he knew that someone would be quickly dispatched to the house and he would be found. He collapsed in the easy chair and waited; the sliding glass door was still wide open and he would be easy enough to find.

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Weeks later, after Tim had returned from the hospital as a patient instead of a nurse he sat down and took a hard look at his life. He decided that it was time to go back to school and become the doctor he wanted to be. He figured that if he could operate on himself then dealing with college would be easy. Tim had also joined the local gym and vowed to get into shape. He would never have the physique of a gymnast but he could stand to lose sixty or seventy pounds.

The other amazing thing that happened was all of the attention he had gotten from his story. He was on the television news, in the papers and a subject on talk radio. One of the nurses in the emergency room became Tim's biggest fan and supporter; her name was Jillian. After dating Tim for the eighteen months following his procedure, they were wed in a small ceremony in the back yard of the Cape style house where they still live.