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That night in Jamaica, a raging tropical storm dampened the mood of the early evening cocktail party. Cooped up inside a waterfront penthouse party room, five of the six surgeons comprising the Austin Orthopedic Surgery Group perched shoulder to shoulder along one side of a banquet-sized ebony table. Spines erect, the surgeons faced the floor to ceiling wall of plate glass that, during fair weather, offered a stunning view of Montego Bay. The spouses that should have graced the empty chairs across the table were stranded at the straw market until the rain let up.

At the far end of the room, the sixth surgeon, hand specialist Dr. Renaud Gibeaut, pressed his forehead against a sliding glass door that opened to the seventh-story terrace. The rain pelted the glass and Ren imagined himself felled by a firing squad while his straying wife, devastated by grief and guilt, begged for forgiveness.

His senior partner and mentor, Walter Jurbarkas, said, “Hey, Ren. Quit brooding. There’s still a chance we’ll get out fishing.”

Ren shifted his eyes and focused on the reflection of Walter’s worried face, which vaporized in a flash of lightning. When Walter’s frown reappeared, Ren said, “Piña coladas? Count me in, Walter,” trying, but unable, to inject joviality into his voice.

Outside on the rain-swept terrace, potted palms shivered as wet rats clawed for a warm spot beneath the halogen bulbs.

Ren rested his eyes on the Jacuzzi—out of commission because the filtration system was broken—that steamed in the cool rain. As far as he was concerned, even a properly filtered Jacuzzi was a cesspool. Imagine *relaxing* in communal bathwater!

The wind had overturned and shattered a glass-topped patio table. The table's furred umbrella sprawled on the scored concrete like a blanketed corpse. With every gust of wind, the canvas folds swept the glass shards closer to the Jacuzzi.

"Ren. Get over here. You need a drink."

Ren turned away from the window. At the far end of the banquet table, Walter's surgically scrubbed hands mixed a precisely measured pitcher of piña coladas, poured the drink into six hurricane glasses and speared six pineapple chunks with pink and red paper umbrellas. The umbrellas' dye swirled into the milky drinks like seeping blood.

Ren collected his glass and returned to the window. He sucked on his drink in silence; but his partners began a heated discussion on ObamaCare; and the surgeons' cheeks flushed with passion.

The lights flickered and the electricity died. During the next thunder clap, Ren cracked open a terrace door, stepped outside and shut the door behind him. Rain pummeled his bowed head and shoulders. The thunder, as insistent as his daughter's rap music, insulted him with imagined lyrics. "Clueless! Clown! Cretin! Cuckold!"

He sloshed across the terrace and set his drink glass on the waist high wall. His dripping fingers picked at the loose mortar that held the bricks together. Over time, the cement he used in his surgeries would separate from the bone and metal and crumble just

the same way, but not yet. He hadn't been practicing medicine long enough to face maintenance on his original work.

His marriage, on the other hand, had had ample time to deteriorate beyond repair. And this last year had been code blue bad. He thought the problem was that he'd been preoccupied with his fledgling practice and wasn't home much. Janine accused him of avoiding their latest problem: their daughter Renée had festered into a belligerent teenager. They'd had Renée too early. Way too early. He'd only been a junior in college when Renée's bald little head poked out from between Janine's thighs. He wanted to say, "My God! Do you see that? I did that." But he hesitated to interrupt the attending staff, who, while peering between Janine's chubby parted legs, ordered hamburgers, requesting pickles, mustard, mayonnaise, ketchup, as though condiments were more important than the imminent arrival of Renée. And it was, he discovered later. He'd ordered hamburgers in the middle of surgery plenty of times. But he ordered his dry, out of respect.

His soaked clothes chafed his chilled skin. He kicked off his loafers, peeled back his socks and yanked his polo shirt over his head. Then he folded his clothes and stacked them on the wall. A gust of wind snagged the neat pile and tossed everything over the edge. Ren leaned over to watch. A strobe light of lightning illuminated their descent. They fluttered to the palm trees lining the condo and settled in the branches like forgotten laundry left out to be pummeled by the rain. And just like real-life laundry, one of his socks was missing.

The lights came back on and seconds later Walter's hand gripped Ren's shoulder. "Vhat are you doink?" His carefully submerged Lithuanian accent—patients didn't choose a surgeon who sounded like Dracula—surfaced when he was agitated.

Far below Ren, the rain-beaten palm fronds rustled as though beckoning. He flexed his thighs and imagined flopping over the wall. He'd have to go head first. Otherwise, a seven story fall to forgiving sand might only shatter his spine.

But he'd never do it. *Primum non nocere*: the medical ethic "first, do no harm" had been drummed into him for a decade. And certainly he would never commit such a horrific act in front of Walter, a person who actually gave a shit about him.

Ren shivered. He was freezing. That's why Janine had unloved him. She complained he'd changed, become cold and unresponsive, that he wasn't fun anymore. But the changes in Janine were terrifying. Pound by pound, his round, soft wife had disappeared, revealing acute angled clavicles and a jutting jawbone. His luscious Janine had contracted until he could count her ribs through her black leotard. He imagined their bones clattering together like skeletons if they made love, but they hadn't for a while.

"Dieting saps my energy for sex," she claimed as she pumped the exercise bicycle she'd set up in their bedroom.

Even her words sharpened. He didn't approve, but he never mentioned her transformation. Her weight had been a restricted topic of conversation ever since the first time they had made love.

"Was it good?" she had asked.

Nineteen years old and knocked witless by his first fuck, he'd compared the experience to the thrilling time he and his grandfather took the Hobie-Cat into the gulf just hours before hurricane Allen made landfall north of Brownsville. "Like being buffeted about in a storm," he'd said, and was confused when she pressed her hands to her flushed, lovely face and cried.

He broke away from Walter and padded barefoot across the terrace, carefully avoiding the broken glass. Then he recklessly waded into the warm but fecund Jacuzzi. Maybe the coddled germs would kill him.

Walter, his leather soles skidding across the wet cement, followed behind. “Are you drunk? I told you the filter wasn’t workin’.” The rain smacked his bald spot and streamed down his concerned face.

Ren settled into the Jacuzzi and pressed the button to start the bubbles. “I’m impervious, Walter. The fact is, with all the prophylactic antibiotics I swallowed for this trip, I won’t shit for a week unless I introduce a few germs into my intestines.” He slid down until the froth tickled his lower lip, and then he sipped the fetid water as though it was a tea of poison hemlock and said, “Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius. Do pay it. Don't forget.”

“What has gotten into you?”

Ren shook his head and waved at Walter to back off. Indirectly, Walter was responsible for Janine’s change of heart.

During last year’s Jamaica trip, Walter flew in a Dallas HR guy who led team-building exercises intended to teach the surgical group how to relate to one another to form a cohesive partnership. Com-mun-i-cation,” Big Batterson stressed. “No one knows what you’re thinking unless you tell them.” Ren was grateful about that because Batterson’s exercises reminded Ren of the pointless games Janine used to organize for Renée’s birthday parties. Ren thought the corporate trainer was a positive-thinking ass, but he had only com-mu-ni-ca-ted this to Janine, while they shared a condo bathroom before going to bed. She was ticked at him. Earlier, she had tried to coax him into the

then-working Jacuzzi, but he'd refused, reciting the STD diseases that potentially fester in a hot tub.

He shuffled Plaxx around his teeth. "Big Battering Ram reminds me of Milton the Monster. Two hundred and twenty pounds of cancer-causing saccharine."

Janine smiled, and he thought she was appreciating his joke, but then she said, "Not Milton the Monster. More like Sugar Bear, I think. Why do you have to be so negative? Why don't you listen to what he has to say?"

Ren spat the mouthwash into the black marble sink and ran his tongue across his teeth. "I am listening. I just spent eight hours trapped in the same room with him, playing 'trust your buddies.'"

"You can tune things out when you want to. You've had plenty of practice with me." Janine had never forgiven him for his ability to study in their tiny apartment, oblivious to his crying baby and talkative wife.

She was right. He hadn't listened to Big, and he hadn't listened to Janine, either. The following day, while Ren and his partners studied arthroscopic surgery videos, Janine and Batterson explored the island on bicycle. Ren hadn't considered it a big deal at the time. He considered Batterson an over-muscled fool; a vain clown who used sticky stuff to make his hair puff up.

Oblivious to the threat posed by Batterson, Ren was caught off guard when Janine told him she wasn't interested in retuning to Jamaica, that the trip would sabotage her diet.

Yesterday, she and Renée left for San Antonio to visit his mother. Last evening after work, he discovered a rambling "good-bye forever" note on his pillow. He'd jabbed the page button of the empty cordless phone base and followed the beep to Renée's room.

The receiver lurked under her Blink 182 quilt. The three nearly-naked-except-for-tattoos rock musicians embossed on the quilt sprawled across Renée's bed like spent lovers.

His mother answered on the first ring and said, "What's going on? Janine says she's moving to Dallas. She's asked me to keep Renée until she gets settled. What did you do now?"

"Dallas? Why Dallas?"

She sighed. "Honey, where are your priorities? The question is, 'why is she leaving?'"

He sagged to Renée's bed, joining the tangle of lolling bodies. "I don't know, Mom. What did she tell you? This came totally out of the blue."

"I don't know which is worse, that you're pretending to be clueless or that you really are. Either way, if you have to ask your mother, then I suspect Janine's doing the right thing." It was typical of his mother to take Janine's side. She took the "daughter" in daughter-in-law to heart. Affectionate Janine made up for Ren, who never could think of conversation that would interest his mother.

He'd pulled Renée's quilt to his chest. "Is she there, Mom? Let me talk to her. Please."

After a moment of muffled conversation, Janine had whispered, "Hello, Ren. I can't talk until your mother gets upstairs. I don't want her to hear this."

The familiar sound of her voice calmed him, and he believed he could sort this out.

She was crying, he could tell, when she said, "I'm sorry Ren. I really am. I should have left a better note."

"Don't worry about the note. I tore it up. When are you coming home?"

“I’m not. I’m sorry. I don’t love you. I thought I did, but I was wrong.”

His confidence sweated into the bed sheets. “Honey, don’t say that. It sounds too terrible. Whatever it is, I can fix it.”

“There’s nothing to fix. It’s not you. I’ve met somebody else.”

“What?” Why had he assumed something like this so unlikely that he’d never thought of it? “What? Who? Who is it?”

“Oh, Ren. I wish I didn’t have to tell you. You’re going to hate this. It’s Big Batterson.”

Shocked tears had choked his hysterical laughter, and he slammed down the phone before he said the things that would only push his wife farther from his reach.

Walter gripped the railing by the Jacuzzi steps. “Son, what’s going on? Are you in some kind of trouble?” He flung his hand from the steel rail as lighting ripped across the sky. “We’re going to get electrocuted out here.” He yanked open the terrace door. “Come inside.”

The hot Jacuzzi was soothing Ren into a paralyzed stupor. He didn’t have the energy to turn his head when he heard a terrace door slide back open.

Walter said, “Heads up, Ren!” A towel whacked the back of Ren’s head. “We have eight o’clock dinner reservations. Dry off and get dressed. The limo arrives in ten minutes.” Walter stepped back inside and closed the door before Ren could decline the dinner outing.

Ren floundered from the Jacuzzi and wrapped the towel around himself. As he tucked one corner of the towel inside another, a gust of wind swept across the rooftop terrace. A flap, like the wings of a huge bird, caught his attention. The fallen table

umbrella, now open and airborne, rocketed toward him. And yet he continued to clutch the towel.

He lifted his fly rod and cast into the Frio River that ran alongside his grandfather's Texas Hill Country rustic resort, Chez Gibeaut. The restaurant's dinner bell was clanging, inviting the cottage guests to assemble for the Saturday night barbeque of garlicky sausages and lamb chops. Mid-flight, the airy creation tied to Ren's barbless hook morphed into Janine. Her weight yanked him off balance and pulled him into the water. His waders ballooned and the current dragged him downstream. The water muffled his shouts.

His grandfather called out to him, his French accent replaced by lilting English. "Ren?" The jovial voice thudded in Ren's skull. "Are you with us?"

Ren told his grandfather, "No gaff. Get the net and bring her in. Make sure she didn't swallow the hook." Each word popped like bubble wrap under his skull. "Jesus, my head is killing me."

"Ah, you are awake. Good. I'm Dr. Peterson."

Ren's dream faded and he recalled his trip to Jamaica. "Hurts like hell."

Dr. Peterson pressed a disk to Ren's palm and said, "Here, press this button. It's a morphine pump."

Ren nail-gunned the button like the greediest of patients. His eyelids refused to open, even when he raised his eyebrows. "I can't open my eyes." He reached for his face, discovering that his wrists were bound to the bed rails. He'd ordered wrist restraints for his patients plenty of times. Wrist restraints meant bad news. "What happened to me?"

“You’ve been in surgery. I’m afraid I had to perform an enucleation.”

“You did?” The word sounded like eunuch or neuter. He knew he should be worried, but now the morphine was suspending his concern.

Peterson said, “You injured your eye in an accident.”

He reached for his face and again was stymied by the restraints. “My eye? How bad?”

“I couldn’t save it, but I was able to reattach your upper eyelid.”

Again, Ren struggled to open his eyes, but could not. “I’m blind?” Even he was impressed by his drug-induced detachment.

“You still have one eye.”

“But I can’t see. Not at all.”

“It’s difficult to raise either eyelid after this type of surgery. Your other eye is fine. I promise.”

“Well, that’s good, I guess.”

“Yes. You shouldn’t feel discouraged. Monocular vision is not such a handicap. There are methods to compensate for the loss of depth perception and peripheral vision. And today’s ocular prosthetics are quite lifelike. I must caution you, however, that there was some muscle damage. I can’t guarantee that you will have full movement of an artificial eye.”

A budding disturbance fluttered in Ren’s mind and he pressed the morphine button before the realization could flower. “I have to sleep now.”

When he woke up again, he could open his good eye. Outside, a dripping palm frond smacked against the window facing his bed. Drugs no longer clouded the obvious. *Depth*

perception is pretty damn important to a surgeon, and probably, decent peripheral vision comes in handy, too.

“I’m fucked,” he said.

“Ren?”

He jerked at the sound of Walter’s voice. “Christ, you snuck up on me.”

“I’ve been here for quite some time, actually.”

Ren twisted his head to the side in order to see Walter, who was seated on a folding chair.

“I lost my eye.”

“I know.”

Ren was behind on his morphine and during his nap had misplaced the blessed button. His bound hand skittered under the sheet until he found the button wire. His fingers pulled the wire until they reached the button, and he squirted in another shot of couldn’t-care-less. With his good eye, he followed a translucent lizard that scuttled across the ceiling. “Off the top of your head, can you think of any one-eyed surgeons?”

“We don’t need to talk about this now.”

Walter’s accent put Ren on alert and he said, “Monocular vision is not a handicap.”

“We can talk about this later, when your head is clear.”

Quelling his panic, Ren said, “There are methods to compensate for the loss of depth perception and peripheral vision.”

“Maybe you’d like teachink. I know Ralph Lephers, the dean at UT. I’ll talk to him.”

Ren wished his drugs were stronger. “Christ, Walter. I was in school for thirty years. I don’t want to go back.” He pressed the morphine button, but he wasn’t yet eligible for another dose and the dispenser beeped in disappointment, like Janine did when he didn’t come up with the right words. “Did you call Janine?”

“I haven’t been able to reach her.”

“Thank God. Do not call her. I need to think this through.”

The following day, Dr. Peterson removed the bulk of Ren’s bandages and the hospital discharged him. The rest of the orthopedic practice had left first thing in the morning as originally scheduled, but Walter had stayed behind. Ren, who had already studied himself in the mirror, knew why Walter’s eyes bugged when he entered the room to collect him. It wasn’t the sight of the swelling and bruising distorting one side of Ren’s face; Walter had already seen that. Although paired with a white shirt and jeans, the black eye patch made a bold fashion statement. Pirate. Ren could hang a dozen stethoscopes around his neck and no one would take him seriously.

Ren said, “The patch is temporary. I get an eye in eight weeks. It’s already on order. I’ll look perfectly normal.”

Walter nodded.

As they exited the skywalk in Austin, Walter flagged down a black-suited limo driver waving a sign that read, “Dr. Gibeaut and Dr. Jurbarkas.”

Ren clutched his bag. “I don’t need a ride. My truck’s in long-term parking.”

Walter took Ren's bag and handed it to the driver. "You can't drive. Especially at night. It takes practice. You'll need to install special mirrors. Besides, you have to pass a test." Obviously, Walter had been doing research on the limitations of monocular vision.

Ren followed the driver outside. The streetlights glinting off the gold trimmed white stretch hummer, longhorns decorating the grill, made Ren's good eye ache. The driver opened the door and Ren and Walter climbed inside. Ren poked his finger through a cigarette burn that marred the crushed velour interior. The stuffing underneath was damp and sticky, as though the limo didn't have a chance to dry out between prom trysts. When the door thumped shut, the shroud of tinted windows blinded him.

Walter settled in the opposite seat and Ren pulled back his legs to avoid his partner's knees. When his eye adjusted to the dim light, he noticed Walter was sweating.

"I'm sorry, Ren. You're going to have to refocus your career. Take all the time that you need to figure out what you want to do next."

Ren shoved his shaking hands into the pockets of his jeans, massaging the bag of peanuts he'd received during the flight. "Who says two eyes are necessary to perform surgery? Does the AMA have a ruling?"

Walter shook his head. "I don't know, Ren. But who could afford the liability? Surely you've thought of that. What a waste. You were a brilliant surgeon. The best I've seen."

After turning the corner onto Ren's street the limo slowed to a crawl. Hordes of children played in the street. His neighbors lounged on Restoration Hardware style outdoor seating arranged around a fire pit set up on the driveway catty-corner to Ren's. The Labor Day Neighbor Day block party was in full swing. The limo stopped in front of

Ren's dark house and the trunk popped open. Ren climbed from the car. The smell of toasting marshmallows reminded him once again of his grandfather's Saturday night barbeques.

A neighbor called out, "Hey Gibeaut! You signed up to bring a case of Chardonnay. Nice welch."

Ren pulled out his bag and then he poked his head back inside the limo. "Thank you, Walter, for this lovely evening. I've always wanted to get fucked in a limo."

He walked toward his empty house, grateful when the motion detector lights winked on to guide his way but also irritated that the lights might rekindle his neighbor's sense of injustice.

He entered his house thinking that the single event he could predict about his future was eating a bag of over-fondled airline peanuts, washed down with a glass of welched Chardonnay.

On the fireplace mantle, the light reflected on a photograph Renée had shot and framed for his birthday. The bass he held between his hands was an enormous beauty, but he hadn't kept it. After Renée took the picture, he'd thrown the fish back for the next guy's enjoyment. Just like I've done with my own family, he thought. Catch and release? How stupid is that rule?

As Renée was taking the picture, Ren had been saying, "Don't drop the camera in the..." She'd snapped the shutter as he'd said, "water," catching him in profile, gape-mouthed and stun-eyed, just like the shocked bass in his hands.