

# THE SURGEON

a novel about a  
dedicated man and  
his dramatic life

**W.C. HEINZ**

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# *The Surgeon*

*by W. C. Heinz*

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To the many skilled surgeon

## ~~Author's Note~~

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This book, which the publisher has decided to call a novel, was not intended to be a fictional portrayal of a surgeon of our time. Rather, it was to be a factual narrative, but early in the research it became obvious that for this effort to obtain its objectives it would have to go beyond the beginnings and experiences of any one man. What those objectives were I shall leave to the reader, but he should know that the professional characters portrayed are composites, and that only those giants of the past such as Osier, Billroth, Liston, and Evarts Graham are identified by name. Although the surgical cases dealt with are true, the names, occupations, and other identifying characteristics of the patients have been changed to insure privacy.

Because of the anonymity which the medical profession prefers to impose upon its members I am unable to thank by name those dozen men who gave so freely of their knowledge, patience, and understanding. They know that I am in their debt.

"Good morning, Dr. Carter," the voice of the woman on the phone was saying. "It is now 6:45."

He had been lying there only half asleep in the heavy gray darkness, half waiting for the phone to ring. When it had rung he had picked it up quickly, before it could ring a second time, he had sat up and swung his legs out from under the covers, and now he was sitting on the side of the bed and, with his feet, finding first one slipper and then the other.

"At 8 o'clock, Doctor," the woman's voice was saying, "you're at Mercy Hospital for a pneumonectomy. At 1 o'clock you're at University Hospital for a conference. At 2 o'clock you have a mitral stenosis there. At 5 o'clock you're at your office to see patients until 7. At 8:30 you're at the Academy for a meeting of the Medical Society. That's all."

"Thank you," he said, softly.

"You're welcome, Doctor," the woman's voice said.

He sat there for a moment, listening to his wife breathing evenly in the other bed by the heavy-draped windows, and then he bent over and pulled the phone plug out of the wall jack. He stood up and, carrying the phone, he went out and closed the door softly behind him and walked down the dark hall toward the light of the lamp on the table in the foyer.

Good morning, Doctor, he was saying to himself, hearing the voice again. For twenty years they have been awakening me like this and, unless I have passed them on the street or, perhaps, in a restaurant, I have never even seen them.

In the foyer he put the phone on the table and plugged it in. Then he went into the guest bathroom.

For twenty years, he was still thinking, theirs are the first voices I hear each day and I have no idea what they look like and I am seldom even conscious of the difference in one voice from another. The only one I could ever distinguish was that one with the English accent and I suppose I remember her because she sounded so cultured. In fact, I do not even know where that switchboard is they call from, because Carrie pays the Bill, whatever it is, from the office, and every Valentine's Day, instead of Christmas, she sends them that perfume.

"But what do you want to send them?" she said once. "Mink stoles?"

"I don't know," he said. "I just wonder how they can use up the perfume everybody else sends them on Christmas by the fourteenth of February."

"Oh, for John's sake!" she said. "If that's all you have to think about, why don't you at least look at your mail?"

When he came out of the bathroom he walked to the kitchen and went to the range. He lifted the percolator off one of the back burners and onto a front one, and he could tell from the weight of it that there was enough water in it. He took the top off and saw the fresh coffee grounds and fitted the top back on. Then he turned the gas up under it and, hearing it ignite, he saw the flare of the blue flame and turned it down just enough so that it would not boil over while he shaved.

What this is going to come down to with this Mr. Scheller this morning, he was thinking, the razor in his right hand and starting to shave the lather from the left side of his face, is about five minutes in the three hours or so it is going to take me to do this thing, if the cancer hasn't spread too

far already and if I do it at all. Actually, I can win it in three and a half minutes, or four, but I have those five minutes if I need them, and I lost before because that polyethylene tube slipped. It slipped because it was a first try and I did not flare the flange at the end of it enough, and by the time I had reclamped and recovered I had used up my time. And that, he thought then, is just a professional euphemism, because what I had really used up was my patient's time, not my time but that little Brazilian lawyer's time, the time of that little, dark-haired, dark-eyed Roberto Leon who came into my office so dynamic and decisive and, when I told him what had to be done, said: "I have confidence." I will never forget it, or him, and it was his time.

As he started to shave the right side of his face he shifted the razor into his left hand, but he did automatically, without thinking and without remembering. He had begun to develop the dexterity of his left hand in his third year in medical school, so what ambidexterity he possessed was really born boredom in Parasitological Diseases.

The course lecture was right after lunch when, as he knew by then, the distribution of his twelve pints of blood would be primarily devoted to supplying his digestive organs rather than his brain, which would be slightly ischemic, or sluggish. Because he went reluctantly, he was always one of the last to file in. He would sit in the back, rather than walk down the tiered, curved rows of the old amphitheater, and down at the bottom, backed against the blackboard, that tall, thin, and tired old Westby—Millard Fillmore Westby—would clear his catarrh and begin. He was one of those mumblers who talk to the floor, so what you saw, as you looked down at him from above, was his long and narrow bald head.

The steam radiators were under the low, curved windows, high in the back, and near the top of the high room the temperature must have been in the 80s. On clear days in winter the sun's rays would cut across the room on sharp, slanting planes, and in them the dust would settle slowly and somewhere along the back a steam valve would open and a radiator would hiss.

One day, because the subject was schistosomiasis, which is a disease prevalent in Egypt and the Orient and contracted by wading in infested water, and because he had already decided that he wanted to be a surgeon and would probably never go to Egypt or the Orient anyway, he began to equate the dexterity of his left hand with that of his right. To remain awake he began to write his notes with his left hand, his notebook on the desk arm of the seat to his left, and by the end of the course he could write as legibly, if not as neatly, with his left hand as with his right.

Sometime during that period he began to shave with his left hand and to brush his teeth with it too. Ambidexterity is not an absolute essential in surgery but it is an asset. It increases your speed and smooths out your moves and, if you can do it, you use your left hand almost as much as your right when you work in a right chest, as he would do this day.

So the first thing for me to check on, he was thinking, still shaving, is that they have that polyethylene tubing in three sizes soaking in that germicide. The diameter of the superior vena cava, which is the main vein that drains the blood from the upper half of the body to the right atrium of the heart, varies with the individual, but you can eye-match it for size when you get in there. You can eye-match it, or sight-measure it, or whatever you want to call it, if you have to, meaning if the cancer had spread from the right lung to the pericardium, the covering over the heart, and to the superior vena cava.

He realized then, as he had realized many times over the past eighteen months, that what he was hoping to find, when he opened that chest this day, was something that no sane and decent human being could wish upon another. During those past eighteen months, though, when he could find time, he had perfected his procedure in the dog lab, and now he had four live animals to prove that he could

do this, if he had to, upon a human.

~~Besides, he said to himself now as he had before, my waiting for this and my desire to find it and to defeat it, will have nothing to do with whether this man, this Mr. Scheller, has it or not. Besides, for twenty years I have been seeing this about once every two years and, like all the rest of us, I have been closing them and leaving them to die within days or, at the most, weeks. That is ten cases for me alone in twenty years, and if I find this today I know I can do it and I can cure this man, and that will be the end of all this for all time. Certainly, he thought, it is not wrong for me to wish this for this day.~~

When he finished shaving he went to the window in the guest room and looked across the seventy-five feet of the court toward the opposite wing of apartments and then down at the grass plot with the rhododendrons and laurels. The air had that gray-gauze quality of early morning city air before the day has a chance to assert its character through the smoke and the dust and the fog.

If it has any character, he thought, starting to dress. A man shouldn't live in a city like this. He should live in the suburbs of a city of about 150,000 where a good clear day has a chance. It takes about 150,000 in population to support a thoracic surgeon, but the trouble with me is that, when I started, the thoracic giants were either in the universities or the big cities and I had to be with the best. I had to learn from the best and then you learn and the first thing you know you are one of the best and you're fifty-two and the big city has you. What it all comes down to, when you think of it, is that a man goes where his kind of work is, whether he's a fruit picker or a bridge builder or a chest surgeon or whatever he is.

He was dressing from the mahogany valet stand that they sent him air freight, special handling, from Costa Rica after he went down there to deliver that paper on "The Management of Chest Injuries" and to do that lobectomy for tuberculosis. He had admired one just like it in that little Juan's house on the hillside outside San José, deriving an actual pleasure sensation from the look and the feel of the hand-turned and hand-polished mahogany across the top where it represents the cervical region and the shoulder girdle in the human anatomy.

Then that little Juan says nothing and never lets on and just sends it, he thought, and he's a good little surgeon, too. If I had to describe him I would call him quick, rather than fast. He does everything quickly, and his only fault is that he doesn't know change of pace and his operations have an almost frenetic quality about them. That could be putting it a little strongly, because it doesn't make one bit of difference in the final result, but the operations that are pleasing to watch and to do are the ones that have the smoothness and the easy natural rhythms of a fine piece of music.

Maybe that's just a North American temperament talking, and you don't get that every day, anyway. A man operates according to his personality, and the Central and Latin Americans are different, and so is their music. That could be the answer right there.

He left his tie and his coat on the stand and he walked to the kitchen. He could smell the heavy-bodied, soft, head-filling aroma of the coffee, and he turned the gas off under the percolator and went to the counter and came back, carrying the cup on the saucer. He started to pour the coffee, the steam following it but coming up off it, into the cup, and he saw from the color in the bottom of the white cup that it would be strong enough. He filled the cup almost to the top and then he carried it to the table and put it down and walked out to the foyer and to the front door.

Opening the door, he bent over and picked up the folded copy of the newspaper. As he walked back he opened the paper and read the headline:

RUSSIA EXPLODES 2 MORE;  
K LAUGHS OFF THE BIG ONE



Damn, he thought, feeling the depression come, as he had felt it come many times in the past year or so. ~~I am feeling good today because I know I can do this thing, and I can cure a man. It makes me feel that I am important, which every man must feel, but after I have worked at my best for three tough hours and saved a life these idiots talk about dropping bombs that will take millions of lives, and what satisfaction does that leave me or any man who is doing his job in our time?~~

He was seated now at the table and he put the paper down. He tried the coffee, black, felt the cup too hot against his lips, and took just one small sip. Then, without looking at the headline again, he opened the paper to the sports page and found Red Smith's column on the left and folded the paper and started to read.

"Men who have heretofore," he read, "looked upon wealth with admiration, if not downright tenderness, choked on their rock Cornish hen in Twenty-One yesterday, when one of their number got up on his hind legs and put the knock on \$302,365. Even the Chambertin turned pale.

"Assembled at lunch were some of the owners and trainers of horses that will endeavor to extract this sum from . . ."

When he heard the white wall phone ring he reached over with his left hand and took it down. He took another sip of the coffee and put the phone to his ear.

"Yes?" he said.

"Dr. Carter?" the feminine voice said, and he recognized it. "Sally Wheeler."

"Well," he said. "Sarah. How's my gal Sal?"

"Terrible," she said.

"Oh, come on," he said. "It's too early in the day for that."

"It's not too early for me," she said. "We're in a real jam here, and I called to say that your 8 o'clock case, your Mr. Scheller, has to be moved back."

"To when?"

"I'm hoping for 9:30 or 10."

"How about another room?"

"Not this morning."

"What's going on?" he said. "What kind of a schedule have you got?"

"The schedule's not the problem," she said, "but we had a real free-for-all last night. Don't even ask me about it."

"I won't."

"We got two out of an auto crack-up. We had a stabbing, two Caesareans—and I'm just giving you the hit shows. The girls I have on call I had in here all night, and one of them is having her period. You know that one who has dysmenorrhea?"

"Yes," he said, although he had no idea about whom she was talking.

"You know, the one who fainted the other day. Well, even she came in, but she spent most of her time flat on her back in the nurses' lounge. Anyway, three of our major instrument kits are just now being cleaned and they have to be autoclaved and set up. Dr. Berkman and the great Jaffrey are also delayed, but I thought I'd call you first."

"You're my gal," he said.

"Listen," she said. "That reminds me. Your young friend Stanczyk has been on an emergency in Room Three since 6 o'clock. The way he's calling for blood he's not enjoying himself."

"What's he doing?"

"A sub-total gastrectomy, but what I started to say is that he's got your room, so if he ever gets out of there you'll follow him."

"All right, Sal," he said. "I'll see you."

~~"Listen," she said. "Another morning like this and you'll see me, but as a cardiac patient."~~

"You'll handle it," he said.

"Stop flattering me," she said. "Good-bye."

She certainly will handle it, he thought, when he had hung up. He had been waiting for this morning and this operation for eighteen months. He could drink his coffee now, however, and feel neither annoyance nor frustration, because years ago he had come to accept that few days, even as few operations, go exactly as you foresee them, and because, for as long as he had known her, Sarah Wheeler had had that quieting influence upon him that only the really competent can impart to others.

"We've got this operating-room supervisor," he was telling someone, not another doctor, not long ago, "who used to be a great scrub nurse. You ask me if a surgeon ever gets nervous. Well, in my first year of residency, about 3 a.m., this emergency case came in, a woman out of an auto accident, and I had to relieve the pressure on the brain. I'd assisted on this kind of thing and I knew what I had to do, but when you do it your first time you're nervous as hell. After all, it's just you with the assistant resident and the intern and the scrub nurse and the anesthetist, and you're the boss.

"Anyway, I was sweating right through my scrub suit, but you have a tendency to hold your hands out and this gal I'm telling you about, this Sally Wheeler, was slapping the right instrument in there every time. When I wasn't so sure what I wanted next, she had it in there. She wasn't much older than I was but she'd been around those operating rooms while I was just going through med school.

"A good scrub nurse," he had told whoever it was, "is like a good caddy. A good caddy may not be able to make the shots himself but he knows his course. You finish a shot and walk up to your ball and stick out your hand and the club he gives you is the one you'd better use."

Sally's no great intellect and she's a little too flip for some people sometimes, he was thinking now, walking to the range and pouring another cup of coffee, but somebody should have married her. She's about fifty-three now and carries too much weight and those varicose veins forced her out of the operating room, but about twenty-five years ago somebody finishing up his residency would have been a lot better off with Sally than marrying social standing or intellectual stimulation or whatever those losers married. The trouble is, women like Sally don't want that kind anyway.

He walked back to the table and sat down. Then he took the phone off the hook and dialed the hospital and, while he waited for the answer, he took another drink of coffee.

"Mercy Hospital."

"Good morning," he said. "This is Dr. Carter. Do you think you can find our eminent thoracic surgical resident, Dr. James Bronson?"

"Yes sir, Doctor. I'll try. . . . I'm ringing. . . . Just a moment. . . . Here he is."

"Hello?"

"James? Matt Carter."

"Good morning, Doctor."

"You know my 8 o'clock has been delayed?"

"Yes, sir."

"How's everything else?"

"Yes and no."

"What's the trouble?"

"I have a question about Benjamin Davies."

And I know what your question is, he thought. You want to know why I'm taking him off the morphine.

"Shoot," he said.

~~"His night nurse called me, and said the sedation is wearing off and the patient is starting to complain. I checked the orders you left last night, and I see you don't want him to have any more morphine. It seems to me that the pain will increase and I'm wondering if you want to revise the orders."~~

"No," he said, "and I'll tell you why. You and I know this man is terminal, and he hasn't got more than about thirty-six hours, at the most, to go. When Bob Robinson and I operated on him originally a couple of years ago he forbade me to tell his wife it was a cancer. I went along with this, and now I have to pay the price."

"That's not right," Bronson said.

"I've never met his wife. When we operated on him he told her it was for an old football injury and, as far as I know, she never came to the hospital. When he checked in a couple of days ago she was with him but I was operating and Bob Robinson saw her. Since then the grown daughter has arrived in town but I've had him heavily doped up all the time and they're complaining. When they come in to see him, if he's awake at all, he doesn't recognize them, and they want to talk to him."

"I see."

"Now they called last evening to say they'd be in at 9 o'clock this morning, and that's the reason for the orders to take him off the morphine. We know his physical and mental state is such that there won't be much of a conversation, but this is a husband and a father and this is going to be the last chance these people will have to see any resemblance to the man they knew. After all, they're going on living, so I'm allowing them this."

"I understand."

"As a matter of fact, when they see him and find out he's having pain they're going to come running to me to ask me to put him back on the drug. He won't be off for long."

"I see."

"You'll soon find out that for every patient you treat you've got to treat two or three or four relatives."

"I've found that out already."

"Just remember that, about four thousand years ago, when the patient died they cut off the surgeon's hands. They later amended that custom so that, when the surgeon failed, he was given to the patient's relatives to do whatever they wanted with him."

"Then things are improving?"

"We sometimes wonder. How's Mrs. Kirk?"

"She's doing all right. She had some nausea."

"That's expected. Did they change her position from her back to her right side?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know why?"

"I have an idea."

"That's to reduce any chance of pneumonia."

"She's a very fine woman."

"And she's got two nice girls and, I understand, a fine husband. We're not going to tell her that I just opened and closed her chest without being able to do anything for her, but I've got to tell her husband. Hell be in this morning, and I've got a little time now with this delay. Tell the nurse to call me if I'm not on the floor while he's there, and if I'm not in the O.R."

"Yes, sir."

"How's Bernie Waterman?"

~~"Fine. He had a good night, and he says he's hungry."~~

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"You may not believe it, but in about three weeks or a month I'll buy that kid a steak, and he'll be able to eat it."

"I believe it, Doctor."

"All right. If you have no problems, I'll be over in an hour."

That Bronson is all right, he thought, finishing his coffee. He's conscientious and he's a learner and I'll open his eyes today if we get to that vena cava problem. I'd really like Stan to see it but Sally says he's having trouble and he'll work his way out of it but this won't be the day for him to watch me. This will be one of those days when he'll be doubting how good he is and right now he's at that stage where he suffers a little by comparing himself to me.

That's what happens when you like some kid and you take him under your wing. While he's interning or in his residency he thinks you're a god. He may dream it, but he never quite dares say to himself that he will be as good as, or better than, you. Then he's out two years and starting to move, and one day it comes to him that maybe he can be you. Now he's lost a god, and when he looks at the man he's found he forgets that you've got twenty years to his two. This man, toward whom he feels a challenge for the first time, is too much for him, and this is when he needs you as much as he ever had. This is no time to dazzle him, because as much as you have enjoyed it you can never be a god again anyway, and he doesn't need that any more.

It is like Pete Church and me, he thought. When I came back after five years and watched him again that first day doing that lobectomy I thought: "He's slipping. He's not what he used to be." The truth was he was better than he had ever been, but while I had been moving forward whole yards at a time his progress was in inches, as it must be after so many years and when about all that there is left for you to do is to refine your techniques. It was only the gap between us that had narrowed.

Of course this Mr. Scheller's vena cava may be free of the cancer, anyway, he thought. He had rinsed the cup and saucer at the sink and left them on the drainboard and he was walking back to the guest room. You can't really be certain about a thing like this from the X-rays, but after you have looked at enough of them you can almost sense it. If I get shut out again I hope it's because this vena cava is clean and not because the cancer has spread to the diaphragm and it's hopeless and I've got another Mrs. Kirk.

So how will I tell Mrs. Kirk's husband? How will I tell him that in five months or six he will be left alone with two little kids? He will look at me and force a smile and say: "Well, Doctor, what did you find?" I'll look back at him and somehow I'll tell him, although I don't know exactly how I will do it because I have never learned it in twenty years and I never will.

When he finished dressing he went out and closed the door behind him. He rang for the elevator and looked at his watch and saw it was 7:40.

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"Good morning, John," he said to the doorman. "Good mornin', Doctor," big John said, handing him the car keys. "It's still across the street where you're leavin' it last night."

"That's all right. How's your health?"

They were standing on the sidewalk, under the awning. Big John, in his uniform overcoat, seemed bigger than ever.

"I'm not for complainin'."

Any day now big John would tie one on. About twice a year he tries to challenge single-handedly the combined inventories of Schenley and National Distillers and then his son, the cop, comes into the office on his way home from the precinct and he says: "Dad's got that bronchitis again, Doctor. Will you write out that prescription and send a note to the superintendent saying you're treating him and he'll be back to work in a couple of days?"

"So what kind of a day are we going to have?" he said now, feeling the chill.

Across the street, in the park, the two black oaks near the fence still held some of their jagged, dried, rust-brown leaves. Beyond them the single-pointed, almost ovate, light brown leaves of the big gray beech would cling, most of them, into the winter and beyond it, but the maples and the plane trees were already bare.

"I'll not be predictin' the weather, Doctor. There's too much smoke and fog every day now."

"That's right."

"Now you're a doctor, and you'll be knowin' this better than I, but I think it's them Bolsheviks explodin' their bombs that's makin' this."

"You may know as much about it as I do," he said.

"I'll be goin' home now and to bed, anyway," big John said.

"Good."

He drove the Mercedes down the half-block to the dead end and swung it around the concrete stanchion and came back past the apartment house. At the corner, as he passed under the traffic light, it changed from green to yellow, so he turned left, knowing that he could pick up three green lights going south before he turned west again and, if he timed it right, pick up three more green lights before he would have to stop.

Near the first corner, in the gray dampness, a middle-aged woman in a green coat with the fur collar held tight around her throat and her hair in curlers was curbing a black cocker spaniel. At the bus stop on the next corner two teen-age girls, their stacked books cradled in their crossed arms, were talking and laughing, and on the one-way street the traffic, mostly trucks and taxis, the taxis cruising empty or heading back to the garage, moved easily and with a shushing sound.

It is all right, he thought, knowing again the sensation that is not nervousness, but the starting small, spreading feeling of excitement. When he was younger and just beginning and still insecure, every operation would be prefaced by anticipation and tension. He would lie in bed the night before and play it over and over, trying to imagine every complication that he could possibly run into and trying always to think one step ahead. What, he would ask himself, if I run into this? Now he was fifty-two and had opened more than three thousand chests, and he had it all so beautifully systemized that each move was almost a reflex. It is never boring, because no two are exactly alike, but now, in most of them, the tension is gone and so is almost all of the exhilaration, and now you just refine and refine and refine.

"My God, Matt!" Bob Robinson said to him one day, assisting and watching him dissect around the aorta, which is the great artery. "How simple can you make it?"

Rob will be a little anxious today, he thought. We've got those four dogs, living, but he won't really be convinced until we succeed in a human. Thinking this, he could see the superior vena cava, thin-walled and showing the dark blue of the de-oxygenated blood it is returning to the heart and, where it crosses it, he could see the right pulmonary artery, thicker-walled than the vena cava and pink, and both of them about the size of a man's thumb.

Sally won't have that jam cleared away before 10:30, he thought now. He turned right then and, finding no parking space in front of his office, he drove halfway down the block before he found one. After he had backed in he walked back and through the arcade and around the fish pool, dry now and its bottom covered with damp leaves, and he unlocked the door and went in.

He walked through the heavy, close air of the darkened waiting room and through Carrie's office and into his own. He turned on the lamp on the end table beside the sofa and the hanging light over his desk and saw the stack of opened mail, where he had left it the night before, with Carrie's note, scrawled on a piece of memo paper, lying on top: "will you please look at these!"

Paper work, he thought. If there is anything you don't want to put your mind to when you would rather be operating it is paper work. You don't want to put your mind to it after you have been operating, either. In fact, you don't ever want to put your mind to it, if you can help it.

He sat down and picked up the first letter. It was written on notebook paper, white with light blue lines, the rectangular folds still showing, the writing in blue ink level with the lines, but labored and awkward.

Dear D.R. I don't know who else to turn to for help. D.R. as you no Wm. Siler was cut off the Welfare last June. Just as soon as you said he was able to work they cut him off. D.R. he have look high and low for a job and he just can't find one and you have been so good for him I am wondering if you know a job. . . .

What she sees in that sob I don't know, he thought. Maybe he's the first and only man she ever had, but he's got the intelligence of a ten-year-old and it is all you can do to get an answer out of him or to get him to look at you. In a stolen car, too, he remembered, and he plants it on top of a fire hydrant and the intern who rode the ambulance said there was water and oil everywhere. Multiple broken bones, and then four years later he comes in with that traumatic aneurism, that dilation, of the aorta.

Today we'd bypass an aneurism like that with the artificial heart pump, but on that Siler we made a temporary shunt with that cow's carotid artery from that kosher slaughter house. That rabbi was a nice little man and they always cut the carotids at the angle at the jaw so he preserved the length we needed for the shunt instead of cutting it at the origin in the chest the way they do in the commercial stock yards. You might almost say that was another example of the wisdom of the rabbinical laws, and then we took that aorta from that marine killed in that three-car wreck and preserved it by freeze-drying and gas-sterilized it and grafted it onto that aorta of our Mr. Siler.

What this skinny, sandy-haired, squint-eyed Siler doesn't know is that he's walking around today with about two inches of the aorta of a U.S. marine in him. Then he uses a mail drop to get \$65 a month from welfare but he moves in with her and she gets another \$65. That's \$130 and then she does daily cleaning at different places but not enough in any one place to get on social security and lose that welfare, and Carrie can handle this.

"You answer," he wrote in pencil at the top of the letter. Then he underlined the "you," and put the letter aside. He picked up the next one, and saw the letterhead of The American Association for Thoracic Surgery.

This is to confirm acceptance of your paper entitled 'Radical Pneumonectomy for Carcinoma of the Lung' for presentation on the scientific program of The American Association for Thoracic Surgery. Your paper will be presented on April 17. The exact order of presentation has not been decided as yet, but. . .

He put that on top of the first letter. He picked up a letter typed on single-sheet male personal stationery, and when he did not recognize the engraved name and the suburban address, he looked down at the bottom and saw the signature "Vi Landers." The i was dotted with a small circle.

This is the second one in about ten days, he thought, and I will bet you dear Vi has lost again. I remember him now, the name on the letterhead, a benign tumor in the upper lobe of the right lung about a month ago, a retired real estate broker in his late fifties and free game for dear Vi.

"Dear Dr. Carter:" he started to read. "I am writing this while my patient is taking a nap, because it is getting so that he watches everything I do, and there are some things I think you should know. . . ."

I'd bet, he thought. I'D bet he's got a wife somewhere, or you've overestimated his economic resources or his married daughter doesn't like you or he eats onion sandwiches before he goes to bed.

In the first place, the patient is fine. He has no more pain, his blood pressure is normal and his appetite has improved. Except for his nap he is up all day (and into the night) and he really has no more need for me. That is, I should say he has no more need for my nursing services. He needs me to cook for him and clean house and do the shopping and run errands.

As you may recall, when I came out here with him, my understanding was that he had a maid who came in for four hours daily. Since I have been here, however, she has come only on Thursdays, so you can imagine what I have been spending most of my time doing.

I think you should also know that everything else is not as it appeared, either, and that is why I am writing this. Last evening, to my great surprise, he suggested that we go out to dinner. We did, and he had two bourbons before we left and another at dinner. When we came home he talked more freely than he has before, and after I gave him his sleeping pi'll he told me that the bank owns this place and just about everything else.

I immediately thought of you, because you know how I respect you, and after what you have done for him I wouldn't want you to be stuck for your Bill. Please, however, do not write me or call me about this, as he sorts all the mail and overhears any conversations I have on the phone.

As you know, we will be in for his check-up next Thursday at 4 p.m., anyway. At that time, will you please make it plain to him that he has no more need for me? I'm sure you will, and I hope all else goes well with you.

Your good friend,  
Vi Landers

My good friend, he thought. If we weren't short of private-duty nurses, like everything else, I'd lose my good friend quick. My good friend must be about forty-one or forty-two now, and she'll never pick a winner. She's got a nice body, or used to have, and about fifteen years ago it was interns and then residents and then young doctors and now patients. You're trying to speed a patient's recovery and

she's holding it down. You're trying to get him to believe in himself, and she's trying to get him to depend on her.

---

"Have you Billed this yet?" he wrote in pencil at the top of the letter, and then he encircled the letterhead.

He picked up a postcard and glanced at the aerial photo of the modern white concrete and glass hotel on the beach. Turning it over, he saw the Miami, Florida, postmark and he read the scrawled writing: "Down here to give Father some of this wonderful sunshine. He's feeling fine and we both send you our thanks again. Best, Isabel Damon."

She's the one, he thought, who came in here after the operation complaining that Father had lost so much weight that his gums shrank and now they had to get him new dentures and could I please take something off the Bill? So I tell Carrie to take \$200 off, and they're nice people and appreciate everything I did for Father and now they want me to know they're thinking of me while they're having their good time in Miami. They forget it's my money they're having this good time on, but Carrie won't forget. Carrie just drops it in here, but she'll hit me with it.

The next letter was on pale yellow folded stationery, with a small purple orchid in the upper left hand corner. Although it had been lying open for probably twenty-four hours a slight odor of perfume still came off it, and he recognized the handwriting in the purple ink.

My dear Doctor Carter—I bet you'll be surprised to hear from me again so soon. I know you're busy (you always are!) but I imagine you like to take a few moments off and relax and read letters from friends (I should say patients, but I consider myself your friend.)

I am feeling much better since you reassured me, and I hope Dr. Berman won't mind waiting for my money. I got a Bill from him for \$40 (!) I didn't think it would be that much as this very young doctor, maybe a student, got to practice on me so I thought maybe it wouldn't cost so much. Anyway . . .

Why do I get hooked by all these neurotics? he thought, putting the letter on top of the other three he had read. You feel sorry for people, and they abuse it. This kind of stuff is all right for Jaffrey, who needs these hypochondriacs as much as they need him, but I don't have to be involved with every. . .

He heard the outside door open and close. He looked at his watch and saw it was 8:35, too early for Carrie, and then she walked in.

"What are you doing here?" she said, looking at him and making a show of surprise.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

"Listen, I've got work to catch up, but you have an 8 o'clock."

"Delayed."

"Mr. Scheller?"

"Right."

"Not poor Mr. Scheller. You know we had to postpone him once because we couldn't get him a bed. What's the matter over there?"

"They've got a traffic jam. I'll do him at 10 or 10:30."

"Well, at least you're looking at the mail. Honestly, some of it has been lying there since . . ."

"I'm not looking at it any more. I've retired."

"Oh, for John's sake, Matt."

"I'll go over it when I get back."

"You can't. You and Rob are going to be crazy from 5 o'clock on. You've got the biggest patient



load in weeks."

"Never mind. Call ~~what's-his-name~~ over at University and tell him I can't make the conference a  
1. I'm delayed."

"You know you have a mitral there at 2."

"That reminds me," he said. "See if you can get Mrs. Scheller on the phone, or her son. Tell them  
I'll be doing him around 10 or 10:30, so if they can get over there, they can see him for a while now."

"Honestly," he heard her saying, walking to her desk and talking to herself. "Poor Mr. Scheller.  
That place is getting worse all the time."

You can't buy them like Carrie, he thought She and Rob and I get on one another's nerves once in  
a while, but she's right about the mail and she's right with the patients. They come in here feeling  
sorry for themselves and she mothers them, and I'll bet she gets Christmas cards from some we cured  
ten years ago. She's therapeutic. Mother Carrie.

"Good morning," he heard her saying, and he knew she was talking with the answering service.  
"Well, that's because I'm full of vim today. What have you got? All right. That's all?"

"Matt," she said, hanging up. "Dr. Fineman has been trying to reach you. He's waiting for your  
call."

"Who?"

"Dr. Fineman."

"Call him," he said, "and look up his first name."

"It's Harry," she said, dialing. "Hello, Dr. Fineman? Dr. Carter's office. Dr. Carter will talk with  
you now."

"Hello, Harry?" he said, feeling the split-second guilt from the familiarity he knew that Fineman  
whom he had never seen, would expect. "How are you?"

"Good," Fineman said. "You?"

"Okay. What's your problem?"

"I've got a woman," Fineman said, "the wife of an attorney, and last night she was eating a  
hamburger, and a piece of meat or a sliver of bone got caught in her throat. She says it's been making  
her cough, so it must be in her trachea or bronchi. She called me at 8 this morning, so I've been trying  
to get you. Have you got time to take care of her?"

"I'll make time," he said. "I'd better bronchoscope her. I've got a friend whose eighty-two-year-  
old mother, a couple of months ago, did something like this with a chicken bone. She neglected it, and  
the bone perforated into the mediastinum and she died."

"But don't tell this woman that. She's the nervous type, and it'll scare her to death."

"Of course not. I'm telling *you*. When did she eat last?"

"Last night. The hamburger."

"Then we can bronchoscope her right away. How long will it take her to get to Mercy?"

"She can be there in a half-hour. She can take a cab."

"Okay. What's her name?"

"Louise Brower. She's fifty-three."

"All right. Hold a minute, and I'll turn you back to Miss McKeen, and she'll book her into the  
hospital."

He put his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone.

"Carrie? Pick up Dr. Fineman on three. He's got a woman with a piece of meat stuck somewhere  
and I'm bronchoscoping her. She'll be at the hospital in a half-hour."

"How in heaven's name are you going to do her this morning?" Carrie said. "You've got Mr."

Scheller."

~~"They won't be ready for him yet. I can do this in ten minutes. Pick up three."~~

So the first thing he tells me is that she's a woman, he thought, and the second thing he tells me a nice offhand manner is that her husband is a lawyer. The shysters have us all scared, and now he's clear and I've got the ball. I'd do this woman, whatever her name is, anyway. I'd do her if her husband were a bank robber, but it's something the way they always let you know now if there's a lawyer in the family or somewhere in the shrubbery. The shysters have us on the defensive and the shame of it all is that every day now you have to order a lot of unnecessary tests. You overload the labs, which are too busy anyway, just to play it safe on the legal side and the public gets stuck with rising hospital costs. Too many insurance companies are settling out of court, too, and that's another reason we're all stuck with rising rates.

"I've got a woman swallowed a piece of meat or a bone the wrong way," he heard Carrie saying, talking to the hospital. "She'll be there in a half-hour. Mrs. Louise Brower. B-r-o-w-e-r. No, give her private room, if you've got one. She'll be out by late afternoon."

"A general anesthetic," he said, walking out to Carrie's desk. "Pentothal."

"Pentothal," Carrie said, into the phone. "Okay."

"I'll go over now," he said, when she had hung up. "I'll call you later."

"Wait a minute," she said. "Are you and Marion going to that dinner party tonight?"

"What?" he said, and then remembering, "I forgot. I should go to the Academy. I missed the last meeting."

"I know."

"I could go to the Academy, and pick Marion up at the party about 10:30."

"Didn't she talk to you about it last night?"

"No. I got home late and she was still asleep this morning. Call her about 10, and see what she thinks."

"I know what she thinks. She's been to the last two alone. She thinks she hasn't got a husband."

"Is it formal?"

"Yes, and that's why I want to know. Your two shirts are still at the laundry, and if you're going dress here, I'll have to go out and buy you another one."

"Do that, and call Marion and tell her I'll see her there at 8 o'clock."

"Pick her up at home."

"All right. Good-bye."

"One other thing," Carrie said, but the phone was ringing, and she picked it up. "Dr. Carter's office."

As he opened the door to the court the postman was about to push the bell. He said hello to him and took the mail, holding it in both hands, and closed the door again with his shoulder. He carried the mail back into Carrie's office, a dozen or more flat envelopes and a couple fat with samples of sedatives or antacid pills for which he had no use, glossy brochures from equipment houses, at least one of them a new one putting the last of its economic resources into this advertising, a square cardboard box with samples of a new suture material, a copy of *Newsweek*, a copy of *Life*.

"That's all right, Mrs. Mossman," she was saying on the phone but shaking her head at him. "Dr. Carter or Dr. Robinson will be able to see you on Friday. I'm putting you down for 4:30. All right?"

"Enjoy yourself," he said, turning.

"Listen, Matt," she said, hanging up the phone. "One more thing."

"I'll call you," he said.

One more thing, he thought, walking to the car, and then another. Maybe I am really starting to get old, but the only place I get any peace these days is in the operating room. That's the way it should be, I suppose, because that's the only place where I really have something to contribute anyway. The O.R. has become my only sanctuary, and I don't know how those general practitioners and internists can stand it without it. Nothing can get at you in the O.R., nothing or nobody. It is really an only sanctuary.

The receptionist saw him as soon as he came through the door, and smiled at him.

"Good morning," he said. "How's everything?"

"Just fine."

In the doctors' lounge he pushed the light button next to his name. He looked at his watch and saw it was 8:58, and signed in on the registry. He was starting toward the elevators when he became aware of the lighted coffee shop and heard the low sound from it coming out of the open glass door. He walked in and sat down at the counter.

"Hello, Doctor."

"Why, Mac!" he said, seeing her two stools away. "I didn't expect to see you here."

Mary MacGowan was in her street clothes, a dark blue coat over her shoulders, her overnight bag at the foot of the stool. She was all of five feet, one inch, and about a hundred pounds, about fifty years old now, her hair going all gray but her complexion still smooth and young.

"I know," she said, smiling. "I didn't expect to be here."

"I saw you on the 4 to midnight with my Mrs. Kirk," he said, sitting down next to her.

"That's right. She's a lovely lady."

"She is."

"I'm sorry about her. I'm sorry you couldn't do something for her."

"I'm sorry, too. That kind make you feel so helpless."

"Not you, Doctor. You should never feel that way."

"You know her husband is that TV newscaster."

"I know. I watch him when I'm home."

The Puerto Rican counter girl was wiping the counter in front of him with a paper napkin.

"Coffee, black," he said to her, "and a piece of coffee cake. Mac?"

"No, thank you. I have to be going."

"So you did a double shift?"

"They're short-handed again, so I had your Mr. Davies on the midnight to 8."

"How was he when you came off duty?"

"He was sleeping again. He was restless about 6 and complained of a little discomfort but I note you didn't want him to have any more morphine. Dr. Bronson said he'd checked with you about that."

"That's right. The patient's family is coming in, and they want him alert. Hell be all right for a while."

"Both his wife and his daughter called this morning," she said. "They seemed very disturbed."

"They can't accept it," he said. "How are your two kids?"

"Fine. Annie's finishing up business college, and John made the dean's list again last semester."

"He'll be an engineer before you know it."

"In one more year."

"What will you do when you haven't any more educations to pay for? Buy another duplex?"

"Not on your life," she said, standing up. "You know what I'm going to do right now?"

"You're going home and sleep until 3."

"I'm going home and leave this," she said, picking up the overnight case, "and I'm going to take my tool box and take a bus up to the apartments and replace a fuse."

"You're kidding."

~~"No, I'm not. You won't believe this, but last night one of my tenants—this woman married to a~~  
oaf—called the Private Duty Office and insisted on talking to me. They called me off Mrs. Kirk and I  
phoned her back. She said: 'Mrs. MacGowan, you've got to come up here right away and fix the lights.  
They won't light in the living room or the dining room.' I said: Then it's a fuse. Have your husband go  
down in the basement and the new fuses are right on top of the fuse box.' You know what she said?"

"I might guess."

"She said: 'My husband doesn't know how to change a fuse, and he's afraid of being electrocuted.  
He must be six feet two and weighs over two hundred pounds, and that's God's truth.'"

"I believe you," he said and then, thinking the rest to himself: and that one you married must have  
been like that and the kindest thing he ever did was leave you and the two kids.

"The God's truth," she was repeating.

"So you really have a tool box now?" he said.

"I do. Two dollars and fifty-eight cents from Sears, Roebuck. Now I've even learned how to  
rewire a lamp and change a washer in a faucet."

"Good. The next time I need a plumber at the office I'll call you. Last month it took us two days  
to get one."

"Anytime," she said, smiling, "but right now I'm about to fall asleep on my feet. I'll be back for  
Mrs. Kirk at 4."

"You're the best, Mac," he said, "and thanks for everything."

And she really is the best, he thought, having his coffee and cake. She may fall asleep on her feet  
but if she does it won't be while she's on duty. You won't walk in and find her asleep in the chair like  
did dear old Vi Landers, my good friend.

It had happened about five years before. The patient was in terminal condition. He was an old  
Italian landscape gardener with no money but with his grown kids all kicking in to give Pop the best,  
including private nursing around the clock. It was about 7:15 in the morning, and dear old Vi was  
sitting by the window, her head down and asleep.

When he took the patient's wrist to feel for the pulse, there was none.

He pressed the back of the hand with his thumb and, when he released the pressure, the thumb  
mark stayed white and he quietly picked up dear old Vi's stethoscope and put it over the heart and then  
took it off and put it on the foot of the bed.

"Why, good morning, Doctor," she said, obviously thinking he had just walked in.

"Good morning," he said. "How's the patient?"

"He seems to be quite comfortable," she said.

"I know," he said. "Has he had any liquid lately?"

"Not for several hours."

"Try to get him to take some right now," he said.

She took the water glass with the bent glass tube in it. She put her right arm behind the patient's  
back, lifting him.

"Now," she said to him, "it's time. . ."

still holding him she turned, and she looked like the old man had just slapped her across the face.

"Why!" she said. "He's dead!"

"I know," he said, and he made the notation on the chart, with the time, and walked out.

Damn, he had thought then, they are paying for nurses because they did not want the old man even  
to be alone again. He went easily and it made no difference to him, but he was alone.

Now he stood up at the counter and picked up his check and paid the cashier. In the hall he pushed the button for the elevator and waited.

"Good morning, Doctor," the elevator boy said. "O.R.?"

"Yes," he said. "Good morning."

The elevator stopped at the second floor. A young Negro girl in the green uniform of a ward maid was waiting for it, and she started to get in.

"You going down?" the elevator boy said.

"No," she said, surprised and hesitating. "I'm going up."

"So am I," the elevator boy said, laughing. "Get in."

"Honest," the girl said, getting in. "That all you got to do?"

"You know me," the elevator boy said.

"I know you all right," the girl said. "That's the last time you'll do that to me. Now, if it's not too much bother, would you mind letting me off on seven?"

"Anything you want," the elevator boy said, still enjoying it. "O.R., Doctor."

When he got off he walked across to the glassed-in nurses' station. There was just the faintest, light, sweet-sharp odor of ether in the air, but he had long ago become insensitive to it, unaware of it even on his person when they were using it almost exclusively and, hours later, he would come home and his wife would detect it immediately.

"How's my gal Sal now?" he said, when she turned from showing the other nurse something in the schedule book.

"Do you really want to know?" Sarah Wheeler said, looking up at him over the tops of her glasses, and then standing up.

"You'll handle it," he said.

"I don't think we can get you into Room Three until about 11:30."

"Stan is still having trouble?"

"He's on his fourth pint of O-Negative. After last night the blood bank may be hollering for help."

"He'll work his way out of it," he said. "Have you seen my invaluable associate?"

"I called him after I called you, but I haven't seen him."

"Dr. Robinson was here a while ago," the other nurse said. "He said to tell you he's seeing patients."

"Thanks," he said, and then to Sarah Wheeler: "I suppose I'll have to do my bronchoscopy down in Emergency."

"Unless you want to do it out on Walker Avenue," she said.

"It's too cold out there, and they'd give me a parking ticket. I've got two already that Carrie has to answer."

"I got one myself the other day."

"While I think of it," he said, "I want to be sure they've got the polyethylene tubing in three sizes in my kit today."

"If you called for it, it'll be there. You know we're efficiency plus."

"I'll be down on Four seeing patients for about twenty minutes," he said. "Then I'll be down in Emergency."

"Enjoy yourself," she said. "I'm leaving on my yacht for the Bahamas."

On the way down the stairs he took out the slip of memo paper on which, the evening before at the office, he had written down the names while he and Bob Robinson had divided up their rounds. Rob had put his in his little black book, carefully writing down, after each cancer case: "Patient

knows. Wife doesn't." Or: "Patient, no. Wife, no. Son, yes."

~~"God, Matt," Rob had said to him, going over the in-hospital cases about a month after he had joined him. "I don't know how you can keep them all straight."~~

"Keep what straight?" he had said.

"Who we're telling what. I walked in this afternoon to see that case we did four days ago, that M Isaacson with the cancer of the left lung ..."

"We told him because he asked, and he took it all right."

"I know, but I thought his wife knew."

"No."

"That's what I found out. She walked me out in the hall and started to question me about his recovery and I said: 'Well, you have to remember he had a cancer. . .'"

"What happened?"

"She went into hysterics. I had to get a nurse, and it took me about ten minutes to get her back to normal. I finally got her to listen and I told her we got it all out."

"We did."

"But I don't know how you remember who knows what."

"I may have a fair memory. I don't know. As long as I'm treating them I remember them, but if a patient I cured five or six years ago walks up to me on the street, I won't have the vaguest idea who he is. He'll be walking around with my big incision on him, but I won't recognize him. If I saw his chest X-rays again I could tell you everything about him— occupation, family, everything—but his face means nothing. You'll get like that."

"I'll have to start keeping a little notebook," Rob had said, and then: "but I don't like it."

"None of us like it," he said, "but we have to face it. Curing a difficult surgical problem is a pleasure, and that's why we chose surgery. Treating a difficult mental or emotional problem, unless you're a psychiatrist, is, to put it succinctly, a pain, but it has to be done."

"I know, but I'm no good at lying."

"I wasn't either, but today I'm one of the world's biggest liars. For a long time I was ashamed of myself. I used to hate myself, but you get over it. I don't mean you'll ever enjoy it."

"You can bet I won't."

"You worry too much about it. In the time you've been around, how many patients have come right out and asked you if they had cancer?"

"Damn few."

"You'll find that ninety per cent never ask the question. If they ask, you're morally obligated to give them the truth, eventually, but you can see it coming, and if the time isn't right you can take the play away until it is."

"Have you ever had a situation where the patient said: 'Tell me, but don't tell my wife' and then the wife says: 'Tell me, but don't tell my husband'?"

"Yes, I've had that, too. Somebody in the family, close to the patient, if not the patient, has to know. You figure out who it is, remembering it's the patient that you're treating."

He had gotten up then, and gone out to the small refrigerator in the back room and poured a bourbon for Rob and a vodka for himself.

"A few years ago," he said when he came back, "I had a case that proved to me that I was right. He was an intellectual—a college professor—who came into town to see me on a Thanksgiving vacation. When I examined him he talked pleasantly enough, but I knew he was scared. He had a fast pulse, he was perspiring, and his skin was cold."

"Anyway, the next day I bronchoscope him and when the biopsy report came back I called his wife at the hospital. She'd been in the office with him, an intelligent woman, and I told her it was cancer. She said on the phone: 'Well, we've always been very close, and I think he should be told.' I said: 'All right, but when I examined your husband and again while they prepared him for the bronchoscopy, I found him apprehensive. Let me tell him in my own way in my own time.' She agreed.

"The next morning I read about it in the paper. He was dead. He'd jumped out of the window of their hotel room. Later on I found out that about 11 o'clock that night, after she'd talked to me, she had said to him: 'The doctor wasn't sure you should be told right away, but you have cancer.' When she went into the bathroom a few minutes later, he went out the window."

"Damn," Rob had said.

"I'd have told him, because she wanted him told, that the tumor was not large, that it was easily removable, that there was small operative risk and a high prospect of cure. All that would have been the truth, too."

"I read a paper not long ago by somebody who doesn't hold with this. He says he tells them, at least ninety or ninety-five per cent of them."

"I know, I've read those papers and listened to them on panels, and they may be right. If they are they're treating a different race of human beings than I am. They say that they tell their patients, and their patients thank them. If we're honest men, it's easier to tell the truth than to lie. Also, we all like to be thanked, but after you've told a patient you couldn't get all the cancer out and he thanks you for being so honest and goes home, something happens to him. He lies there at night, the only one awake in the house, and in his mind, if not in fact, you've pronounced the death sentence on him. Then he begins to feel pain, either real or imagined, and this now is not the same man you told three weeks or three months before, and who thanked you. This is a different man and, whether he'd admit it or not, I'll bet he wouldn't thank you again."

Now, walking down the stairs and looking at the list on the memo paper in his hand, he saw there were six names on it, and he realized that he couldn't see more than three or four before the bronchoscopy. Coming out of the stairwell onto the floor he walked to the nurses' station and saw two of the newer ones sitting and talking with their backs to the desk.

"—and then," one of them was saying, "Jackie Cooper gets this chance to take this temporary assignment in Hawaii. He wants to go, but he doesn't dare tell her, so . . ."

"Oh, hello, Doctor," the other one said.

"Hello," he said. "Did he go to Hawaii?"

"Who?" the one who had been listening said.

"Jackie Cooper."

"Oh," the first one, the talker, said, "that was just a television show, Doctor."

"But did he go?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. How are all my chest patients?"

"No complaints, Doctor."

"All right, but now I'm going to have to check up on you. See if I've got the rooms right."

"Yes, sir," the listener said.

"Benjamin Davies, 410."

"That's right," the listener said, referring to her list.

"Grace Cowan, 415, and Lynn Cummings, 417."



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