

Bearing witness

Dorothy E. Haswell, MB, BS

Walter was dying. It was a bright August afternoon when his wife, Mary, called me at the office. Her voice faltered as she spoke: "Will you come, Doctor? Walter says he's dying. He wants to see you and I don't know what to do for him." I said I would drive out after office hours.

Birds sang overhead and a gentle breeze barely lifted the leaves as I left for Walter and Mary's house. They had been my patients for several years. Walter drank too much; in fact, it seemed as though he was always drinking. Although he came to my office frequently, grinning at his own jokes, he never seemed to want anything in particular.

Small and malnourished, he had become sicker and sicker with cirrhosis. His grin was often quite yellow in those latter days. "Walter, you have to stop drinking," I would tell him. "Your liver can't take it any more." He would grin and say, "I know that, Doc!"

Sometimes he came to the office drunk. "*Why*, Walter?" I would plead. He wouldn't or couldn't explain. The grin would become sheepish as he apologized for bothering me.

What a contrast to Mary: so neat, so perfectly groomed, so proper. She was angry with him. She never actually said so, but it was obvious during her rare visits to the office. Because of that anger I had always thought it strange that she was the one who arranged his appointments. I supposed that she hoped I could persuade him to change his ways.

That summer was exceptionally dusty and hot. As I approached Walter and Mary's street, I passed people I knew, walking their dogs in the cool of early evening. Some waved as I drove by.

Walter was dying. Not that day, but soon.

In a street of identical houses Walter and Mary's was a small, white clapboard bungalow. Immaculately maintained flower beds disguised the grey concrete foundations. Bright impatiens, petunias and geraniums complemented spreading junipers and conical blue spruce. There wasn't a weed to be seen. Walter had told me that he used to love working in the garden, but during these last few years it was Mary who kept it up. Another burden that had fallen on her, he had said.

Behind sheer curtains neighbours were keeping up with the local happenings. I could almost hear them saying, "It's the doctor. She's come to see Walter."

Mary greeted me at the door. Her impeccable house was cool, shaded by the crisp lace that shrouded the windows. Gleaming furniture was carefully covered with hand-embroidered runners. Family photographs hung on the wall above an antique bureau. From an old sepia picture in an oval frame, a young woman in a high-necked, lace-trimmed blouse gazed solemnly. Mary caught me returning that look. "That's Walter's grandmother," she explained.

She led me through the darkened house to Walter's room. "The doctor is here," she announced. Leaving me there, she returned to her kitchen. I pushed open the door and saw Walter lying in his bed.

His eyes were closed. His jaundiced face was smooth and carefree. There was no alcoholic grin. He was sleeping peacefully between starched white sheets.

Walter was dying, but not that day.

Beneath the window stood a plain wooden kitchen chair. I pulled it close to the bed and sat down. I placed my hand gently on Walter's wrist and whispered, "Hello, Walter." His breathing deepened as he slowly awoke. He turned to the



Experience

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sound of my voice and smiled a wide, wholehearted welcome. "Hello, Doc. Thanks for coming." We sat in silence for a while. There was no point in hurrying. Outside the sun was fading but the birds still sang. We could hear dishes rattling in the kitchen, water running, taps being turned on and off. And then the sound of Mary's footsteps as she went out to the backyard.

"She has loved me and been angry with me for so many years," Walter sighed. He paused, and I waited.

"It's nearly over now. I'll be dying soon. We'll both be glad when it happens."

"How can I help you, Walter?" I asked quietly.

"You already have," he said, "by coming here." He hesitated for a moment, and then he asked me to close the bedroom door.

And that is how I came to notice what Walter needed me to see: the hook on the back of the door, from which were suspended a small, grey woollen coat and a little matching cap.

I turned to Walter. His face was very still as he watched me. My unspoken question hung in the air as I sat down again beside his bed.

He reached out and I took his hand. "Can I tell you?" Something settled between us. Then the story came out, in short sentences, with long pauses between.

"It's years ago now, Doc. We had a child. He grew to be three years old. She was devoted to him. He was her life. And mine too. A little boy with sparkling blue eyes and soft fair hair. He was always smiling."

As if from far away I could still hear the birds singing and the breeze lifting the leaves, but all that mattered was Walter's voice as he told me about his boy.

"He had a little tricycle that he loved. He would ride it for hours. It was hard to get him off it long enough to eat." Walter smiled at the memory. "He rode it on the sidewalk and in the drive — sometimes even on the road when we all went for a walk together."

"I was in a hurry the day it happened. Work was all important back then and I was late after lunch. I got into my car and backed out of the drive."

Walter's wide eyes stared into the past. Then he turned and looked at me. I could hear my mind protesting, *No, oh please, no!*

"It was such a little bump. I hardly noticed it."

He closed his eyes and turned away. There was silence again in the room. Walter was in a time and place where there were no words for his sorrow. An eternity went by.

Slowly, he turned and looked at me again. "And I've been dying ever since."

He nodded his head toward the back of the house where his wife still moved among the tomatoes, lettuces

and geraniums. "She's been a good wife. She blames me, but she's never said so. No matter what happened, through all the drinking, she stayed."

We sat a while longer in silence until Walter fell asleep. Slowly the lines of pain left his face.

I found my way to the back door and into the garden. Mary turned toward me as I approached.

"He has told you about our son, hasn't he?" she said. "He never got over it. And neither did I." She sighed and plucked another tomato. "How do you ever get over something like that?"

The question was not for me. I did not venture a reply.

I watched as she gathered herself together. "Will you come to see him again?" I promised to return in a few days.

I visited Walter several more times as he moved toward his death in that perfect room where the little grey coat and cap were kept. He did not speak of the child again. He was always glad to see me. There was never anything in particular that he wanted from me.

Late in September I got the call I was expecting. "Doctor, will you come? Walter is gone." I went one last time to see him at peace forever. ?

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