

Room for a view

Breaking the news

Schwartz, my doctor, called me at work, angry and upset.

"Lieberman, all week I've been phoning, leaving messages. What have I done to deserve this? Have I not been a good doctor? Have I not been there for you all these years? Where the hell have you been?"

"The usual. At work," I said.

"Work? Is that where you've been? You'd better come in."

"Why?"

"It's your tests, Lieberman."

"I feel fine. There's nothing wrong with me."

"Maybe. But I have to talk to you."

"Schwartz, you've been my doctor for 20 years. We know each other — if there's something important, tell me over the phone."

"This is not for the phone."

"What's wrong with the phone? I do business on the phone. I know who I'm talking to on the phone. I trust the phone. Since when do we play games over the phone?" I said. There was a pause. "So, are you going to tell me?"

other. We respect each other. I know how he thinks.

I looked through my schedule.

"Next Monday," I said.

"Too far away," Schwartz said.

"What do you mean too far away?"

"I mean that I have to see you today. This afternoon."

"Impossible. I can't make it. Is this about *you*, Schwartz?"

"It is about me. And you. And your tests."

"Tomorrow afternoon is the best I can do."

"Tomorrow then, three o'clock. We will have an hour." He slammed down the phone.

Probably you know what it's like. A good friend, someone you trust, says you look tired. Until that moment you've been feeling fine. But then they give you this spiel about how pale you look. Your eyes grow heavy and you wonder. People are crazy, the way they start asking questions and looking you up and down. Pretty soon, you lose your optimism and confidence and you question yourself.

I worry whether I have had this conversation with Schwartz or if I am imagining it. I ask what is real, and what is not. I doubt myself.

In my business, I'm only as good as my last deal. Schwartz knows this. He knows I am closing on two buildings in February and the end of the month is murder for me — checking tenants, reviewing accounts, pestering trades, scheduling meetings with lawyers, worrying about supers and managers. Schwartz knows this because I give him tips. He does well by me. Before a deal closes, I admit, I am impossible. What else can I think about? Take a look for yourself: it's a bazaar out there, agents vendors, lawyers, accountants, bankers, private backers — and in the beginning they all have smiles on their faces and everybody is a friend.

Now that I let myself think about it, though, I *have* felt odd the last few days and weeks. I haven't seen my wife and son. Hardly anyone talks to me at work. I go into my office and close the door. The air has been grey this February, the sky misty. The hours pass. I think it's really been months since I have felt alive. I ask myself how I got to work, or whether I've eaten, or what I just said. It's all habit and memory.

Everything is a haze.

Is Schwartz ever on time? Three o'clock, he says. I'm in the waiting room, and he has not come out. Nobody is there. I'm not even sure what day it is. I'm in no mood to read stale magazines. I feel impatient and unwell, my body is heavy, my thoughts move slowly, nothing is clear.

Schwartz comes out to meet me. We walk into his office.

"No receptionist. No nurse," I wisecrack. "No patients."

Schwartz looks quite medical in his white coat. But he is farther away, smaller, and there is a blur to his words. When he shakes my hand his skin feels like wind.

"The symptoms are back," I say. "First things seem normal, then they get smaller, then everything is faint and goes black. I float away. No one is close to me."

For a moment I feel better. The room grows brighter, the heaviness in my body vanishes. A second later, the old feeling returns, a nameless ache runs through my soul.

"Lieberman. Sit."

"I'm not sitting," I say.

Schwartz shakes his head. His eyes vibrate. "This isn't easy for me, either," he says.

He opens up my chart. It is a thick folder filled with his scrawl, lab tests, consultation notes.

"Your writing is atrocious," I tell him. "Even I can't read it."



Fred Sebastian

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because, Lieberman, you idiot, I've got to see you in person. Face to face."

We've had arguments like this for years, Schwartz and me. We hate each

Schwartz nods. He pulls out a couple of lab tests.

"See, look at your blood work."

"I'm looking." Everything is numbers. A few numbers are high. Some are low. I try to add them up, like rents, subtract them, like expenses, to make sense of them.

"Lieberman. Here is your EKG."

Schwartz pulls out an EKG strip from the chart. Usually it is cut and glued to a paper for filing. But this is a long strip. There are blips like little hills, then little scratches, then nothing. Just a straight, dark line.



"So I'm supposed to know how to read EKGs? Tell me what it says."

"Lieberman, look into my face."

"What?"

"You are dead."

For a couple of seconds I am in disbelief. "Don't bullshit me. You call me to your office. You take me away from my work, to play doctor. What's the bottom line? Will you level with me? Are you trying to *make* me sick? Are you?"

"Lieberman, shut up a second, you idiot. Your tests came back. I've checked them over."

"So?"

"You're dead. All the tests point to it. Dead. I'm sorry."

"What kind of joke is this?"

"It's no joke, Lieberman. You're dead. Take it or leave it."

"I don't believe you, Schwartz. I want a second opinion."

Death is a messy business. Doctors stick together. They cover up details. If I was alive, they didn't let on. I saw a second doctor, then a third. So what did they say? Sorry. If Schwartz says you're dead, you're dead. But, if I am dead, how can this be? Who tells me that I am dead? Am I making this up? I tell you the worst part of dying is the shock afterwards; it can go on for months. It's the shock that finally kills you.

I saw six doctors in all. The whole lot said the same thing. I wasn't feeling

any better. So I went back to Schwartz.

"When did it happen?" I asked him.

"Six months ago."

"You mean to tell me I've been dead for six months?"

"More or less," Schwartz said. "Don't you remember?"

"How am I supposed to remember? What happened?"

"Lieberman. What have you been doing the past six months that you are too busy to know whether you are alive or not? What kind of person are you? Don't you remember you've been coming here and we've been having this same crazy argument for six months?"

Now it was my turn to say I was sorry. "My mind has been somewhere else," I said.

Schwartz leaned forward in his white coat. He had heavy eyes and a broad, intelligent forehead. He studied me with a perplexed expression and then reached toward me with one hand. Of course I felt nothing.

"So," I asked. "Is there any more bad news?"

"Yes, Lieberman. The fact is, you've been talking to your memory. Like the light of a distant star long after it has faded."

"But why are you talking back to me?"

"Lieberman, to tell you the truth, I am not here."

"If you are not here, and I am not here, then who the hell is having this argument?"

The world outside is a void. If you want to know the truth, arguing stops me from being alone. It is a force of its own, a gravity that keeps me in orbit. The doctor's office is gone. Everything is black. I see the end, or is it that I am blind? It is not so much pain as a question that eludes me.

Ron Ruskin
Psychiatrist
Toronto, Ont.

Room for a view

A long way down

Rushing to the hospital at 2 a.m., I tell myself, "No hurry, the baby is already dead." Nevertheless I feel compelled to get there quickly. The drive is quiet, the city as sleepy as it ever gets.

I am late for the blessed event. One of my specialist colleagues is cleaning up. The lighting is low, the manner funereal. The specialist speaks in hushed, compassionate tones. Then he leaves.

I sit for a long time, offering my presence to the parents' grief and anger. They try to absorb the loss of their chromosomally normal child, killed by our need for reassurance.

The nurse brings her in and places her in her father's arms. "I didn't think I would want to see her or touch her," he says. Then he turns to me. "Carl, this is Kim." His eyes lock on mine, brimming with tears.

I become aware of the music being piped into the room: Nat King Cole singing "Unforgettable."

Later, after all the forms are signed, I return to say good-bye. Simply entering the room takes an effort of will. It seems to me a holy place, where the loss of a life is being honoured. Mother and father embrace in the middle of the room, Kim between them, and they waltz. Through a little speaker in the ceiling Sarah McLachlan sings:

it's a long way down,
it's a long way down,
it's a long way down to the place
where we started from ...

Carl Wiebe

Assistant professor
Department of Family Practice
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, BC