BE STILL, YOUR HEART

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"Be still, your heart," Barry said, with his usual stupid smirk.

My husband thinks he's funny. And I will grudgingly admit that, every once in a while, he does get off a line that makes me smile. Like the time we were out to dinner with Annette and Tom and Tom was up in arms about some silly thing or other and slammed a fist onto the table, making Nettie's Cobb salad jump out of its bowl and fly all over the place … at which point Barry bowed his head over his laced fingers and murmured, "Lettuce spray." I got a momentary chuckle out of that one.

Mostly though, his idea of humor is that passive-aggressive thing where he insults someone who's done nothing whatsoever to deserve it and then—air quotes—*apologizes* for whatever he said by tacking on a "just kidding" at the end.

And it got worse after Capital One laid him off. None of the other Richmond banks were hiring, and after a couple of weeks of halfhearted job hunting, he started spending most of his time on the couch, drinking beer, watching sports on TV, alternating between anger and depression, hitting me more and more often with his dumb insults and dumber "just kiddings."

Meanwhile, I had troubles of my own. My left knee had been bothering me for months, and it had gotten to a point where it was painful navigating the stairs in our modest Brandermill abode. I made an appointment with Dr. Mark Smith, one of the surgeons at OrthoVirginia who specializes in knees and hips, and he sent me off for an

assortment of tests and scans and what have you and eventually recommended that it was time to trade in my original factory-equipped joint for a shiny new titanium replacement.

"What are you gonna do with the old one, Sal," Barry quipped, when I broke the news, "donate it to the needy?"

Anyway, I made an appointment to have the surgery, set up PT sessions for the first couple of weeks post-procedure, bought myself a walker and a shower stool and one of those grabber thingies for picking stuff off the floor, and on July 2 Barry sulkily drove me to Johnston-Willis for my big day.

Except the pre-op team picked up some atrial fibrillation I hadn't had a clue I was afflicted with, and Dr. Smith sadly told me he couldn't cut my leg open until they brought it under control. Dr. Khan, a hospital cardiologist, had them admit me, and my dear hubby accompanied me up to my room in the IMCU. When I was all tucked in and he was about to abandon me to my fate, Barry leaned close and said, "Be still, your heart."

"Not funny, Bar," I said. "Do you have any idea what—?"

"Just kidding," he cut me off, and then he pecked me on the cheek and went home to suck down some beers and watch the Nationals on TV. God forbid he should miss a ballgame, just because his wife of sixteen years was stuck in the dang hospital.

At least they had me in a private room, hooked up to a beeping heart monitor and with two IVs in my arm, one for saline and the other pumping diltiazem into my bloodstream to bring down my BP (which was up around one sixty over ninety-three) and hopefully my heart rate (which was fluctuating between the one twenties and one forties).

The bed was more comfortable than I would have expected, complete with a remote control to raise it up and down and operate the television and a call button for when I had to be disconnected from the machines so I could get up and pee.

My day nurse was a character. She introduced herself as Cole, and her multicolored spiky hair and half-dozen glittering facial piercings and perky attitude brightened the otherwise gloomy room. The printed legend at the top of the whiteboard hanging on the wall opposite my bed read "Above all else, we are committed to the care & improvement of human life," and in the "My Plan of Care/Goals" section below that Cole scrawled "Get ❤️ acting right!!" with a bright red marker.

When a couple of hours had gone by without any appreciable decrease in my heart rate or blood pressure, Dr. Khan decided to put me on a course of oral flecainide, which he explained is sometimes referred to a "a pill in your pocket," since some people with cardiac issues like afib and various tachycardias carry one at all times to restore normal rhythm when they feel the need, the same way people subject to attacks of angina carry around a tin of nitroglycerin tablets.

Cole brought me a single white pill in a little plastic cup, and I swallowed it with a swig of water—and I'll be darned, within about an hour my monitors stopped beeping and my HR had slowed to a steady sixty-five beats per minute, BP down to one twenty over seventy-one.

Dr. Smith checked in on me before he left for the night and nodded his approval. "We'll slot you in tomorrow," he promised, "and get that knee taken care of."

After Cole went off shift and the night nurse—Ayana, a very friendly older woman who spoke some language that might well have been English but was pronounced

with such a heavy accent that it made absolutely no sense to me whatsoever—took over, an orderly brought me some food. Tuna sandwich, bowl of broccoli, small square of strawberry shortcake, can of ginger ale. I'd asked for mac 'n' cheese and carrot cake with my tuna, but the woman who took my dinner order over the phone told me those items were verboten on what she called the "heart healthy diet" to which I had been restricted.

After I ate, I fiddled with my phone for a while, tried to read a book I'd downloaded but couldn't concentrate on it, and eventually drifted off into a sleep that was interrupted every couple of hours by Ayana coming in to take my vitals.

Barry, my devoted husband, called me twice to see how I was doing.

Just kidding. He didn't call.

The next morning, I woke up to find the abbreviation "NPO" written in giant letters on my whiteboard. When Cole bustled in, I asked her what it meant. "No food or drink today," she explained. "You're gettin' your noonie, my friend!"

"My noonie?" I echoed—and then I got it. "Oh, my *new knee*. Cool. But how does NPO stand for 'No Food or Drink'?"

"It's Latin, sweetie. 'Nil Per Os. Nothing By Mouth.'"

"You get a lot of patients who speak Latin?"

She grinned. "Not so many. But it's the lingua franca here in the medical world. That's—"

"Latin, I got it. But I'm *hungry*."

"Sorry, darlin', them's the rules. And the *bad* news is Dr. Smith has four other surgeries scheduled for today, so he's not going to be able to get to you until three-thirty

at the earliest. You'll be ready to eat an elephant by the time you wake up from the anesthesia."

At ten o'clock, with my monitors continuing to show All Systems Go, I still hadn't heard a peep out of my darling husband, so I broke down and called *him.*

"Hey," Barry grumbled, barely audible over the sound of the TV in the background. "I was just about to call you."

That, I was pretty sure, was a lie, but whatever. I told him what was going on, and he said let him know when they took me back down to pre-op, and he'd probably swing by the hospital to look in on me before they put me under.

Probably.

"You better watch out for that surgeon of yours," he added, before disconnecting the call, "I hear he's a real cut-up."

Hilarious.

By four thirty, I was starting to think an elephant steak might just hit the spot, after all. When Dr. Smith finally came into my room, my initial thought was, *It's show time!*

But then I saw the look on his face, and he was even sadder than he'd been the day before.

"Sally," he said dolorously, "I am truly sorry, but we're not going to be able to get you in today, after all. Both of our operating theaters are occupied, and by the time they finish up and one of them's available, it'll be after eight—and I just can't keep a surgical team here that late."

"So what does that mean?" I asked, too dazed and hungry to cry. "I just lie here and starve to death until tomorrow?"

He shook his head. "Tomorrow's the holiday, and I'm not back at JW until Tuesday. We're going to send you home tonight, and I can shift some other surgeries around and get you in first thing Tuesday morning, guaranteed."

"As long as I don't go back into afib," I said dully.

He jammed his hands into the pockets of his long white lab coat. "Yes, well, I talked with Dr. Khan, and he's going to have the hospital pharmacy bring you up a supply of oral diltiazem and flecainide while the nursing station processes your discharge papers. You take those drugs according to the instructions, and you'll be fine for Tuesday."

We exchanged a few more mournful pleasantries, and then he took off. I called Barry to have him come get me, but before I could break the news he said, "They taking you down now?"

When I explained the situation, his first reaction was, "Jeez, Sally, this is getting to be a pain. You sure you really *need* your knee swapped out?"

My mouth dropped open, but before I could think of a comeback, he tacked on his usual, "Just kidding, babe. I'll zip right over, pick you up at the main entrance."

While I waited for my paperwork to be put together, I looked up diltiazem and flecainide on my phone. Turns out that dilt can make you feel faint or dizzy if you take too much of it, but a flecainide overdose is actually kind of scary. Take too much, and it can lead to something called hemodynamic collapse, which can't be good, plus nausea, puking, seizures, and even the big M for mortem, which I believe is Latin for death.

Take the drugs according to the instructions, Dr. Smith had told me.

Well, duh, I thought.

It's about a fifteen-minute drive from our house to the hospital, and it took half an hour before the pharmacy sent up my meds and the discharge paperwork was finished. I figured Barry would be pissed at having to wait for me, and, sure enough, he was not a happy camper when I climbed out of the wheelchair they brought me down in and hobbled across the sidewalk to the car.

Did he come around to the passenger side and open the door for me?

Take a wild guess.

When we got home after my thirty-four hours hooked up to machinery and twenty-three hours of nothing to eat or drink, Barry flopped onto the living-room sofa with a deep sigh, reached for the remote, and said, "Bring me a beer, would you, Sal?"

I limped into the kitchen, dropped the pharmacy bag on the counter, opened the fridge, and took out a bottle of Legend Brown. Stood there for a long moment with the bottle in my hand and my eyes fixed on the plastic bag on the counter.

"Hey, Sally!" called my husband from the living room. "You bringing that beer, or what?"

Half an hour later, Barry was in the bathroom, hunched over the porcelain goddess, ralphing his guts out.

There were twenty-eight flecainide pills in the bottle I'd gotten from the pharmacy, and the instructions said to take two a day. My surgery was six days off, and at

two pills a day that meant I needed an even dozen of them for myself. The other sixteen I'd powdered and added to my loving husband's beer.

How deeply into the litany of overdose symptoms, I wondered, would sixteen pills send him? Listening to him hurl, I had a feeling his prognosis was not good.

Oh, crap, I suddenly thought. *Now who's gonna drive me home from the hospital and take me to PT until I can drive myself?*

Well, too late to worry about that now. Maybe I could catch a ride with Nettie. Her kids were both at sleepaway camp, so she had plenty of time on her hands. And if there were days when she wasn't available, it was for times like those that the good Lord invented the Uber.

Barry stopped vomiting and keeled over onto his side. There were flecks of foam at the corners of his mouth, and he was starting to shiver.

Flecainide flecks, I thought, and giggled giddily at the alliteration.

I crouched down and patted my better half—now down to about an eighth, I estimated—on the shoulder.

"You stay right there, hon," I said, "while I call 911."

I took out my phone and held it in front of my face to unlock it.

And then I put it back in my pocket and said, "Just kidding, Bar."

I left him there, shaking violently on the tiled floor, went out to the kitchen and wolfed down two bananas to take the edge off my hunger while I thought things over. Then I returned to the bathroom.

The convulsions had stopped by then, and Barry's eyes had lost all expression. He was still breathing, but shallowly and irregularly. I hunkered down beside him and

tenderly took his hand … and wrapped his fingers first around the flecainide vial and then the beer bottle, both of which I'd wiped clean of my own prints and swathed in a dishtowel. In a minute, I'd take the vial and bottle to the living room and set them on the coffee table, maybe even uncap the vial and tip it over and spill a couple of the remaining pills on the table for a bit of extra atmosphere.

But first, I leaned closer and pecked my husband on the cheek.

"Be still, your heart," I said.