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Doing the Dead

by Sharon Mauldin Reynolds

As soon as Neill hangs up the phone, it rings again. She expects it to be another funeral director reporting an obit.

"Everybody's dying to get into the paper," she says with a sigh, looking around the half-empty newsroom.

It's her daughter, Alicia. And she's crying.

"Alicia, are you okay? What's the matter?" Neill can barely understand her for the sobs. She holds her breath, her stomach burning, knees tingling.

"Come home. Come home, Mom. It's Dad. We have to go to the hospital."

Driving to the emergency room, Neill can sense Alicia mentally rushing ahead of the car, as if to clasp her father's face in her hands and breathe life into his body.

"Jinger just blurted it out over the phone," Alicia says. "She goes, 'Ted's in the emergency room. He's unconscious.' She must've thought I was you."

Ted's girlfriend is probably still scared of her and was glad Alicia had picked up, Neill thinks.

"I'm sorry, Alicia. I'm sorry you had to be the one to hear it first." Neill feels a flash of irritation. Ted was always having bizarre health problems or accidents, even though he'd been a college athlete and a Marine. He still called her with questions about stomach pains and other bodily functions, as if she were his private nurse.

When they arrive at the emergency room, Alicia heads straight toward a woman in the corner who is leaning forward, elbows on her knees, smoking. This is the first time Neill has seen Jinger since right before the divorce a year ago. She's wearing her dark hair in a pixie cut with a fringe of bangs over penciled-on eyebrows.

"How is he?" Neill asks.

Jinger looks up briefly, then studies the long scarlet points of her nails. You should be embarrassed, Neill thinks, making all those hang-up calls to the house while we were still married.

"Still unconscious." Jinger nods towards the double doors marked "Authorized Personnel Only."

Alicia slips into a chair beside Jinger, her hazel eyes dark with fear. Jinger pats her hand. Alicia never tells Neill what the two of them talk about when she visits

Ted.

"What happened?" She takes a chair next to her daughter. Jinger's eyes slide toward Alicia momentarily. She speaks in a flat, husky voice.

"I hadn't been able to get him on the phone all day." I usually call from the office to wake him up in time for work. He's supposed to be at the convenience store by six. I was afraid he'd overslept so I stopped off at his apartment after work. He was still lying in bed. The bed they had purchased when Alicia was barely five. Neill remembers how Ted had dragged his heels about buying it, even after years of living with the shabby furnishings of student housing. He said it really made him "feel married." Yet after the divorce, it was the only piece of furniture he took.

"I couldn't wake him up, so I called 911." When the paramedics got there, the first thing they did was look for the pills.

"Pills?" The ex-wife is the last to know, Neill thinks. She had lived with Ted for nearly seventeen years but never thought he would actually try to kill himself. He came undone with the slightest hint of illness, imagining a headache to be a sign of a brain tumor, indigestion a heart attack.

"He took sleeping pills," Jinger says.

Alicia draws in her breath raggedly, pressing her lips together and making a hiccuping sound. Neill puts an arm around her, but she pulls away.

"They don't think he—I mean, on purpose? Neill asks.

"I found an empty bottle in the wastepaper basket. And there was a place over by the sink. A spot or something, dried and yellow. Like he'd thrown up."

Neill looks at Alicia again, wishing she didn't have to hear these details. But she would have to know the truth sooner or later.

"It must've been an accident," she says, wondering where the truth really lay. Why would Ted try to kill himself now, especially since his dumb girlfriend had finally gotten her divorce?

She remembers how, years ago, when they were young and literary, and it was fashionable to cultivate a sense of doom, Ted's heroes were either sixties radicals or suicides, from Hemingway to Plath. He seemed extremely impressed when the poet John Berryman jumped to his death from a bridge in Minneapolis to the frozen Mississippi River below.

She feels compelled to do something now, to take control.

"I'm going to find the doctor," she says, getting to her feet and placing her shoulder bag over her raincoat on the back of a chair. "You wait here, Alicia. I'll be right back.

She pushes open the double doors marked "Authorized Personnel Only." Ted is just inside, lying on a gurney in the hallway, wearing a green hospital gown, a tube running from his nose and another from his arm. He really is unconscious, she thinks. A dark-haired young woman with a stethoscope draped around her neck and "Nisha Patel, M.D." embroidered on the pocket of her white jacket is flipping

through his chart.

"I'm his former wife," Neill announces. "Can you please tell me if he's going to make it?" The words roll easily off her tongue, and she realizes she must've heard that question at least a hundred times in movies. Dr. Patel glances at her, then back at the chart.

"Well, if he took as many as sixty pills, probably not. But we think it was more like thirty."

Tentatively, Neill touches her fingertips to the limp hand on the rumped sheet. Ted doesn't move. Only thirty pills, and he probably figured Jinger would come by later that afternoon.

"We're taking him up to ICU in a few minutes if you want to come," Dr. Patel adds.

On the elevator, the three of them are crammed in with Ted and assorted authorized personnel. Jinger tilts her head to gaze down at him. Alicia clutches the gurney as if to keep it from flying into an abyss. Even though he's unconscious, Neill can't shake the feeling it's all part of a game he's playing, some attention-getting ploy. The ICU waiting room is just a little larger than the elevator. A woman leafing through magazines at a small table in the corner glances up as the three of them walk in. Blankets and an air mattress are stacked against the wall. The woman is wearing fuzzy pink socks without shoes. Neill looks at the clock and can't believe it's only eight pm. After a few minutes, Jinger gets Alicia involved in a crossword puzzle. Around nine-thirty they're allowed to see Ted for ten-minute intervals. Jinger goes first, then Neill and Alicia. Alicia holds Ted's hand and whispers something into his ear. Neill tries to read the heart monitor. The only thing she understands about such machines is the flat line; his has nice jagged peaks. Before she learned about the pills, Neill's first thought was that Ted had had an aneurysm—finally imploding from all his rage. "Anger is my element," he'd told her once. She'd understood this was supposed to be viewed as a positive trait, a sign of his passion. Like one of Britain's angry young men. She would listen, fascinated, as he railed against the middle class, corporate America, college administrators, high school teachers, his mother, and a host of other villains. Like the possibility of his attempting suicide, it had never occurred to her that the anger might one day be directed toward her.

Long after midnight, after she and Alicia are home in bed, Neill gets up to use the bathroom and sees a light beneath her daughter's door. "Alicia? Are you okay?" She knocks lightly, then opens the door a crack, thankful Alicia hasn't pushed her dresser against it the way she sometimes does. She's lying on her stomach, reading, her gray tabby, Ethel, curled up at her feet. The Sony Dream Machine Neill gave her last Christmas is playing faintly. Neill picks her way across the minefield of clothing, paperback novels and sheet music. Lately, Alicia has been trying to teach herself how to play the guitar. "I'm just going to read a little," she says, glancing over her shoulder. Her face is pale, eyes puffy. "I'll turn off the light in a minute."

"He's going to be all right, Alicia. The doctor's already said so."

Alicia shifts her body and turns a page. "Mom, we're not the Waltons. Just go back to sleep."

"Okay, well, goodnight, John Boy."

“Goodnight, Ma.”

Neill lies down on her bed, sinking into the pillows. As she sips a glass of red wine, she imagines for a moment that she hears voices, floating up from the basement through the floor register beside the bed. Ted used to sit down there, watching TV after he got off work late at night driving a cab. In the final year or so of their marriage, that’s also where he slept, supposedly to keep from waking Neill. But they both knew that wasn’t the only reason. Sometimes Alicia would wait up, slipping downstairs to see him. They would snuggle on the couch, whispering and stifling giggles at Johnny Carson. Their coziness reminded Neill of the first year of her marriage. She and Ted had lived in a tiny apartment in Denver, where he got his first teaching job. They would lie down on the sofa, Neill’s head resting on his chest, and watch Chet Huntley and David Brinkley while Alicia slept in her crib. Images of the war in a distant, exotic country lit up the living room but didn’t cut through the warmth of their bodies joined together.

The ice maker wheezes in the kitchen and plops another load of cubes into the plastic container. Neill puts her empty wine glass on the floor and turns off the light. Lately, when she can’t sleep, she “does the dead,” as she calls writing obits. Facts fall into place in a preordained manner: name in boldface, followed by age, occupation, one survivor, place and cause of death. Then come visitation, funeral services and burial. She usually remembers one or two from a recent night’s batch. She starts with Rillia Bell Bias, 82, homemaker, mother of somebody, of Knoxville, Tenn., formerly of Lexington, Ky., died Friday at. . . .

She skips work the next day to bring Alicia in to see Ted. She’s alone in the ICU waiting room with Jinger when she decides to ask the question that’s been dancing around in her head. Alicia has gone up to the hospital nursery to look at the newborns. “Do you have any idea why he did it?” she asks. “Did something happen?” Jinger is examining a long white thumbnail, as if looking for traces of last night’s scarlet polish.

“No, not really. The only touchy subject between us lately was about me staying overnight at his place. He couldn’t understand why I didn’t just come down and stay at his apartment after the kids got to bed. I told him it wouldn’t be right. I said, ‘You wouldn’t want Neill leaving Alicia all night like that, would you?’”

Neill feels a stab of annoyance at this presumed solidarity. What is she supposed to do? Smile ruefully and nod?

“You know, your daughter has been so fortunate,” Jinger continues. “I wish my kids had had her advantages, a father who encouraged them to read and think about ideas.”

Neill looks at this woman in her carefully starched and pressed white shirt, the collar turned out over the jeans jacket collar. Nothing like her, yet responding to Ted the same way Neill had so many years ago.

Ten years Neill’s senior, Ted was a teaching assistant in her American poetry class when they met at a Midwestern university in the late sixties. He was at once much smarter, more intense and better looking than any other man she’d ever dated. She thought herself extraordinarily lucky that summer night he walked up to her desk in the university library where she worked and asked her out. Within a few short weeks, she was spending every night with him. She decides there’s not a lot to dislike about Jinger, really. After all, hadn’t Jinger done her a favor? Ted might still be sleeping on the couch in the basement if he hadn’t run into her. He’d

been adamant before about refusing to get a divorce.

“You want to kick me out like an old dog,” he’d said to her on more than one occasion. “I won’t let you have this house and Alicia.”

Neill still doesn’t like the cozy way Jinger and Alicia bend over the crossword puzzles and hold long, whispered conversations, like two roommates. It wouldn’t have surprised her if Jinger actually confided in Alicia about Ted.

He begins waking up slowly. As Neill stands at his bedside, she watches him turn toward Alicia, his face carved with deep furrows, the startling aquamarine eyes dulled with weariness. Instinctively, she steps back, narrowly missing the heart monitor.

“I’m sorry, Alicia,” he says, his mouth trembling. “I haven’t been a very good father, have I?”

“Don’t say that, Dad.” Her mouth trembles as she reaches down to hug him.

Neill can remember only once during the whole time she and Ted were married that he had apologized for anything. They’d gone to a cabin on a lake for a week, supposedly to try and patch things up after they’d both slept with other people. You can have sex with whomever you want, Ted had told her. It was the seventies, after all, the decade of open marriages. But her brief affair with a divorced colleague of his had derailed him, especially when Neill fell in love with the other man. For a while, they’d tried marriage counseling, then Ted started taking antidepressants. The effect was eerie, and Neill wasn’t so sure she liked it.

At the lake, she watched him holding eight-year-old Alicia up in the clear chilly water, wondering who this patient, gentle person could be. When Alicia, who’d always been timid physically, was learning to ride her bike the year before, he’d called her a baby for balking at getting back on after a fall. Neill felt wary, wondering when the real Ted would re-emerge. That night, after Alicia was asleep, they sat on the screened porch, watching the moon over the lake and listening to the loons.

“I’m sorry, Neill,” Ted whispered, his hand covering hers on the arm of the rocking chair. “I haven’t been a very good husband.”

Neill knew it was too late. Any love she’d felt for Ted seemed to have departed, as if the affair had been an inoculation. Yet she stayed with him another seven years, like some Biblical character accepting her penance, telling herself it was for their daughter’s sake. And of course, the real Ted was back as soon as he went off his meds. He would go for days without speaking to her. And when he did, it was usually to make some demand or an accusation.

Back at her desk, Neill has to handle a fake obit that somehow got through the paper’s system of checks and balances. The subject, a man named Jimmie Dunn, had called the day before to announce he was alive. But then Neill learned he was the one who’d called in his obit in the first place. Nobody was trying to kill him, as he’d claimed. He’d just needed to extricate himself from a jealous girlfriend and get out of paying child support to his ex-wife. What better way than to play dead, he’d reasoned?

“Did you ever stop to think how people might’ve felt, believing you were really

dead?" Neill asked him in a phone interview.

"No, I never, not at first, not when I done it, at least," Jimmie said. "But then I thought better of it. That's how come I called you all back in the first place, to tell you I wasn't dead. I just wanted to do the right thing."

Neill decides to go by the hospital later that afternoon, during her break. She feels sneaky, but she wants to talk to Ted about Alicia before he leaves the hospital.

"She's worried about you, really, you've got to understand," she'll tell him. "You need to reassure her you won't do this again. That it's not the right solution."

But when she walks into the room and sees him, fully dressed, sitting on the edge of the bed, the words won't come. They're alone for the first time in more than a year. She sits in the chair next to the bed. He braces his palms on the edge of the mattress, his head bent, and raises his eyes briefly to hers.

"I, I can't stay but a minute," Neill says. "Have to get back to work. Alicia went to school today."

"That's good." He nods slowly. They sit silently for a few moments, then he says, "I heard they put you on obits."

"It's just temporary. Until they find somebody full time."

"You shouldn't let them do that to you."

She shrugs. "It's a living."

There's another long silence, then Ted reaches down to take Neill's hand. She looks at the tableau of their fingers entwined, his large and pale, hers tapered and tanned.

"It wasn't your fault, Neill," he says softly, his mouth beneath the shaggy gray mustache trembling slightly. She blinks and presses her lips together. She doesn't know whether he means the suicide attempt or their failed marriage, or perhaps both. She puts her free hand over his.

"It's okay, Ted," she says, feeling very civilized, just as she had walking through the Authorized Personnel Only doors or sitting politely in the ICU waiting room with her ex-husband's girlfriend. "I have regrets, too."

He drops his head, but she can see he's weeping. The pressure on her hand grows tighter.

"We were so close," he whispers, "so close."

She goes back to the newsroom, a pain gnawing at her gut. She keeps forgetting to ask the funeral directors crucial questions over the phone. Something is missing, like an object left behind in another room.

When she gets home after ten o'clock, Neill pours a glass of wine and goes back to her bedroom. The muffled sound of the TV in the basement rises through the floor register. Alicia got a part in the school play and wants to stay up late to read

her lines. She was almost cheerful when she called Neill to tell her the news.

The wine warms her, numbing the pain in her stomach. The name of one of the evening's dead comes drifting into her thoughts. Betty Worrell Wittmer. She had asked the funeral director the cause of death. He'd chuckled. "Well, hon', she was ninety-five years old. I reckon it was old age."

She pushes back the covers and climbs into bed, trying out the words "old age." She imagines an ancient, grim hag creeping into the bedroom, lying down on top of her. The faintly metallic taste of the wine lingers on her tongue. She thinks of Ted, a listless version of his old self, washed through the filter of narcotics, draped on the edge of his hospital bed like a forgotten, faded bathrobe.

She recalls a remark he'd made once when they were seeing the marriage counselor: "People don't change." Was that what Ted saw as he stood in his studio apartment over an auto mechanic's shop, holding the bottle with just enough pills to almost kill him, the bleakness of his surroundings answering the question, "Why? Why now?" Maybe, like Jimmie Dunn, Ted hadn't really wanted to die. He'd just wanted to change, to disappear.

All those years she had spun in the orbit of his moods, even wished him dead at times so she could be free. Now she's not sure she knows how to not act like a wife, to not be married to Ted.

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