

The Out-Patient

By Joseph Grant

"You know if I die, it will be *all your fault*." The man in the hospital bed muttered caustically and pulled the sheets up to his chest. Next to him a heart monitor beeped and his wife nervously followed each of the beats of his heart as it corresponded on the monitor.

"I know, I know. You always say that and this time I almost did it, I'm sorry."

"Really, Doris! How much butter did you put in the cream sauce the other night?"

"I know, I said I was sorry." She said and worriedly wrung her hands in her lap as she sat at his bedside.

"Any word on Stanley? When is coming?" He changed the subject.

"No. He called me back this morning and told me that he had a meeting to attend until 4:30 and then he was going to drive up from Temecula."

"Temecula?"

"Yes dear, Temecula. That's where he had his sales meeting, remember?"

"You would think with his only father in the hospital after suffering a heart attack that he would cancel his damned meeting and get his sorry ass up here. I could be on death's door and you think he would care?"

"He's his father's son."

"Doris, could you for one day *just zip it*?" The man requested in a bitter manner. "You don't want me to have *another* heart attack, do you?"

"I was only pointing out that you taught him well, that's all. Look at when your own father died, Walter. You stayed at work even though you knew he was dying and then when your brothers and sisters called you."

"Worthless parasites, all of them." He muttered.

"Then they called you again to tell you that he died and you still stayed there."

"Yes, I'm aware, Doris." He sighed. "We've been over this *a thousand times*, my father and I were not close. I mean, I loved him, he was my father, but as a person, he was cold and distant."

"Would you have loved him if he were any different?"

"Probably not." He scoffed. "Why are you bringing him up anyway? The poor man's dead. It's ancient history."

Doris looked at him and furrowed her brow. "Well, if Stanley is unable to make it, don't be mad at him. He said he was going to try. He said he wasn't sure with the traffic and all if he would make it before visiting hours were over."

"Of course he'll make it." The old man nodded. "I'm his father!"

"I'll call him in a little while."

"Oh, don't bother, if he's too busy to see his own father, then the hell with him."

"Oh, Walter, you don't mean that."

"Yes, I do, Doris. The hell with him if he can't get here on time. I've provided a house and food and clothing for him, got him into Stanford and this is how he repays me? I could be dead right now."

"Well, what can I say?" Doris said and looked away.

"Hello." A voice said from behind the curtain and into the conversation stepped a small Filipino woman.

"Can we help you?" The old man asked angrily.

"He doesn't remember you, Ingrid." Doris smiled, somewhat embarrassed.

"Mr. Donaldson, I'm Ingrid. I will be taking care of you."

"Well, you can stop that machine from beeping. I guess it doesn't mean anything because if I was dead you people would be too late! It's been beeping non-stop for at least forty-five minutes."

"Maybe ten." His wife interjected.

"Doris, please!" He blurted. "The point is I could be dead."

"Oh, no." The nurse chuckled. "We won't let that happen."

"Don't sass me, miss. That machine was beeping and no one came in to check in on me. Even the red light was flashing."

"Mr. Donaldson, all it means when the nitro-cycle is complete and that you have been given the proper dosage." She said, pressed a button to stop the beeping and patted his shoulder. "You will be fine, Mr. Donaldson."

"Well, the red light *was* flashing."

"You will be fine." She repeated and raised her voice. "How do you feel?"

"Like I've had a heart attack? What kind of question is that? Are you a doctor?"

"No, I'm your nurse."

"Why am I wasting my time talking to you?" He exclaimed. "I want to see my primary care doctor. I demand to see my doctor."

"The doctor is very busy today. He will be in when his schedule allows, but he will be in today, no worry."

"I demand satisfaction. I am the customer. I demand to see the doctor."

"Calm down, Walter." His wife said. "Mind your blood pressure."

"Don't tell me to calm down, Doris. I know when I'm being jerked around when I see it."

"I will see if I can get the doctor in to see you sooner, Mr. Donaldson."

"You do that. I didn't become the president and CEO of Donaldson Industries by being someone's fool."

"His father owned it." His wife smiled at the nurse.

"Doris, please!" He snapped and peered at her badge. "Miss Delgado doesn't have to know our business." He sighed and gestured at the nurse as she walked out of the room again.

"Well, it's true, Walter."

"Daddy!" A female voice called out from behind the curtain and a slightly less-wrinkled version of his wife passed through.

"Princess!" His mood lightened as she gave him a hug as the nurse side-stepped her and walked out of the room. "How are you?"

"I'm okay. I had to leave the kids with Raoul." She said dismissively.

"Yes, how is the entrepreneur of the year?" The old man sniffed.

"Ugh. Don't remind me." She said and made a face that exaggerated many years of bad relationships, bad addictions and rough road. "He's still an asshole."

"Well, I tried to warn you, Princess. But Daddy's just an old fart wavering in the wind."

"Oh, no." She pooh-poohed him. "Daddy, please."

"You wouldn't listen to me."

Walter, please. Drop it."

"No, Doris. My children should be aware of all the pain and heartache they've caused me over the years having not listened to my words of wisdom, gained by many years of experience of lessons learned; now they must suffer with it."

"Don't be melodramatic, Walter."

"Doris, please. I've had a heart attack. No doubt brought on by my children's neglect."

"Oh, Daddy!"

"Oh, please. Collette dear, if you must know, your father's heart attack was brought on by many

years of his *own* neglect; of *not* listening to doctor's orders, *not* taking care of himself. It had absolutely *nothing at all* to do with you or your brothers or sister."

"Thanks, Mommy." She nodded.

"That doctor was an idiot." The old man interjected.

"Has anyone called Susan?" Collette asked.

"No, I don't think so." Her mother answered.

"Keep it that way. I refuse to see her. As far as I'm concerned she's no longer my daughter. The disgrace of the family." He said bitterly. "An actress, ha! At least Barry is making his old man proud." He beamed.

"Are you comfortable, Daddy? Can I get you a pillow?" Collette asked nervously, changing the subject.

"I'm dying, Collette, how comfortable can I be?"

"Oh, Walter." Doris sighed. "He's *not* dying, sweetie."

"It's 10:30, Doris. Isn't it about time for a nip?"

"You're heartless." Doris said.

"Apparently not, my dears. I have had a heart attack. Had it on Saturday, only your mother was too boozed up to call an ambulance, couldn't even dial 911, can you imagine? Three simple numbers and she's three sheets to the wind to dial. I had to suffer the entire night and finally found the strength to dial it on Sunday morning." He said bitterly. "So don't tell me about heartless."

"Is this true, Mommy?" Collette asked, shocked. "You don't drink, Mommy, do you?"

"Only to excess, Collette dear, only to wretched excess." The old man sniffed.

"I need to grab a smoke." Doris shook her head. "I need some air."

"I'll join you." Collette offered.

"Then make sure to make it a double for both of you." He said scathingly as they left the hospital room. "On the rocks, like our marriage."

"Daddy!"

"It's the medication talking, Collette."

"Like hell it is." The old man roared.

Upon their return, the old man was fast asleep, snoring loud enough to wake the dead in the morgue a floor below. The patient in the bed next to him was accomplishing a duet in the same key but his aria was overdose-induced, the result of a failed suicide of wine and sleeping pills after his wife had left him. An

attractive blonde was sitting silently by the man's bedside. Doris wondered if she was his wife or the reason his wife had left in the first place.

Doris gazed at her husband. He was a vague shadow of the bright young man she had met in the facade of their youth. Time had a way of ravaging youth and prioritizing old age and in many ways, he appeared much older than his sixty-six years and much older than his father when he died at seventy-nine.

The nurse returned to the room. "I am going to take your temperature."

The old man stirred awake. "Well, you don't have to wake me up to do that, do you?" He grumbled.

She swiped a device over his forehead. "Normal. Just rest, Mr. Donaldson."

"How can I rest with the racket this guy's making over here? He's rattling the windows and you're waking me up to take my temperature?"

"Walter, shush!" Doris waved at him.

"I will not. I'm a patient here and I have rights too, ya know."

"What is the problem, Daddy?"

"I'm surrounded by idiots." He spat. "Now what is that device, nurse?"

"It takes your temperature. Don't worry, you're fine."

"I didn't ask you what it does!" He snapped. "I asked you what it is!"

"It's a Welch Sure Temp, an electronic thermometer." She said, confused.

"Please don't speak to me as if I was a child!" He continued.

"Mr. Donaldson, you're fine."

"If I was fine, I wouldn't be here! And who are you?" He said to a tall, thin man who was slowly wheeling a cart into the curtained area.

"I'm going to take your echocardiogram."

"Finally! Now were getting somewhere. Here's a doctor who can tell you if I'm sick or not."

"I'm just a technician, sir."

"Surrounded by idiots, like I said."

"Walter, please!" Doris said, her face flushed. "I'm sorry, he didn't mean it. He's grouchy because of the medication."

"I am not!" He protested. "I have had a heart attack. I have not eaten since I've gotten here. All I've had are the goddamned ice chips and I haven't taken a dump since I've had my heart attack on Saturday. That was two whole days ago. I am in pain. I cannot roll over on my side on account of all these goddamned wires hooked up to me and on top of all that; my son hasn't come to see me. Do you have any

children?”

“Uh, who me?” The young man looked around uneasily. “No I don’t, sir.” He half-smiled.

“Thought not.” The old man grouched. “You wouldn’t understand then. At least you people can get married these days, huh?”

“Walter, stop!”

“Oh, Doris, I’m only trying to make conversation, kind of like I do now with you.”

“He doesn’t mean anything.” Doris backpedaled as she looked at the tech.

“It’s all right, ma’am. Now, sir this will take about twenty minutes and I will be out of your way, okay?” The man’s eyebrows arched down over his straight and pointy nose. “I will need to move the bed slightly, if that’s okay.” Before the old man had a chance to answer the technician moved the bed.

“Careful you don’t disrupt the I.V.!” The old man shouted, having mastered medical talk from watching tv shows about hospitals for years and then turned his bitterness back to the direction it had always been; his family. “Has anyone heard from Stanley?”

“No, Walter. I can try him on his cell again, if you want.”

“If you can remember how to use it.” He sniped.

“I’ll call, Daddy.”

“Thank you, Princess.” He smiled and as she was just about to step out of the room, he called out. “Princess, have you heard from Dex?” He asked, referring to his meandering twenty two-year old grandson going on an insolent sixteen.

“I’ll call him, Daddy.” She said as she walked out of the room.

“I’m sure his father has been too busy to let him know.” He offered.

“Leave Stanley alone, Walter. I swear your mood today.” She said and rubbed the back of her neck embarrassedly at the tech who had applied electrode patches and was now applying gel to the echo transducer leads.

“What mood? Why lie to the boy?” He smiled in regard to the tech who returned the smile. “I’m always this much of a pain in the ass.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now don’t you be giving me any guff. I’ll have your badge number and get you fired, boy.”

The technician’s smile faded and his face ticked noticeably.

“Oh, I’m only joking, son.” The old man said. “What are you doing?”

“I’m taking a Doppler, um, an ultrasound of your heart. This allows me to see the chambers of the

heart, the valves and assess the blood flow and see if there has been any damage to the heart.”

“Walter, leave him alone. Let him do his job.”

“I’m not bothering him, am I boy?”

“No sir.”

“You see? That’s the problem with today. No one is courteous like...like, what’s your name?”

“Adrian.”

“...like Adrian, here. Usually you get a bunch of snot-nosed little shits fresh out of college who think they know better.”

“Now take a deep breath for me, sir. Inhale, please.” The technician instructed him. “Good, sir.” He nodded. “Another *deep* one? Good.”

“So, is Collette’s new guy, this Raoul out of jail yet?”

“Well, she said he was watching the boys.” Doris answered, not comfortable discussing the family situation in front of the technician.

“Good Lord, all we need is some ex-convict watching the kids!”

“Raoul seemed like a nice guy. You liked him when you met him.”

“That was before you told me Collette met him at rehab.” He coughed. “Well unlike the last five or six, at least this one has a job.”

“Walter, shhh.” Doris waved her finger in front of her mouth. “I think you have to be quiet during this procedure.”

“Adrian, do I have to be silent during this procedure?”

“Well, no.” He stammered. “Not really, no.”

“See?” The old man said proudly. “Do you know if there’s any damage to my heart?”

“Well, we’ll have to wait until the cardiologist looks over the report and only then can he discuss the findings with you.”

“That’s not what I asked you.”

“I’m not at liberty to say, sir.”

“What are you at liberty to say, then?” The old man snapped. “What is it that you’re doing? Can you tell me *that*, at least?”

“Well, I’m scanning your heart for advanced imaging. This Doppler uses is a two-dimensional echo and it’s displaying a cross-sectional "wedge", let’s say, of your heart, including the chambers, valves and the major blood vessels that egress from your right and left ventricles. It all goes to a report.”

"Ask a simple question, get a complicated answer."

"Should you have any further questions, you can always ask your doctor."

"Can I at least ask you one question, Adrian?"

"Certainly, sir." The young man said and ran the scope across the old man's chest and watched the valves of the man's heart pump almost as an afterthought but said nothing more.

"Do you know who will do the surgery?"

"No sir, I do not."

"Well, I hope to hell it's not that same doctor that did my last heart surgery. What was his name, Doris?" He wondered aloud and snapped his fingers. His attention was taken away momentarily as the glycerin monitor began to beep again.

"Dr. Chang?" She offered.

"Dr. Chow. That's it! That man was a butcher. A *real* butcher, I'm telling you. I'd sooner let a chimpanzee stand on my chest with a rusty scalpel and operate before I let that guy near me again."

"Yes, sir." The technician said, barely listening.

"That man must have gotten his license from a veterinary school. He messed up my heart and created all this scar tissue and damage. He damaged my heart. He said my heart would be fine after and then boom! Ten years later, I'm here. That should tell you something."

"Yes, sir."

The old man looked at him with a confused expression. "Well, what does it tell you? I asked you a question."

The tech looked at him and then his family. "Sir?"

"I asked you...oh, never mind!" He griped. "Surrounded by idiots, like I said."

"Walter!" Doris exclaimed. "I am so sorry."

"It's quite okay, ma'am. I get it all the time. I'm used to it. I'm done here, anyway." He said and started to wipe down the paddles and disconnected the pads.

"I bet you do." The old man mumbled.

"Have a good day, sir." He stood and wheeled the echocardiogram machine from the bedside and returned to move the bed back and then wheeled the cart out of the room without another word.

"Did you see that?"

"Did I see what?" Doris asked.

"Did you see the way he said that? Did you see the way he said it, like he was hoping I got worse?"

"No, Walter I didn't." said his long-suffering wife.

"I suppose you both think I'm being paranoid, but remember, the psychiatrist said that I was not, just that I had the tendencies, *tendencies*, Doris." He smiled, almost in a boast. "They're all out to get you here, you know that don't you? If they can kill you while they're at it, it's more money in their pocket." He nodded.

"Daddy, that doesn't make sense."

"Sure it does, Princess. The more empty beds they can fill mean more bodies coming through the door and the more that lobby door spins, the more money they get."

"Wouldn't it make sense if they cured the patients and sent them on their way so they could return as repeat patients?" Doris asked.

"That's what they want you to think. They might have fooled you, my love, but I'm not so gullible."

"Hi, Pop!" A portly bespectacled man in a pedestrian blue work shirt, khakis, tan Oxfords and receding sandy blonde hair said.

"Stanley!" The old man's face brightened with a smile.

"How are you, Pop? Are they treating you okay?"

"Oh, I guess. I had a heart attack on Saturday, you know."

The son looked around the room as his mother and sister nodded to him. "Saturday? Is this true? No one told me! I thought it was chest pains?"

"If you'd pick up your messages once in a while or maybe even answer your cell phone, Stan, you'd know." Collette snapped.

"I spoke to Stanley this morning, dear. It's okay." Doris interjected.

"Well, the important thing is that you're okay, Pop."

"I guess." He grumbled and looked at Collette. "Could you get your poor old father some ice chips?"

"Sure, Daddy." She said and grabbed a cup.

"Go to the nurse's station. They can get you some dear." Doris gestured as their daughter left.

"How are you feeling?" The nurse peeked in and smiled.

"I've been better."

"Just wanted to see if you needed anything, Mr. Donaldson."

"I need to get the hell out of here and back to work, if that's any of your concern!" He growled and then murmured sarcastically. "I need to pay the doctor's bill somehow." And then smiled to himself.

"You have no insurance?" The nurse asked, somewhat confused.

"Of course, I have insurance!" The old man railed, insulted by the insinuation. "I'm not an immigrant, you know!"

"Walter!" Doris snapped. "Now, that's enough. I am so sorry, Imelda."

"No problem." She shrugged. "You just get better, you hear?"

"Maybe if I could get some peace and quiet." He sighed. "Any word on the doctor?"

"He's coming, Mr. Donaldson."

"On a slow boat to China." He muttered.

"I'm sorry?" Imelda asked, not understanding the saying.

"Thank you, Imelda. You're an angel." Doris smiled and grasped her hand as she passed by heading toward the door.

"Let me know if you need anything, Mr. Donaldson." She said as she left the room.

"I'll send you a letter." He said as he began to feel groggy again from the liquid Ativan they had given him earlier.

"I forgot to ask her. Dang it, oh, miss!" Stanley spoke up and charged to the doorframe in his best *I'm in charge* imitation. He caught another nurse at the door.

"Miss, there's something wrong with my father's equipment. It keeps beeping."

"Imelda?" The pretty Latina called out. "Something wrong with the monitor?"

"No." Imelda said with a curious expression.

"Don't tell me no!" Stanley blustered as he got red in the face. "That monitor has been beeping since I got here. I'm no dummy. Something is wrong. I demand to be informed what's wrong with my father!"

"He said it's beeping." The young girl said in a compassionate manner.

"And the light's flashing red. That's *not* a good thing."

Imelda walked into the room as Stanley and the young girl followed. "All it is, is the monitor letting us know the nitro cycle is complete." She said blithely and walked over and pushed the button again as she had before. "His medication is complete for now."

"Oh." Stanley said in a singular manner and returned to his father's bedside. The old man was now snoring as loud as his roommate. For all of Stanley's pompous posturing moments before, it was now obvious that he was in fact the dummy he denied ever being, thought the two nurses as they left the room with bemused smiles.

"He looks good." Stanley said as he stood next to his mother and looked up to see Collette return with a cup of ice chips and place it on his table. It was almost as if they were admiring a corpse at a wake.

“He looks peaceful.” He whispered to them as Doris nodded worriedly and Collette checked her text messages.

“Dex!” Doris smiled. “You made it!” She said and hugged sideways at a dark figure entering the bedside. “How’s my favorite grandson?”

“Uh, okay, I guess.” The shaggy-haired and unkempt boy of twenty-two shrugged and crossed his skinny tattooed arms over his black t-shirt and then dug his hands self-consciously into his black jeans and shuffled uneasily in his black shoes.

“Oh, when did you get this?” His grandmother looked at his latest attempt to not fit in and be a part of societal indifference; an earring.

“Oh, a few months ago. Watch, it’s still sore.” He swatted at his grandmother’s hand.

“That’s because it’s infected.” His father, Stanley, spoke up. “Beatrice and I were so upset. It’s embarrassing.”

“Shut up, Dad.”

“Don’t tell me to shut up in front of your grandmother!” He bellowed, rousing the old man from his languor.

“Dex!” He half-smiled. “How’s my boy?”

“Uh-ok.” He said .

“Still going to school? How’re your grades?”

“No, grandpa I quit months ago. I’m working in an auto body shop.”

“Stan?” The old man asked in an alarmed manner.

“I...don’t want to talk about it.” Stanley pivoted uneasily on his feet and paced in a complete circle and stopped and suddenly looked out the window passively.

“What? Dex, you should be back in school.”

“I’m not going back, grandpa. I’m going to be in a band.”

“Oh, that’s *just* great! What’re you trying to do, Dex, give your grandfather *another* heart attack?”

“What about taking over for your uncle in the family business? I had hopes for you.”

“Oh, that’s right, Pop! Because you never had *any* hope for me.” Stanley blurted.

“Could we please keep it down?” Imelda asked and brought in a tray.

“This is just great.” Stanley smacked at his legs with both hands in dramatic exaggeration.

“What’s this?” The old man asked.

“It’s your dinner, Mr. Donaldson.” Imelda said and took the lid off to reveal steaming chicken and

mashed potatoes.

“Great.” He sighed. “If the doctors don’t kill you here, the food will.” He waved his hand. “Take it away.”

“Oh, a full house.” A pear-shaped man, almost as profound as Stanley’s girth walked into the conversation.

“Now, *who the hell* are you?” The old man opined. “It’s like Union Station in here.”

“I’m Doctor Ornstein, your cardiologist.”

“Well, if you’re my doctor, I’m Brad Pitt.”

“I’m sorry?” The man asked.

“You look worse than I do.”

“You’ll have to excuse my husband.” Doris sputtered.

“Doris, don’t make excuses for me, goddamn it.” He spat. “I’m tired of being here and tired of being poked and prodded. Look, doc, I want the best. I don’t want someone operating on me like last time. The man was an incompetent buffoon. I wouldn’t have him as dog-catcher, much less my primary. The man was a butcher. Totally botched my surgery; messed up my heart.”

“I’m sorry your last experience was unpleasant.”

“Unpleasant?” He looked up at his wife. “Doris, do you hear this?” He asked as she nodded sympathetically. “Unpleasant? Doc, I *almost* died.”

“Do you remember his name? Was it here?”

“It was, uh, was, Dr. Chow and no it was in Long Beach.”

“Oh, so it *wasn’t* here.” The doctor nodded to himself and cleared his throat.

“No, thank God. I hope you people have got it together here.” He said and tried to cough but was too weak and waved his wife off as she nearly leapt to his side.

“Oh you won’t be getting the operation here, Mr. Donaldson.”

“I won’t?” The old man asked, perplexed. “Then would you mind telling me why in the hell I’m here?”

“Well, Mr. Donaldson, your heart disease is genetic-.”

“Yes, I’m well-aware that my old man didn’t give me much but he left me a bum ticker. I had a heart attack twelve years ago, a triple bypass two years later and a heart attack Saturday and that was because the heart surgeon was useless; he’s the reason why I’m here today. He screwed up my heart but something awful, I tell you, scar tissue.” He nodded.

“Well, the reasons you mentioned are half correct, Mr. Donaldson. You have a history of heart

disease in your genetic make-up and I see you've been a smoker for the last forty-five years and your diet is full of all the wrong habits and your exercise regimen is practically non-existent." The doctor lectured him.

"Yes, I'm fully aware of my bad habits, as you say." He countered. "All I ask is that you fix what's wrong."

"Well, you had a blockage near your anterior cardiac valve and your other valve is corroded and diseased by cholesterol and plaque build-up in what we call atherosclerosis and this lead to your myocardial infarction..."

"In English, doc, *in English!*" He cried out. "I don't need to know what the problem is but if it can be fixed, that's all! I don't want to go through what I did with that other sadist and get my chest cracked open and have to sue you, too."

"Let's hope not, Mr. Donaldson. Good to know. We've already begun fixing it. We've put a stent in, but I won't be doing the surgery."

"*You won't?*" He repeated.

"You won't? Doris parroted. "Then *who* will?"

"Why am I here, can I just get a straight answer from someone?" The old man demanded.

"Dr. Bailey will be performing your surgery at USC. We'll be moving you tomorrow, if your triglycerides are down." He said and then added: "Hopefully, you'll be feeling well enough to be moved and released."

"Oh, no!" The old man protested. "I want my surgery done here."

"Mr. Donaldson, you were brought here to be stabilized and monitored. We were contemplating transferring you to the DOU, but I don't think that will be necessary. You seem to be doing well enough, your vitals are strong, blood work is good and your tryptonin levels are improving each day. We don't do cardiac surgery here any more."

"Are you trying to tell me that I won't be having the surgery here *but at USC?*" He bristled.

"That is correct." The cardiologist nodded. "Visiting time is nearly over. Imelda, can you give the family five more minutes?"

"Sure, doctor." She nodded and left with the doctor and came back to the room only after the nurse's huddle, which ran longer than usual due to complaints about Donaldson's treatment of the staff.

When she returned to usher the family out, all she found was a note. The family had gone, including Mr. Donaldson. While the nurses were in their meeting, the old man had angrily switched off the machines

and ripped out his IV and hurriedly gotten dressed. He swore up and down as he did so, dictating a diatribe to his son that informed the startled nurse that *no way in hell* would a proud alumnus of UCLA such as he, ever allow himself to live with the knowledge that his Bruin heart was saved by a Trojan surgeon from their old adversary, USC.

© 2011 Joseph Grant