

*Corrine, or a Journey of the Magi*

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On Monday, December 21, 2009 at 8:30 AM, W. Carter Haley, M.D. entered his office through the side door to avoid any patient contact until it could be reduced to its ocular essentials. He noticed the silence after he had changed into his white laboratory coat: no junior members of his practice group talking in the hall, no residents awaiting his arrival, no nurses whispering to each other about last night's encounters with their teenagers, no ringing phones, no beeping instruments, no patients arguing about co-pays.

After thirty-five years of practice and three failed marriages, the eye doctor focused exclusively on his office, the operating room, and the endless hospital and professional meetings that drew out the days to the farthest limits of exhaustion. He rarely had time for his office manager or the lawyers who fended off claims from former wives and alienated children for higher alimony and ever increasing tuition.

Dr. Haley pressed the intercom button on his phone. He could hear it ringing at the nurse's station, but no one answered.

*Now what the hell*, he thought and went into the waiting room.

It was empty. For the first time since he had taken the space fifteen years earlier, the huge television set was off. R. Carter Haley suddenly felt a dread he had not experienced since he emerged from a spectacularly successful retinal reattachment during his residency to be told that his first child, a boy with his mother's light blond hair, had been born dead.

As his children had aged and graduated from college, and one ex-wife succumbed to liver disease and the others to second and third marriages themselves, their demands on him eased. The eyes that awaited him on the days he saw patients in his office, or stared duly into the operating room lights during surgery, were separated from their bodies. A process begun when he first cut into a cadaver in gross anatomy was nearly complete: Dr. Haley was detached from all humanity except himself.

*They must have changed my schedule for an emergency*, he thought.

He picked up the phone at the nurse's station and called surgery.

"Dr. Haley," he announced. "What do you have there for me today?"

"Dr. Haley?" the nurse said, surprised. "You're supposed to be on vacation."

“Who said anything about a vacation?” he exclaimed.

His last vacation was in 1998, when he spent a long weekend in St. Louis after The American Ophthalmological Society’s annual meeting.

“Your office is closed for a two-week vacation. The other practice groups are covering your patients.”

Haley felt as if he had died and were arguing theology with the devil.

“Who said we were closed?” he demanded.

“Corrine Whitaker, your office manager. She arranged everything months ago.”

“Oh,” said Dr. Haley, hanging up the phone.

Corrine Whitaker had retired in July after nearly thirty years managing his practice and his brokers and accountants and attorneys. Two months later, she was diagnosed with cervical cancer. Like many in the medical profession, she had neglected her own health, assuming that by dispensing medical services she was exempt from the ills of ordinary humans.

*It’s metastasized to her brain, Haley thought. She’s gone crazy.*

He returned to his office and sat down at the cramped desk where he had written prescriptions for decades. On one side was an envelope with his passport, an airplane ticket to Ft. Lauderdale, and a ticket for a twelve-day cruise through the Panama Canal and up the coast to San Francisco. On the other side was one patient chart.

Dr. Haley picked up the chart. The patient was The Reverend Charles Spears, Rector of the Downtown Church of Our Savior, scheduled for his biannual check up. Haley smashed his fist on his desk, rattling dozens of lenses in his antique lens cabinet.

The last thing he wanted now was an encounter with the myopic Episcopal clergyman. Once a week at church was enough.

“Hello,” Spears called from the waiting room. “Is anyone here?”

*Damn it, the doctor thought. He found me.*

“Hello, Charles,” he said, emerging from his inner sanctum to guide the patient into his office.

In gray tweed jacket, black shirtfront, and clerical collar, the mid-sixties priest modeled the introverted rectitude that Episcopalians demanded in their clergy. He was carrying his Prayer Book.

“I thought I had the wrong day,” the Rector said.

The doctor took the Prayer Book and set it beside Spears’ chart. As the patient settled into the examining chair, Carter Haley turned down the lights and went on automatic pilot. He could never be sure whether the priest’s problem reciting the letters on the chart was due to his vision or an inability to concentrate on anything so mundane. Finding a new prescription was even more frustrating.

“Is one better than two?” he asked.

“I’m just not sure, Carter.”

“Three or four?”

Silence.

“Not much of a change,” Dr. Haley said, scribbling nearly illegible numbers on a notepad.

The glaucoma test was much more scientific, because only the eyes spoke. Eyes did not deceive, or become confused, or cancel patients, or spend thousands of dollars on

tickets for a Caribbean cruise. The priest was wincing from the solution to dilate his pupils before the doctor remembered to say, “This may sting a little.”

Dr. Haley helped Spears out of the chair to send him back to the waiting room.

“It will take about forty-five minutes for them to dilate,” he said.

“I remember that,” Spears said, picking up his Prayer Book. “Can you tell me how to get to intensive care?”

“Is there something the matter?” the doctor asked.

“I thought I’d see Corrine Whitaker while we’re waiting.”

For the second time that morning, Dr. Haley felt the world slide away.

“Take the elevator to the basement and follow the tunnel to the hospital. When you get to the cafeteria, you’ll see colored footprints on the floor. Green is for intensive care.”

“Thanks, Carter,” the Rector said, leaving his doctor feeling as frustrated and useless as patients who have been told to sit for an hour with nothing to do while gradually losing their sight.

Spears found the elevator without difficulty and even turned the right direction when he got off in the basement. From there, however, his vision started to blur, and the people morphed from hospital staff and workers into white and blue sheets fluttering from the heating and air conditioning pipes on the ceiling. Dodging gurneys and food carts, he found the cafeteria, but the colored footsteps on the floor had all blended together like a smear on an artist’s pallet.

The Rector followed the smear until one set turned into an elevator. After a few floors, he emerged in a dark gray passageway that ran through a snack bar into an antique

operating theater. Like an arena uncovered in an ancient hillside, concrete benches formed a semicircle overlooking a dark space where patients were once disemboweled for the benefit of future surgeons. Unable to see whether the steps led to the floor or into a cistern, Spears sat down. Like Dr. Haley, he suddenly felt as if he were looking into hell.

Two aides carrying huge plastic cups led him down the steps and gave him conflicting directions to intensive care. Trusting this was some sort of a sign, he walked into another elevator and pressed a button. To his surprise, the doors opened into a light green space, and he stepped out into a glass door.

“May I help you?” a voice said through an intercom.

“Charles Spears,” the Rector replied, delighted to hear another human voice.

“Just a minute, Mr. Spears,” the voice said.

The door clicked, and Spears entered a green blur inhabited by blue blobs. Before he could say whom he was there to see, one of the blobs broke from the others and streaked past him out the door.

“Stop him!” somebody cried, but the figure vanished in a blue haze.

“Shit,” a male voice said. “Derek got away.”

“Derek Simpson?” Spears asked.

“Just a minute, Reverend,” a female voice said. “I gotta call security.”

“I’m not chasing him,” the male voice said. “He’s too big.”

Until a few weeks earlier, Derek Simpson had been his Curate, the first additional priest his parish had employed in twenty years. Initially Simpson had said all the right things and pacified all the right people. A former college football player, he even

attracted a few people his own age to the church. Spears started to worry when he heard a brittle note in the young man's laughter over wine at their wealthiest parishioner's mansion.

One Sunday morning at the eleven o'clock service, Derek had a vision of St. Francis. Stripping off his vestments and everything else, he ran out the church and into the side of a passing police car. If Corrine Whitaker had not been there to explain to the officers that they could take the naked man to the hospital and have him admitted to psychiatry for observation, the Curate's career would have been ended by a charge of indecent assault.

"Can you direct me to intensive care?" the Rector asked.

"Take the elevator up three floors," she said.

As she buzzed him out, he nearly tripped on the blue haze on the floor. Reaching down, he picked up Derek Simpson's discarded gown. Somewhere in the hospital labyrinth, St. Francis was at large.

While the Rector was feeling his way to the elevator, Dr. Haley fumed. Corrine Whitaker, his trusted assistant, had betrayed him. Even now she was lying in intensive care, pressing a little plunger to control her pain, oblivious to his humiliation. This was a blow that his competitors and enemies on the hospital board would never let him forget.

*Damn it, he thought. I can't let her get away with this.*

Dr. Haley set off for intensive care.

The Rector found the elevator, pressed a button, and stepped out into a brilliant lavender waiting room dominated by a huge flat screen TV.

“Can you direct me to Corrine Whitaker?” he asked the TV screen, mistaking Oprah for the charge nurse.

“You’re just in time, Father,” someone called behind him.

Still carrying Derek Simpson’s discarded gown, Spears followed the voice through the waiting room into intensive care. Soft beeps and gurgling sounds were coming from the patient rooms to his right, while bulbous figures floated like hallucinations around the nurses stations to his left.

“She’s in here,” the nurse said, stopping at the door to a silent room.

Spears peered inside. Something like a long white cone was on the bed.

“Corrine?” he said softly.

“Wait for me, Charles,” Dr. Haley called behind him.

“Oh, hello again, Carter,” the Rector said. “I’m sure she’ll enjoy your visit.”

“You’re too late,” the nurse said. “Miss Whitaker just died.”

“How could she?” Dr. Haley cried, stunned that anything could frustrate his wrath.

Feeling his way to the bedside, Spears bent over her. Death had not come gently to Corrine Whitaker. Chemotherapy had ravaged her body without slowing the cancer’s corrosive spread. To conceal her baldness she had wrapped a towel around her head like a turban. The priest touched her face as if he could wipe away her anguish, and made the sign of the cross on her forehead.

“Miss Whitaker?” a familiar voice called from the hall, and Mr. Simpson entered the room wearing only his hospital booties.

“I didn’t know you were still making pastoral calls, Derek,” the startled Rector said.

“My God,” Derek Simpson whispered. “Is she dead?”

“Yes,” Dr. Haley said in a voice the doctor did not recognize.

“We have to do something,” Derek said.

He took the Rector’s Prayer Book, opened it to the *Litany at the time of Death*, and burst into tears. Stunned by the young man’s sorrow, Dr. Haley felt his anger dissipate. Spears shook out the Curate’s gown, while the nurse, who thought that she had seen everything, stared in awe at the naked priest.

“Here, Derek, let’s get something on you,” the Rector said, slipping the gown over Simpson’s left arm. “Would you mind holding the book for a moment, Carter, so we can get the other arm?”

The ophthalmologist held the Prayer Book while the Rector gowned his erstwhile colleague and tied the strings at the back. Compassion, the beast Haley had kept caged for so many years was shaking itself free.

“She saved my life,” Derek sobbed.

A male aide in blues, contrasting white hairnet, and enormous silver gym shoes rolled a gurney into the room. As he lowered the bed rail, the nurse reached for the turban.

“No,” said Spears. “At least leave her that.”

While the nurse and the aide pulled on latex gloves, the Rector squeezed around them. Through his dilated pupils Corrine Whitaker’s features appeared relaxed, even

softened by death. He held the turban to her head as the aide and the nurse lifted her body onto the gurney.

*To a certain type of man, Spears thought, she may even have been beautiful.*

He remembered her expression the one time she had knelt beside Carter Haley to receive the sacrament. They always sat on opposite sides of the church. One Sunday, however, when the line to the communion rail became entangled in a rare group of visitors, she had stepped into the aisle after him.

“Did you want to read the prayers, Carter, before we go?” Spears asked the doctor. “They’re on page 462.”

R. Carter Haley, M.D. opened the Prayer Book, but he didn’t get any farther than the Curate. Staring at Corrine’s face, the doctor realized that death did not always separate the dead from the living. Sometimes it only intensified their longing.

Spears took the book and read the *Litany* as the nurse covered the body with a shroud.

“She must really have meant something to you guys,” the aide said.

“We’ll go with you,” the Rector replied.

So the Rector, the ophthalmologist, and the Curate followed the body out of intensive care down four floors and through a corridor as crowded with pipes as a passageway in a submarine. When they reached the morgue, the attendant held the door open.

“Head injury?” he asked, looking at the turban.

“No,” Spears said. “Just her last hope to be herself.”

Spears opened his Prayer Book. and read *A Commendatory Prayer*. When he finished, the attendant rolled the gurney away. Everyone shook hands, and three men, who had not realized that they loved Corrine Whitaker until after she died, left her.

“Need some help finding your way back upstairs?” the aide asked Derek Simpson.

“Yes,” the Curate replied.

“I’ll be back tomorrow, Derek,” the Rector said.

“I’d like that,” Simpson said.

The aide and the Curate walked back to the hospital, and Carter Haley led his nearly blind patient to his office. While the doctor shined bright lights into his eyes, Charles Spears wondered if they were like the lights people with near death experiences saw the instant before death.

“Retina, good. Optic nerve, good. No macular changes,” the doctor said.

He helped his patient out of the chair.

“You aren’t going to drive back to the church, are you?”

“I took a cab,” Spears said.

“Give me a minute to turn off the lights, and I’ll take you,” Carter Haley said, hanging up his white coat and putting the tickets and passport into his jacket pocket.

“I’m not doing anything else today.”

Like the priest, his mind had been elsewhere during the examination. Beyond the Rector’s retinas, he saw the Pacific stars arch over the ship as they steamed out of the Panama Canal, and smelled the air change from the thick perfume of the tropics to the

sharp clean sea. As he walked through the office flipping switches, he wondered what would it be like to be somewhere that was not hermetically sealed.

“Ready, Charles?” he called.

“Where is everyone?” the Rector asked.

“Oh, I like to close my office for the holidays,” the doctor replied.

The Rector followed him out of the silent office to the underground garage. As they drove downtown, Spears’ vision started to clear. Glancing at Carter Haley, he saw the same expression of excitement, wonder, and delight that he had seen on Connie Whitaker, when she knelt that one time beside a man who was too blind to see that she was even there.