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POLITICAL ANECDOTE

After years of increasing economic and military conflict between the two neighboring countries, the two Heads of State, President X and King Y, were brought together for a summit meeting. President X, an aging man known for his stubborn determination to adhere to his own plans and to ancient ideologies, received King Y with flowered banquets, marching bands, and a gala dance. King Y, a large round man known for his diplomatic skill, and lack of humor, waited patiently through the pomp ceremonies for the time set aside for the actual summit meeting. The two Heads of State had never met alone, tete-a-tete, before.

Finally, the King was brought to the garden on the edge of the woods where he and the President could walk and talk in full and secure privacy. The men met with a shake of the hands and a bow of the heads. Their glistening eyes met. They started to walk.

They walked silently through the garden, into the woods, and along a winding path that circled back to its origin. Neither of them said a word; they kept their heads bowed to the ground; they examined trees and shrubs; they listened to breezes wandering among the leaves; they glanced at the sky, at beams of light, and at each other.

After hours of such meandering, they emerged, still not having said even a single word to each other, yet having understood and developed a deep respect for each other most fully. King Y was secretly ushered off to his own country.

A barrage of noisy reporters, journalists, and advisers awaited President X at the arena that had been created for his post-summit meeting press conference. He was delivered to the podium where he stood facing a thousand microphones and cameras. The whole world was awaiting his personal response to the intimate meeting.

President X's press adviser signaled the crowd to quiet their applause; he asked his Chief the all important question: "What is the outcome of your meeting with King Y?"

The President answered without hesitation: "We have reached full and uncompromisable agreement...that is all I have to say!" He stepped down from the podium amidst the thunderous cheers and applause knowing what only a Head of State could know: that the economic and political climate would perhaps grow worse, or perhaps get better.

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(approx:1,800 words)

SHORT STORY

Dr. Vesuvius stood over his most interesting patient, a young woman who at any moment could die. Her name was Shoshana.

"Shoshana," he said, "I must speak with you openly and truthfully. I have tried all of nature's medicines, all of technology's machines, and all of man's physical therapy but nothing has alleviated your ailment; you may die at any moment. According to my charts, seven out of ten patients in your condition die within a year, nine out of ten die within two years, and one out of ten recovers fully as if the disease had never occurred."

"Is there not one machine that can prolong my life?"

"No."

"Is there not one recommended physical therapy?"

"Not one."

"Then I am surely going to die."

"Sooner or later we all must. Do you still feel any pain?"

"More than I can bear. What am I going to do? Is it true then Doctor, as many wise men say, that only God can give and take away life? Is it true?"

"I have been practicing the art of medicine for over half a century and have seen many things: patients closer to death than to the beds they were lying on come back to life, fully recover for no apparent reason. I have seen remarkably healthy people suddenly drop dead for no apparent reason. I have known two patients of similar bodily structure, with the same disease, where one went on to die while the other, receiving identical treatment, went on to live, fully recovered, a normal family life. Where is the logic in such events? How can a doctor interpret them? I'll tell you. I have come to accept over the years the points of view that even though I have been President of a large prestigious medical society, even though I have been a most respected teacher at the best

medical schools, and even though I have won countless awards for public service, that I am no more than an attendant, an assistant doctor to the Great Physician who makes all the big decisions, who has the power to grant life, to cure illness, and to distribute death as He pleases and according to His vast, not always fully comprehensible design."

"But you are a doctor. You may heal a person who otherwise might die, or become crippled, or go blind."

"Only God grants life, health, and sight. His ways are mysterious. As a doctor, I do seem to be able to, now and then, to guide the course of events, to turn the odds in the patients favor, so to speak, but more often than you can imagine I just sit and watch as patients gradually heal or helplessly die. I can never really tell what is going to happen. Too many times I have regarded a patient as well on the way to recovery, solid, healthy, out of danger, with simple problems to overcome, only to have a nurse call on me with the report of a sudden remission or even death. Too many times I have given a patient up in my heart and in my intellect as lost, incurable, on the certain road to death, only to have a nurse report to me of a sudden recovery, a regaining of strength, or the miraculous disappearance of all symptoms of a debilitating disease. No, the doctor's art is as illusionary as the magicians. For every patient that I seem to help there are ten for which I can do nothing. And when, on occasion, I really seem to be the savior, to be the hero, to work miracles, to save lives and to cure pains, well then I become so respected, so happy, so praised that my spirit soars and I feel the presence of God and know that He has worked through me, that He, in those wonderful instances, has been particularly close, guided my moves, watched over the situation, and determined the outcome according to some unknown justice, mercy, or plan. The moments are rare when I feel that I am in control of my patient's health."

Shoshana closed her eyes. "I don't understand," she said aloud. And quietly, inside, she sadly asked herself, "Why me? Why me? Why me?"

"Let me tell you a story," said the doctor. "When I was a young man, but a good five years out of medical school, I fell in love, as young men often do, with a very beautiful lady, the sister of one of my colleagues. I first saw her at a party, and then at a local theater, and then noticed her often walking by the hospital in which I worked. She regularly passed the hospital on her way to and from work. We spoke casually, exchanging brief salutations as if we were mere acquaintances but I knew from the first moment I saw her that I was deeply in love. Every chance meeting between us I took to be divinely written in the book of fate.

One evening I noticed her in front of the hospital walking alone. It was late and in the absence of any moon, very dark. I asked her if I could walk her home. With a kind smile, she agreed. We spoke of life, politics, and art. She was the most intelligent, wittiest, and sincerest woman that I had ever met. She was also very beautiful and unattached...so I thought at the time. I brought her to her door and politely said good night.

A few weeks later I bumped into her again, this time in the early evening. I anxiously had been awaiting such a chance meeting; I invited her to join me for dinner at an exclusive restaurant. With a kind smile, she agreed, and off we went. I was in ecstasy. Dining with her was a fantastic experience. She spoke profoundly with her eyes and told enchanting stories with a gesture of her hands. I knew that she was the woman I had always dreamed of, who I had waited for until that very moment; I wanted to marry her. I stared at her absentmindedly as I sipped my coffee, at first neglecting then gladly paying the impressive bill. I called a cab to take her home but before she stepped inside I asked her when we might meet again for dinner.

'Next time we could include the theater,' I had suggested.

'I'll have to ask my fiancé,' she calmly replied. She closed the door and was gone.

At first I thought that she was joking, being that she was so witty, but then I realized the sincerity that had been in her voice. Above all else, she was sincere. The single possessive phrase, 'my fiancé,' the direct object of her crushing sentence, put a clamp on my throbbing heart and formed icicles in my placid brain. She could not have said anything more hurting except perhaps, 'my husband.' That night, needless to say, I did not sleep well.

The next day, shyly but with some determination, after a long and tedious operation, I took her brother, my colleague, aside and asked him what he could tell me about his sister's fiancé.

'My sister's fiancé!' he replied with surprise. 'I didn't even know that you knew my sister.'

'I met her some time ago at a party.'

'That's wonderful, yes, her fiancé, a fascinating man who loves to tell long intricate tales - never misses a detail - a novelist, a writer of mystery stories. You should meet him; he's quite a fellow. I'm rather pleased to have him coming into the family.'

I could not have been more upset if the two of them, my colleague and his sister, had purposely made up the story to mock me. I had heard enough. 'Thank you,' I said, 'I was merely curious.' I wanted to say, 'Please mention my regards to your sister next time you see her,' but I felt as if that might be too pushy. I turned and walked away as if I had an emergency to attend to. I went straight to my closet and drank a double shot of brandy. I was heartbroken.

The next time I saw my love in front of the hospital, my rational thought was to avoid her, but I surrendered to an emotional impulse; I approached her, declared my love, and begged her to marry me. She laughed.

'I am already engaged to a man whom I love very much. If polygamy were acceptable in this country then I might possibly marry you too but as of the moment I am completely faithful and singularly responsible to him. I have given my word. I am sorry; we obviously have had a misunderstanding. I should not have dined with you the other evening but I do want to be your friend, I enjoy your company, and I was extremely hungry at the time. Do you understand?'

Stubbornly and stupidly I implored her to break off her engagement until she at least gave me a chance. She said that I was being ridiculous and before departing expressed her anger coyly, as only a vengeful woman could, by promising to invite me to the wedding. A few days later I received the invitation, a letterbomb that exploded in my heart. It tore me up so I tore it to shreds and threw it in the wastepaper basket.

A month later, not yet fully recovered, but at the persuasive request of my dear colleague and only on his account, I attended the wedding. Of course, when I saw the bride march down the aisle in her intricately laced white matrimonial gown I nearly fainted; she was the most beautiful angel that I had ever seen. The groom followed. I had never been, nor will I ever be, as envious of another man as I was at that very moment. It was my greatest sin.

But minutes later, when they were joined together, when I beheld the way they looked at each other, the way they touched, and the way they kissed, I realized that their mutual love for each other far overshadowed my jealous and selfish love for her. I let go of all my foolish thoughts."

Shoshana opened her tired brown eyes. "What are you trying to say? I still don't understand....Please explain!"

"Try to relax; I am getting to that part. I'll explain everything. I remember the whole thing very clearly as if it all happened recently. A few months after the wedding I was called by my colleague rather unexpectedly to the home of his sister and brother-in-law. The writer met us at the door. He was anxious and upset. He did not even offer to take our coats but instead hurriedly ushered us into the bedroom where his wife, my colleague's sister, the woman who I immediately realized that I still loved with all my heart, without jealousy, selfishness, or envy, lay feverish in bed. She was in terrible pain.

After hours of examinations and days of tests, my colleague and I could come to no conclusion as to the cause or possible remedies to her illness. She had a disease very similar to your own. But we did discover something that none of us had known before: the woman was in the early stages of pregnancy. This fact, as well as our own personal attachment to this angel, made us work with dedication and until complete exhaustion to save the mother's and the child's life. We brought her to the hospital where we had use of all the appropriate facilities. We kept the pregnancy secret from her. The situation rapidly deteriorated.

Convinced that she only had moments to live, I called her wrecked husband into the room which so many times in the past few days I had forced him to leave for medical reasons. I had never seen a man with so much love and dedication suffer so much. I was sure that the pain he felt as he watched his wife die was no less than that of her own from the debilitating disease. I saw that he was dying with her.

He began whispering, between sobs, into his lover's ear: "Please live! Please, please live! I want to hold you and our baby. Please live! I want to hold you and our little baby." He did this for hours.

Then, as if gazing through the haze between life and death, the woman's eyes slowly opened and slowly closed. With all of her remaining energy she seemed to

be saying, that is, we read it into her gesture, "I hear you. I love you. Good bye!" But her starched mouth ever so slowly moved, and in the faintest of whispers, or perhaps we read it on her dry cracked lips, she said, "Baby." Her eyes opened again.

"For the baby!" Her delirious husband cried. "For the baby! Please live for the baby!" We had to take him out of the room.

When we returned to the bedside, we noticed that the woman's hand was resting upon her belly. It had not been there before, and we could hardly believe that she had moved it with her own failed strength. Again, with blood on her lips, she mouthed the word, "Baby."

We sat with her through the day and through the night and through another day. She held on, as if by a single gossamer thread, to what we in the medical profession call life. Every moment, we thought, was surely her last.

Days passed by, then weeks, then months. She neither got better nor worse. Her husband nursed her faithfully, regularly feeding her a spoonful of sugary water. Her belly grew larger and larger. As far as my colleague and I could tell, the fetus was developing normally inside the dangerously ill woman.

One afternoon my colleague grabbed me by the arm and pulled me into his sister's room. Within an hour, we had delivered a perfectly healthy little girl. The blessed woman seemed to gain strength immediately after the birth; she even held the baby, kissed her husband, and appointed me to be the child's guardian. The next day she died, but, as you see, not before having delivered that baby, having given a gift to her husband and to the world. She had done what no doctor could do; she had shown with her own true love and with her husband's prayers, how only God can grant and take away life. It was a remarkable event."

Shoshana burst into tears. "And what happened to the writer and his daughter?"

"They left town, and I have never heard from them since."

"What were their names?"

"The little girl was, to the best of my knowledge, never named in my presence. The father, the writer, was named _____. I often wonder what has happened to them."

Shoshana chuckled as no one with her grave illness possibly could. She said excitedly, "The writer _____ pined unforgivingly for his wife and her lost love. He died a few years later a broken man, leaving to the world: his daughter, a few as yet unknown novels, and a remarkable short story which is precisely the one that you have just told me. I am that little girl, the writer's daughter, the beautiful woman's baby who after my brave mother's death, but before my father's, was named Shoshana. And you doctor, who delivered me into this world, according to my mother's final wish, are my guardian and now my only living relative. My uncle, your colleague, I know for a fact, is no longer with us."

The doctor stood in disbelief. "I am surely your guardian," he said aloud. He bent over Shoshana and gently kissed her forehead. A few months later, moments before Shoshana's soul left her body, the sweet young girl, full of understanding of the role of doctors in relation to the Great Physician, pulled the doctor close and whispered in his ear, "Blessed be the name." Then she expired.