

“You’ll Never Get Off the Table”

By Tom Janisse, MD

“Doctor, it’s Carla in ER, the Tyler police just called. Medic 3, Tony’s rig, is rolling in Code 2 with a suspected leaking abdominal aortic aneurysm. That’s what Tony said the patient said. They’re twenty minutes out.”

“A triple A! Why not Code 3?” said Stewart from the sleep room.

“Patient said not to. Police don’t know any more. Tony’s probably hoping he can go straight to his mortuary.”

“Why are the police calling?”

“You don’t know Tony,” she said. “He’s always hated this medic stuff. In the sixties, back before EMTs, he’d just cruise out to the accident scene in his Cadillac hearse to pick up bodies. Turned on siren and lights to blast through traffic. Not really legal.”

“Does he always call the police?” asked Stewart.

“They might have been at the patient’s house. Tony calls whoever and whenever he wants, to avoid taking Medic radio orders. He’d still rather go straight to his mortuary than the ER. But doctor ... he drives like Mario Andretti!”

“Some story, Carla,” Stewart said.

“I’m going on a bit to make sure you’re awake. Tony wants to go Code 3 speed, but doesn’t want to give Code 3 care. You need to be here when Tony gets here. No telling the patient’s condition.”

“What time is it?”

“It’s 3:15.” Carla hung up.

“Thanks,” Stewart said to the dial tone.

Good, not another drunken 19 year old.

Wrecked his car. You wonder, when they go off the road on a straight stretch, like last night. Switching tapes? No turns to keep him awake? Unconscious suicide attempt?

Middle-of-the-night stuff irritated Stewart. A Houston physician, on a research year in residency, he worked in any ER that needed a doctor on the weekend. Tyler County Hospital needed one because the hill town doctors were exhausted seeing patients day and night, in their office, in the hospital, in the ER, quick questions at the flower shop, consultations in the hardware. Even home visits for some old folks.

“Doc, you up? Medic 3 called back. Tony’s rounding the corner by the bank. It’s Barry Colton. You don’t know him but he’s got a history of an abdominal aneurysm. Half the

town knows. He’s 84. Tony says they can’t hear the blood pressure now ... because of road noise.”

“Okay, be there before you can hang up.” Stewart slept in his clothes. Gave him an extra minute. He struggled to drag himself out of the deep sleep that he’d fallen back into. His black ruffled hair flowed over his ears and onto his neck. In contrast his mustache was trimmed into a trapezoid. He had an incessantly twitching left upper eyelid. It made him nervous because it meant he was nervous.

Only August ... wish it was 1986 already. Outta residency. Treat a triple A in Tyler? Ship him to Houston before it blows. Not while I’m standing next to him. Vascular surgical team would save him ... Tony could take him. Maybe just a kidney stone. A triple A! ... in the middle of the night ... in Tyler. What a nightmare! Major pain. Like getting shot.

“Hello, Mr Barry Colton? I’m Dr Eddie Stewart. Are you all right? Do you hurt?” Stewart scanned his face and belly for clues. Barry had this eerie look of painful calm on his round face. His ashen hair curled under his ears, matted with sweat against his neck.

“Hurt’s here.” He points mid-abdomen. “Deep. God, it’s intense! I gotta have something for pain, doc. I’m dying from the pain.”

“Okay, Mr Colton, but let’s see what it is first.” Stewart started palpating his belly with his hands one on top of the other, fingers pressed tightly together creating a blunt instrument. “On a one-to-ten

scale, how much pain now?”

“Eleven. Christ!”

Tense, full, yet feeling’s distinct. Pulsatile mid-abdominal mass—aneurysm. Belly and back pain—leaking. Hypotension—near rupture.

“His blood pressure is 70 over 50,” Carla said. “Rate’s 130.” She spoke to him across the bed while plunging the puncture end of the IV line through the soft port in the second bag of saline. As she slid the top slit in the bag over the metal hook, the pole rattled in its base. Carla had a square face, traditional stiff nursing cap pinned on, starched white uniform, nursing pin exactly horizontal on her left lapel. Always adjusting it to make sure.

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soul of the healer

"Start another large bore line," Stewart said, looking straight into Carla's eyes. "Turn up the oxygen, call EKG, call blood bank for six units, get labs, call Dr Sovitch, call the OR crew in. Get the floor supervisor down here. And draw up ten of morphine."

"Done." Carla turned to Jimmy, the lab tech who had just run into the room, carrying his basket of color-coded tubes tinkling in little wire cages, and said to him, "You hear those orders?"

"Got 'em. Know the drill from car wrecks." Jimmy pulled out red top, purple top, and green top tubes, a syringe, and tourniquet.

"Mr Colton," said Stewart, "we're drawing up your pain medicine right now. This looks serious." Stewart, six feet tall, reached down and touched his shoulder. "You know you have an aortic aneurysm?"

"Yes, doc. It's it, isn't it? That's what I told Tony."

"Sure looks like it." Stewart looked up, for the first time noticing Tony leaning against the supply cabinet. He didn't look 60. He was tall and lean with his head down writing his ambulance ticket for the transport down the hill. He wore a navy blue uniform top that zipped up the front. After replacing his call log into his waist pocket, he clicked his ballpoint, twirled it to see the "Hill Country Mortuary" logo on it, then clipped it alongside the log. Tony cured olives every season and brought jars around to everyone he worked with. He even gave Stewart a jar of green ones yesterday. Reminded Stewart of his dad who made little tile trivets and gave them to neighbors. He died last year. Cancer. Stewart felt he should have helped him at the end, as a doctor.

For all the olives he cures and eats, smoking must dictate his weight. Did leave his face with creases ... visible because he's clean-shaven. Reminds me of a saying, "There are more old lungers than there are old doctors." After smoking ten years ... wonder how many lung units I have left? Dad never smoked. Still died.

"Tony," said Stewart, now over in the corner close enough to talk to him softly, "Can Medic 3 take him to Houston? We can't get a chopper in and outta here in time. They'd have to land up at the airport. Triple transfer."

"Bart's gassin' er up now, doc," said Tony. "But doc ... don't order CPR in the back. It'd be a flail at high speed. I have two sets of lift tracks in the back. Bart and Barry need to stay on each side for good balance. You know what I'm good at. I can get him to Houston faster than anyone in the county. Cops know the Cad. It's like flyin' a jet under radar. And doc, he doesn't want us doing anything anyway."

"How long?"

"Under 40 minutes with lights 'n siren. The Cad's made for this trip. Cuts through the air like a fish through water."

"Doc, talk to my wife first," Barry interjected, overhearing the exchange. He motioned Stewart over. "Sara should be

here. She followed the ambulance in." He paused to take a breath. "I'm not going anywhere 'til you talk to her. She'll tell you what we decided. Hurry doc. This pain is killin' me!"

"His pressure's up," Carla said, "now that we've got some fluid in ... 98 over 70."

"Give him the ten of morphine then. Add five if you need to."

Stewart spun around, and took three steps into the hall where he stood along a wall of soft cream tiles across from a tall, slight, 80 year-old woman wearing a long, coat-like, gray woolen sweater. Her reddened eyes emitted tears on a face long in grief, like a window dripping after the rain. A quality of calm accompanied her sadness. "Hello, Mrs Colton, I'm Dr Eddie Stewart." The tone of his voice sought resonance with her feelings. "I'm sorry about your husband. He said you knew what to do." Like the wisp of a wing in flight his fingers touched her forearm.

"Dr Stewart ... it's his aneurysm?" She clutched her small black embroidered purse. She knew but didn't want to.

"Yes, Mrs Colton."

"Oh dear ... we knew it would happen." She blinked, blinked again, then looked down and away, as if searching through the fog for ground.

"We have a plan though, Mrs Colton," Stewart said, eyelid twitching.

Sara looked around Stewart into the trauma room and saw the people fussing around Barry. She saw Tony. "Is he going somewhere?"

"To Houston. It'll take a team of vascular surgeons to operate on his aneurysm. As a back up, Dr Sovitch is on his way in. Honestly, even a great general surgeon couldn't save him in Tyler. It's a very complicated operation."

"It's leaking then?"

"I think so, yes, Mrs Colton."

"Dr Stewart, he'll never make it through surgery. He's 84, and he's got a bad heart."

"The best thing for his heart could be to fix his aneurysm."

"Dr Gibon, his family doctor ... do you know him?"

"Yes, I met him last month."

"He's Barry's family doctor ... always has been. Dr Gibon told us it was coming; we just didn't know when or where. He said we could either wait and panic or we could prepare and flow with it. After many talks we agreed to no heroics ... no tubes." Sara searched for Stewart's reaction.

"We're definitely not there yet, Mrs Colton, though I'm an emergency doctor."

"Dr Stewart, I don't want you to be that kind of doctor," said Sara, "I want you to be Barry's doctor." She cupped his elbow in her hand and turned him toward the trauma room, "Let's go in by my husband."

"Hi Barry honey, how are you?" she said, as she grasped his hand in both of hers.

soul of the healer

"I'm hurting real bad, Sara. Dr Gibon didn't talk about this part." Barry looked at Stewart in a plea and said, "Doctor, I gotta get some relief. This is no way to go. Have some compassion for an old man." Barry's face and forehead glistened with beads of sweat. Sara looked at Stewart, then back to Barry.

Carla pressed up against the other rail of the gurney and blotted the sweat over Barry's eyes, then pushed in the last three milligrams of morphine. "That's 15, doctor. I gave it all." She took down the empty bag of saline, replacing it with the unit of blood Jimmy had handed her.

Tony stood by holding the top rail of his shiny tubular aluminum lift with a clean, pressed, white sheet drawn taut and neat around the mattress ready for the transfer. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Stewart knew Tony wanted to be rocketing down the road. It's what he got up for in the morning.

Mrs Colton turned to Stewart, "Dr Stewart, Dr Gibon said straight to Barry's face many times in his office, 'You'll never get off the table, Barry, you're too old, and your heart's too sick. If you did survive, you'd suffer a stroke.' Barry wished for the old man's friend—pneumonia—but he's got good lungs. Never smoked."

"I'll never get off this table if I don't get some relief! Give me somethin' more for this pain, please. It's all that matters now."

"Carla, give him another 15 of morphine, please. Carefully. His pressure."

"Hurry, doc! This dyin's hell!"

"Dr Stewart," said Ginny, one of the OR nurses who'd popped into view in the hall doorway, "we've got the OR ready. All the trauma trays are open, blood's in the OR fridge, and Dr Sovitch is getting out of his car."

"Thanks," Stewart said, turning back to Sara. "Could I please talk to you for a minute?"

"Yes." She looked to Barry. "We're going to stay together, Barry."

Stewart took her arm and guided her into the hall. "Mrs Colton, this is very serious. This is life or death."

"Yes, we're ready. Only surprise has been the pain."

"What do you think we should do?" Stewart looked to her imploring for resolution.

"As long as he's comfortable when he goes. That's all that matters."

"Yes, we're doing that. But usually we make every effort. Surgery could save him. We can do that here. Everyone's ready."

"Doctor, he'll never get off the table." She looked annoyed.

"That's easier to say than do," Stewart said.

"Once you took him into the OR I'd never see him again. We planned to be together at the end." She reached for his hand. "Your work now is to relieve his suffering."

"I'll call off surgery then. Tell Dr Sovitch and the crew. I'll call Dr Gibon. He'll be awake. We can take good care of Barry right here."

"Thank you." Her face lightened with a faint smile. "Barry said when he passed he'd wait for me. He always does." Looking down and away, like a heron tucking its head in its wing, she stood motionless.

Dad thought of mom the same way ... when she wanted to give him a pill ... he accepted ... it was the end.

Stewart's mother was poised at his dad's bedside at home to place a pain pill on his dry tongue, water in hand, saying, "Conrad, here ..."

"Margaret," he responded, "I don't have pain anymore, but I'll do it for you." He swallowed it, and stopped breathing. His eyes widened as if he was seeing beyond, as if he saw friends waiting in the light, drawn to it. He died in that instant. It was a joyous moment, until the reality of death struck her heart.

"His pressure's down to 70 over 40. That's the second unit of blood hanging there, almost in." Carla reached up and squeezed the bag. "We've finished our third liter of saline. And he's got PVCs now. Is it the table ... or the Cad, Dr Stewart? Table ... or Tony?" Impatient, she wanted action.

Tony caught Stewart's eye and started wheeling over his lift.

Stewart stood silent, arms hung at his sides. His eyelid was still. The green EKG tracing blipped rapidly across the blue screen. Oxygen hissed through the nasal tube. Mr Colton's eyelids hung heavy leaving only a slit of white. His bulging belly had smoothed out the waves in his gown patterned with turquoise diamonds.

Duty ... science or heart? Barry wanted it ... Sara did, and Gibon agreed. Never get off ... the table ... or the bed. The table or the bed. Go ... no, not you, it's about Barry ... at peace with death ... but with pain? ... hope now. Dad said, "This is no way to live," before I knew he'd decided ... slipped off ... I was already gone ... planning on Christmas together. Sara's here, Barry's here. Their town hospital ... and Gibon ... their friend too ... right here. I'm in the way. Losing him. Not sure ... morphine could knock out breathing. Advanced age ... pouring in fluid ... heart failure. Hope he doesn't arrest in the ER. Reflex reaction to V Fib near impossible to suppress ... a circus. Jump on him, thump his chest, press his sternum, slap on a mask and pump the bag. A wild primitive dance to restore life. What it would take now. Easy to say, "Do nothing" Not sure we relieved pain, or oversedated. Either way, it's good. Sometimes best we can do ... technical training, how's it help? Breathing's slowing. Don't stop breathing here, Barry.

Stewart suddenly saw Tony across from him. Tony held his lift's side rail behind him with his left hand; his right hand floated above Barry's rail. Stewart called Tony off with a slight wave of his hand and shook his head back and forth several times messaging a no go.

soul of the healer

"Let's get him down to his room," Stewart said to Tony, Carla, and Jimmy, all still anticipating action. "Come on, let's go. We're admitting him to treat his pain."

"Doctor," Carla said, while snapping the wheel lock with her foot, "I haven't notified the floor yet."

"Call ahead and find an empty room," said Stewart. "I'll take him and Mrs Colton."

Finally got him in bed ... only a slight grimace.

They were in a single room at the end of the wing that looks out over the hillside through the oaks to the pines up on the ridge. Private. Peaceful. Daybreak. No nursing station calls. "Mrs Colton, here, let's pull this chair up for you alongside his bed. He looks comfortable now. Resting." She sat on the edge of the chair leaning toward Barry as if looking for signs of distress to relieve, and cupped his hand with her hands.

God, he's snoring! Sounds awful. Could lead to an obstructed airway ... struggling breaths ... long, drawing ... pulling for air ... could just stop breathing trying ... then a guttural release of air. Such noises. Quietly ... has to go quietly ... best for her.

"Hand me an oral airway please," Stewart requested Betty, the floor nurse now at bedside.

"Number four alright?" she asked.

"Yes, thanks."

"Betty, I'm so glad you're here," said Sara.

"We've known you since you were seven. Knew your mom."

Betty smiled. Offered her presence.

It worked ... tongue up ... obstruction's gone. Breathing quietly. So undignified, that square plastic protrusion from his dry lips. Could gag him. If terminal gasps, even more pleasant. Guess this airway's better.

"I'm sorry, Mrs Colton. I wish we could do more."

"It's all right, doctor." She turned to Stewart long enough for a meaningful connection. "You did the right thing." Sara slid a hand out from Barry's to touch Stewart's.

Warm, firm grasp. She is thankful. Knows now she'll go home alone. Doesn't want to let go. Touching the dying ... touching the living ... the dying's fading.

Stewart turned away, hearing someone.

"Doctor, there's a sick baby in ER," Carla said, reappearing in the hospital room. "Can you come now?"

"Yes, soon as Dr Gibon arrives." Stewart turned back to Sara, now stroking her husband's forehead.

She's with him. I wasn't with dad. "He'll be fine, Mrs Colton." *Squeeze her hand ... hate to pull away.*

Stewart hesitated. Sara said, "I'd rather be alone with him."

Barry's breathing quietly now. Hardly breathing ... seems so much better somehow. Slip his lids shut. Rest his eyes. No chance to shave. Looks unkempt ... whiskers, clammy pale skin exuding sour scent, matted hair, mucous visible in his nose, drool sliding off the corner of his mouth. Wipe it ... find something ... the sheet. How can it matter to a dying man? Mrs Colton doesn't mind. Dying at the end of summer's better than the middle of winter. Was for my dad. Winter's a cold death. This was really a warm death. Though he probably felt colder the more his pressure dropped. Maybe he didn't notice with the morphine.

Sara seemed to breathe with Barry. She turned half her face to Stewart looking out the window, and said, "I called our children, but they live too far away to come this quick."

Took us so long to relieve his suffering. Dad suffered too. My plea to his doctor for more morphine ... sounded like asking a doctor's favor. Dad said it was fine ... didn't want to bother anyone. Heroic—this saving life at any cost. Training ... the right thing ... no liability ... no family emotions. Too busy to sit with them. Barry didn't suffer too long. Would've going to Houston. OR ... the table ... ICU ... a bed like the table ... the vent. Die alone ... strange place ... the last hour.

Still staring out the window, Sara started when the oak leaves moved in the wind,

and said to Stewart, "I wish we were home ... but ... we're here."

"Dr Gibon. Thanks for coming." Stewart shook out the reverie then took the hand of the doctor who had guided them. He had a full head of gray hair, and was dressed in a white shirt, blue and burgundy striped tie, and charcoal sport coat. At 5:00 in the morning! He had posed the inevitable dilemma for the Coltons. How to act when the quality of your life hangs in balance with the quantity of your life. "In the crisis, Dr Gibon, I tried to understand and follow your plan."

"Yes, Dr Stewart," said Dr Gibon, "We talked about it, but you carried it out."

"Sara, how are you?" said Dr Gibon, bending down close to her face, hand on her shoulder. "I'm so sorry. Barry looks peaceful."

"Oh yes," said Sara. "Thank you for coming out in the middle of the night."

"Dr Stewart, the baby," said Carla, reappearing. "It's crying."

"Yes. Right away." Stewart backed away from the bed, turning toward the door. While his eyes lingered on Sara and Dr Gibon, left to complete their relationship with Barry, his heart felt the presence of his dad. ❖

"I don't want you to be that kind of doctor," said Sara, "I want you to be Barry's doctor."