Killing You Softly

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*Entry 10.*

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They say that untreated depression or just depression in general is what causes most people to take their own lives. That twenty-four percent of those people that yearn for the freedom of death suffer from depression (Glover, 2010). They also say that no 'normal' person would ever take their own life; they would never even dream of it. My wife was always considered normal. Nice house, nice husband (at least I thought I was anyway), nice family. But, that was just it. Nice. Nothing bad, nothing great. Just a comfortable, easy, 'nice' life. Maybe that should have been the first clue that something was wrong. They had said that we should have noticed that, maybe I could have stopped her somehow. Who are ‘they’ though? Well, they are the ones who decide what is right and what is wrong. What people can do and what people can't do. They can even decide whether you live or die.

Twenty-eight year old Sebastian Reynolds sat at his living room table looking at what he typed in his Mac Book. The room was not brightly lit; only the sun permeated the room and painted it a mix of orange, red, and yellow. The rays bounced off the glass table to the shiny stainless steel refrigerator, to the stainless steel countertop, and back to the glass table – the cycle probably repeated until the sun changed position. He looked at the table which was usually neat and in order. However, since his wife’s diagnosis with Incuritis, it was littered with pictures, books, legal papers, medical notices, and bills. Sebastian was in a hard place these days.

His wife, Talitha, was a wonderfully successful woman. She owned her own bakery called *Confections!* outside of Portland, Oregon and it was her pride and joy. Although it was primarily a bakery, it also doubled as a small dive. She not only sold breads, cookies, cakes, and brownies, she had small meals for those constantly on-the-go. Funnily enough, Sebastian didn’t know the place existed until he was experiencing the absolute worst day of his life; on that day he was the poster-child for Murphy’s Law. Everything about his day went wrong. No coffee, late for work, lost important papers, and he got a ticket to put the icing on the cake.

He craned his head toward the neon numbers on his stove. *9:07*. He’d been up since five o’clock that morning. He was doing nothing. Not contributing to the world in any way, shape, or form. He sighed and stood up to take a shower. He needed to really get a grip on things. It was undoubtedly the end of his world, but he had a duty to take care of. His lovely Talitha had been diagnosed with Incuritis six months ago.

Incuritis is a rapidly debilitating disease that attacks the bones and breaks down all of the nutrients that bones possess. Eventually, the bones will deteriorate and eventually the muscles will follow. This pain, he reasoned, would eventually lead to violent outbursts, delusions and hallucinations. The process is painful and it has a one-hundred percent fatality rate. The only thing doctors can do at this point is make Talitha as comfortable as possible in her final days, which is proving to be easier said than done.

He dressed himself and sat back at his table. Placing his head in his hands, he thought about the decision he had to make. In one of Talitha’s more lucid days, she’d constantly mentioned how she was tired of being in pain and she wanted it to be over. He’d tentatively suggested the idea of Euthanasia to his ailing wife. She readily accepted that as an alternative to living with the excruciating pain. He needed to excuse himself because of the wave of nausea he felt at her enthusiasm. That night, he’d done all the research on Euthanasia he’d ever need.

Euthanasia is described by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as being *'the act or practice of killing or permitting the death of hopelessly sick or injured individuals (as persons or domestic animals) in a relatively painless way for reasons of mercy'.* By using a medical term like euthanasia, it makes the whole situation seem a bit more...lovely, doesn't it? He mused to his friend Nathanial. If you tell someone you have malignant neoplasm, they'll probably give you a bemused look and ask you what that is, smiling all the way. When you tell them it's cancer, the smile will fade and the pity will start to show in their eyes. The difference between a medical name and the words we use every day is that by using the medical terms, we can distance ourselves from the pain and negative connotations we connect to the everyday words. By using the cold, crisp, sterile words, we can try and ignore what we know is going to occur – it just doesn't seem real.

He had an appointment with Talitha’s doctors at 10:15. He began to gather all of his notes for the meeting. He needed to know *everything* about what he was about to do. He organized his notes into three piles: QUESTIONS, NOTES, and LEGAL. His *questions* binder would have all of his questions about the procedure. *How would it be done?* *Who would do it?* *Would it be painful?* His *notes* binder would contain all of the notes he compiled from databases, books, and interviews with other physicians. The *legal* binder would be copies of all legal documents presented to him. If it needed his signature, he’d be bringing in a lawyer to approve and go behind him every step of the way. He packed his things up and headed to the treatment facility.

Walking into the Center, he was greeted by the receptionist and she immediately directed him to one of the many conference rooms that the hospital used to destroy someone’s life. As he sat down to wait for the doctors to arrive he analyzed the room. Being a businessman, he knew the secrets to rooms like these. The way a room smells, the color of the paint, it all meant something. He could see the strings that control the system. The room was white. Not eggshell. Not cream. *White*. The room smelled like a dentist’s office. You know that smell that smells too clean? It makes you feel nauseous because you are so used to the polluted air of the city? The door opened and in walked a man wearing a sterile white lab coat. “Mr. Reynolds, I trust that you are well.”

Sebastian looked at the man critically. He was aging, around his mid-fifties. He reminded Sebastian of a toad, to be honest. His face was pudgy, squished, and wholly unattractive. He glanced down at the man’s ring finger, not surprised to find it bare. Sebastian looked up; mouth set in a grim line and commented with a small sneer. “As well as one could ever be in my situation.”

The man nodded slowly, looking for something to say; he took a deep breath and exhaled. “Mr. Reynolds, I’m not going to beat around the bush with this. Your wife is going to die.” Sebastian grimaced at the wording, but nodded in understanding. “There is absolutely nothing we can do for her at this point, we have tried the strongest procedures and they are not doing anything beneficial. As a physician, it is my job to end pain, not prolong it.” He placed his elbows on the table and his chin on top of his laced fingers. “It is my understanding that you are considering a form of euthanasia to alleviate her pain altogether.”

Sebastian sighed, defeated. “I am. You’ve said it yourself, she’s in uncontrollable pain. The pain is so bad she isn’t even lucid enough to comprehend I’m her husband any longer. It falls on me to make this decision.” The man raised an eyebrow and it served to only agitate him. “She is estranged from her family. She does not have many close friends that didn’t include her customers. She had me to take care of her. *Me*. And I don’t want to see her suffering like this. I’ve done the research. Checked out books, looked through databases, and I’ve made my decision. I simply wish to speak with you about the technicalities and the procedure itself.”

“Medicine, Mr. Reynolds, is not an exact science – contrary to popular belief,” (Battin, 1994). “There is always the possibility of human error.” The doctor began slowly. “I took an oath before becoming a physician. One part in particular relates to your case.” He cleared his throat, “I will not give a lethal drug to anyone if I am asked, nor will I advise such a plan,” (North, 2002).

At that Sebastian stilled and narrowed his eyes, “Are you trying to tell me no, Doctor?” Sebastian knew all about the Hippocratic Oath, it is perhaps the most widely known of Greek medical texts. It requires a new physician to swear upon a number of healing gods that he will uphold a number of professional ethical standards. In fact, the creation of the Oath may have marked the early stages of medical training to those outside the first families of Hippocratic medicine, the Asclepiads of Kos, by requiring strict loyalty, (North, 2002).

“Mr. Reynolds, I am not telling you no. I merely wished to share that piece of information with you so that you can understand my position as a doctor. So tell me what you would have me do. This is a decision you will make. I will simply advise.” The doctor placed his hands in his lap and folded one leg across the other, waiting patiently for him to begin. And so, Sebastian laid out all of his plans.

“The article *How Dying Became a ‘Life Crisis’* (Lavi, 2008), lists a number of ways a person can go about euthanasia. My wife has expressed her desire for all of her pain to go away. This is the only way that I can think of that handle it…humanely.” He mumbled. “This leads me to one type of euthanasia: voluntary, physician-assisted suicide.” The voluntary portion explains that the subject who is killed, requests to be killed; the physician-assisted part says that the doctor is the one that enables the final act (Euthanasia Definitions, 2011). The doctor nodded thoughtfully, but kept silent as Sebastian explained himself. “My beautiful wife,” He thumbed his wedding band absently. “…is going to die. I see it like this. We can let the disease run its course and keep her in constant pain, or I can make the decision to…you know and let her have her peace.” It was obvious to anyone that he was conflicted about the choice, but he was dead-set on ending his wife’s pain. Talitha never harmed a soul and for her to be tormented in such a fashion is cruel. “I wish for her to be at rest. She is relying on me to do the right thing. This, I feel, is the right thing.”

The doctor rubbed the back of his neck. “I agree with your decision, Mr. Reynolds. I don’t wish to prolong her pain; it goes against all I’ve been taught as a physician.” He removed the glasses from his face. “The principle of mercy states that as a physician, I cannot cause any further pain and I have to act to end pain already occurring (Battin, 1994).” He looked the young man in his eyes. “I’ve been a physician for more than fifteen years now and I know very well that there are cases where pain and suffering cannot be quantified, as in Talitha’s case.”

Sebastian pursed his lips. “I’ve read different books on the topic. I’ve consulted ministers and I’ve contacted other physicians – not that I find you incompetent – for their opinions. It’s frustrating me. They give me all this advice and make it seem like she has a fighting chance at living.” He rubbed his forehead and closed his eyes. He heard the doctor make an unrecognizable sound before he heard the shifting of the material. “If I’m being objective, the only thing that Talitha is doing is taking up space in the hospital. She isn’t active and she is kept in something akin to suspended animation twenty-four hours a day on a feeding tube.” He’d read some time ago that euthanasia frees up medical funds to help other people and provides a way to relieve extreme pain (Euthanasia Pros, 2011).

“Mr. Reynolds, I applaud you for your diligence in learning about your wife’s condition. It makes my job somewhat easier because you have some knowledge of what is going on.” The doctor re-adjusted himself in the cushioned chair and placed his glasses on the wooden table. “However, I have to adhere to protocol before I can authorize this. Not that I suspect you of dubious behavior, but do you have some type of evidence that confirms your wife’s statement about alleviating her pain?”

Sebastian nodded and pulled out a CD-ROM along with an envelope. “I’ve been keeping a video-diary of Talitha’s progress. I plan to give it to a research group that deals exclusively with Incuritis.” The group was based somewhere in Northern California, so he’d be driving there himself. “I’ve also had one of my lawyers draw up a form to which consent is confirmed and witnessed by a third party.” He slid the manila envelope to the doctor with the CD on top. “I have duplicates of both.” He added. In the CD, Talitha wasn’t in the painful stages of Incuritis just yet, so they (Talitha, Sebastian, and Nathanial the Lawyer) were able to speak extensively about the topic. She asked questions and was all-around actively involved with the discussion. Nathanial explained what the implications of the consent form were and clarified any parts that she was fuzzy about. The doctor took a look at the documents in the envelope with a pleased expression.

“I applaud you for being thorough, sir. I know that this is not an easy decision for you, but she is lucky to have such a caring husband.” The doctor thumbed through the papers, skimming each one briefly before is eyes skidded back up to Sebastian. “Did she leave a will?”

Sebastian nodded slowly. “I believe it is the last document in there. She left her restaurant to her most trusted worker and me to run.” Sebastian swallowed the lump in throat and forced his voice to remain steady. “Doctor, I still have some…concerns.” He looked in the doctor’s direction, but didn’t look at the doctor himself. The doctor nodded like an accommodating grandfather. “That is to be expected. Please, ask away.”

Sebastian took a deep, deep breath and exhaled. “Is the procedure painful and how exactly will it be done?” This had plagued him to no end many nights. He was quite certain that he would not be able to handle seeing his already ailing wife go through anymore pain. He just wanted it to be quick and painless. He wanted his wife to make her trip into eternity with something akin to peace.

The doctor rolled his sleeves up and propped his elbows on the table. “The procedure itself will not be painful in the least. We will use the standard lethal injection formula, which is administered in three parts.” The doctor rested his chin on his laced fingers. “The first is sodium thiopental; two to five grams of this will place her into a medically induced coma and provide the anesthesia. The second is pancuronium bromide; this is a muscle relaxant that stops breathing by paralyzing the diaphragm and lungs. This drug takes effect in one to three minutes after being injected. Finally, potassium chloride is injected, which interrupts the electrical signals essential to heart functions. This induces cardiac arrest.” (Bosner, 2001). Sebastian smiled somewhat. “So she won’t feel it at all?” This eased his fears tenfold. “She will not feel a thing, Mr. Reynolds.” The doctor confirmed before bringing up one last question. “So when would you like the procedure to take place?”

Sebastian looked at the doctor, his eyes bright with emotion. “I don’t want this ever to happen. I don’t want to kill my wife.” He wiped at his eyes and with a shaky sigh. “This Friday. It was her favorite day of the week and it was also the day I proposed to her.” He’d want the day to be symbolic, so that even if he were to fall off the face of the earth tomorrow, he’d never forget Talitha. “Everyone that I want present has that day off, so I want it to happen then.” The young man placed his head in his hands.

The doctor gathered all of his papers together and stood quietly. He walked over to the distraught young man and placed a hand on his shoulder. “You’re not killing your wife, Mr. Reynolds, far from it. You’re setting her free.” With that, the doctor strolled toward the exit of the room, “I’ll process this paperwork and leave you to your grief.”

On June 8th, Talitha Na’imah Reynolds departed from this lifetime at 3:09 P.M. She leaves behind the legacy of her restaurant Confections! and a loving husband – Mr. Sebastian Tobias Reynolds. In her final moments, she was joined by her closest of friends, who will always remember her as the perpetually happy baker that loved animals and sweets. Ms. Reynolds will never be forgotten for years to come. Looking at his wife for the final time before leaving, Sebastian wondered if he’d done the right thing. Then Nathanial pointed something out that removed all doubt.

“Look, she’s smiling.”

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