

My Sister's Death

By Cynthia L. Bostwick

I knew Claire called me not just to tell me she had cancer. She needed help. After three decades of lawyering, I've come to accept that it doesn't end when you leave the office or the courtroom—you get pulled into every family drama, every human wound, and every friend's secret becomes your conspiracy.

She proposed driving out to the farm she owned with Winslow until their divorce. "I haven't seen the mare for a while. Can you drive?" she asked.

"Sure, but why?" I asked. Claire was always in the driver's seat. We had always been able to tell each other the truth.

"Because I am already taking morphine. The pain is intense. I shouldn't drive."

"Shit," I said. "Claire, I am so sorry."

"Can we go today?"

"Of course." I grabbed my coat and told Suzanne I was leaving.

"Whatever," Suzanne said with a smile and sighed the sigh of every excellent assistant.

On the ride to the farm, Clair and I talked about intestate succession, wills, powers of attorney, medical marijuana. The conversation gave us a place for our grief, a nice little concrete vault of legal advice.

When we arrived at the farm, Winslow wasn't there and, thank God, Candace wasn't either. "I never signed off the property," said Claire.

I shook my head. "Figures," I said. "I give you all this free advice and you just ignore me."

We laughed, and heard a soft nicker from the pasture. "There's my girl," said Claire, and she walked slowly toward the gate. Claire nickered back. The mare snorted and bobbed her head in a

longer, familiar greeting. Claire opened the gate. The mare came forward. Grasping the horse's neck from the side, Claire leaned into the warm, dark body. The mare turned her head to sigh and nuzzle Claire. Claire said, "Oh baby, I love you." The mare lowered her lovely head and rubbed her white blaze against Claire's face. They stood in that intimate embrace for long seconds. I tried to take a picture with my phone, but all I got was the mare's eye—deep, warm, brown, bordered by dark lashes.

My friend was dying.

When we got back, we walked to the walnut grove near her house. Claire showed me how to identify walnut trees by the horse's face in the leaf scar. I started to weep. She put her arms around me. Looking over my shoulder toward the lake, she said, "Burn me up, don't use any precious earth to bury me. Burn me, and leave me here in this walnut grove, among the horses."

I asked her if she'd ever put that in writing.

"You asshole," Claire said gently. She held me at arm's length and looked into my wet eyes. "I am not asking you for advice. My only family is my idiot nephew. He'll get all weird about burning his auntie. I'm asking you to see that this is done for me."

"OK, sure, of course. You know I will," I said.

"Now, wipe your nose, baby," she snorted.

For two long months, the double punch of chemo and cancer ravaged Claire's wiry body. She had taken up residence with our friend, Delia, in a hospital bed. Claire was now incoherent. The day she died, I sat with her for the better part of six hours and felt more drained than I ever had after a trial.

Claire had started having seizures. They were constant. Her eyes were fixed on a corner of the ceiling. "I've called hospice," Delia said near twilight, "and the nurse is on her way." Delia sat down beside the hospital bed. "She must be exhausted from all these spasms."

I said nothing. I knew that we could give her enough morphine to end it. Delia said, “When she dies do they have to do an autopsy?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think they call the medical examiner to certify the death. I haven’t been through this part before.”

“I don’t want to have an ambulance come and I want her to die here,” said Delia. “She loved this house.” The house had a beautiful view of the lake. “Will the police come?”

“No, no, I can’t imagine that,” I said, “but I don’t know what happens when someone dies at home.”

“Can we ask the hospice nurse?” Delia asked as her tears began. Her face was already red and chapped from her time beside this hospital bed.

“Let’s get her advice on how to stop the seizures.” I was thinking of the nurse asking about the morphine and how much we had. I didn’t want an inventory taken. I left Delia alone in the room and wandered downstairs to wait for the nurse.

A willowy young man with dancing eyes and a sweet smile came to the door. I opened the door, thinking this teenager must have been selling something.

“I’m Ben, the hospice nurse. You called?” he said, flashing his laminated ID card. Nothing like an old feminist confronting her own internalized sexism.

I imagined Claire’s response. She’d have said, “Who needs morphine, baby, just lay down here beside me.”

“Where’s Claire?” he asked after a slightly awkward pause while I no doubt was, in my unseemly reverie, leering at him.

“Forgive me,” I said, and ushered him upstairs.

Delia looked up from the shaking bed when we came in. “Has she been doing this long?” Ben asked as he took out his stethoscope.

“A couple of hours,” I said. “We’ve been giving her the doses of morphine every six hours, but nothing has helped.”

“What is it?” whispered Delia. “Is it that the cancer has gone to her brain?”

“It could be,” replied Ben, “but there’s really no way to know. Have you opened the comfort pack yet?”

I knew about the comfort pack, for the final hours, in the fridge. I didn’t know if anyone had opened it or not, and I wasn’t going to give any answer. I looked at Delia. “No, it’s in the fridge,” she said.

Ben said, “There’s some Haldol in there that might ease her. You can also give the morphine more frequently.” I saw no conspiratorial glint in his eye. He was just starting a fact. I went downstairs to get the package. Haldol is a major tranquilizer—combined with morphine, it is most certainly lethal.

Ben administered Claire’s first dose. It was liquid, like the morphine, and just putting it into the side of Claire’s gasping mouth allowed her to absorb the drug through the tissue in her cheek. “At the first line on the dropper, every four hours,” Ben said.

“How long can this go on?” Delia asked, tearing up again.

“There is no way to say,” said Ben, softly. “It all depends on how strong her heart is. She could last days. Death is a process.”

I looked at Delia. I didn’t think I could stand this for many more hours, forget about days. Delia’s look was pure despair. Winslow, Claire’s ex-husband, walked in. “Yeah, my grandmother was like this for four days. Her teeth began to rot in her mouth before she finally gave up.” I wanted to strangle him right there.

Delia said, “For chrissake, Winslow, Claire can probably hear you. Shut up.” All her life, Delia had made better decisions than I. She had a house on the lake; she knew strangling Winslow in front of so many witnesses would be ill-advised.

Ben looked at his clipboard and wrote down the instructions for the Haldol and morphine. He reminded us he was available any time of the day or night. I walked him to the door.

“Ben?”

He stopped and turned in the gathering dusk. “Yes?”

“How can you do this work, day in and day out?”

He took a step back toward the house. “Helping people die well is good work. My grandfather died in a hospital, plugged in, and intubated. I decided to become a nurse the moment they turned off his ventilator. Claire is lucky. Call if you need anything,” he said as he turned and walked to his car.

I stood there in the gathering darkness and looked across the street at Claire’s walnut grove, and remembered my promise. A crow was perched near the top of a bare tree. I felt a hundred horses’ eyes pleading with me from the leaf scars on the bare trees. Shivering, I turned back inside.

Upstairs, Winslow and Delia were sitting beside Claire’s bed.

“I’m making a beer run,” I said. “You guys want anything?”

“Jameson’s,” said Delia. “It was Claire’s favorite.”

“Jameson’s is the Catholic Irish whiskey, Bushmill’s the Protestant,” Winslow said, puffing out his chest. He reached up and stroked his gray beard. He is an expert on all things related to alcohol, I thought.

“Jameson’s it is, then. Anything else?”

“No, there’s a ton of food around here,” Delia smiled again. “Davey and the kids are coming by in a few minutes. They just called from the highway.”

The kids were Claire's grown former stepchildren. Davey had been Winslow's first wife. I searched Winslow's face for a reaction, saw none, and figured all the years had mellowed the ancient troubles. Or maybe he just didn't care.

"I'll be right back," I said. I looked at Claire and noticed that her shaking had stopped. She was moaning softly. The liquor store was just three blocks away. I hoped either the walk downtown or the whiskey would lend clarity.

When I got back, Delia was in the kitchen. I poured us each a drink. "Davey and the kids are upstairs with Claire," she said.

"To Claire," I said, and raised my glass to Delia's.

"To Claire," she answered.

"What's Winslow doing here, anyway?" I said, not kindly.

"Claire called him three days ago and asked him to come. He was too busy to come until tonight." Delia rolled her eyes. "At least he didn't bring Candace."

In the growing silence, I poured us another drink. "So the Haldol has helped, right?"

"Yes. I am so glad." Delia turned to look out at the lake. "And we can give her morphine more often." I said nothing. Admissions were out of the question here.

Winslow came down and helped himself to three fingers of Jameson's. "I have a friend whose wife was dying. He just took all the morphine suppositories and jammed them up her ass," he said to Delia's impassive back. He turned and looked at me, cocking his head, inviting assent.

"A mercy killing is not the way I want to end my career," I said flatly.

"Oh, come on," Winslow sneered. "Who would know? Don't tell me you haven't considered it."

I held his gaze. He blinked and looked away.

"Deal? How about you?" He tapped her shoulder.

Delia turned slowly around. Her voice was shaking. “No one is going to kill my friend,” she said, “and don’t call me “Deal.””

Winslow put his hands up, the half empty glass in his right hand. “Do it your way. I won’t stay around to see her suffer like this.”

“I think it would be a good idea if you left,” I said.

“Jesus,” he said, “some things never change.” He gulped down his whiskey. “So long, sisters.”

Delia and I looked at each other and when we heard the door slam, we laughed. “I can’t believe I found the courage to stand up to that jerk,” she said. “Must be the Jameson’s.” She set her half-full glass down. “No more for me,” she said, and gave me a hug. “I am so glad you are here,” she said.

Davey and one of her daughters came down the stairs. “I’m glad Dad finally got here,” Elizabeth said. “Where’d he go?”

“Delia threw him out,” I grinned.

“If I recall, it was you who threw him out, counselor.” Delia grinned back, wagging a finger at me. “It’s just us girls now.”

Davey had been weeping. “Claire was a better mother to my girls than I was during the divorce. I’ll always be grateful to her.”

I left them to talk in the kitchen and went back upstairs. “Is Dad still here?” Melanie asked. I shook my head. “I heard someone leave. I figured he wouldn’t last long once we got here.”

“How’s Claire doing?” I could see that she had started convulsing again. It had only been an hour since the Haldol.

“Not well. I think she’s reacting to us being here,” said Melanie.

“Or reacting to Winslow.” We shared a smile. “Maybe we should give her some more medicine?”

“Can’t hurt, can it?” said Melanie. “I mean, she can’t get addicted at this point, right?”

“Right,” I said. “But I am going to run it by Delia first.”

Downstairs, Delia, Davey, and Lizzie were looking at a photo album. Delia was laughing with Davey.

“Delia, Claire is seizing again. Do you think we should give her more medicine?”

A shadow passed over Delia’s face. “How much have you had to drink?”

“I’ve had two, just like you,” I said, a little defensive.

“I just don’t want us doing anything we would regret,” she said, sagely. Her face was kind.

“Agreed. And our friend is suffering,” I said, my voice cracking.

“There’s the comfort pack,” Davey said. “Can we use it to make her more comfortable?”

Delia was silent for a long time. She looked back at the album. “Look, there you guys are at my sister’s ranch. We were so young!”

I went back upstairs. “I think we should wait,” I said. Melanie nodded her head and got up to join her mother and sister downstairs.

Claire’s face was rigid; she moaned a rhythmic dirge. Her left side convulsed with each breath. I turned off the lights. The moon was rising over the lake. Sit down and shut up was the best advice I ever got from a judge. I did just that.

It was a long time before Delia came back in. “The girls and Davey have left. They were tired.” She sat down. “Give her another dose.”

“Are you sure?” I wanted to know she was being rational. “Both?”

“Yes. But no more than the nurse said.”

I filled one dropper with morphine and a second with Haldol, just to the line Ben had showed us. I said, “Claire, honey, we are giving you some medicine to help you.” Help you where, I thought; help us or help you? Delia climbed into the hospital bed, lay down, and wrapped her arms around Claire’s shaking body. She began to sing softly.

“In a mean abode,

On Shankill Road,

Lived a man named William Bloat”

I joined in.

“He had a wife,

The bane of his life,

And she always got his goat,

So one day at dawn

With his nightshirt on,

He slit her bloody throat.”

We sang on through the gory parts, and then:

“An awe of the mighty law

Filled his heart with an icy chill,

So to finish the fun, so well begun,

He decided himself to kill.”

An ancient story of spousal ineptitude: failed murder followed by the murderous husband’s successful suicide. Fifteen years ago, Delia, Claire, Winslow, and I had sung that song in a pub in Ireland. The pub owner had given us all free rounds of dark pints for our efforts.

Claire stopped breathing. In the dark silence of the moonlit room, Delia and I looked at each other. A full 20 seconds passed and Claire moaned, and breathed again.

I went downstairs, poured another drink, and wept. I could not go back in that room. Two hours later, Delia came down, smiling. “Claire has left us,” she said.

“What do we do now, call the police?” I asked.

“No. Tomorrow, we are going to have a right Irish wake and home funeral. We’ll think about it in the morning.” Delia tossed me a blanket and went upstairs to sleep in the same room with the corpse.

Delia awakened me just after dawn. I had slept so deeply I couldn’t remember where I was.

“We should call Ben,” she said.

“Ben who?” I asked, stupidly.

“Ben the angel, the nurse,” Delia said without a trace of impatience.

Ben arrived, verified the death, and began to ask questions. Had anyone questioned the manner of death? Did either of us have any suspicions about the death? Who is Claire’s next of kin?

Only the next of kin can make the decision to cremate. Claire’s errant nephew would screw it up—if we could even find him. We’d have to go to court to get permission to honor Claire’s simple wish. I had made a promise.

“We are sisters,” I said a little too loudly. “We just have different parents.”

Delia looked straight at me. “You mean different *fathers*,” she said, without missing a beat. “And to think you’re the lawyer in the family!” She shook her head in mock disgust.

Ben smiled and took down our names and the names of Claire's mother and father for the death certificate. He called the medical examiner and the funeral home. He destroyed all the remaining Haldol and morphine. He told us we could stay with Claire as long as we wanted.

"After all, you're family," he said. I swear I saw him wink.