

CHAPTER 1

Death Sentence

“Bad news,” he said. “Really bad news.”

She looked at his face, bleak and unsmiling and ineffably sad. Normally he was loud and jovial. She had known him for many years, ever since her father’s arthritic hips had needed to be replaced. Her mother’s knees had also finally worn out and had been replaced a couple of years ago. As a child, she had accompanied her parents to the orthopedic clinic. Since he had heard of her ambition to be a painter, he had joked with her.

“Are you going to be a real painter like Van Ruisdael or waste a supreme talent like Dali or be a cheap crook like Picasso? No, *cheap* is not the right word. Two masterpieces a day for thirty years is certainly not cheap. Picasso could probably buy this whole hospital, me included. You have to give him an A for effort and P for Ponzi, the world’s greatest con man.”

Initially she did not know what to say, but as she grew older and realized he was joking with her, she would verbally fence with him, which he encouraged.

“All you like is kitsch,” she would say, smiling at him, scandalizing her listening parents, to whom this man was their savior. Many of their friends and acquaintances had had hip and knee replacements carried out with results that were not up to expectations. Neither her father nor her mother had had any problems at all with their new joints. For years now, they, like all other joint replacement recipients, had turned up annually to have their new joints x-rayed to see if there was any wear or impending loosening.

The surgeon had told them that this would happen eventually, as all things wear out, and what they were walking on was a piece of plastic, but those problems could be seen on an x-ray years before they developed any symptoms. He had always insisted that they look at the x-ray images with him so that they knew what was happening.

“This is not rocket science,” he would say. “Artificial joints are no different than the brakes on your car. Everything wears out in time. Even we humans wear out. We don’t get out of this one alive.”

One of the patients in the next bay was listening, having heard the doctor say that before. “That sure is true, but if you are on this side of the grass, you are having a good day.” Many of the surrounding patients were elderly and had heard that truism many times previously and knew the truth of it. They laughed at the statement.

Jasmine liked the outpatient clinic. It was inside a small hospital where all the surgery was elective and only joint replacement was done. Consequently, there was no trauma, no emergencies, and no sick people. As the surgeon would say, “If you are sick, don’t come here. Get well and then return. This is the body shop, not the wrecker’s yard.” All the patients found that amusing because it was so true. If you were really sick, a worn joint was the least of your problems.

The clinic was a big room, with a stretcher in every corner. The only operation their surgeon did nowadays was replace hips and knees, so the patients were a mixture of some being assessed for the need for joint replacement and many being seen for follow-up, some like the parents of Jasmine, being multiyear veterans. Many knew each other, as they would come back for annual or rechecks every two or three years, or sooner if there were any concerns. Some patients from northern Ontario would drive down together and make the visit to the big city of Toronto a mini holiday.

The surgeon encouraged new patients to discuss their fears and concerns with those who already had had a joint replaced. New patients contemplating surgery would find it very reassuring when the surgeon should ask others in the room, “Anyone here had a hip or knee and willing to talk to this newcomer?”

There was always someone who would say, “Yes, me.”

“Then talk to Mrs. Jones here. She needs to know what it is like. No secrets here.”

Jasmine—or Jazz, as the surgeon called her—knew several of them, including James, a patient whose hip the surgeon had replaced thirty-five years before, with still the original components.

“How in hell it has not worn out, I don’t know,” the surgeon would say. “James here must live somewhere with zero gravity.”

That day, hearing again that her parents were good for another few hundred miles, as the doctor would put it, Jasmine was happy. But she felt wonderful for another reason. Her life was opening up like a storybook. As a child, she had been accepted into one of the two art schools in Toronto. Having completed that with honors, she had gone to university. After a couple of years of that, she became utterly fed up. All she could see around her was postmodernist indoctrination, with essentially no instruction on art or literature or anything else of practical value. She despised her fellow students rushing around, waving placards, and protesting about this or that, which their professors encouraged and, to some extent, pressured them to do.

She had always been interested in art and literature and had read widely on her own. In some of her classes, she felt that she was in the ridiculous situation of knowing more than her so-called lecturer, as most of them were actually fairly junior, extremely poorly paid, teaching assistants. As she could see that she was wasting her time listening to essentially illiterates, she dropped out and went to one of the Toronto community colleges, which had been famous in North America for producing artists before computer graphics decimated that field almost overnight.

She was experimenting with various styles and was already quietly selling her paintings at various private galleries in the city. She agreed with the surgeon who would laugh at some moron buying a toilet as art. The surgeon thought that the artist was clever; it was the moron who was duped into buying a toilet bowl as art who was the fool. The ultimate joke was that someone spent \$125,000 buying a banana duct-taped to a wall, and the buyer had to change the banana himself every other week or so. Then again, art is in the eye of the beholder.

At college, she kept quiet about recognizing such idiocy for what it was—idiocy. It would not help to point out that the emperor had no clothes. Her father had told her a long time ago to keep her head down. “If you stick your head above the parapet, someone will put a bullet in it,” and, “It is the tall poppy that gets cut down.” He told her that in real life, the little boy who pointed out that the emperor had no clothes would

never have been feted. Instead, he would immediately have been clapped in a dungeon and then quietly strangled, or maybe publicly executed to encourage the others to keep their mouths shut.

Taking what she had been told at home to heart, she looked at this utter rubbish masquerading as art and oohed and aahed with the rest. She could never decide, and never dared to ask, how many of her classmates oohing and aahing with her were fools and pretentious idiots and how many were like herself, quietly amused at this lunacy. She knew the surgeon thought it was all a giant Ponzi scheme, set up by those who could not actually paint, as evidenced by Picasso, when he was trying to draw during his so-called Blue Period.

The surgeon, who was an internationally well-known designer of artificial joints, would say, "People have to walk on what I do. So if my designs are fake and futile, people know pretty quickly. It is difficult to pontificate about the beauty and significance of an artificial joint if you can't walk on the damn thing."

"All you like is ancient," Jazz would tease him. "If it was not painted by a Dutchman or Turner, you don't like it."

"My father told me years ago," the surgeon once said to her, "that if he could do it, it was not art. So if I can hang a toilet on a wall or drop a used bedsheet on a floor, then by his definition, it is not art."

"Ah but think of the existential beauty and significance of it," she once told him, quoting one of her more pretentious teachers.

"Existential rubbish!" the surgeon had said. "I don't even know or care what the word *existential* means. Nowadays, it is like Alice in Wonderland. A word means what I say it means. Art, by Kant's definition, is supposed to be something which enhances life, or that is what I think he was trying to say. The only philosophers who really could write intelligibly were Hume and Hobbes. But if that is true, then the artist is supposed to communicate with me. If he is not prepared to make the effort to communicate, then neither am I."

Teasing him, she said, "But my professors would say that that is a Philistine's approach."

"Philistines. Yes, that's me. Goliath of Gath, before the poor guy's pituitary adenoma half blinded him so he could not see that David was slinging stones at him."

Jazz had attended a black Evangelical church with her parents, so knew the story. "Goliath was blind?"

“Likely was. He was a giant because he had a tumor in his pituitary, and sometimes that tumor presses on the optic nerve, and they go partly blind, usually a quadrant of an eye.”

“So it wasn’t a miracle?”

“Don’t be so dismissive. Miracles do happen. If you are in the medical business as long as I have been, you will see the odd one. Completely inexplicable, like the finger of God reaching down from the naked sky.”

Jazz was amazed that the surgeon never seemed to be in a hurry when he talked to her, or any other patient, and yet could see a clinic of fifty patients in a day, so she never felt that she was wasting his time.

“You mean as in the Sistine Chapel? That is the ultimate kitsch.”

“Right now, the crowds in Rome are so bad it is not worth trying to see, but someday a cardinal will give a famous young lady artist a private showing. Wait till then.”

“Oh yes! You think?”

“Dream dreams, Jazz, and work for them, work hard. Nothing comes without work.”

She kept her mouth shut and did work, and as a result of that work, and maybe a little affirmative action, she got a scholarship to study and paint at the College of Beaux Arts in Paris for a summer. She had received confirmation and booked her flight the day before she accompanied her parents for that annual recheck with the surgeon.

“The City of Lights,” she told the surgeon. “I am going to paint in the City of Lights.”

He beamed proudly at her. “That is great, Jazz. When I was a boy, I wanted to work for a famous surgeon there who had his own hospital in the Sixteenth Arrondissement. You will absolutely love it. The Louvre is full of junk, but make sure you see the Rodin Museum. When do you go?”

“In a couple of days. Incidentally, I have had this little pain in my hip for a couple of weeks. Probably nothing, but it seems worse when I walk.”

“Since you are going away, we had better have a look at it. Hop up on the stretcher, Jazz.”

She lay down on the stretcher where her parents had been examined and pronounced fine for another year. He lifted her leg, bent her knee, and wiggled her hip.

“Full range of movement. Any pain, Jazz?”

“Just a very little in the groin.”

“Probably nothing, but since you are going away we should probably x-ray it. Let’s get you registered and up to x-ray.”

Half an hour later, she was back. Her parents accompanied her. She stood with him as he clicked her x-ray images up on the computer screen. She saw the images of her hip and, as an artist, recognized what they were, but the details meant nothing to her. He flicked slowly through the three images. She looked at him. He said nothing, but he was no longer smiling and looked bleak and then ineffably sad.

“Bad news,” he finally said. “Really bad news.”

“What is it?” she said in alarm.

“I am so sorry, Jazz,” he said, turning to her and putting his hands on her shoulders. She saw tears in his eyes.

“What is it?” she asked again, dreading the answer. What else could make a tough, jovial senior surgeon so sad? The bottom fell out of her world. She knew the answer before he gave it.

“I don’t know how to say this, Jazz, but it’s cancer.”

He let go of her and opened his arms. Instinctively, she came inside them, and as he held her close, she whispered, “How bad?”

“As bad as it gets.”

What do you say when your life is over, when you have been given a death sentence? She had thought her young life was opening like a flower. “In the glad morning of my days,” or as she had read of the poet Coleridge, “With hope like a fiery column before thee,” or like the poem,

When all the world was young lass
And every tree was green
And every goose a swan lass,
And every lass a queen.

She shuddered. Her dreams were over. She was going to die.

“What is it?” she whispered to him.

“Cancer, spread all over. The pain in your hip is because the tumor is eating away the bone, and the bone is about to break. The pain is the impending fracture. It will have to be nailed, and the other hip too. It is almost as bad.”

Rose, the mother of Jazz, broke in, “What’s going on? What is it? I was a nurse before I retired after my knee replacements. What’s wrong with Jasmine?”