In today's post I found a letter from a doctor in Stirling who said she had been privileged to care for many patients with a terminal illness in the course of her work as a general practitioner. "Some time ago," she wrote, "while having a cup of tea with the family of a dying patient, his wife turned to me and said, 'I suppose you get used to this, Doctor.' The day I 'get used' to human tragedy is the day I will hang up my stethoscope and go home."

It was that kind of humanity from the medical profession that my friend found in her last days. It made the end of her life worth living and her death an easier thing for the rest of us to endure.

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Don't leave a mess. Call Triple S!

Thomas Lynch

This extract is from "Uncle Eddie, Inc" in "The Undertaking—Life Studies from the Dismal Trade," a collection of essays by Thomas Lynch which will be published by Jonathan Cape in April. Lynch, the author of two books of poems, most recently "Grimalkin and Other Poems," operates a funeral home in Milford, Michigan.

Uncle Eddie needed an 800 number. His sideline in the suicide cleanup trade was going gangbusters. He needed a separate phone line, a logo, a slogan, and magnetic business cards. I was touched that he would come to me, his much older brother, for advice.

"Whadaya think about 1-800-SUICIDE? Too morbid? Too direct? Or 1-800-Triple S? You know. For Specialised Sanitation Services?"

In his heart of hearts he had hopes that Triple S—for Specialised Sanitation Services—would become as widely recognised as Triple A had for Automobile Association of America, or WWW had for the Worldwide Web, or Triple X had for a style of cinema that Uncle Eddie said excited his passion for First Amendment Rights. Though perhaps his services were a little too specialised—known only to local and state law enforcement agencies and county medical examiners and funeral homes and needed only by the families and landlords of the messy dead.

Indoor suicides, homicides, household accidents, or natural deaths undetected in a timely fashion—these were the exceptional cases that often required the Specialised Sanitation Services that Uncle Eddie and his staff at Triple S—his wife, his golfing buddy, and his golfing buddy's wife—stood ever ready to provide for reasonable fees, most often covered by homeowners' insurance.

"Maybe you should just play whatever numbers come up Ed." I counselled. "Maybe ask for something that ends in zeros."

At this Uncle Eddie's visage changed—adopting the distant and bedazzled gape of the ancient Mayan perplexed by the delicate mysteries of nothingness.

Years ago I would do it for free. I'd only been in town a matter of months when the chief of police called the funeral home in the middle of the night to ask if we had anyone on the staff who took care of "the messes...you know, the really bad ones."

"We've had a bad one over here on Highland Road. I just can't let his family back in the house until something's done with it. Really bad."

It seemed the late mortgagee of the split level home on Highland Road had grown weary of his wife's ongoing affair with the chiropractor for whom she worked. The chief had been able to piece it together from physical evidence and the widow's understandably agitated testimony. The cuckolded householder had sat up drinking after his wife had gone to bed, announcing her intention to put spongy rollers in her hair. This had

become an intimate code that meant she did not want to have sex with him but wanted to look good for the boss tomorrow. He'd finished the bottle of Dunphy's Irish and raided her stash of Valium, then gone to the drawer where the Black and Decker electric carving knife was kept between Easters and Thanksgivings and Christmases. He'd plugged it into the wall socket on his side of the bed, locked his jaw against any utterance, and, laying down beside her, applied the humming knife to his throat, severing his carotid arteries and making it half through his oesophagus before he released his hold on the knife's trigger. It had not been his coming to bed, nor the buzz of the knife, nor any sound he'd made that woke her. Rather, it was the warmth of his blood gushing from his severed vessels halfway up the master bedroom wall and soaking her and her spongy rollers and saturating the bed linens and mattress and box springs and puddling in the carpet beneath the bed that woke her, wondering was it just a dream.

Determination

We washed and scrubbed and wiped until daybreak. And after much suturing and the use of a turtleneck sweater, predicted the possibility of an open casket, though nothing could be done about the dead man's mouth, which was clenched in the way you see in the movies when they give the wounded hero a bottle of hooch and a bit of leather to chew before they remove the bullet or the leg that the bullet was shot into.

The poor client looked, as a cousin several times removed remarked, "determined."

This is the part I have always admired—the determination, the pure resolve, to do one's self such massive and irreparable damage, which is the distinguishing element of all successful suicides. It distinguishes the true killer from the occasionally suicidal. Who among us in our right minds hasn't yearned several times in the course of life for the comforts of absence and non-being? But there is a subtle and important difference between those of us who'd rather not be alive tomorrow—incomplete homework, biopsy results, romantic reversals, pregnancy tests—and those of us who want to be dead, tomorrow and the day after and forever. The latter is the exception; the former, the rule.

To kill a member of one's species—be it oneself or another—calls for a deadly silence, however momentary, of all the voices raised to the contrary. As anyone who has swatted a wasp, or caught a fish, or shot an animal, or sat with the dying of our own kind knows, life—at the cellular level—rages against the dying of the light. Something in us argues, "Don't!"

Don't leave a mess. Call Triple S! is the slogan Uncle Eddie invented. He had it printed in 22 point bold Mead gold letters on a dark green background along with his 800 number (1-800-668-4464) and made into kitchen magnet cards, and he mailed them out to police

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and fire stations, funeral homes, and the county morgues here in southeastern Michigan. Before he knew it the phone began to ring—once or twice a month at first, then once or twice a week. There was the occasional murder that called for his attention, or the old timers dead but undiscovered. But for the most part Triple S relied on the grisly and violent homemade suicides that erred on the side of excess and overkill to cover the fixed costs of the enterprise.

It was June 1990 when Uncle Eddie burst into my office waving a newspaper that carried the story of Jack Kevorkian, one of our local head cases here in Oakland County, who had just used his suicide machine for the first time a few miles north of here.

"Who's this asshole Dr Death?" he hollered. "And why is he trying to put me out of business?"

I told him it had nothing to do with Triple S. But my younger brother, ever the visionary, said that it was a genuine threat. He went on to explain that tidy, bloodless, medically supervised, and assisted suicides would make his Specialised Sanitation Services redundant, his mop and bucket crews as obsolete as typewriters or telegraphs. "The handwriting's on the wall," he sighed. "It's only a matter of time."

I told him not to lose hope. Surely Kevorkian would go to jail or to the asylum. Injecting poisons was against the law. Clearly suicide was more murderous than medicinal. "Assisted suicide" like "holy war" is an oxymoronic romance that seeks to make killing sound like kindness or courtesy or a good cause. Folks would soon go back to the old trusted solo ways—pills, gas stoves, bridge abutments, firearms—that made up in raw independence whatever they lacked in tidiness.

Of course, recent history has proven me wrong. Nearing the end of 1996 Jack has assisted in nearly 50 "medicides" and is picking up the pace, delivering the bodies to local hospitals himself, daring the local prosecutor to take him back to court. He has become the poster boy for the Death with Dignity, Right-to-Die, PAS [physician assisted suicide], VES [Voluntary Euthanasia Society] crowds; the cartoon and caricature of a deeper, darker existential question about the meaning of life and choice that promises to divide us as abortion—the other existential question we have bungled lately—has and always will.

A more shameful, sad, and perilous world

Truth told, I believe it is our nature to die, not our right. I believe we have the ability to kill, to make things dead, even ourselves, but we haven't the right. And when we exercise that ability in the name of God (as we have done in war), or of Justice (as we have done with capital punishment), or of Choice (as we have done with abortion), we should have the good sense to recognise it for what it isn't: neither enlightenment nor civilisation nor progress nor mercy. Nor is it an inalienable right. It is, rather, a shame, a sadness, a peril from which no congress's legislation, no churchman's dispensation, no public opinion, or conventional wisdom can ever deliver us. For if we live in a world where birth is suspect, the value of life is relative, and death is welcomed and well regarded, we live in a world vastly more shameful, abundantly sadder, and ever more perilous than all the primitive generations of our species before us who were sufficiently civilised to fill with wonder at the birth of new life, dance with the living, and weep for the dead.

But the advance of our biomedical prowess is coincidental with the loss of our appetite for the ethical questions that ought to attend the implications of these new powers. We have blurred the borders between being and ceasing to be by a technology that can tell us *How It Works* but not *What It Means*. And we, godhelpus, are afraid to ask.

No member of my generation—that demographic aneurysm called the Baby Boom—should miss the irony that the first generation to plan its parenthood, to manage and manipulate its fertility, may well be the first generation to have its deaths planned for them, its mortality managed and manipulated by our own children, those who survived the gauntlet of our "choices." Likewise, we should depend on them to make their choices the way we've made ours: by convenience and expedience and five year plans, efficiency and function and high performance, quality time and available resources. *Less*, we've always lied to them, is *more*! Maybe we shouldn't have fooled Mother Nature.

But Uncle Eddie, as I mentioned, is a visionary. And nowadays the suicides are tidy and well planned. The messes, the really bad ones, are the questions we would rather no one posed. Unvexed by the existentials, what Uncle Eddie wants, while Kevorkian purses his immortality, is what he calls "a little something on the side"—an extra income not promised to the mortgage or the grocer or the shoe store or the tax man.

"You've got to give 'em what it is they want" is what he tells me, "the better mouse-trap, you know *packaging!*"

Thus Specialised Sanitation Services has evolved, like a new version of Windows, into a new, more user friendly Triple S. Suicide Support and Supply is Uncle Eddie's sideline now. Instead of a rusting minivan and these jerry rigged contraptions Kevorkian uses—intravenous bottles and carbon monoxide canisters—Uncle Eddie arrives in a new black sedan, dressed more or less like a TV preacher, and carrying a briefcase in which he has release forms, credit card vouchers, generic farewell notes, a pearl handled hair triggered 22 calibre Smith and Wesson, and a specially designed trash can lid with bullet proof vesting Velcroed to the interior. He calls it his "Sanitron" in homage to Kevorkian's bizarre wordsmithing. He instructs the client on aiming the pistol just behind the right earlobe and squeezing the trigger. There are practice shots. The client holds the Sanitron in his or her left hand, like a baseball glove, to catch any debris. Most often the bullet is caught in the bullet proof netting. Uncle Eddie has these made into commemorative pendants for the next of kin. It is this attention to detail that has made Triple S the local leader in the assisted suicide trade.

The handgun is, to no one's surprise, One Hundred Per Cent lethal. There's a small entrance wound that doesn't interfere with plans for an open casket. The spinal cord is severed. Death is immediate and merciful and remarkably tidy. Uncle Eddie's slogan, *Don't leave a mess. Call Triple S* still makes perfect sense. The kitchen magnets turn up everywhere in the county. He accepts all the major credit cards.

Uncle Eddie says it's not the suicide—we've always had that—it's the assistance that we need to sell. It's someone to stand up and shout down the voices. Those women in the back of the Volkswagen van didn't need the help with the killing part. They had the physical resources to swallow pills, pull a trigger, start a car, turn on the gas stove, call it a day. They had the psychological resources to overcome the fear of dying, a fear like the fear of any unknown. They had the spiritual resources to understand that God or Whatever Is Out There would, by definition, understand them. What they lacked was the voice to shout down their own voices that whispered to them the case for living—part nature, part nurture—the voice that says that to take life, however painful and imperfect, does damage to the rest of life in all its incarnations. The old pathologist, with his jerry-rigged contraption—his *Thanatron*—and his ethically neutered lexicon made all those women his *patients* and potassium chloride and carbon monoxide not poison but *treatment* and what they were doing not suicide, but

medicide proving once again that modern axiom about the big lie being easier to sell than the small one.

And to those who argue only doctors should do it, Uncle Eddie simply asks them *Why?* If unlicensed pathologists, why not retired clergy, or victualers short on cash, or rehabilitated serial killers, or veterans of foreign wars. We're not talking, as the overworked idiom holds, brain surgery here. Most of the species knows how to kill.

Nor should this right to die and right to assistance with one's death be limited to the terminally ill. Pain is the problem, suffering. Do jilted lovers suffer less than cancer patients? Who's to say? Is heartbreak more bearable than congestive heart failure? Is perfect memory less painful than senility? And if the teen girl who gets pregnant at the prom is as entitled to an abortion as the child raped by mannish violence; so too, the teen who doesn't get a prom date is as entitled to her assisted suicide as is her grandparent with Alzheimer's.

Where life is sacred we must suffer the life. Where choice is enshrined we must suffer the choices.

Uncle Eddie's talking clinics now—*obitoria*. Because a rusting Volkswagen and Kevorkian's crazed personal style are the back alley and coat hanger of the suicide trade. And he is getting tired of house calls. I confess it has occurred to me that a tastefully unimposing annex to our current emporium here in Milford might be the obvious and proximate preference of my townspeople. Two or three thousand non-threatening square feet, say, with plenty of big pillows in earthtones and natural fabrics, new age music piped in, a staff of appropriately frumpy helping professionals trained to assist with "end of life" (the locally fashionable euphemism) decisions. And exclusively motivational wall treatments—*Love is Forever* or *Just Do It!* imposed on a watercolour landscape of the Dolomites—reminiscent in decor and

concordance of nothing so much as one's kindergarten. And maybe a two or three unit crematorium attached since, if the records in Oakland County are any predictor, the bodies will be for the most part female (Is this sexism, gender-norming or affirmative action?) and, for the most part, burnt. By a happy coincidence, our current holdings here in Milford take up most of a block on the corner of Liberty and First Streets making *The First Liberty Clinic* an aptly patriotic, almost churchy corporate name. Or maybe just *The Libertorium*?

Someone will have to be in charge of establishing federally mandated minimum standards for Meaningful Living, below which, it might prudently follow, social security checks could be discontinued. Once life is meaningless, it oughtn't to be a burden on the taxpayers. And just as our generation of policy makers has found that abortion is more cost effective than paying welfare, our children's generation, already in arrears with our national debt, will find *medicide* a better bargain than *Medicare*. This will not require anyone to take their voluntary leave of this life, but it may help to educate them as to their duties as a citizen. Surely there will be no shortage of bishops and politicians willing to serve on such a panel.

Of course, Uncle Eddie wants to call it *Serenity Social Services*, you know, Triple S. He says folks could make a day of it. A light breakfast. A chat with one of his "facilitators," prearrangement of the obsequies, a video farewell message for the survivors. He says he'll offer several methods—guns, gas stoves, gallows—you know, choices. He says he could keep the same slogan and logo—*Don't leave a mess...etc.* He's got all these memo pads and coffee mugs, key chains, and kitchen magnets. Even the same 800 number would work, puzzling over the familiar digits of which Uncle Eddie has noticed it always spelt NOTHING.

Rowlandson's *Death in the Nursery*

Fiona Haslam

"At a Christening at Beddington Surrey," said the *Gentleman's Magazine* of Sunday 4 December 1748, "the nurse was so intoxicated, that after she had undress'd the child, instead of laying it in the cradle, she put it behind a large fire, which burnt it to death in a few minutes.—She was examined before a Magistrate, and said she was quite stupid and senseless, so that she took the child for a log of wood; on which she was discharged."

Thomas Rowlandson depicts a drunken nurse in charge of a young baby in a scene entitled *Death in the Nursery*. A skeleton representing death tenderly regards his small victim as he rocks the cradle. The nurse in charge sleeps with an overturned glass in her hand. An appended verse reads:

Drown'd in ebriated sleep
No vigils can the Drunkard keep.
—Death rocks the Cradle, as you see.
And sings his mortal Lullaby.
No shrieks, no cries will now its slumbers break;
The infant sleep,—ah, never to awake!

Rowlandson produced a series of prints between 1815 and 1816 under the generic title of "Dances of Death." Ackermann published these with verses by William Combe. Rowlandson and Combe never met (Combe was in prison at the time), but their collabora-

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tion through Ackermann was a success. Rowlandson's drawings were typically robust, often overflowing the canvas in untidy profusion to indicate the chaos taking place within its compass. He depicted aspects of life from birth to death and was no respecter of any aspect of it or of any of its participants. Nurses, as in this print, received their share of his barbed attentions.

Earlier, Rowlandson had drawn a midwife going to confinement, complete with pattens on her feet and with lantern and spirit bottle, and this image was used by Dickens to represent "Sairey Gamp" in *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4). It was alleged that this good woman would attend a "laying-out" and a "lying-in" with equal zest and relish. Dickens described how "the face of Mrs Gamp—the nose in particular—was somewhat red and swollen, and it was difficult to enjoy her society without becoming conscious of a smell of spirits." Fortunately, this image improved as midwives and nurses received more training, but other problems arose with the advent of the man-midwife or accoucheur.

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