The Seventh Door

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PROLOGUE

Over the years as a practicing physician, stressful clinical situations tend to give me visions reminiscent of the dark and gloomy tale of the Duke of Bluebeard, a classic one-act opera by Béla Bartók, the famous composer from my homeland of Hungary. As oncologists dedicated to taking care of the very sick, facing real and perceived failures when our patients take ill can be a daunting task. I share my recurrent vision with you in case you have had similar hauntings, to know that you are not alone in this experience and to help us together find the renewed energy to carry on with our chosen mission.

SYNOPSIS OF THE STORY OF THE DUKE OF BLUEBEARD

Young Judith leaves her family and moves into the castle of the Duke of Bluebeard, a powerful but enigmatic and feared man who is rumored to have murdered his former wives. Judith finds the castle dark and dreary, with seven large doors, all shuttered tight. Bluebeard asks Judith not to open the doors, as they lead to private places, but she is insistent on opening them so light may come in. Ultimately, Bluebeard yields to her and hands over the keys, one by one. She starts opening the doors and finds that each room beyond contains new and troubling information about Bluebeard's past, including spilled blood and a silent silvery lake, "the lake of tears," which Judith suspects is filled with tears shed by his former wives. Bluebeard begs Judith not to open the seventh door, as that must stay shut forever, but she is not to be stopped. This door hides Bluebeard's prior wives, alive but imprisoned. As she sees them, she realizes that, having opened all the doors, she has to become one of the wives of the past. She steps inside, and Bluebeard shuts the door on all the women. Now he is left alone in the darkness.

MY STORY

I chose Raisinets. Sometimes I choose that and sometimes the one with the filling that has a pasty taste to it, I forget the name. Goobles? Goobers? Whatever. Today it was Raisinets. It feels somehow so relaxing to stick with the routine, feeling those little delicious, chocolaty pieces rolling down your throat, with the juicy raisin in the middle, while you put your feet up and stay in a sort of daze through the previews. A little break away from the week, a little separation over the weekend, thinking it is all fine, sitting back and drifting to a different world, even if just for a few hours.

Ding, ding . . . what the heck? Forgot to turn the phone off again, sorry. Didn't that Muppet guy just tell us to do that

during the intros? Now I won't be able to resist looking at this e-mail. Let's see . . .

"FYI, Mr. So-and-So is in the MICU. He became suddenly comatose, probably massive bleed, family in shock and very upset, they did not think this could happen. Will keep you posted."

Shoot, that's bad. I told them: between a rock and a hard place, massive embolism, brain mets. There are impossible choices we need to make, not easy. There are frightening risks we need to take. Huge clot, the filter didn't work, legs more and more swollen, he started to look like a balloon, just huffing and puffing. There was no other way out. What do you do? Have not seen them for days—why are they upset? Are they mad at me? Gosh, cannot watch this freaking movie, my mind just keeps going back. Tumor growing, blood vessel bursting. Heart pumping but to no avail, clots shutting all the doors.

The movie is over? Jeez, I don't even know what it was about. OK, let's go then. "Dad, you promised we could go to Ronnie's for dinner." Not now please, there is no way I can eat now, will get you guys some take-out, let's just go home. Need to make a phone call first. What? He's dead? This fast? My God, I am so sorry. My condolences. We need to involve Risk Management? Really? Sure, have a full clinic tomorrow but let's have a family meeting. Maybe we can get some sense into this situation. Will make time.

Quiet drive through the dark woods, mind racing, vivid images of the first meeting. Cancer diagnosis, somber conversations, family discussions. Clearly, a strong man, such a loving family. Can he make it? He wants to be at the graduation, just a few months away. If we do this, if we do that—we trust you. It should be possible. Treatments through the months, encouraging results, side effects, admissions, changing course, changing again, setback after setback. Now the end of the road.

You guys go to sleep, I need a drink. Maybe two. Evening news just floats in front of my eyes, wars here and there, journalists killed, teams winning and losing. I am just here lying awake, motionless, thoughts rushing through. Tumor growing, blood vessel bursting. Family members crying, family members screaming. What was I to do?

There is darkness. Everyone is asleep now. Just my thoughts swirling through some fog. There are some noises, doors opening. Faces of patients float in front of my eyes. Emergency calls in the middle of the night. Blood stains in a kitchen . . . "He should have gotten his treatment started earlier on." ICU beds, ventilators . . . "Had I just known it would come to this, we would have never opted for treatment."

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Doors creaking open.

It is still dark, but there is some familiarity in this darkness. I am in a castle. It is very cold and pitch black, and there are shut doors all around. Déjà vu. I know now, I have seen this before. This is Bluebeard's castle. See, there is Judith walking around, she is trying to open the shut doors. Some light is coming in, another door opens and then another.

"You said she would be cured."

"You said he might make it."

"We never thought it would be this bad."

"Something must have gone wrong, she just started treatment."

"She should never have been sent home like this."

There is solemn music in the background. Must be a funeral home. People in dark clothes muttering.

A young woman lifeless in bed, two little boys being scurried out of the room. I am so sorry. It was too late, we just could not bring her back. I am walking out of the room, passing by the two boys. They look at me frightened, confused. I don't look back. I see a lake, a lake of tears. Many years passed, you two must be grown men now.

"She wanted to make it to the graduation."

"I just wanted to see him to get his boat to set sail, he has been building it so long."

"He wanted to walk me down the aisle."

There is more and more light now. There is one more shut door. Judith, please, I beg you, do not open that door. But the door creaks open. I just see two feet dangling, I cannot clearly recall his face—I see it only blurrily in the haze. Why did you do it? I did not say that. Wish we had spoken more that day, wish I had gotten to know you better. Then there is darkness again, pitch darkness, and complete silence.

Chirp, chirp, chirp . . . what is that? Shoot, the alarm. What time is it? 5:30. Gosh, need to get myself together. Coffee

pot, three scoops . . . I have a splitting headache, let's make it four. Brushing teeth, matching ties, hmmm, more and more crow's feet looking back from the mirror. I ache all over, trying to stretch my arms. I feel like I have to rise from my ashes this morning. I am walking to the car in the foggy darkness of dawn, a crisp morning but spring is in the air. That's nice, the wind clears my mind. As I drive through quiet neighborhoods, slowly waking up, lights turning on, I can picture them sitting in their kitchens, making coffee, getting ready, chatting . . .

"You think I will do OK on this chemo?"

"You think the scan results will be all right?"

"What is he going to say, can I go on with more treatment?"

"What will happen to us?"

Let's think through what is ahead for us today. I feel worn out but need to compose myself. There you will be, exam room after exam room, like little flocks of birds sitting on a wire, some of you in groups, most in twos, some alone. People coming and going, new discussions to be had. Difficult options to gauge, hard choices to be made. Graduations to get to, weddings to attend. It is tough, but try not to worry, I will be there for you. I will be your counsel and your compass. Trust me. I will do my best to get your boat to set sail. I won't stop trying. I just wish somehow those rotten doors could stay shut forever.

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