

A GREAT VOICE STILLED by Shirley Jackson

[from PLAYBOY, March 1960 (pages 57-58,91)]

THE HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM was an island of inefficiency in the long echoing and white-painted and silenced stretches of the hospital. In the waiting room there were ashtrays and crackling wicker furniture and uneven brown wooden benches and clearly unswept comers; the business of the hospital did not go on with the intruders waiting restlessly. and with every bed in every wing of the hospital filled, it was perfectly all right with the hospital administration to see the wicker chairs and wooden benches in the waiting room empty and wasting space. Katherine Ashton, who had not wanted to come anywhere near the hospital, who had wanted to stay at home in the apartment on this dark Sunday afternoon, who had wanted to cry a little in private and then dine later in some small unobtrusive restaurant — perhaps the one where they did sweetbreads so nicely — and linger over a melancholy brandy; Katherine Ashton came into the waiting room behind her husband, saying, "I wish we hadn't come. I tell you I hate hospitals and death scenes and anyway how does anyone know he's going to die today?"

"You'd always be sorry if you hadn't come," Martin said. When he saw that the waiting room was empty he turned back and looked hopefully up and down the hospital hall. "You think we could go upstairs right now?"

"They won't *possibly* let us upstairs. Not *possibly*."

"We got here first," Martin said reasonably. "As soon as they let anyone go upstairs, it ought to be us, because we certainly got here ahead of the rest." "I'm going to feel like a fool," Katherine said. "Suppose he doesn't die? Suppose no one else comes?"

"Look." Martin stopped walking back and forth from the window to the door and came to stand in front of her, as though he were lecturing to one of his classes. "He's *got* to die. Here Angell is Bying down from Boston. And practically the whole staff of *Dormant Review* up all night working on obituaries and remembrances and his American publisher already getting together a *Festschrift*, and the wife being in from Majorca if they weren't able to stop her. And Weasel calling every major literary critic from here to California to get them here in time. You think the man would have the *gall* to live after that?"

"But when I tried to call the doctor—"

"In my business," Martin said, "you've got to be in the right places at the right times. Like a salesman or something. Just by being here I get a chance to meet Angell, for instance — how long could I go, otherwise, trying to get to meet Angell? And if I swing it right *Dormant* could even——"

"Here's Joan," Katherine said. "She's still crying."

Martin moved swiftly to the doorway. "Joan, dear," he said. "How *is* he?"

"Not ... very well," Joan said. "Hello, Katherine."

"Hello, Joan," Katherine said.

"I finally got hold of the doctor," Joan said. "I called and called and finally *made* him talk to me. It sounds pretty . . . black." She put her hand across her mouth as though she wanted to stop her lips from trembling.

"A matter of hours," she said.

"My God," Martin said.

"How awful," Katherine said.

"Angell's flying down from Boston, did you hear?" Joan sat tentatively on the edge of a bench. "Anybody upstairs with him?"

"They won't let anyone go up," Katherine said.

"Maybe they're giving him a bath, or something. Or do they bother, if it's only a matter of . . ."

"I don't know," Katherine said, and Joan sobbed.

"But it's pretty certain to be today?" Martin asked, with a kind of reluctant delicacy.

"You know how doctors talk." Joan sobbed again. "They had to take me home this morning and give me a sedative, I was crying so. I haven't had any sleep or anything to eat since yesterday. I was right here all the time until they took me home this morning and gave me a sedative."

"Very touching," said Martin. "Katherine and I thought it would look better if there weren't so many people around, so we haven't come until today."

"John Weasel said he'd bring in some sandwiches and stuff later. I plan to stay right here. now, until the end."

"So do we!" Martin said firmly.

"The Andersons are coming over, and probably those people he was visiting last weekend, they're probably coming down from

Connecticut. And — we all thought it was so sweet — the bar, you know, the one where he had the attack, well, they're sending over flowers. We all thought it was so sweet."

It was nice of them," Katherine said.

"I only hope Angell gets here in time. Weasel's got the Smiths and their car at the airport and he even called the police station to ask for a police escort, but of course you can't ever make *them* understand. I'm still crying so I can't stop. I haven't stopped since yesterday."

"Someone's coming," Martin said, and Joan sobbed. "Weasel," Martin said. "Weasel, dear old fellow. Any news?"

"I called the doctor. Katherine, hello. Joan, my dear, you shouldn't be here, you really *shouldn't*; you promised me you'd try and get some rest. Now I am cross with you."

"I'm sorry." Joan looked up tearfully. "I couldn't bear it, not being near him."

"What a *day* I've had." Weasel sighed and sat down on a bench and let his hands fall wearily. "The *police*, honestly! I told them and *told* them the light of the literary world was going *out* right here, and so could we *please* just get some kind of an escort to bring the country's foremost literary critic over from the airport to hear his last words and close his eyes and what-not, but I swear, darling, it's exactly like talking to a pack of *prairie* dogs. Calling me 'sir' and asking me who *I* was, and —" he sat up and slapped his forehead violently, "the *wife*, great Bacchus, don't *ask* me about the wife! Cables to Majorca all day yesterday and phone calls to Washington and clearance on the plane and all those cousins of hers pulling strings just simply *everywhere* and she's arriving with absolutely *no* baggage!"

"You mean his wife *is* coming?" Joan stared open-mouthed.

"Darling, she'll be here practically any *minute*; I kept *pleading* with the woman, I swear I did, positively *entreating* her — no place to put her up, no one free to take care of her, we're *perfectly* capable of making all arrangements this end, and she literally would not listen to a word I said. I swear that that woman would not listen to a blessed word I said. I knew you'd be *furious*," he said to Joan.

Joan wailed. "Naturally we'd send her the body."

Martin was pacing back and forth again, from the door to the window. "When will they let us go upstairs?" he demanded irritably.

Joan looked at him, surprised. "You think *you're* going upstairs?"

"We were here first," Martin said.

"But you didn't even *know* him."

"Katherine knew him exactly as well as you did," Martin said flatly. "Besides, he had dinner with us Tuesday night."

"Katherine certainly did *not* know him as well as I did." Joan said.

"He did not have dinner with you," Weasel said. "Not *Tuesday*. Tuesday he—"

"I certainly did," Katherine did. "If you care for a public comparison—"

Joan opened her mouth to interrupt, then sobbed and turned as more people came into the waiting room. "That's Philips. from Dormant," Martin said in Katherine's ear. "The woman is Martha something-or-other; she writes those nasty reviews. I don't know the other man." He went forward, so that Weasel would have to introduce him, but more people came in, and he was suddenly involved in a group, talking in lowered voices, asking one another how long it would probably take, telling one another the names of people in the room. Through and around the quiet

conversations went the soft half-moan which was Joan's crying.

Katherine, unable to leave the bench where she was sitting because of the crowd around her, turned and said to a strange man sitting next to her, "Someone told me once how you could train yourself to endure physical torture without yielding."

"Could it have been Neilson?" the man asked. "He did a nice piece on torture."

"You pretend it's happening to someone else," Katherine said. "You withdraw your own mind and you just leave your body behind."

"Did you know *him*?" the man asked, gesturing. "Upstairs?"

"Yes," Katherine said. "I knew him very well."

Somebody seemed to have brought a paper milk carton full of vodka, and somebody else went into the hospital hall and came back with a stack of paper cups; Martin pushed through the crowd to bring Katherine a paper cup with vodka in it, and said, "Angell's here.

He did make it. No one knows anything about the wife. The man in the blue suit by the door is Arthur B. Arthur, and the dark-haired girl next to him is that little kid he married."

Near Katherine, Weasel was explaining to someone "—stopped off in the chapel to pray. He's thinking of being converted, *anyway*, you know."

The man not to Katherine leaned over and asked her, "Who's doing the Memorial Fund?"

"Weasel, probably," she said.

"Don't *ask* me," Weasel said beside her. "Simply don't ask *me*. Any more dealings with that shrew of a wife, and I will positively be ready to die *myself*. I will simply *have* to get back to Bronxville for a long rest after all this; it's been perfectly *frightful* ever since Friday morning; I haven't been home since he had the

attack, I came right down from Bronxville and I've had to stay in the Anderons' place over on the West Side and it's been just *amful*."

From the little group by the door, there was a little rustle of quick, hushed laughter.

"I want Angell to do the Memorial Fund. anyway," Weasel said. "His name always looks so much *better* on a thing like that."

Joan was crying loudly now, struggling in the arms of the tall man in the blue suit. "I want to go to him," she was shouting. Vodka from her paper cup spilled onto the floor of the hospital hall.

"There's a nurse," someone said. "'They're not trying to offer her a *drink*?" someone else said. "Be *quiet*, everybody," Weasel said, struggling to get through to the doorway.

"Is he dead?" the man next to Katherine asked her, "did the nurse say he was dead?"

"About three minutes ago," someone else said. "About three minutes ago. He died."

"We missed *everything*?" Weasel's voice rose despairingly. "Because this just *finishes* it, that's all. They promised to call us," he said wildly to the nurse.

"That's just about the lowest *I've* ever seen."

"You wouldn't let me go to him," Joan said to the nurse; her voice was heartbroken. "You wouldn't let me go to him."

"We weren't even *there*," Weasel said. "This poor child . . ." He put an arm tenderly around Joan.

"Mrs. Jones was with him," the nurse said.

"*What*?" Weasel fell back dramatically. "They sneaked her in? No one let me know? She got here?"

"Can we go up now, anyway?" Martin asked.

"Mrs. Jones is with him," the nurse said.

"Mrs. Jones will no doubt want to thank all of you at another time. Now . . ." she gestured slightly but unmistakably; she was indicating

the hall which led to the outside doors of the hospital.

"Well." Weasel tightened his lips. "How about the service?" he said. "I suppose Mrs. Jones wants to run *that*, too? She never read a *word* of his work, *naturally*. I was planning to read the passage on death from his *Evil Man*," he explained to Angell, "you remember; it begins with that marvelous description of the flies? He used to recite it when he was drunk. Mrs. Jones will simply *have* to come down here," he said to the nurse. "How can we make any *arrangements*?"

"Mrs. Jones will no doubt be in touch with you." the nurse said. She stood back a little and this time her gesture was a shade more emphatic.

There was a minute of silent hesitation., and then Angell said, "Within the twilight chamber spreads apace the shadow of white Death, and at the door invisible Corruption waits . . ."

"A great voice has been stilled," Weasel said reverently.

"My only, truest love," Joan mourned.

"He writes now with a golden pen."

"A great writer is a great man writing."

"It was worth coming down for," Martin said, coming over to take Katherine's arm. "I talked to Angell for a minute, and he said to call him tomorrow." Impatient now, Martin led Katherine through the crowd to the doorway and out into the hall.

"Goodbye," the nurse said.

Slowly, a little ahead of the others, who lingered, laughing a little now, gathering around Joan, listening to Weasel, Katherine and Martin went down the hospital hallway. "He might have a spot for me now in that lecture series," Martin said. He gestured upwards. "Now that *he's* gone, I could do a talk on *his* work. His personal tragedy, maybe."

“It was hot in there,” Katherine said.

Weasel caught up with them, and said quickly, “We’re all going on to Joan’s. I don’t think she should be alone right now. You two come along?”

“Thanks,” Martin said, “but Katherine’s pretty broken up, too. I’m going to take her directly home.”

Weasel glanced quickly at Katherine and said, “Terribly sad, the whole business, wasn’t it? I nearly *died* when I heard he was gone, and absolutely *no* one there cared. I mean really *cared*.”

“We paid him what tribute we could,” Martin said.

“The responsibility of the intellectual,” Weasel said vaguely. “Come over to Joan’s later if you can make it?”

He pattered away, back down the hall to Joan, and Martin and Katherine came down the steps of the hospital into the unexpectedly dark afternoon.

“My only, truest love,” Katherine said.

“Hm?” said Martin. “You ask me something?”

“No,” said Katherine, and laughed.

“Anyplace special you want to go for dinner?” Martin asked.

“Yes,” Katherine said. “That nice little place where they make sweetbreads. I was thinking about it earlier.”

[THE END]