

## The Dying Man (fiction)

“And here I was counting on Shauna being single again.”

“Hey, great party. So were you sick or something?”

“I know everybody teases, but I just wanted to say that I’ve been praying for you, the Lord truly blesses. You and Shauna just make sure that you two make the best of second chances.”

“It’s just incredible. This was the best news I’ve heard in, well...ever.”

“I want a second opinion!”

“Ok, Mr. Drama, you’ve got to go through a normal mid-life crisis now just like everyone else.”

“Honestly, my faith has been restored because of this.”

Andrew ambled through the crowded room full of toothy grins. “You’re letting Katie and I take you out on the yacht next weekend. Something like this should be celebrated every day for at least a year,” came another friendly halloo from Ted, an old friend from grad school that had recently taught him to hunt.

“Oh maybe next weekend,” Shauna kissed her husband’s face. “There’s plenty of time for all of that now.” Andrew looked into her eyes. They were big and bright green in contrast to her dark brown hair. A rare combination, but that was Shauna, rare and breathtaking. “Can you believe it? A whole new start.”

New start. “I’d like to get you started.” He tugged at the waist of her ivory Donna Karen dress playfully.

“Really, Drew,” She smiled, skirted him coyly and then shifted her gaze dead on. “Now we have the chance to focus on all those things that we couldn’t for so long.”

He swirled the cognac in his hand. All those things? Other things? “Yeah.” Everything seemed to be slipping out of focus. He sipped his brandy. Yep, definitely distorted. Shauna hadn’t declined him in years. Not since they had found out he was sick. Before, yes, he had been subject to her whimsical moods and a few abstract womanly ailments. But over the past few years she had always managed a happy face and been, well, accommodating. He pulled away from her and started on.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I just need to, I mean all these people, it’s like...I’ll be back.” He angled and drifted his way through boisterous and pleasant faces. Some made amusing remarks and all got a return wave of his hand as he jumbled through the living room and into the hall. He escaped the crowded room and thick smell of pinot noir, lobster rumaki and Swiss chocolate fondue. Making his way across the hardwood floors he slipped in to his study.

A big mahogany desk stood center. On the wall to his right was a large, framed antique print of a hunter and his dogs over a low standing bookshelf. On the left, stood two glass cases displaying an arrangement of ceramic ducks and the stuffed remains of two squirrels and a raccoon. Between the cases hung his respite; three hunting guns. The Ruger 77 for short range, the Weatherby Vanguard for accuracy, and above the other two hung his favorite, the Sako 75, optimum for versatility and smoothness. Some people didn’t enjoy hunting like he did. Shauna never understood its appeal. He had taken up the sport only recently himself. He loved the finality of it all. One dog, two guns, three beers

and four friends equaled success or failure in no uncertain terms. He sat down in the cushioned rolling chair, leaned back and swigged his drink again. The ice bits floating at the top were nearly melted, but the condensation against his heated hand left him with a hot, clammy sensation.

His first trip had been a year after his diagnosis. Ted had insisted it would be refreshing- a weekend to unwind in the crisp autumn air. He agreed to go simply because it was something he had never experienced before. His tousled brown hair, usually well-groomed, had peeked out of his tent that first Saturday morning to the smell of burning oak from the campfire. Tall trees surrounded him, their orange and red leaves drooping gloriously, poised and ready to fall. He quietly strapped his gun over his shoulder and zipped up his coat, imitating his friends as they geared up, and started out. Slowly tip-toeing through the forest his senses pricked with excitement and anticipation. Everything felt invigorating, the crackle of the twigs beneath his black Ecco boots, the swish of wild ferns against his calves, the sweet smell of decay that only an October morning can emanate. His eyes felt keener than ever. The flutter of every robin, every squirrel scrambling through the branches, nothing escaped his sight.

He had gone on like this, peeked, for hours until the moment came, the stomach-lurching moment, sending tingles shooting up through his underarms and into his ears. Bang. Ted's rifle had discharged. He saw the buck leap forward, but land clumsily on his forelegs, slumping over. It wasn't dead yet. Ted had terrible aim.

The hunters rushed to the wounded body that lay thrashing and twitching in the dirt. Wide-eyed and motionless, Andrew watched as the animal staggered to its feet again, falling over and rolling from side to side. The animal's eyes transfixed on his own and Andrew began to feel an unexpected sensation. It wasn't joy exactly... justice? No. Maybe relief? He couldn't be sure, but there was something there, a kinship. Two mortal beasts that, while pitted against one another at the moment both faced the same enemy. Whatever it was, he began to feel less alone.

Bang. "Couldn't let him keep on like that." sniffed Ted, strapping his gun back over his shoulder. The next day, at a sighting of a doe, Andrew drew up his own gun for a shot. He had not recalled hearing the firearm discharge, but had had a fleeting feeling that he was a better marksman than he had anticipated. This time it had felt a lot more like joy, a lot more like life. It seemed as if the blood pouring from the animal somehow flowed over the ground and soaked up into his own body from the feet to the head. It wasn't dead. It was him. Later, despite his friends telling him that he should have the head mounted, Andrew had refused to keep the body or even to touch it. Instead, he gave it to Ted who had accepted it quite apprehensively.

Now, the words reverberated in his head, the infamous words, each one pummeling its way to his consciousness: "Inexplicably cured."

"Cured? Cured!" Shauna had cried. "That's wonderful! Honey, isn't that wonderful?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it's a...relief."

"I can't explain it," the doctor continued. "Sometimes illnesses have been known to clear up on their own, but it's very rare. I've never actually seen it in my own practice. All I know is, these last test results came back and well, they show no traces of, well...anything at all. I'm going to run some more tests just to make sure, but it looks like you're completely healthy. You're a very lucky man, Mr. Stuart." No one spoke as

they left the doctor's office. Shauna was all tears and kisses and Andrew had left numb and expressionless.

On the ride home that day Shauna had excitedly suggested the party to celebrate the miraculous turn of events.

"A party? Like a 'hey-I'm-not-gonna-die-after-all' party?"

"A celebration, of new beginnings." She smiled "Like the other ones, only bigger and more fabulous, this is the best reason of all to rejoice." A sort of grand finale, he thought.

Over the past five years they had celebrated every possible event that Shauna could guise as landmark. Holidays, long weekends, even the morning his daughter joined them at church after coming home from her first break at college had been preceded by a luxurious breakfast spread, and filled with camera flashes of him and Ashley "all dressed up." He hadn't minded. He loved Ashley, and he loved church. It had been hard at first, attending services, when the news had still been *news*. People treated him with such pity and looked at him with sorrow as if their smiles were pained by his mere presence. But over time the intensity faded and he became accustomed to the continual gush of "It's sooooo good to see you this week" along with the references to "our brother's great strength in facing the dark valley," He also found himself to be of great comfort to those in grief, as he, himself, sat on the threshold of passage. Had. Had sat. Each word he spoke had been revered as enlightened and no one had the heart to be trivial in his presence, even his family. After the initial rage of the diagnosis, the household environment had managed to shift from self-pity and to a general contentedness. The family outings had increased tenfold and even Ashley returned from NYU nearly once a month and stayed at home during every break. Had. Had returned once a month. She would probably visit less frequently now and maybe even spend Christmas with her boyfriend's family.

Sweat now tripped down the glass, pricking his pinky before plopping onto the hard, dark wood, the surface of which shelved the most recent picture of he and his family. They had had professional photos taken every Christmas and Easter for the past five years. His eyes flitted over each face: beautiful wife, and a sweet daughter whose music scholarship to NYU and unfailing choice in upstanding men could make a father feel as though he could die happy. All were smiling and the look in each eye serene, indescribable, poetic. Yes, every year, each picture, pure poetry. He took a sip and glazed over the study walls. A myriad of glinting frames filled with photos of numerous vacations and excursions hovered timelessly. The pyramids of Egypt, canals of Venice, Stonehenge- it was a montage of world wonders starring him and the Stuart family. He had, in solemn jest once while wondering through Barnes and Nobles, bought himself the book "1000 places to see before you die" and he had managed to check off all that had interested him. He continued to scan the room. There he was again, big goggles, unopened chute, face like putty flapping in the wind. That had been one hell of a trip. He had never dreamed of jumping from a plane before, but there he was. Historical proof; he had done it. He had done a lot of things now. Before he would have been afraid, but fear had long since been vanquished, along with regret, guilt, dread, and reservation.

"You ready?" The instructor had yelled over a deafening grumble of the plane engine.

"Nothing to lose," he had laughed.

"Only way to live, man."

Only way to live. His thoughts drifted to his favorite things, the way hot cocoa steams the nose on a frosty morning. It's luxurious feel in the bitterest of colds, even when it burns the insides. Or the way firelight kindles at its most brilliant in the darkest of nights. There were the hunting trips where upon his return Shauna's skin felt smoother than ever, as did her added caresses before them, when she anticipated his departure. He considered how disgusting hot chocolate is on a temperate day. The way a mid-afternoon campfire always amplified the dinginess of the grounds. Or the familiarity of his wife's flannel PJs when a trip got cancelled. He took another sip, stood up and dazedly made his way to his hunting guns. He grazed his hand over the barrel of the Ruger: he hated ambiguity. Then his eyes fixed upon the Sako. It was so beautiful, smaller than the others. One could only truly grasp its magnificence when discharged. Impactful, but only when it was a success in the one thing it was ever meant to achieve. The thing it had been made to do, created to do. He took it off of its rack, fingering the cool metal encasing of the trigger. He had been out of the party for awhile now. He put the gun to his temple, then in his mouth. No, maybe under the chin. He pulled the gun out and pressed it against the underside of his jaw, his finger lacing in and out, nearer and then further again from the trigger. The safety's on. He took the gun down, unlocked the safety button and put the gun back in his mouth.

"Andrew?" he heart jolted as he heard his wife's voice coming down the hall. He was expected to go back out there.

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