

Fateful Choice

Jonathan Maddox looked up from his reading and glanced at the clock. Seven-thirty-four. His wife was supposed to be home by seven, and he had dinner sitting ready on the stove, staying warm. No need for alarm, though. Punctuality was not Janet's greatest virtue. How many times had he imagined the worst and worried himself sick in the first months of their marriage fourteen years ago? She would call and say, "I'll be home soon." In his mind "soon" meant within fifteen minutes; in hers it was whenever she finished her work or her shopping, and that could be two or three hours later. Once she learned how he tormented himself with worry when she was running late, she did get better about calling and updating him on her progress. Better, but not perfect. He would just continue reading until she got there.

Ten minutes later the doorbell rang. She often had her arms full of work folders or grocery bags and didn't have a free hand to unlock the door. So Jonathan got up as usual to open the door for her and help her with her things. When he opened the door, he started to say, "Hi, honey," but stopped short.

Two police officers were standing there, one middle aged, the other considerably younger.

“May I help you?” Jonathan said.

“Sir, it’s your wife.” The older officer broke the news in a serious but matter-of-fact tone.

“She’s okay, isn’t she?”

“Sir, there’s been an accident.”

“An accident? What kind of accident?”

“I don’t have those details, sir. They’ll tell you at the hospital.”

But she’s going to be okay, isn’t she?”

“Sir, you’d best let us give you a ride to the hospital.”

“Uh . . . okay . . . let me turn off the stove and get a jacket.”

Once Jonathan was sitting in the backseat of the squad car and the officer driving was pulling out, he asked, “It’s not serious, is it?”

“Sir, I’m not qualified to answer that question. You’ll have to speak with the doctor.”

From that point on, they rode in a tense silence. Jonathan thought of how he and Janet went to a coffee shop on Saturday mornings and grade papers after teaching all week . . . How they liked to go to the art museum for the new exhibits and to the arts cinema for foreign films . . . Their walks after dinner in the spring and the fall . . . Her gardening, his classical guitar playing . . . She never tired of listening to him practice or play his latest composition.

Suddenly Jonathan felt guilty. He was always reading a book or playing the guitar. How often did he just sit and talk with her? Almost never. He just couldn’t think of anything to say. Day after day it was the same routine. Work, dinner, reading, music. There was never anything new for him to talk about. Yet she would have loved to spend an evening just chatting with him.

She always had something to tell him about. Something that happened in her day. Something she read about in the paper. Something she saw on the news. Why didn't he spend more time with her?

He didn't even know how to start the new washing machine. She always washed the clothes. How would he manage without her? He mowed the grass and trimmed the hedges. But the garden, all the flowers and shrubs, that was her specialty. He wouldn't know where to begin. And the house cleaning. Plus the grocery shopping and cooking. He couldn't do it all by himself. It was too much.

God, what was wrong with him? How could he even think of such things when she might be seriously injured? Maybe she would be okay. But what if she wasn't? What if she had to stay in the hospital for months? Health insurance hardly covers anything these days. And on their teacher salaries, how could they afford it? And what if she needed round-the-clock care when she got home? He had to work. How would he take care of her? He wanted to ask the police officer again how bad it was but knew he wouldn't get a straight answer.

Once they had entered the hospital elevator, one of the police officers said, "She's in the ICU. Fifth floor." Jonathan pushed the button, and the elevator seemed to creep upwards ever so slowly.

In the waiting room he fidgeted with a quarter in his pants pocket, rocking back and forth on his heels in an unconscious, yet vain, attempt at self-soothing. After five or six interminable minutes a young female doctor came out to talk with him.

"Mr. Maddox, I'm Dr. Heiler. I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but your wife suffered an extreme head trauma during the accident. We have her on vasopressors to keep her heart beating

and on mechanical ventilation to keep her breathing. But there is no clinical evidence of brain function.”

“You mean she’s brain dead?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“So there’s nothing you can do for her? There’s no hope for recovery?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Jonathan felt himself falling through a bottomless void. Stumbling backwards, he collapsed into a chair and choked back the tears.

“I know this is a difficult question,” the doctor said. “But would you be willing to consider organ donation?”

“Uh, I don’t know. We never talked about it. We never expected . . .”

“There is a patient in the hospital right now who will die without a heart transplant.”

Jonathan looked up at her. “So Janet’s heart would save his life?”

“Yes, it would. I should tell you, though, that he is the driver who crashed into your wife.”

“What?”

“Apparently he suffered heart failure, lost control of the car, and had a wreck.”

“Oh, the poor man.”

“I should also tell you that the heart failure was caused by excessive alcohol consumption. He is a long-standing alcoholic.”

“You mean he brought this on himself and killed my wife?”

“What I need to know now, Mr. Maddox, is whether you will authorize a heart transplant.”

This was all too quick. “Wait a minute. He nearly drinks himself to death and then kills my wife, and now he would get to go on living with Janet’s heart as if nothing had ever happened?”

“Mr. Maddox, the question at this point is whether you will give us permission to do the heart transplant.”

“I-I don’t know. Can I have some time to think about this?”

“Yes, of course. You might want to use the chapel on the fourth floor. But please don’t take long. We need to act quickly if we are going to act.”

This was so unfair. At the worst moment of his life they were asking him to stay cool, calm, and collected, to think through an issue clearly and rationally, to weigh the pros and the cons with a clear mind and come to a responsible decision. He needed to scream, to bang his fists against the wall, to fall on the ground and wail. How could they expect him to think at a time like this?

Jonathan staggered to the chapel and slumped into a pew, aching to be alone where it was quiet. Had he gone there to pray? Did he even believe in God? He didn’t know. Where the hell was God when Janet had her accident? Why didn’t he prevent it? Why was he letting her die? He knew that millions of people had asked those very same questions about their loved ones and no one had ever received an answer, at least not one that would satisfy him.

Jonathan was a man of simple beliefs. When it came to moral and religious truths, he knew very little for sure. One thing he did know, perhaps the only thing, was that love was right and hate was wrong. Not the love you read about in the tabloids at grocery-store checkout lines—Hollywood celebrities constantly getting married, divorced, and remarried. No, the way

that Janet had loved him. The kind of love that seeks never to harm and always to do what is truly good for the other.

The right thing to do, and perhaps God's will, if he even existed, would be to seek the other driver's well-being. Or would it? Would he just continue drinking and destroy Janet's heart the way he had destroyed his own? Would the gift of life be wasted on him? And there were other people to think about besides the driver. What if he did keep drinking? Would he kill someone else because he was driving drunk or his heart failed again? Would Janet's heart allow him to kill a second time? Or a third? He didn't want that on his conscience.

Jonathan shuddered to think of Janet's heart, the heart that had loved him so, beating in her killer's body. Of course, he was confusing metaphor and literal reality, but still . . . He shuddered again to think of her heartless body lying in a casket buried in the earth. When had she ever been heartless? The thought was too much to bear.

Did the other driver even deserve to live? At first Jonathan felt sorry for the man. Then he learned that the heart failure didn't just happen to him. He inflicted it on himself. Oh, don't come with that AA crap that alcoholism is a disease, that it's not the alcoholic's fault, that he can't help himself. Sure, maybe when he loses his job, or his wife leaves him, or his doctor tells him that he has cirrhosis of the liver, then he wishes he didn't drink. But when he reaches for that bottle, he is doing exactly what he wants to at that moment. No one is holding a gun to his head. Perhaps he will regret it later. But right then and there he wants that drink more than he wants his job or his wife or his health. Janet's death was that bastard's fault, and he deserved to die.

He killed Janet, and now Jonathan would kill him. An eye for an eye. His life for Janet's. That would be justice. Perhaps if the killer lived, some slick lawyer would get him off scot free, and he would never have to pay for what he had done. But right here and now Jonathan held in

his hand the sword of justice. One single blow and Janet's death would be avenged. His justice would be swifter and more certain than that of any court or judge. No appeals. No retrials. No pardons or paroles. No time off for good behavior.

If anything could make an alcoholic quit drinking, though, it would be carrying inside him the heart of the person his drinking had killed. What if the gift of Janet's heart did heal him, not just the sickness of his body but the illness of his spirit? And what if he then went on to help others who had been in his same position? Think of all the good Janet's heart could do. His beloved Janet was dying one way or the other. Without the transplant her death would just be a senseless tragedy. But with the transplant some good could come from it. A good that would give her death some meaning. She would not die totally in vain.

In spite of his anguish over her certain death and his anger at the other driver, Janet would want him to do the right thing. But what was it? Jonathan had no idea. He took the quarter from his pocket. Heads he would allow the transplant, tails he wouldn't. But first he prayed with all the fervor he could muster, as though he were about to perform a solemn religious rite, "O Lord, bless this coin." Then he flipped it.

In the elevator on the way back up to the fifth floor Jonathan had misgivings. Should he have gone the best two out of three? No, a flip was a flip. But how could he entrust such a momentous decision to mere chance? He had flipped back and forth in his mind; the coin simply put an end to it.

When the elevator door opened, Dr. Heiler was still standing there, waiting for him. At first Jonathan froze. He couldn't go forward; too much was at stake. Yet the unavoidable moment had come. Jonathan took that fateful step out of the elevator and walked heavy-footed up to Dr. Heiler.

“Did you decide, Mr. Maddox? Will you authorize the transplant?”

“Yes,” Jonathan said.

The coin had come up heads.

Glossary of Names

Jonathan: God’s gift (Hebrew)

Janet: feminine form of John, same meaning

Maddox: fortunate (Welsh). Jonathan and Janet were fortunate to have one another and were God’s gift to each other.

Heiler: healer (German)