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## BUSTER'S VIEW

"9-1-1."

"My husband's dead! My son just found him!"

"What's your name, M'am?"

"Out in the barn, he's dead!"

"M'am, what's your name?" When the woman did not answer, the dispatcher called, "M'am, M'am!" Then he heard a young man's voice. "Let me have your phone, Mom. Here! Let me talk to them."

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Buster's cell phone rang out its melody. Centered on one side of its leather case was a silver star surrounded by a circle touching each of the 7 points. The tall man flipped the phone open, held it to his ear, and said, "Sheriff Holman."

"Buster, this is Aubrey. We got a suicide out in Cougar Gulch. This guy suffocated himself, plastic bag over the head. His son found him out in his barn a couple of hours ago."

"Was there a note?" Buster asked.

"We haven't found one. Hank's in the house with the boy now, goin' through his things. But the wife said he was just diagnosed with cancer. His father and uncle had the same thing. The uncle was the guy that jumped off the bridge over Wolf Lodge Bay 'bout 15 years ago. You 'member that case?"

"I remember," Buster said. "Has the M.E. been there yet?"

"Doc's about to finish, but I won't let 'em move the body 'til you get here. You gotta see this one!"

"I can be right out there," Buster said.

Aubrey continued, "Can you imagine the poor kid walkin' into that barn?"

"What's the address?" Buster asked, not wanting to go into the family's anguish with Aubrey. Buster had to do the job, had to and would do it, as ugly as this part of it always was.

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Janice Holman leaned against the deck rail swirling a glass of wine. "Sure is pretty out here, and I love watching the geese," she said. "You and Evelyn are so lucky to have found this place."

Bob Kraus took a third steak off the gas grill and closed the top. Then he, too, looked down between the trunks of the pine trees to the lake. V-shaped

ripples trailed several Canadian geese paddling together. "They've been back a few weeks," he said. "I've seen several pairs nesting on top of the rock outcroppings."

"Be sure to cook Buster's steak well done," Janice reminded. "He doesn't want to see any blood on his plate."

Bob grinned, thinking, 'Ever since police academy.'

Buster called from inside the cabin, "The salad and potatoes are ready!"

"Great!" Bob called back. "Your steak needs a few more minutes!"

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The 4 old friends sat together around the dining room table, the meal ready. Buster set his wine glass down and looked across at Bob. He envisioned passing the ball out after the rebound and watching Bob dart up the court with it, a piercing squeak accompanying each sudden change of direction.

Bob said, "I understand the levy for a new jail will be on the ballot again this fall."

Evelyn added, "I thought your suggestion to build it next to the recycling center was great."

"Yeah," Buster said, "The inmates could work off their fines there. The land's a lot cheaper, too."

"It's bound to pass this time," Bob said.

"Not gonna happen," Buster stated. "The commissioners are for it, but they're not willing to get out front and sell it. It takes a supermajority to pass, 66%, so no one thinks it has a chance." He took a sip of wine, cocked his head to one side, and asked what had been on his mind since leaving that barn, the woman, and her teenager a few hours earlier. "Bob, what do you think about assisted suicide?"

"You mean, 'physician-assisted suicide'?" Bob asked.

"Yeah," Buster replied. "The doctor prescribes enough medicine for someone to take it, go to sleep, and die peacefully."

Without giving the question any thought, Bob answered, "A law was passed 2 years ago in Washington to permit that. I know it has occurred in the state, but I don't know anyone who has prescribed the medicine. It's happened a number of times in

Oregon, though. They've had a law there for a long time."

Janice said, "I'm sure it happens all the time. When my father was dying, he was having a hard time breathing. I think the nurse slipped a little extra morphine in there."

Bob spoke quickly again. "That's palliative care, preventing someone in the process of dying from suffering," he said. "Physician-assisted suicide is giving someone who is not in the process of dying medication to take to commit suicide." He continued, "Our hospital provides palliative care. The Hospice House just opened, so that's 8 beds available, and there are hospice home health services. There's no reason now for people to worry about suffering in that last phase of life."

Buster listened to his buddy, "respected neurologist Dr. Robert Kraus," a long life away from the scrappy 17-year-old point guard.

Bob concluded, "My partners and I decided not to participate in assisted suicide, so I won't be involved with it." Then he questioned, "Besides, who exactly would we be assisting? I suppose there are some patients with Lou Gehrig disease or severe MS who are so disabled they can't find a way. But people who want to commit suicide usually just do it."

Buster said, "I think it would keep a lot of families from having to deal with ... coming home and finding Dad lying on the floor in a pool of blood beside a shotgun. That happened here a couple of years ago. That guy had cancer in his bones, I believe, and was in a lot of pain."

Perceiving that Buster had more to say about this, Bob refilled his glass and passed the bottle of wine around the table.

"When someone gets diagnosed with a terminal condition, why not tell them medication for suicide is available?" Buster asked. "That way they can pick the time they die, work it out with their family and the doctors. There wouldn't be the shock to these families."

Bob frowned. "That would feel really awkward. Perhaps it would empower some people to go forward with their treatment, knowing that if things didn't go well they could ... end it." He paused before asking, "What if they just got depressed but were doing okay with their treatment, or if there were a little blip like the doctor saying, 'The tumor in your liver has gotten larger, so we're going to modify your chemotherapy regimen'? How would you keep patients from overreacting? The whole matter would be very complex."

Buster felt uneasy but couldn't hold back. "Some suicides look like they were horrible. This morning

we were called about a man who drove his pickup out into his barn, covered his head with a plastic bag, ran a tube connected to an argon cylinder up under the bag, and taped the bag around his neck. He looked real peaceful. I guess it was the argon because, by the time we get to them, most of the ones who self-suffocate look like those last attempts to breathe must've been ... agony."

Evelyn asked, "Where do you get argon?"

"Welding supplies," Buster replied. Thinking he'd bring the conversation to a close, he said, "Anyway, he'd just been diagnosed with cancer of the pancreas."

Bob jerked forward and said, "You see how complex this is? Depression can be a remote effect of pancreatic cancer. If depression had been recognized and treated, then chemotherapy might have given him a year or longer, like Patrick Swayze."

Feeling compelled to clarify this particular death for Bob, Buster said, "His wife said he'd seen his father die with it. She said his uncle got the same cancer and killed himself. This guy contemplated the means and followed through. He chose a secluded place so his plan wouldn't be interrupted. It's obvious he was determined not to die like his father."

"I suppose," Bob acknowledged. "Still, it's a shame he wasn't counseled about contemporary end-of-life care. He might have chosen differently." Then Bob sighed and said, "Who knows? Maybe he was."

"Does there have to be a full investigation in an obvious suicide?" Evelyn asked.

"Yeah," Buster answered. "They're treated as a suspicious death—autopsy, forensics, interviews. It's not an issue of the commitment of law enforcement resources; that's appropriate in those cases. It's just the families finding these people. We have to deal with them, too." He paused before adding, "We have to ... confront the despair."

For a while no one spoke. Finally Janice said to Evelyn, "The salad dressing was delicious. How did you ...?"

While the women chatted, Bob said, "Bus, I've never considered a family's shock or grief. I've only considered the physician's perspective."

Staring at the glass he was rotating in place, Buster felt words escape from him. "I hope you're not telling me that Jan and I need a doctor in Oregon, just in case."

Janice and Evelyn overheard and stopped talking. As if posing for grace, the 4 friends looked down at the table in silence. Buster took a steadying breath, hoping he hadn't ruined the evening. Then he raised his wine glass, smiled, and said, "Great steak by the way, Bob-o. It was perfect!"

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**Reflections for May: Buster's view**  
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*Neurology* 2011;76;1677  
DOI 10.1212/WNL.0b013e318219fa78

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