

Kathy

Shirley Jo Waltz

“MILDRED! Come quick! The baby’s sick. Awful sick! Hurry, Midge, hurry!” He cuddled the soft, round body of his baby daughter in his arms and stood helplessly looking down at her. If only she would make a sound, or groan, or move a little bit! Her face looked so strange! Quickly, he tried to think of something he could do for her. First Aid. That was it. First, you place the victim in a horizontal position. He strode quickly across the room and placed her on the soft green couch.

“Midge, please hurry; I don’t know what’s the matter with her! For God’s sake, hurry!” That was the trouble. He didn’t know what was wrong. How could he help her when he didn’t know what to treat her for? But there must be something that someone could do. He wiped her white little forehead with his handkerchief. Her face was as white as a piece of china, yet little drops of perspiration stood on her forehead.

Mildred stood in the doorway, her usual calm, collected self. “What’s the matter, Jim?” His jawbone juttled in and out nervously. He nodded toward the little limp figure lying on the couch.

“The baby is sick, Midge.”

“Don’t call her a baby, honey. She’s almost five years old, you know. She’s not a baby anymore.”

“For Christ’s sake, let’s not argue over trifles, Midge. Don’t you understand? The baby is sick! Just look at her Midge—look at her!!!” He jumped up and paced back and forth, his hands pressed down hard in his pants pockets.

“Oh, Jim, she *is* sick. Call the doctor, quick! . . . I’ve never seen anyone look like this. Whatever is wrong? Please hurry, Jim. The number’s in the front of the directory.”

The next few hours were confusion for Mildred and Jim. There were those horrible moments of waiting, waiting, and then the sirens and squealing of the ambulance tires. And always there was that numb, paralyzed feeling.

Jim walked down the hospital corridor. For some silly reason, he noticed the speckled floor. It was gray and white with a spattering of green here and there. Funny, the things you notice when under a strain. For some reason, the confusion of the pattern nauseated him. He turned right at the second door.

“Hello, Midge. How is she?” Although he spoke softly, she jumped. Drawing in a long breath, she shook her head and looked down, her lips pressed tightly together. He wondered how she could remain so composed after going through such a strain. Midge was that way, though. She had always allowed her head to control her emotions. But how long could she keep that up now?

“The doctor wants us to see the X-rays now. He’s sending a nurse in to stay with Kathy till we get back. Come on, honey.”

"Okay, but how soon will the nurse get here? I hate to leave Kathy alone."

"She's right down the hall. Let's go now. Dr. Barton's waiting for us, Midge." Up the elevator to the fifth floor they went. Past the children's ward, past the man in the wheel chair, past the room with the strong smell of ether and the white carts on rollers. The elevator rocked as if it were floating in a rising tide. Up, up, and up. Jim felt unsteady as he once again stepped on solid floor. He turned to help Midge off the elevator, but she was already off.

Dr. Barton was deep in thought as they entered the room, so they sat down silently and waited for him to speak. Finally he turned his head and smiled slightly.

"Hello, Jim, Midge. How was Kathy when you left her?"

"Just the same," Midge answered quickly.

Dr. Barton began a technical explanation of the illness. While talking, he brought out the X-ray and held it up to the light, pointing out various points in it while talking. Why didn't he just get down to the part they wanted to hear, Jim thought. The details could come later. Of course they wanted to know all the details, but just what was wrong with their baby, and what could they do about it? Still the doctor droned on and on. Finally Jim could stand it no longer.

"Dr. Barton, just what is wrong with Kathy?" Dr. Barton looked at him, hard, and then back at Midge. He chewed his lip for a minute and then leaned forward in his chair.

"Well, Jim, it seems that Kathy has a brain tumor. It is very unusual in one so young, but it does happen. Nature is funny that way. She plays some strange tricks on us at times, and this is just one of them."

"Is it fatal, Doctor?" Midge said weakly. How she could come right out and ask such a horrible thing so calmly, was hard for Jim to understand, and he held his breath waiting for the answer.

"Yes, I'm afraid it is, Midge. I'm so sorry. I thought perhaps the X-rays would reveal something of another nature, but everything points to what I feared it would—brain tumor."

Midge closed her eyes, weaved forward, and fell out of her chair. Moving mechanically, Jim caught her and with a hypnotic expression laid her on the floor. Dr. Barton was holding ammonia under her nose, and soon she came to and lay there staring at the ceiling. Nobody spoke, and Jim suddenly realized what Dr. Barton had said. Why, he said that Kathy was going to die! Kathy! Their baby! Dr. Barton had just told them that she was going to die!

"But, Dr. Barton, you don't understand. She can't! Why, she's just a baby. She hasn't even *lived* yet. We've planned so much for her. Don't you see, Doctor, she just can't die!" Jim spoke like a wild man, his eyes blazing. Dr. Barton eased him back into a chair.

"Easy, Jim. Take it easy. I know this is going to be hard on both of you. But you must bear up under the strain for Kathy's sake, if no other."

Midge looked dully at the wall and said nothing.

"But, Doctor, don't you see? You've got to do something. Anything! There must be something, with all the new drugs and medicines, that you can do for our baby. Surgery! Yes, why not an operation? That should do it!"

"I'm sorry, Jim, but an operation can't help Kathy. She has gone beyond that stage."

Midge's face twisted as if in pain and then suddenly her entire body heaved and jerked as tears streamed over her face.

"Jim, Jim, can you ever forgive me? Ever? It's all my fault. I should have known something was wrong!"

"Mildred, what are you saying? A brain tumor is never anyone's fault." Dr. Barton spoke quietly.

"She complained of headaches several days last week. But, Jim, I . . . I . . . really didn't realize how sick she was. Oh, Kathy, Kathy . . ." She sobbed out loud. Jim spoke as if talking to a fourth person in the room.

"How can God take away what isn't His to take away! She belongs to no one but Midge and I. We created her. We produced her." He clenched his fist. "She's ours!" He swore loudly. Directing his words to Doctor Barton, he shouted, "You know of course that Kathy is our only child, and that Midge can't have any more! You know that of course! And yet you stand there and tell us that we're going to lose that one thing we both love! Something that can't be replaced!"

Dr. Barton nodded his head. "Yes, Jim, I know. I delivered Kathy. Look, why don't you and Midge stay here for a while? I have to go into surgery in just 20 minutes. Here are a couple of sedatives. Give one to Midge and take one yourself." He patted Jim's shoulder gently and started toward the door. He turned and pointing toward the desk, added, "There's something in that top drawer of my desk that might help." The door swung silently to.

Jim walked over to the desk. What could help? What possibly could ever help now? His shaking fingers pulled open the drawer. There in plain view lay a Bible with gold letters impressed in the soft white leather. Angrily he banged the drawer shut. How funny! Yes, it was funny. "Ha, ha, ha." He laughed loudly and harshly. Funny to think that a book, a ridiculous, leather-bound book could help them now. He laughed again, even louder than before. Midge looked at him and screamed. The laugh died on his face, and he threw himself across the desk, sobbing.

II

They took Kathy home the next day. She came out of the coma and seemed almost to be recovering. It was encouraging, but Dr. Barton had told them that she would seem to recover, but that the headaches would become more and more painful. Each one would be followed by a coma, and then finally—one last coma.

"Wead me a tory, Daddy. Pease."

"Sure, honey, sure. What would you like to hear?"

"Da wun in da gween book."

His mouth read the words in the book, but his mind was on the body which was but a shadow of the child he had once read stories to. Her once-bright eyes now were set in black hollows and flitted about the room like a restless spirit. The vitality of life which once had sparkled in her every movement was gone. She was like a shell with all of the living matter scraped out. She was asleep now. He closed the book, bent over and kissed her forehead. The kiss seemed to disturb her. She opened her eyes and frowned.

"Daddy, who tooned da wight off? Daddy, daddy," she screamed. "It's so dawk!" Jim grabbed her up in his arms and rocked to and fro.

"Now, baby, baby. Daddy's here. Everything's okay. Everything is fine." His voice cracked on the last sentence, and he looked up to see Midge come in the door.

"Jim, what's happened? What's wrong?"

"Mommy, Mommy. I can't see oo. Pease toon on da wight. I'm afraid of da dawk!"

As Midge and Jim looked at one another, the horrible truth was written on their faces. The tumor was slowly accomplishing its terrible work. Kathy was blind.

Days of intense physical pain for Kathy followed and horrible mental pain for her parents. Midge tried to cook special dishes, and they took turns feeding her. Quite often she would awaken them at night with a shrill scream. And always she was afraid of this new, dark world into which she had so recently been tossed.

Jim rebuked himself a hundred times a day for sharp words he had used with Kathy. And Midge hated herself for the times she had said "No" to Kathy's harmless little whims. The tension was beginning to show in them too. They almost never smiled, and the lines deepened in their faces.

As the days passed, the headaches grew more and more painful. At times Kathy didn't even recognize them. Her eyes were open and seemed to stare at something behind them or above on the ceiling. Still she cried out of her fear of the dark. Her fear seemed quieted if one of them would hold her hand.

On a Thursday of that week, she seemed to improve remarkably. Her headaches were gone, and she sat shakily in her bed and smiled weakly when they spoke to her. Just to see her smiling again was as if a genie had suddenly been released or set free. Their happiness was shortlived, however. And the headaches began again with such intensity that she writhed and threw herself from one side of the bed to the other. The sedatives were used till they lost their power, and pain was constantly pulsing through the thin little frame.

Midge stretched a cool, wet cloth across Kathy's forehead. How feverish she was! She really should take her temperature, she

thought. But it was all so futile. There was nothing more she could do. The cloth had lost its coolness already. She dipped it down into the pan of cold water, squeezed out the excess and placed it again on the little forehead.

She wondered if Kathy was conscious of all this present pain, or if through some mercy of God, she was being spared from a little of it. Kathy opened her hot, swollen eyes, and Midge caught her breath. She recognized her!

"Kathy, Kathy girl," she whispered softly, eagerly.

But no, there was not even a flicker of recognition in those deep, dark eyes. Midge laid her head on the pillow next to Kathy's. Even the pillow was warm from the fever. Why couldn't she accept the inevitable? So tired! . . . so tired. But no, she couldn't break down now. They all needed her too much. She pulled herself up straight in the chair. She mustn't let Jim see her like that. Must remain strong. Her thoughts wandered back to Kathy now. She wouldn't die. Not really. Kathy would always live within her. When Jim came into the room, she seemed calm and resigned.

Although knowing what the final result of the illness would be, Jim was still stunned and shocked as daily Kathy's body shrank and unbelievably withered. He felt as if his own body were rotting and distributing the poison through his system. His brain felt feverish. He couldn't eat, and sleep just wouldn't come. Fatigue, nervous exhaustion and tension were building constantly within him. Having neglected to shave or get a haircut, he gave the appearance of a caged animal. And constantly his mind was striving to find a solution to this living hell.

The doctor had said for certain that Kathy couldn't live. But was it human to let her suffer like this? Nothing could be more cruel, Jim felt sure. He remembered reading in the paper not long ago about a mercy killing. He also remembered thinking at the time how wrong it was. But he had not been capable of judging then. Now he was. How could anyone look at Kathy now, and say that mercy killing was wrong! He had to do something to relieve her pain! If death were the only way, then death it must be. He lay awake at night, his eyes burning feverishly, and tried to think of the best possible way. Midge slept fitfully, and he wondered if she knew what he was planning. He must carefully conceal his plans. She might not agree with them. Now he was afraid to sleep for fear of revealing the secret in his sleep. On and on, he drove himself. Racking his brain for the best plan to follow. If only Midge would understand! If only she would forgive him. She would, someday, he was sure. He was positive that she felt almost as strongly about watching Kathy die as he did. But still she remained outwardly calm.

Finally Jim hit upon what he considered to be the best possible solution. Kathy's fear of the dark and of being alone haunted him. His heart twisted whenever she cried out in fear. He couldn't bear to think of her going into the realm of death alone. While perhaps

he couldn't share in her world of darkness now, he could go with her into death. Above all, she must not go alone.

That night as he pretended to sleep, he began to plan. He heard Midge get up and go to Kathy when she cried out once in her sleep. And then a semi-consciousness drifted over him. He awoke to find the sun peeking in the room, and Midge sitting at the dressing table, fully dressed, with her head in her arms.

"Midge, Midge, what's the matter? What's wrong?"

Her face looked aeons older as she turned toward him. Her eyes were dry.

"Kathy's dead," she said quietly. It was as if she had said, "What would you like for breakfast?"

Jim buried his face in the pillow. No, oh, no. The baby had gone alone. No one to comfort her or be with her! She would be so afraid!

"Why didn't you call me, Midge? I'd like to have been with her." Even Jim seemed quiet now. It was as if the sunshine had cleared away all the shadow and darkness, and a restful peace prevailed. Midge covered her face with her hands in a weary manner.

"I didn't call you, because I gave Kathy an overdose of her medicine. It was much better that way, Jim. She just went to sleep."

"Midge!"

"She was smiling, Jim. I know the pain was gone, because she was smiling. Now it's all over for her. No more pain or being alone in the dark."

In an impulse, she threw herself across the bed, and the dry, chalky face broke into a soft, wet one. The two wept softly.

"I suppose we should call someone, Mildred. The doctor or coroner or someone."

She nodded. The tears were still pouring from under her half-closed lids. All the tension of the past weeks was released in those tears. Before they had a chance to move, the telephone rang. Jim hesitated to answer. It sounded almost as if coming from another world. Finally he held the receiver up to his ear.

"Hello! Jim?"

"Yes."

"Good morning, Jim! This is Dr. Barton. Sorry to call so early in the morning, but I think I have some news that you and Mrs. Easton will be happy to hear."

"Yes."

"Well, it's this way, Jim. We have a new brain surgeon here at the hospital. I've shown him Kathy's X-rays, and he thinks he may be able to operate quite successfully! I think it's worth a try, Jim. Jim? . . . Jimm? Still there? . . . JIM!!!

Dr. Barton turned to the young nurse at his side.

"Hmmm. Must have been disconnected. Try this number later, will you?"