



THE BITTEREST PILL OF ALL

2,914 Words

This story came from reading about placebos, very much like the character Babs in the story.

A friend had recently gone through alcohol rehab and I understood the strain of withdrawal put on a body denied its drug.

Humans are very good at convincing themselves that something is good for them, ultimately to their detriment.

THE BITTEREST PILL OF ALL

I have a confession.

I need to cleanse my soul. Although, I feel no real guilt for my actions. Perhaps that in itself damns me to the eternal fires, and yet I find it difficult to believe that even the most vengeful of Gods would demand penitence of me.

As I put pen to paper, a strange thought amuses me. The recollection of a younger me as a rebellious and defiant teenager in laddered tights and garish red lipstick telling the English teacher that Billious was the Roman God of hangovers and Catharsis was a Greek deity who slayed demons. I think the latter was nearer the truth for me than I cared to admit. The demons to be slain lay within me.

I was born in the early seventies; one of seven. A solitary girl among six boys. My childhood was one of an empty belly and threadbare hand-me-downs from my brothers. It wasn't until I turned twelve that the neighbours realised I was a girl.

My parents never had anything throughout the whole of their sorry miserable lives. My father had been invalided out of the pits and so my mother, poor cow, had to work all the hours God sent just to put food on the table. And God sent so many. She had three jobs, and what little money she did manage to put aside, father squandered on the ponies and the booze. Consequently, the seven children he fathered only ever received the richness of his disdain and the back of his hand. Even now, I'm not sure what finally killed my mother, simple exhaustion or sheer bloody hopelessness.

From the age of fourteen, my time was spent filling the household vacuum left by my mother's parting. I loved school because it was an escape from the prison my father and

brothers had fashioned from our flea pit of a council house. Fortunately, God in his infinite wisdom had seen fit to bless me with a sharp wit and intelligence. I had realised from a relatively early age that most men didn't appreciate a woman with a brain so I kept mine well hidden. On those rare moments of freedom from my domestic subservience, I would sit alone in the kitchen, the only place I knew none of my brothers or my father would ever venture, and I read everything I could lay my hands on. However, I later discovered that God had also gifted me with other assets far superior to my little grey cells.

Large pink swells.

Considering my poverty-stricken background, the abuse and servitude, I felt perfectly justified in using these assets to full effect. So naturally, when Gerald Deville III proposed marriage several years later, I readily accepted.

Gerald was 82, riddled with arthritis and confined to a wheel chair. Cancer had effectively removed a number of his internal organs and age had shrivelled the external ones. If that wasn't bad enough, the poor old sod had barely survived three heart attacks and now remained alive purely by virtue of an exotic cocktail of drugs. The nurse that used to push him around carried enough pills to sink a battleship.

I, on the other hand, was twenty two, blonde and beautiful, slim and long legged, and to Gerald's obvious delight, possessed of a pair of very large firm breasts with hat-peg nipples. These fleshy attributes led me to the very early realisation that I could cut off my own head while talking to most men and they would only notice when the blood ran down my cleavage.

It all began when I was nineteen. I got a job as a hostess at the Red and Black, a small casino in town. My name is Barbara but the management insisted on calling me BABS. Soon

enough I was known as Bimbo Babs to all and sundry, as if the alliterative nom-de-plume was a logical progression.

Alliterative nom-de-plume?

Logical progression?

I'm doing a disservice to my nick-name. Even though I played the part of a dizzy, dumb blonde perfectly, even right down to the passable impression of Marilyn Monroe's squeaky voice, *'Oh Mr Deville, you are a naughty boy'*. I knew then just as well as I do now that being too intellectual wasn't good for business, it tended to intimidate the punters. Emasculation they call it. Castration sounded better.

I met Gerry darling at the casino three years later. He immediately endeared himself to me by pointing at my name tag and asking me if BABS stood for Big and Busty. Well, how could I resist? I simpered and giggled delightfully, shaking my ass and jiggling my assets in his face when I served him his drinks.

I didn't need a bloody degree to work out the advantages of becoming Mrs. Deville III. He was loaded up to the eyeballs. You could say it was a marriage made in heaven. At least, that's where I hoped the old sod would be headed very soon.

"Don't worry," all my friends told me. "The old bugger won't last the honeymoon. You'll be the rich widow before you know it."

Oh how wrong they were. The old bugger lasted the honeymoon and beyond, and I quickly became nothing more than his skivvy and plaything, condemned to enduring the nauseating state of his personal hygiene. I am almost certain that he insisted on French kisses only so that I could feel his handful of remaining teeth wavering in their bleeding sockets. I was forced to participate in the games which boredom, dysfunction, and the strange corruption of age had twisted into sickening perversities. I was beginning to

succumb to a slow panic that was manifesting itself in my haggard reflection that stared back at me from the bathroom mirror every morning. My attempts at persuading him to get a nurse fell on deaf ears.

“Why should I pay a nurse,” he said, “when I've got a loving wife to look after me.”

Every waking hour was dedicated to his needs. The holidays and shopping trips I had envisaged never materialized and I was confined to the fall walls of his mansion which began to take on the form of a tastefully decorated prison cell.

I put dog food in his chilli con carne once, just to make myself feel better. The irony of it was that he enjoyed the dish all the more. The last of many straws came when his colostomy bag burst while we were having our usual clumsy session of futile sex. Seeing me drenched in his vile waste seemed to fuel his desire all the more.

He had to go.

It was on one of my regular visits to Gerald's doctor that I got the idea. I was in the waiting room reading some article in a medical journal. Apparently, some doctors were prescribing their hypochondriac patients placebos, tablets with no medical benefit other than a purely psychosomatic effect. It seemed so simple and yet could it work? I had nothing to lose, other than a husband.

I collected Gerald's regular prescription from the doctor with the usual messages of caution; six different bottles of pills, one of each to be taken every four hours day and night. However, on this particular day I arrived home with a big smile on my face and not six but seven bottles of pills.

Poison? I'm not that stupid. They wouldn't have to look far to find the culprit, would they? No, I had a better method. You see, Gerald was a bit of a hypochondriac himself and had always complained of a tightening of the chest after taking his regular dosage. The

doctor had explained it as an unfortunate side effect of the drugs and was in no way harmful. Gerald, on the other hand, had never been convinced of this. He didn't trust doctors. He didn't trust anyone.

Later that day as I gave Gerald his six tablets, one from each bottle, I told him about my visit to the doctors.

"You were right about that tightness in your chest, darling," I told him, in deference to his superior wisdom. "The doctor's given me these." I showed him the seventh bottle containing round orange tablets. "He says you must take one when you feel any discomfort and they will remove all the side effects."

"Harmless bloody side effects, was it?" Gerald grumbled. "Bloody quacks don't know what they're talking about. I knew it was something bad all the time."

And so for the next three weeks I gave Gerald his six tablets, every four hours, and thirty minutes later, when the side effect began to manifest itself in the tightening of his chest, I would give him his seventh pill, the orange tablet. He felt better immediately. It wasn't long before old Gerald dismissed the six other tablets as being the sole cause of all his misery, believing that the orange tablet was the only thing keeping him alive.

I kept up the charade for some time, letting it get a grip on him, just as despair had a grip on me. I had seen how booze had affected my father and how conditioned he was to his daily intake. I needed to condition Gerald similarly and that would take time. During those long winter months I nearly weakened but I had chosen a day in early spring and was determined to stick to it. I had ringed the date in my diary and my whole life focused on that one day. As it drew nearer, the days grew longer and my revulsion for him grew in equal proportion. But I had to mask it. I had to play the happy doting wife while all the time I wanted to wring his scrawny little neck. I came so close to cracking that I needed to appease

my misery by playing little daydreams in my head where I plunged a dagger into his foul heart or smothered him with a pillow, each reverie offering a short lived thrill. I almost believed I had died and gone to hell and my punishment for eternity was Gerald Deville the bloody III.

Finally the day arrived. I dressed in my most revealing outfit and gave him his morning dose of tablets and awaited his demand for the miraculous pill. I wandered around the big house, loud music thumping through me AirPods, knowing that he would already be demanding his medication. Eventually, he came to find me. I was strolling casually round the high-ceilinged main dining room when his electric chair rolled in. His anger and pain were etched in deep lines in the leathery skin of his face, his swollen, white knuckles gripping the armrests.

I took out my AirPods and smiled sweetly at him. "Darling."

"Stupid bitch," he gasped at me. "My pill. My pill."

"What a Silly Billy I am," I cried, going to kneel before him. "I forgot all about you. Oh please forgive Babs."

"My pill for fucksake!" he urged, taking large sucking breaths and extending his bone white hand to grab at me.

I took the bottle from my pocket, tipped the one remaining orange pill into the palm of my hand and offered it to him. When he reached for it, I pulled it away out of his reach.

"What's the magic word," I said.

He swore viciously at me. "Give me the bill you fucking bitch."

"That particular Anglo-Saxon expletive is not what I had in mind, Gerald, darling." I told him. "And you really shouldn't get so excited. Puts a strain on that poor cardiovascular

system of yours. We don't want you to suffer an embolism do we, or a myocardial infarction."

Confusion chased anger from the old man's face. He had noticed my squeaky bimbo voice had changed, become more sophisticated, more mature. I was using terms that Bimbo Babs couldn't pronounce let alone know the meaning of. Then he must have seen the calculating gleam in my eye and for the first time I saw the signs of fear send twitching spasms around his thin mouth.

"Please," he wheezed, pain making him cry the first tears I had ever seen from his cold grey eyes.

"Cry baby," I said, and offered him the pill again, teasing him with it.

Sweat was thick as waterglass on his face, giving it the glossy sheen of a corpse that had been treated by a cheap mortician. I danced slowly and gracefully away from him and he steered after me, stopping every few feet to grasp for the pill only to find it was slightly beyond his reach again as I edged back another step.

"You kill me and you won't get any of it," he said. "Not a penny, you, you.." his throat seized up on him, choking off whatever charming sobriquet he had in mind for me. He had tried to inject authority into his voice but it was diluted by his fear and pain, age and disease.

"Why would I kill my darling Gerald? The love of my life," I said. Then I looked coldly into those rheumy eyes and added, "The bane of my existence."

I danced away from him once again and he followed.

"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day," I said as I danced. "Until the last syllable of recorded time."

He was staring at me like I was a stranger. His busty, brainless, bimbo wife was quoting Shakespeare to him.

“And all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death.”

I flung the tablet into the air. Even before it landed on the tiled floor his chair was whirring after it. I very carefully suspended a stiletto heel over the tiny helpless pill. The shoes were the old man's favourite. Fitting, I thought as I inched up my skirt to show him the tops of my silk stockings. He reached down for the tablet. I allowed him the brief flicker of hope as his fingertips touched the pill before I ground it into the floor, twisting the heel into it, relishing it, turning it to dust. The old man's mouth fell open, a rictus awaiting mortis.

“Out out brief candle,” I continued. “Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.”

Gerald stumbled forward off his chair and fell prostrate onto the floor at my feet, dragging himself to the shattered pill. As he stuck out a bloodless tongue to lick up the remains, I stooped down and blew the dust away. He rolled over, staring up at me with clouding, dying eyes, his body arching convulsively as he clutched his chest, his black heart tearing itself apart. I will never forget that strangled sound that came from the back of his throat and the look of pain and twisted hate on his face as he reached his hand out, at first to beg, and then finally, to shake a defiant fist at me. Then he died.

“It is a tale told by and idiot,” I said, raising my arms triumphantly to the empty room. “Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

In my head I could hear the rapturous applause and I took a bow to my imaginary audience and the poor cooling corpse of Gerald Deville III.

I think the performance I gave then would have merited an Oscar. Panic-stricken, I ran screaming from the house and passed out upon my neighbour's doorstep. All very melodramatic. Oh what bitter tears I wept.

"He's gone! Gone!" I cried. "What will become of me?" I wept as we returned to his lifeless body. I thought of my mother's sweet face before they nailed down her coffin lid and my tears came easily.

At the inquest, I still managed to maintain the air of a grieving widow, punctuating each sentence with a breathless sob, burying my face in a tear stained handkerchief. The pathologist confirmed that Gerry had died of a severe heart attack and that there was no evidence of foul play. The postmortem had revealed no lethal substances in his blood. They went for the poison theory in a big way. The necessary chemicals that he took to keep him alive were there in abundance. He was unmarked by knife or hand or bullet. An examination of the stomach contents revealed nothing unusual, except perhaps one thing.

"Tell me, Mrs. Deville," the examiner asked. "Did your husband take any vitamin supplements?"

I couldn't help but grin surreptitiously beneath my handkerchief when he said that.

"Yes, but just Vitamin C," I replied and instantly broke down sobbing again to cover my face and stop myself erupting into hysterical laughter. "He always said it was only those and me that kept him young."

Sniffle...and the award for best actress goes to...

The verdict was death by natural causes. Well, no court in the land had ever recorded a verdict of death by withholding vitamin C tablets. You see the placebo idea worked both ways. An anti-placebo I suppose you'd call it, reverse psychology.

You're wondering why I've decided to impart this little story. Well, you see, it all happened some fifty years ago. I'm seventy two now, with a dodgy heart myself. Due to Gerald's legacy I am very rich and now I find myself engaged to be married to a man of twenty two.

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