

The Strange Disappearance of Young Dr. Young

by Y York

George Bliss dials Dr. Young's office with shaky hands. Becca's usually florid cheeks are snow white. Her pulse is too fast to count. She breathes slowly and holds her chest.

"Come on, come on, answer, damn it," George thinks, but does not say aloud.

The perky receptionist says "Dr. Young's office."

"This is George Bliss. Let me talk to him."

"Dr. Bliss, hi, he can't come to the phone. He--"

"Let me talk to him, damn it!" George interrupts her, but he's disconnected. He angrily presses redial, convinced the disconnect was on purpose.

"Dr. Young's--" the girl again.

"Don't put me on hold and don't hang up. Get him to the phone." Dr. Young comes on the line.

"George, I've got an office full--"

"Becca is having some kind of attack. I'm bringing her in."

"No! I mean, um...don't bring her in, George. I'm leaving here ... for the hospital--"

"We'll meet you. Which hospital?"

"George, don't meet me. Take her to the emergency room. They'll look after her."

"I want you..."

"George, George, I can't. I just can't." And Dr. Young hangs up.

George can't believe it.

Becca is hardly aware of the call. She's in some real pain. They drive to the hospital, where Rebecca is admitted.

She doesn't say a word, no complaints. That's just like her. Rebecca has never been a healthy "bee," but she's kept her complaints to herself over the years, figuring that George hears

enough complaints in the office all day long. Even though George is retired now, Becca still doesn't complain. She is a good bee.

"Mr. Bliss..." the emergency room internist addresses him.

"That's Dr. Bliss, young man." George cringes as he hears his offensive tone. Having noticed that every other retiree in Florida is some old doctor shaking his tail feathers, George attempts to keep his history history.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Dr. Bliss, we're going to admit Mrs. Bliss. We want to do some blood tests and an EKG. Well, I'm sure you know the routine. Her blood pressure isn't elevated. We'll get the pulse stable and we'll see what's what. A day or two. Okay?"

George decides to butt out.

"Yeah, okay, son. I'll go see Becca. Then I'll butt out."

"Before you butt out, go over Mrs. Bliss's history with the floor nurse. Make sure we don't leave anything out." The internist makes George feel needed.

"Okay. I'll run it down for her." These children know what they're doing even though they look twenty-one.

Becca is in a double room.

"Honey, you want a private?" George asks.

"No, George, this is fine. Go home, okay?" Everybody wants George to go.

"I'll stay. I'll sit here. I'll be quiet."

"Please go. I don't want you to stay. I want you to go." She's quietly firm.

He really wants to go, but he wants her to want him to stay. She isn't kidding; she wants him to go. She knows she'll end up ministering to his fears and needs if he stays. She doesn't feel up to it.

"Okay. I'll go. I'll call later. I gave the nurse a history. How's the chest?"

"It feels better, it really does. Please go."

And George goes. And George instantly decides to come back. He looks through the window before he reenters her room. Becca stares at the wall. The angry look on her face stops George in his tracks. He's never seen this look, and he doesn't want to

find out what it means. He goes.

This particular turn of events isn't fair to Becca. She's spent the last year coddling George and his heart-attack fears; a lot of visits to young doctor Young -- the alleged best cardiologist in Florida. George is healthy now, walking every day, thinking about his golf game, maybe even a ski trip in the spring.

George is scared. Becca is his rock, his good bee. She takes care of him. George is struck again with how much of this retirement business is taking care of each other.

Their partnership, marriage, is pretty usual, the usual problems: money, kids, his ego. Becca figures things out for them, sort of makes up their minds about how they see things. That's why George is confused now: Rebecca isn't telling him how to feel about it.

George thought a lot about dying when he was sick. Mostly he doesn't want to die in the worst way. But he figures Becca will be okay when he does. In the deepest true part of himself -- a place George avoids -- he doesn't think he'll be okay if she dies. She better get better.

George decides to get young Dr. Young on the case. The emergency room intern talks a good game, but who knows. Dr. Young has the reputation.

George drives to Dr. Young's medical building to find out where the good doctor is making rounds, but his car is still in the lot. Just then, the doctor comes out of his building.

A woman sits on the hood of a convertible. She's young -- everybody in America is -- and pretty, long hair, nice clothes. Their greeting would be more aptly placed in a bedroom than in the parking lot in the middle of the day. She wraps her legs around his waist for the kiss; pretty hot. He gets in her car, and they drive away.

George follows. He suspects that the good doctor is not going to the hospital to make rounds. George is not mad, not yet, he's numb. He holds his thoughts at arm's length, does not let them get solid, drifting thoughts like clouds, don't look at them, George, just drive, just follow.

They go to a hotel. George sits in his old car. Waits. Remembers.

Before visiting Dr. Young, George bandied his name around town to get the word on the wunderkind from UCLA. The kid is famous; Harvard Medical, UCLA intern, new techniques for heart surgery while still an intern. He's a wonder, alright. Came to Florida

because that's where the oldest hearts in America live.

The first time they went to Dr. Young's office, Becca went with him, of course, they were overwhelmed by the set-up: a private medical building with dozens of technicians and nurses on staff, on-site lab work and physical therapy, a small swimming pool.

The waiting room was full of oldsters, like the Blisses. Everybody dressed in their Florida colors, colors you can't wear in the rest of America without getting stares, Flamingo colors. Everybody looks pretty well-off, if a little sick. You have to be well-off to get an appointment with young Dr. Young. The first appointment, just to see him, is eight hundred. Then if he does something, it's more. It's a far cry from the three-dollar office fee George charged when he started out in practice. Mostly George's patients didn't have three dollars. They paid with bread, a chicken, clean up the yard, do the wash -- medical barter.

At that first appointment, Dr. Young asks Dr. Bliss a lot of questions about medicine in the old days.

Later, Becca says Dr. Young had patronized them; Dr. Young really doesn't care about the good old days. Becca is right. It's hard to believe that nobody cares about the lives George saved over fifty years, but they don't. Back home George is a somebody to some people; here, he's a nobody to everybody. Pretty hard on the old self-image.

In George's opinion, Dr. Young practices assembly-line medicine. And it costs.

George didn't treat his patients so shabby. And when George, Becca, or the kids went to a doctor, that doctor treated them good. George hates being treated like a nobody. Worse is his nagging guilt when he realizes that's how most of the people in the country get treated all time. It's enough to make a retiree go commie.

Sitting in his car outside of the hotel, George realizes how little he matters, how little Rebecca matters to Dr. Young. Just money, they're just money to young Dr. Young.

Now George gets mad.

He calls the hospital from a pay phone. Becca is okay. Stable. Sleeping. Maybe she just needs a rest.

George peeks into the hotel. Dr. Young pays for lunch and then registers at the front desk, takes a key. This is pretty excessive, George thinks. The guy isn't married, they could go to his house or apartment or wherever. Maybe he doesn't like to

mess his sheets.

George arrives at the medical building as the sun is setting. In the waning light, George vandalizes the good doctor's tires, an act he finds surprisingly difficult. He doesn't have a plan yet, but something must be percolating in his brain.

Dr. Young and company arrive sooner than expected. George wonders if things didn't go so well in the hotel room. The love birds have a long-pull of a goodbye kiss, the lady drives off, and Dr. Young starts his car, which limps a few yards forward. He backs into the space again, and is out of the car like a shot, swearing up a storm.

"Dr. Young?" George can't believe the innocent sound of his own voice.

"Who are you? This fucking car."

"George Bliss."

"Who? Oh. A patient. The office is closed."

George is amazed. The doctor doesn't know who he is! The receptionist must fill him in before he takes a call. Remarkable.

"My wife got sick today. I want you to take her case."

"Listen, Mr.."

"Doctor."

"Oh. Right. Dr. Bliss. Didn't you call today?"

"Yes. About Becca. She's had some kind of attack. Could you take a look at her?"

"Is she in the hospital?"

"You know, I couldn't get her to go. She's pretty sick. I thought maybe you could talk her into going."

"You want me to make a house call?" Dr. Young is astounded.

"I think that'd be a good idea." George innocently replies.

Dr. Young shakes his head in amused disbelief. "I can't... I can't believe it. Look, I'm going to call a tow truck. Take your wife to the hospital."

"You got car trouble? Want me to take a look at it? I know

something about foreign cars." George wonders why he's talking with a twang.

"It's just a flat."

"Don't call a tow truck for a flat. I'll change it. Listen. Come take a look at Becca, five minutes, max. We'll come back, and I'll change your tire." The old barter system returns.

Dr. Young calculates.

"All right. You're really five minutes from here?"

"Five minutes."

They drive into the darkness. George is again struck by Florida's primitive night. During the day, it looks like the most civilized place in America, but at night, it's a brand new ball game. George and Becca got lost more than once looking for the piece of property they finally bought in the flats. No street signs, no street lights, no neighbors. The place is still empty, awaiting the arrival of their daughter, but she hasn't gotten it together to dump her husband and relocate yet.

"I don't know this part of town."

"Oh, yeah, this is still town. Just not developed yet. Give it a couple of years." George says.

"Months, more like it. Did you get in on the ground floor of something?"

George doesn't know what Dr. Young means for a second. Then he realizes - real estate. The doctor speaks of real estate matters.

"Oh yeah. We're in on the ground floor. Price will probably go up a hundred percent. Then we'll sell, of course." George imitates the tone of realtors he has overheard.

"Why don't you get a couple of properties. Rent the ones you don't live in. Then you can dump the lot when this area develops." The doctor is a man for all seasons.

"I don't have that kind of cash."

"I do. You get me the prices, I'll put up the cash, you do the leg work, and I'll cut you in for a part of the profits when we sell."

"Okay. Just as soon as Becca is better, I'll get right on it."

Florida, poor Florida, George thinks; the way it's been

butchered, slashed, dredged. George and Becca live in a fancy development in the middle of a swamp. They have a "canal" in their backyard that sports the occasional crocodile. Sad, displaced ducks return to protest. Huge snapping turtles crawl toward the screened-in pool. Somebody forgot to tell the gators and turtles and ducks where to go when the people moved in. There's no way to stop the development, what with people like George and Becca moving down everyday, and people like young Dr. Young getting rich from it.

The sensor lights light up the house when they drive up. Makes it look occupied, if a little overgrown.

Dr. Young takes the lead. George sticks a finger in Dr. Young's back.

"Put up your hands, doctor."

"What is this?"

"Just put them up. I'd hate to waste one of the finest minds in American medicine, but I will." It's Kojak talk.

The doctor puts up his hands. "My money is in my wallet." Dr. Young knows a mugging when he's in one.

George clumsily unlocks the door, and they walk into the kitchen. In the middle of the kitchen is a completely irrational pole - a metal pole from floor to ceiling. George scotch tapes Dr. Young's hands together with the pole between his hands and his back.

"Is this a hold-up or a kidnaping?"

"Which do you prefer?"

"Listen..."

He's forgotten George's name again. They were almost robber-barons in a land deal together, but he's forgotten the name.

"George Bliss."

"You're really George Bliss? A doctor? My patient?"

"Yes."

He smiles. "Is this a joke? Is this for one of those video things?" He looks around the kitchen.

"No joke."

"Fine. Just tell me what you want? Let's get on with this so I can get back to my patients."

"I want you to be a doctor."

"Don't be ridiculous. I am a doctor."

"I want you to empathize with the sick." George feels temporarily inadequate. He doesn't know if he's capable of giving instructions in humanity. "You wouldn't see my wife. She was very sick."

"I couldn't have left all those patients. You're being selfish, Dr. Bliss. I should help your wife while others are in agony, in pain? Where's the morality there?"

"You went out to lunch, Doctor Young. You didn't stay to help the sick. You went out to lunch. Etc."

"What do you mean, etc?"

"You took a room."

"What are you, doctor? Detective? Voyeur?"

George gets weary suddenly. He looks through the drawers for something better than scotch tape; he runs some strapping tape around Dr. Young's wrists a lot of times.

"Dr. Young, I'm getting bored with you. I'm going to go visit Becca."

"Fine. Let's go visit Becca."

"Oh, not you, Dr. Young. You stay here. You think about things for a while."

"You can't leave me here." He lists all the reasons why George can't leave him there. Mostly his reasons have to do with how George can't mistreat a person of his importance in such a rude fashion; he doesn't even bother to say that George could go to jail for kidnaping.

"Well, I'm going to the hospital. Then I'm going home. I'll see you tomorrow. Unless Becca get sicker, or I have a fatal heart attack, or am hit by a truck, or have a mental collapse and forget I've left you here." George watches as the good young doctor pales. "If I was you, I'd hope for the safety and continued well-being of George Bliss."

George has a moment's pause about turning out the light. Then decides not to waste the electricity.

George is overcome with nostalgia. He is seventy-three years old. His parents were poor, but they made him go to medical school instead of helping out. He patched up the wounded in the second World War and never thought to doubt his country. He watched war protesters with dismay in the late 60s thinking they should all go to jail. Then Watergate, the fall of Saigon, and the truth about the lies and vulgarity that had sustained his patriotism over 30 years burned in his ears as only the truth does. In his old age, George learns doubt, mistrust, that the government of the country he loves will manipulate, lie, and cheat to gain its greedy ends. His mind gets broadened, and he learns to doubt, even though it takes decades.

Now, in his mind, there is no doubt; this is the most stupid, terrible, irredeemable, thing he's ever done, bar none. But he's whistling, nonetheless.

He asks at the nurse's station about Becca.

"She's doing fine, much better."

"Can she go home?"

"Nobody goes home on the first day."

Sure, that would make the hospital personnel look stupid for admitting her.

Becca looks up from the wall when George walks in. After only the briefest pause she asks:

"George, what have you done?"

He doesn't answer.

"Oh, George, have you bought something? If you've bought something.."

"No, I didn't buy anything. Really. Not an item. Nary a purchase." She's right though, George has become quite the consumer since the retirement. Every time something goes wrong, or they have a fight, George makes a purchase. It makes him feel better.

"I put things right. That's all."

"Did you vacuum? Things aren't right, unless they're vacuumed."

"Yes. I vacuumed."

"George, you're lying. You'd rather die than vacuum"

"You're right. I hired a woman. She vacuumed."

"So you did buy something. A housekeeper." She's smiling. Hiring a person is okay, buying an item is bad. Becca is not a good consumer or capitalist. "Did you give her enough money?"

"More than the going rate. Are you fine? Can you go home tomorrow?"

"If not tomorrow, then the day after. I feel fine. No pain."

"We'll institute some changes. I'll help around the house."

"George, don't be ridiculous. You're useless around the house, and you make me mad when you make your pitiful attempts. We'll keep the housekeeper. She'll help me around the house."

"But you'll be careful. You won't exert yourself."

"George, you're talking like an idiot. Do you think I like being in here?"

"Well, I'll go home. See you tomorrow."

The next morning, George drives toward the flats, when he realizes that Becca is more important than his prisoner. When George arrives at her bedside, Becca looks great.

"I'm buying ear plugs, George. I had the best night's sleep in fifty years last night, and do you know why? Because nobody was snoring. Get me some ear plugs."

"I don't snore."

"You snore like a whole barnyard. Get me some ear plugs or give me a divorce."

George doesn't think she's kidding.

"I'm NOT kidding." She's reading his mind.

"And another thing. I'm sick of knowing what you're going to say."

"What?"

"I'm sick of knowing what you're going to say. I want you to think of something new."

He's afraid to reply. Afraid she'll know what he is going to say and finish his sentence. She's been finishing his sentences for a long time; George Bliss hasn't bothered to put an object after

a verb in twenty years.

"I kidnaped Dr. Young." He hadn't planned to tell her, but here it is.

And Rebecca beams.

"George Bliss, that's terrible. Why, you'll go to jail, for sure." If she smiles any broader, her face is going to crack.

"I don't care if I go to jail and die there. Somebody had to show that twerp."

"Well, I admit he's a twerp, but no twerp is worth going to jail for. You're going to have to let him go."

"Nah, he can rot. I'm not letting him go."

"Where are you keeping him, George?"

"At the house in the flats. He's taped to the pole in the kitchen."

"Thank you, George." Becca sighs and leans back, weary from the lively exchange. Becca doesn't believe that George has kidnaped Dr. Young. She thinks it's a fun game.

"Yep. I slashed his tires and tricked him. He's tied to the pole in the kitchen, all right."

"Well goodness, George, what's your plan for him?"

"I guess I'll tar and feather him."

"You're going to be in terrible trouble."

"I know."

"Well, George, you're not going to do me any good in jail."

"You can send me cakes."

"My husband, the jailbird. Are you going to take him some lunch?"

"Wow, I guess I ought to feed him."

"Unless you want to be charged with murder as well as kidnaping."

"When can you go home?"

"Don't ask me that!" She's suddenly furious; she does not want to hear anything predictable. "Ask my doctor when I can go home."

"Good bye. I got to go feed my prisoner."

He buys hamburgers.

Dr. Young is screaming.

"You sonovabitch, you sonovabitch!" Over and over like a broken record.

"Now if you're not better behaved, you're not going to get breakfast."

Dr. Young takes a bite of hamburger, but never stops yelling

"You're all the same." Hamburger bun falls from his lips. "Idolized by your wives and patients, treated like gods for lancing boils. Whose life did you ever save? Probably put more than one in the grave. Unless you were too scared to ever actually diagnose anything; sent them all to specialists, let somebody else put them in the ground." At least he's talking about George. Last night he only talked about himself. "I HAVE TO PEE!"

"Who's stopping you, pal?" George is not moved to generosity by this man.

George puts the step stool between Dr. Young's legs and puts the hamburgers on it. Dr. Young can reach them if he bends a little.

"What do you want from me?" He's quieter.

"You know, Doc, I'm not so sure now. I kidnaped you to punish you; now that you're actually here, I don't know what to do with you. Some states execute kidnapers. I don't want to die like that. You may have to stay here forever."

Actually, all George wants is for young Dr. Young to anguish over the old and sick.

George takes Becca home that night. They're adorable; George cooks dinner, which is bad, but he is cute in Becca's apron. George does the dishes, makes breakfast in the morning and brings Becca her slippers and the paper. She looks up from the paper.

"George." Her face is pale.

"What?! Honey, are you all right? Are you sick?"

She starts to laugh. "Dr. Young is missing."

"Oh, yeah. Well, I told you I kidnaped him."

"But I didn't think you meant it. Where is he?"

"He's taped to the pole in the kitchen in the house in the flats."

Becca laughs heartily. "Well, you're going to have to untie him and let him go."

"Not today."

"Yes, today."

"I'm not ready to face the music. Who'd take care of you?"

"George, nobody's going to believe that you kidnaped and captured that muscle-bound young boy. When they accuse you, just deny it."

They've been looking at each other in the mirror. George glances at himself, wonders what a person would see, a person who hadn't known the boy Becca married or the young man who went to war or the middle aged man who saved lives. Would that person see just some old guy?

An old guy who'd kidnaped a muscle-bound young guy? George is happy.

They smile at one another.

"George. Go let him go. He must be terribly frightened."

Maybe nobody will believe that George kidnaped the doctor. But maybe they will. He feels the perfect idiot.

George remembers the events of the kidnaping when he recalls an item. That kiss, that long-pull of a kiss when the fancy lady returned the young doctor to his medical building.

George is not sure about a lot of things, but he has, if not insight, at least suspicions about behavior. When the private part of people's sex is really hot, the public part isn't. Maybe all this public kissy-face is just a lot of show.

Dr. Young is still swearing when George arrives.

"You sonovabitch." He snarls. "You'll rot in jail."

"Wow. You're your same rotten self."

He sits up straight. "I have money. You and your wife, you can have it."

George can't let him go. He thinks this is about money. George puts the hamburger bag on the stool and storms out.

"I'm glad you didn't get arrested." Becca is in her apron and cooking.

"You're not supposed to be out of bed."

"Another one of your meals and I'll be dead anyway. Did you let him go?" She looks at his silence. "George, you did let him go?"

"He's so smug, if you could see him, you wouldn't want me to let him go."

"Take me there."

"You're not well enough for that."

"I'm an accomplice after the fact. You might as well take me."

"He's not feeling any anguish."

"The young don't feel anguish. Don't you remember? You didn't feel anguish until you were an old guy. Take me there and we'll tell him."

She's perky in the car. Crime suits her.

The smell emitted by Dr. Young daunts her slightly.

"Hello, Dr. Young." Becca pulls up a chair to sit next to the doctor on the floor. "George and I wanted you to feel anguish. George and I have talked, and we now realize that the young don't feel anguish. Now, Dr. Young, you understand that George and I are very old. Our minds are rickety. George and I were not thinking clearly when we kidnaped you. George and I wanted to teach you a lesson, but George and I are now sorry that we've made you miserable for two days. We hope you'll forgive us."

"Yes, ma'am." He's nodding like a schoolboy talking to his teacher.

"It wouldn't do for George and I to have to go to jail."

Becca makes her point. George and I, George and I. If the good young doctor is going to send George to the clink, he's going to have to send her to the clink as well.

"No, ma'am, it wouldn't."

"Now, we're going to drive you back to town. But don't you tell on us, now."

"Becca, honey. Want to wait in the car? I'll bet Dr. Young wants to wash."

He glowers at George.

George tries to sound tough. "I don't know what your plans are, but you better think this through before you report us to the police. For one thing, how will your patients react when they find out that you went on a date instead of responding to an emergency? And for another; how is the public going to feel when they hear about your fees?" George saves the best for last. "And lastly, well, I'm old. I'm an old guy. Pretty feeble looking to boot. And Becca is old. We're old people. I wonder how your girlfriend, or any future girlfriend, is going to feel about your manly manhood knowing you got hoodwinked, manhandled, and tied up by pitiful old me?"

That does it.

"Why don't you go have a little wash. Don't want to offend Becca, her being just back from the hospital and all."

Dr Young goes to the bathroom. George waves to Becca who waves back. Maybe this will end up okay.