

# Ferocious beast

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Bogdan Nowak sat in the waiting room anxiously clasping his knees. He glanced at the clock, it was quarter to three. He had been waiting for nearly half an hour, and he could feel the blood pulsating between his ears. An itch of annoyance crawled over his skin like ants racing to the scent of sweet fruit some foolish child had discarded, and it was beginning to drive him mad. The older women beside him gossiped in Polish, and from what Bogdan managed to catch, some scandal had occurred with a priest from their parish and the daughter of the organ player. Bogdan fought the urge to turn to the women and inform them exactly how irritating the sound of their voices was. And how the smell of pickles and old kielbasa—which was most certainly originating from them—was making him feel nauseated. He wished the doctor would hurry up so that he could go home, pour himself a glass, and turn on the television.

An attractive young woman entered the waiting room, her copper hair cut to her shoulders and her slightly parted lips a deep red. She wore blue scrubs that concealed her slender figure. She flipped through some papers on her clipboard and called “Nowak, Bogdan.”

The elderly women glanced over. They took delight in personally knowing everyone from the Parish, but not recognizing Bogdan, they turned back to their conversation about how the youth no longer respected the elderly—or God for that matter. Bogdan followed the nurse, pretending to lose his balance; he grabbed hold of her waist and slowly slid his hand down. Bogdan had always been a man of weak inhibition, whether it came to liquor or to women. She escorted him into the doctor’s examining room and sat him down in the nearest chair. She was all too accustomed to the unwanted advances of men.

“The doctor will be in shortly. Please make yourself comfortable, Mr. Nowak.”

As Bogdan looked around the tiny room, he caught his reflection in a mirror on the wall. He was in his late fifties, and yet as he saw himself, he couldn’t deny that time had not been good to him. His eyes, underlined by dark bags, were void of any expression of contentment with life. The thin line of his lips took a permanent downward curve, giving the appearance of sternness. And each crevice on his face—as if chiseled out of stone—seemed impossibly deep. He touched his face as if in disbelief that it was his own; his skin rough against his fingertips like aged leather.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Nowak. How are you feeling today? How are we doing with those headaches?”

“How do you think they are? I certainly didn’t come here for fun, that’s for sure. If they were better, I wouldn’t have bothered showing up!” he snapped at the young doctor. The doctor smiled and look at Bogdan sympathetically.

“How are you managing at home? Last time we spoke about some difficulties—”

“Get to it, doctor. You called me in for a reason.”

The doctor hunched forward and looked down, as if harbouring the weight of the world on his shoulders. “Very well. If you recall we took some tests last time—”

“I recall just fine.”

“I’ve received the results of those tests, and unfortunately I don’t have good news.”

Bogdan had anticipated this. For the past few years he hadn’t been receiving any good news. It wasn’t good news when his boss called him into his office. It wasn’t good news when his wife said they needed to talk. And it certainly wasn’t good news when she threw him out. He remained silent, staring with disdain at the young doctor whose eyes apologetically avoided his gaze.

“The reason for all those headaches you’ve been experiencing has been this tumour. Based on the biopsy, it’s a glioblastoma ...”

The doctor pulled out an MRI image of Bogdan’s brain and began gesturing at it.

“... cancer...”

The words hit him hard, harder than his co-worker had hit him in the gut for his inappropriate remarks toward the man’s wife two Christmases ago. He had never once stopped to think about the end. Yet, here it had arrived unannounced, staring him blatantly in the face, and he was unsure what to make of all of it. Bogdan could not bring himself to pay any attention to the ongoing explanation by the doctor; he had been expecting bad—but not this kind of bad. The young doctor’s words drifted around the room, dream-like.

“... widespread ... inoperable...”

Bogdan was contemplating things only a man peering behind the curtain of death would. Had he achieved anything worthy in his life? Who would grieve for him when he was gone? His thoughts only grew in severity, and the answers emerging caused Bogdan great despair.

“I know this can be overwhelming, Mr. Nowak. Do you have any questions? Are there any family members you’d like me to call—”

“How long do I have?”

The doctor hesitated, unsure if the answer would provide any solace. “A few months ... a year. It’s hard to tell, Mr. Nowak.”

They sat in silence, the doctor shifting uncomfortably in his chair. He seemed more anxious than Bogdan himself, who, lost in his own thoughts, considered how little he had accomplished in his life. He looked at the haggard old man in the mirror once more. He was tired and worn,

and he needed a drink. He rose and quickly walked out of the doctor's examining room.

"Mr. Nowak are you sure you're all right?" asked the doctor.

Bogdan wandered the streets until he came upon a small corner store. As he searched the shelves for things that appealed to him, he picked up a bottle of vodka and a pack of cigarettes. Placing them in his jacket, he walked out of the store with little to no remorse, but a sense of entitlement and anger; for he was a dying man, and dying men were privileged to things living men were not. He pulled out a cigarette and savoured the first inhalation. It had been 15 years since he last tasted the sweet relief of tobacco, and the sensation made him, for a moment, forget his concerns.

As he walked, he thought of his ex-wife and his daughters. He had tried to contact them sporadically over the years, but to no avail. He eventually had given up. At this moment, he realized that they were the only ones he could call. Bogdan dreamed of having his old life back, even if it was under such circumstances. He fantasized about his wife gently kissing him on the forehead and assuring him that he was going to be okay. And it made him briefly glad he was dying and glad at the possibility of seeing his daughters again. Perhaps there was still a chance for him to hold his granddaughter.

Full of resolution, he walked quickly back to his trailer. Number forty-two. The roof slightly dented, and an old, beat-down Toyota in the driveway. He fixed himself a glass of straight vodka and lit another cigarette. Keen to make amends, Bogdan picked up the phone and dialed his former house number. He held his breath as the loud ringing vibrated in his ear.

He waited—but no one answered the phone. For the first time, he realized how utterly and terribly alone in the world he was. And he became afraid. What was the purpose of rising in the morning, when death lingered around the corner? His life had been devoid of many joys, and yet today he realized that he had lost something he did not think he treasured—his mere existence. He imagined his death arriving at the speed of a colossal chariot pulled by ferocious beasts. He wished it would arrive promptly, to hasten his misery. He became frightened by his thoughts and the air of hopelessness that surrounded him. Sitting silently—hyperaware of the mass in his brain—he dialed again.

"Hello ..."

#### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES**

I have read and understood *Current Oncology's* policy on disclosing conflicts of interest, and I declare that I have none.

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