

Payback

Dr. Lance Michaels walked into the room, chatting with the nurse. When he reached the foot of the bed, where the patient was dozing, he stopped dead. He had not seen that hated face in twenty years. Although the man's hair was now streaked with a bit of gray and he had put on fifteen or twenty pounds, there was no mistaking him. He had the same ugly scar above his right eyebrow.

Suddenly Dr. Michaels was twelve years old again.

He had just finished dinner, and his mom told him to put his baseball uniform in the washing machine before he went out to play. At the unexpected sound of the back door to the patio opening, Lance peered through the louvered doors of the laundry room into the kitchen, where his parents sat drinking their coffee. Perfectly still, scarcely breathing, he watched a man point a gun at his dad. Lance's blood ran cold.

"It's time to pay up."

"Just give me another week," his dad said, trembling. "I'll pay everything then."

“That’s what you said last week . . . and the week before. Do you have the money or not?”

“Not right now, but I’ll get it. I promise.” His voice cracked.

“It’s the same story with you every time. This has been going on forever. We’re sick of it. Get on your knees.”

“So you want me to beg? Okay, I’ll beg. Just don’t hurt me again.” His dad knelt down and clasped his hands. “Please give me another week. I beg you.” His lower lip quivered.

“Turn around.”

“What are you doing?” his dad cried, trembling.

“We’re gonna make an example of you. People shouldn’t bet money they don’t have.”

“O God, please, no!” his dad sobbed.

“Turn around.”

Still on his knees, crying and quivering, his dad turned his back to the gunman, who squeezed the trigger. His dad’s body thudded to the floor, his head in a pool of blood.

Then his mom started screaming hysterically, the way Lance himself wanted to but couldn’t. He stood watching through the louvered doors, frozen with horror.

“Shut up,” the triggerman yelled, pointing his weapon at his mom. “Or I’ll put a bullet right between your eyes.”

She managed to choke her screams but shook uncontrollably.

“Take off your clothes.”

She hesitated.

“Now!”

She unbuttoned and took off her blouse, then rose to unzip and slip off her jeans, and finally stood there in her bra and panties.

“Come on! I don’t have all day.”

With the red of shame staining the white of fear on her face, she reached back, unfastened her bra, and pulled the straps off her shoulders and over her elbows. She lowered and stepped out of her panties then covered her nakedness with her hands the best she could.

“You’re gonna pay part of your husband’s debt. Turn around and bend over,” the gunman ordered. He grabbed her with his free hand, spun her around, and pushed her head down to the table. Then he unzipped his pants. A moment later he had penetrated her and was thrusting so hard her thighs banged against the table edge.

“Don’t move,” he commanded when he had finished and withdrawn. She remained bent over the table, weeping silently. After he had zipped up his pants, he raised his gun, pulled the trigger, and put a bullet in back of her head.

He left the same way he had come in. Only the stench of alcohol and tobacco lingered behind him.

Lance collapsed on the floor of the laundry room in an almost catatonic state and remained there motionless until a neighbor discovered the bodies the next day. Overwhelmed by the trauma, he could not speak for seventeen months. What words could ever express his grief and rage? He could not even give the police a description of the perpetrator.

Later, Lance Michaels learned that the killer’s fingerprints were not in any state or federal database and that the DNA sample was contaminated upon collection by an inexperienced officer, so it could not be used in any match. An arrest was never made.

What would have happened to him if Jason Lalos, a speech therapist, and his wife had not adopted him out of the orphanage where he spent the first year after his parents' death? They nurtured him into speaking again, loved him back to normalcy, and supported him in his studies all the way through to his medical degree. Somehow, as an anesthesiologist, Dr. Michaels had been numbing his own pain by rendering others insensible to pain. But all the old feelings had awakened again.

The man who murdered his father and raped and killed his mother now lay before him, but what could he do? No physical evidence of the crime remained: his parents had been cremated and the house demolished long ago. And the twenty-year-old memories of a traumatized twelve-year-old could easily be called into question in court. He couldn't prove a thing.

"Are you all right, Doctor?" the nurse asked.

"Uh, yes," Dr. Michaels said, jolted back to the present. "I just remembered something. That's all. You can wake the patient."

As Dr. Michaels took the chart from the rack at the foot of the bed and began to study it, the nurse tapped the patient lightly on the shoulder and said, "Wake up, Mr. Sauvage. Wake up. The doctor is here to see you." Blinking several times, the patient opened his eyes.

"I'm Dr. Michaels, your anesthesiologist."

"So you're going to put me to sleep, huh, Doc?"

"I see from your chart that you have an atrial septal defect known as a patent foramen ovale," Dr. Michaels said with a clinical aloofness unusual for him.

"You mean I got a chink in the ol' ticker. That's what my heart doctor said."

“Your heart has an opening in the wall, or septum, between the two upper chambers, or atria, which in various ways can lead to air bubbles in the circulatory system and cause a stroke or heart attack. It’s a congenital defect affecting about twenty-five percent of the population.” So as not to be consumed by his own feelings, he kept up the impersonal, professional façade.

“And I thought my heart problems came from living the good life.”

“The good life?” Dr. Michaels said, raising an eyebrow at the intolerable irony.

“Women, whiskey, and cigars. And all the steak I can eat. But it ain’t that, or even the stress of the job.”

“What line of work are you in?”

“I guess you could say I’m a collections agent. You’d be surprised how many people try to welch on their debts. I see to it that they pay up—or else.”

“I bet you make a killing.”

“I do my best, but sometimes the work is just murder. So, about this surgery.”

Dr. Michaels glared at him. Inside, he could feel smoldering embers about to burst into flames. “We’re going to introduce a catheter into a vein in your groin . . . ”

“Hey, be careful down there.” The patient laughed.

“ . . . and lead it up to the hole in the septum, where an umbrella-shaped device will open and plug the hole between the two chambers. It’s a simple procedure. You should be released tomorrow.”

“So that’s how you’re gonna save my life,” the patient said, musing.

“Surgery always carries risks. And some people never wake up from the anesthesia.”

Gasp. The nurse looked at Dr. Michaels with her mouth open.

“You mean you could kill me?” the patient said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“You have to balance the risks against the benefits.” A block of ice without, Dr. Michaels was now a raging fire within.

“Kind of like gambling.”

“Kind of,” Dr. Michaels said with a poker face. “I’ll be back shortly before the surgery to administer the anesthesia.”

With that, Dr. Michaels turned and walked out of the room

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If the punishment were to fit the crime, Dr. Michaels thought, Sauvage would have to die twice for killing both his parents. And who knew how many deaths he would have to suffer in strict justice for all the other people he had killed? What a tragedy strict justice could not be done. Law enforcement had failed and no longer had any chance of succeeding. If even that modicum of justice were to be done that was still possible, Dr. Michaels would have to do it himself.

His patient deserved to die, and he could take the villain’s life. But Dr. Michaels could not make him suffer the way Sauvage had made his victims suffer. Although as defenseless as his victims, he would lie unconscious, under anesthesia. Dr. Michaels knew Sauvage would never feel his dad’s helplessness and terror, his mom’s shame and humiliation, his own horrified trauma. What a pity Sauvage would die peacefully in his sleep. It was far better than he deserved. Still, it was something.

How could Dr. Michaels avoid detection and punishment, though, just as Sauvage himself had done? There was no such thing as a perfect crime. No matter what means he used, he would leave some trace, one an autopsy could reveal. He would be risking his medical license, his profession, his livelihood, the financial security of his wife and children, the happiness of his

family, and his own freedom, all to avenge the death of his parents. If only he could find a way that would not arouse suspicion during an autopsy. And what if someone walked in on him in the commission of the act? It was a risk he would have to take. But he needed something quick, inconspicuous, and easily hidden.

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A couple of hours later, Dr. Michaels returned to start the IV drip. “I want you to count down backwards from a hundred,” he instructed the patient.

“Okay, Doc. I’ll see you later,” the patient said. “Or maybe not.” Within a minute or so he was unconscious.

Dr. Michaels took an empty syringe from his lab coat pocket, uncapped it, and held it in his hand. Inject enough air into the IV tube or, better yet, into the jugular vein, and the air embolism would do its work. A fatal air embolism happened often enough with this condition anyway, and no one would ever think to look for his needle in this haystack. Who would ever suspect him? No one at the hospital knew his childhood history, and the police never discovered the identity of his parents’ murderer. Well, Mr. Sauvage, it’s time to pay up, Dr. Michaels thought, and I’m here to collect the debt.

Just as Dr. Michaels was bringing the needle to the patient’s neck, he remembered a series of Bible verses he had learned in Sunday school as a child. “When someone smites you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other.” But this man had done far worse than punch him in the face. He had destroyed his family and his childhood. “Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you.” Yet God had to forgive him only for small things. He had never done anything so horrendous as this monster. “Love your enemies, and pray for your persecutors.” How could he feel love for

such a man? He felt nothing but hatred. But he would pray all right—he would pray that the bastard burn in hell.

Dr. Michaels raised the needle to the patient's neck again and positioned the point on the left jugular vein but stopped with his thumb on the plunger. How could the same device administer a life-saving vaccine and a fatal air embolism? The ambiguity of the instrument gave him pause. But he would be saving the lives of this assassin's future victims, not just taking personal revenge.

Dr. Michaels raised the needle again. Just then a voice came over the loud speaker: "Paging Doctor Michaels."

He would have to hurry. One quick puncture with the needle, a push on the plunger of the empty syringe, and the air would do its work.

"Paging Doctor Michaels," the voice said again.

Doctor Michaels. Suddenly he remembered the oath he had sworn "to consecrate his life to the service of humanity," "to practice his profession with conscience and dignity," and to make "the health of his patient . . . his first consideration."

But this was no ordinary patient, a sick person seeking health. This was the hit man who gunned down his parents like a couple of dogs.

As he raised the needle one last time, he noticed his wrist extend from the sleeve of his white lab coat, the symbol of his profession and of the thousands who had given their lives to research and healing. Then it struck him: he was one of them. However much this man deserved to die, Lance Michaels was a doctor, not an executioner. His business was saving lives, not taking them.

If he spared the life of this hollow-hearted killer, it was not out of Christian charity, forgiveness, or non-retaliation. It was because he knew who and what he was. Killing this man would not mean triumphing over him but sinking into his abyss, and he would become like him: a murderer. How could he, a doctor, live with himself? Instead of killing him, he would let this butcher continue to exist as the wretched man he was. Perhaps that was payback enough, though scant consolation to the orphaned child he carried inside himself.

Dr. Michaels lowered the syringe, recapped it, and put it in his lab coat pocket. Then he answered the page. A few minutes later they took the patient to surgery.

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The following day, as Dr. Michaels was returning to the hospital from a late lunch, he saw an orderly taking Mr. Sauvage out in a wheelchair to a taxi.

“Hey, Doc. I survived. You didn’t kill me after all,” the patient said and laughed.

“I haven’t lost a patient yet,” Dr. Michaels responded with a sense of pride.

“I guess one good turn deserves another.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The way I look at it, you just returned a favor.”

“I’m afraid I’m still not following you,” Dr. Michaels said with a certain impatience.

“Well, Doc, you can see both ways through a louvered door. When they told me I had to have the surgery, I wanted to see what kind of man you turned out to be, so I came here. Now I know,” the patient said and got into his taxi.

Glossary of Names

Lance: refers here not to a spear but to a sharp instrument, such as a needle, that might be used to “lance” a boil, for example. Lance considers using a needle to kill Mr. Sauvage.

Michaels: the rhetorical question “Who is like God?” (Hebrew), implying the answer “No one.”
Dr. Michaels does the right thing, refraining from using the needle, but not out of any religious motivation.

Sauvage: savage (French)

Jason: healer (Greek)

Lalos: perhaps from Greek. If so, it would mean “talker” or “talking.” Jason Lalos is a speech therapist, thus one who talks to heal those with speech impediments.