



by C.S. Pomerleau

A small commotion erupted behind the reception desk. The Drakeville Family Practice Group had just hired a third young woman to help handle the mounting work load generated by the thriving practice of Drs. Gibson, Corliss and Hannon, and poor Vanilla still became flustered every time the phone rang.

Vanilla, of course, was not her real name. But the other two assistants shared the same first name, and Dr. Gibson had affectionately dubbed them Chocolate and Strawberry long ago to avoid confusion.

Vanilla didn't mind the inevitable nickname. She had far more important things to worry about. Already Dr. Corliss had scolded her for mixing up two patients' files, and she didn't want to make any more mistakes.

Ignoring the ruckus in the waiting room, Dr. Evelyn Corliss quickly thumbed through the thick pile of folders on her desk. Ah, good. Vanilla had managed to find her way over to radiology. Here were the two packets she was looking for.

One set of films was that of Veronica Stratton, her oldest friend. When Veronica had come in last week for her regular checkup, she had mentioned she thought she might have a mammography. "Now that we're in our forties," she'd said, "it pays to be cautious."

The other films were her own. After all, she and Veronica were almost exactly the same age. So just to be on the safe side, she herself had gone down for a mammography that same afternoon. As she'd told Veronica, "No sense taking any chances."

Evelyn carefully removed the familiar blue sheets from the envelope marked with her name and spread them out on the left side of her desk. From an identical envelope she extracted Veronica's films and placed them on the right.

Just then the phone buzzed. "A Mr. Stratton on line two—says it's important." Vanilla announced. "Thanks, I'll take it right now," answered Evelyn

# Diagnosis

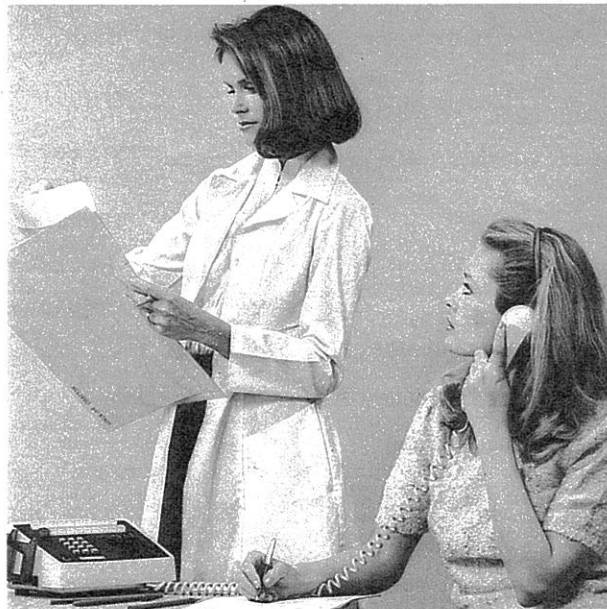


Photo: Amos Chan

## for Death

crisply, pushing the button.

"Evelyn!" boomed Phil's genial voice. "I've been trying to get through for fifteen minutes. First time, I was cut off altogether. Second time, I ended up talking with Henry Gibson—spent ten minutes hearing about State's 6-2-1 record in football. His son's on the team."

Evelyn laughed. "That's our new assistant. What can I do for you?"

Phil's tone became serious. "I'm a little worried about Veronica, and I'd like to discuss it with you. Do you think we could have lunch together?"

Of course," said Evelyn. "I have one more patient waiting. Could we make it at 1:00?"

Evelyn hesitated, then reached a quick decision. "Henry Gibson can probably take a look at my patient. I'll meet you at the Soup 'n Salad in ten minutes."

She spoke briefly with Henry Gibson, then grabbed her coat. The mammograms would have to wait.

Seeing Phil was becoming more and more of a mixed pleasure for Evelyn. She had known him since college. In fact, the two of them had been in love for most of their senior year. But Evelyn, foreseeing the demands

her career would make, had been unwilling to make a commitment to any man, even Phil. Instead, she had introduced him to her roommate, Veronica, and the rest, as they say, was history. Evelyn had served as maid of honor at their wedding. Sometimes she wondered whether Phil even remembered that he had once proposed to her.

Over the years, Evelyn had shared the joys and disappointments of the Strattons' marriage—celebrating Phil's graduation from law school, weeping at Veronica's miscarriage, cheering at Veronica's late-blooming singing career. The whole arrangement seemed very satisfactory to Evelyn. She remained free to pursue the demands of her profession, but at the same time she could participate vicariously in a life that might have been hers, had she been willing to give up her medical aspirations.

Recently, however, the happiness she took from her status as honorary member of the Stratton family had started to pall. She had started to wonder whether she had really had to make that choice at all. Look at her male colleagues—Henry Gibson, for example. He was as deeply involved in medicine as she was, yet it had

never once occurred to him that his profession was incompatible with family life.

Or perhaps more to the point, look at Veronica. Sure, her singing career had been confined to amateur musicals for many years while her children were young. But now, in the first flowering of a more serious concert career, Veronica seemed to be enjoying a sense of exhilaration that she herself had not experienced since she was an intern.

It was with these thoughts rolling in her brain that Evelyn joined Phil at a small table tucked away in the back of the restaurant. Phil was looking slightly distracted. "I'm very concerned about Veronica," he said after a bare minimum of preliminary chitchat. "It's all this traveling she's been doing. I'm afraid she's getting a little run-down. Now she's been invited to do a four-month tour of Europe, and she seems determined to do it—says it'll really establish her career. But what do you think, Evelyn? She tells me you sent her down for some x-rays last week."

"That was nothing, just routine," replied Evelyn. "Actually, I thought Veronica appeared to be in excellent health. I'd say that concertizing definitely agrees with her."

"So you think she ought to go on this tour?"

"I can't see any reason why not unless those x-rays turn up something unexpected. I just had them brought up from radiology this morning. I'm planning to take a look as soon as I get back to the office."

Phil looked relieved. "Well, as long as you give her a clean bill of health, I won't stand in her way." He sighed. "It's ironic, isn't it, Evelyn? You turned me down because you didn't think a two-career family would work. So I marry a homebody, and in the end she turns out to be just as career-minded as you. How very much I loved you way back then!"

Evelyn stared at Phil in utter astonishment. Could it possibly be that he, too, was wondering whether they'd made a mistake?

But Phil refused to meet her gaze, and she instantly dismissed the idea. Phil was a one-woman man who honored his obligations absolutely, and he had bound himself to Veronica for life. For life . . .

Slowly, deliberately, Evelyn hung her coat in the closet. Her lunch with Phil had set off a cataract of wild thoughts, thoughts she

knew she'd have to sort through eventually. But for now, she'd have to concentrate on her work. She was solidly booked for the whole afternoon, and she did want to have a quick glance at those mammograms before her appointments.

She took a deep breath and sat down at her desk. Yes, here on the left were her own films—fine, no problem at all. And here were Veronica's—they looked okay, too. No, wait a minute, what was that tiny spot there in the lower right quadrant? She peered more closely at the film. Yes, there it was, a small but highly suspicious thickening. If it was removed immediately, Veronica would probably recover completely. But if nothing was done, and if Evelyn's diagnosis was correct, the cancer could invade Veronica's body within a few short months.

On a sudden impulse, Evelyn seized the phone and dialed the Strattons' number. "Veronica, it's Evelyn," she said as evenly as she could. "I've just had a look at your mammograms, and everything is perfectly normal. I think you can take off for Europe without a care in the world."

Quaking at the enormity of what she had done, Evelyn realized she would never make it through an afternoon of patients. Composing herself, she donned her coat and entered the waiting room.

"I'm afraid I've been called out on an emergency," she told the three technicians. "Please cancel all my afternoon appointments. And could you just grab those films on my desk and run them back down to radiology?"

Without waiting for an answer, she pivoted and strode out the door.

Vanilla turned to her companions. "I was just thinking . . ." she said with an air of anxiety. "While Dr. Corliss was out to lunch, I went into her office to look for a file, as Dr. Gibson told me to. Well, I had to move a bunch of x-rays she had spread out all over her desk, and when I put them back, I think I reversed them. I'm almost sure I did. Do you think I ought to say anything? I don't want to get in any more trouble."

Chocolate shrugged easily. "Don't worry about it, kid. Dr. Corliss is a real professional. I'm sure she straightened everything out."