

Parallel

Michael, Chattanooga TN

"I'm sorry to have to inform you Michael, but our tests have confirmed that you do indeed have Loeys-Dietz Syndrome. We've gone ahead and scheduled open-heart surgery for the 30th."

Christopher, Portland, ME

"According to your screening results, Christopher, you do indeed have Major Depressive Disorder. I would like to schedule an appointment for Friday, and then we can consider our options for moving forward."

Both

As soon he saw the doctor's face, he knew.

Now what? What will happen at the church? Just when things were going so well. How will the family handle this? Heck, how will I handle this?

His wife gently squeezed his hand. "Hey, love, we'll get through this together," she said. He slowly turned his head as a fog settled on his mind even as his heart began to race. "Yeah, thanks," was all he could manage.

He closed his eyes and thought for a moment. "So my heart," he paused and managed a crooked smile, "is broken then? Or, maybe, breaking?"

"In a manner of speaking, I suppose." She scowled a little, but recovered into a smile. "But we'll do our best to mend it."

He stood up as tears started gathering in the corners of his eyes. "I need some fresh air," he said as he stepped toward the door. He locked his eyes on the doorknob, avoided the doctor's gaze, and quickly exited the room.

"Oh." His wife was taken aback by his abrupt departure. "I'm sorry, he's never like that. I'm sure he's struggling."

"Completely understandable."

"Is there anything I should do? Is he going to be OK?"

“I’ll call in the prescription that he should begin tonight. I think he’ll be OK, but it may take a while until he feels like himself again.”



On Sunday he was more nervous than usual, but no one but his wife noticed the difference in the service or his sermon.

At the end of the service he lifted his hand in a gesture of blessing and said, “And now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing. Amen.”

“Amen,” many murmured in reply.

“I know I usually dismiss you for Coffee Hour now, but I have a special announcement to make, so please be seated.” Tears welled up in his eyes and his throat tightened as many resumed their seats, and a few just stood in place.

“I’ve recently been diagnosed with a major health issue, so unfortunately I’ll need to take a leave of absence.” Those who were still standing suddenly sat down, and the air was sucked out of the room. A few of the older ladies gasped. His wife walked forward and stood beside him at the podium and reached for his hand.

“We’ve already started plans to take care of Sunday services and other needs of the church,” she said. “The Area Office has been quite helpful.”

Someone toward the back of the small sanctuary raised their voice. “What’s wrong, Pastor? Are you going to be OK?”

Michael

“I have something called Loeys-Dietz Syndrome,” he said. “It is basically a genetic heart defect that was undetected until recently, so I need to have open heart surgery as soon as possible.”

He noticed the chairman of the board get up and approach another board member, saying “Now what do we do?” He raised his hand again. “I’m just thankful we found it before it was too late,” he said, and then more brightly: “I’ll miss you while I’m recovering, but I think I’ll come back stronger than ever, Lord willing.”

A middle-aged lady in the front row spoke up, piercing the growing noise of the crowd. “God’s got you, Pastor! And we’ll be OK, and we’ll start our famous Casserole Train tonight if you want, right?” Multiple ladies nodded in relief, eager to do something. “I hope your kids like shepherd’s pie!”

Christopher

“I have...” he started, and stopped, looking at his shoes. “I mean, I’ve been experiencing...”

Shit, he said to himself, hesitating. *I can’t do this*. He was suddenly angry at himself, at these people, at God.

“Take your time!” someone said cheerfully. A few groans followed.

He knew he had to say it plainly, but so much of him resisted, and he suddenly understood why: this was the beginning of the end. His tears began to flow freely and he said quietly, “I’m sorry.” He closed his eyes and shook his head. “I’m so, so sorry. I just...I just can’t take it anymore.” He wept openly.

The people began to murmur and a few got up to leave, shaking their heads and muttering. His wife put her arm around him, and the pianist got up from his piano bench and approached with open arms. The chairman of the board got up and approached another board member, saying “You’ve got to stop this before it gets out of hand.”

“Enough!” he shouted. “I’m depressed, OK? And its because of THIS!” He threw his arms wide, pointing his fingers to the walls. “THIS job, this calling, this bizarre thing we call pastoring has absolutely crushed me, and I am undone.”

The room remained silent except for his shouts echoing off the walls. The two board members looked mortified. Others looked like kicked puppies.

He wasn’t done. “And it’s a damn good thing I don’t own a gun, or I probably would have put a fucking bullet in my head by now.”

The crowd suddenly erupted with various unintelligible shouts and cries. He raised his hands to his face and sobbed, saying “I’m sorry” over and over.

“OK, love, that’s enough,” his wife said, grabbing his hand. “I think we should go home now.”

She led him to the hallway, quickly retrieved the kids from Sunday School, and led them all out the side door to the parking lot. She started the car and pulled out, not yet realizing that this Sunday at the church was their last.