

OBSERVE AND DEPART  
by Dave Biscella

Tom Chaplin looked around the giant office, nervous. He sat in a chair that was far more comfortable than it should be, in front of a desk that was bigger than any desk needed to be, starting at the empty chair on the other side of the desk, that looked even more comfortable than the one he was sitting in. The room was enormous, which felt more cavernous due to only having the desk and the two chairs in it. It'd been at least ten minutes since Tom was escorted into this office and left alone, but for some reason it had felt like hours.

"Mr. Chaplin," Tom heard from behind him, turning towards the door to see a tall, handsome, younger looking man walk in. He was wearing a white labcoat and blue scrubs underneath it. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you. I hope you haven't been waiting for me for too long."

Tom stood up to greet the man and shake his hand. It was the firmest, most professional handshake he'd ever felt. It was firm and dominant, but not forceful or painful. The only way Tom could describe the handshake in his head was by using the word 'perfect'. He wondered to himself how long you had to practice a handshake to make it feel that meaningful and important.

"Not too long," Tom said nervously. "You can call me Tom."

"Great, Tom," the Man said, motioning for Tom to sit back down as he sat himself in the seat on the other side of the desk. "My grandfather's name was Tom. It's a great name. I'm Dr. Adnoto. It truly is a pleasure to meet you, and I greatly appreciate your discretion."

Tom sat on the other side of the desk, trying to get as comfortable as he was before standing up to greet the doctor. Across the desk, Dr. Adnoto organized the folders he had

carried in and took one last look over all the papers with 'Tom Chaplin' written across the top of them.

"First off, Mr. Chaplin," Dr. Adnoto began, "I truly am sorry to hear about your condition. My mother lost her father and brother to the same type of cancer. It's definitely a stark reminder of how unfair life can be. What kind of timeframe did your doctors give you?"

Tom tried not to think about the cancer, but it was obviously hard. He would convince himself that it's out of his mind, but the second he heard the word again it would all come crashing back. Obviously, he wouldn't be sitting in this comfortable chair in front of this enormous desk in this giant empty office if it weren't for the cancer, so in reality there wasn't really any way to put it in the back of his mind.

"Three months," Tom said softly. Every time he said it aloud was just another reminder. "Maybe six if I'm lucky, but that's best case scenario."

Dr. Adnoto looked Tom straight in the eyes sincerely. For a second, his look comforted Tom. He felt like he was looking at somebody who genuinely cared about him, and who was willing to do anything he could to salvage any bit of happiness that Tom could possibly have left.

"OK, Tom, since time is short, I'll cut back on the pleasantries and the concern, and we'll get down to why you're here," Dr. Adnoto said, changing the tone in the room in an instant.

"Again, I greatly appreciate your discretion, but I have to ask to confirm, did you tell anybody we were meeting today? Or that you met with my associates earlier this week?"

"No, sir," Tom began. He hadn't called anybody 'sir' in a very long time, but for some reason it seemed extremely appropriate in this situation. "I haven't told anybody about contacting you, meeting you, or anything we've discussed. Just as I was instructed to do."

Dr. Adnoto smiled and leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbows on the desk. Even when he was all business, there was something calming about his eyes and his smile. "We

appreciate that. With you going through all the steps, from contacting us, to meeting with my associates, to eventually ending up in my office sitting across my desk from me, you clearly understand at least somewhat what is being offered to you. But this is a big decision, and it's one that we don't take lightly. I never go through with this procedure without meeting the client face to face. I feel this helps confirm for me that this is what you really want, and it's one last chance to make sure you fully understand what we're offering. Do you, Mr. Chaplin? Do you fully understand what we're offering?"

Tom stared at the doctor for a second. He let the words process. He didn't fully understand what was being offered, but he thought he did. The parts he didn't understand, he didn't really know how to form into questions. "I think so," Tom tried. "A second chance, in a way."

"Kind of," Dr. Adnoto responded. "We offer a second chance to observe, but not do. You'll be leaving behind three teenaged children. We're offering you the opportunity to watch them grow up. To see them go to prom, to graduate, to watch them become the adults they are going to be. But that's just it, watch. You won't get to play catch with your son. You won't get to question your daughter's first date. You won't get to walk them down the aisle, share a first dance, cheer at his games. We can't offer that. Trust me, if I had the science to make that possible, I would in a heartbeat. But for now, this is the best I can do. Do you understand that?"

"I do."

"Great. And you understand the decision needs to be made right here, right now? If you leave this office, this opportunity is no longer here, and there is no record of us ever meeting or discussing anything. You follow all of that, correct?"

"I do," Tom answered silently as everything began to sink in. "If I say 'yes', can you walk me through everything that happens from here?"

Dr. Adnoto smiled. His eyes and smile still calming, despite everything that's at stake. He could sense the fear coming from Tom. He could sense the apprehension. And he understood it all completely. "Absolutely, Tom. If you say 'yes', my associates will escort you from this office to my lab. From there, we will prep you, let you make your peace, and then we will end your life peacefully. Quietly. My associates will then take your physical body, place it in your car, and stage an accident. You'll eventually be found, and it will be determined that the cancer got you even sooner than anticipated. Your family will have a body to remember you with, and will be able to have regular services, just like they would if you wait for the cancer to do it."

Tom sat there, taking it all in. Dr. Adnoto paused and looked at him, giving Tom a chance to object and call the whole thing off. He didn't expect words, but knew he'd be able to tell by Tom's face. Tom's face said to keep going, so the doctor continued.

"With your physical body out of the way, I then use the science and methods I've created to gather up your, whatever you want to call it, the mental side, spiritual side, whatever you prefer to think of it as, and I transport it. I gather it up, and I transfer it into a six week old Golden Retriever. We give you a few weeks for your soul and the physical body of the puppy to merge and adapt to each other. This gives your family time to have your funeral and calm down from there. Two weeks after the transfer is complete, we deliver the puppy to your family, along with a note from a Lawyer you've never met claiming that this is a gift from you and that you made arrangements for them to be given a dog after you passed."

The thoughts ran wild through Tom's mind. What if they didn't want the puppy and they took it to a shelter instead? What if they were terrible dog owners? But what if they weren't? Tom knew he had a decision to make. He had to make up his mind while sitting in his office. That would mean not saying goodbye to his family. That would mean never seeing them again as himself. But it would mean getting to watch them from inside the house as the family dog. It

would mean them not having to watch him die for the next three to six months. It would mean a lot of things. It was a lot to process.

Dr. Adnoto let Tom sink into his silence for a few moments. It was clear he wasn't trying to rush him into a decision either way.

"Tom, there is a chance your family declines the puppy. That they turn it away. If they don't though, it lets you watch them grow up. You can't intervene, but you'll be with your family. The average lifespan of a golden retriever is 10-12 years, so we're potentially buying you an extra decade to spend with your family. But this also means watching them move on. If your wife moves on and meets somebody else, you'll be right there. If he becomes a father figure to your children, you'll be right there. A lot of great can come from this opportunity, Mr. Chaplin, but there are possibilities that it doesn't work out how you want it to. It's not too late right now. We can leave this office and pretend we never met. All of this is entirely up to you, Tom. Do you understand all of it?"

"I do," Tom said, causing flashbacks to the day nearly 17 years ago when he said those same words to his wife. Leading him to think about the happiness they've shared over that time. Having their first daughter, Alyssa, 16 years ago. Followed by Jaden and Kylee, 13 and 12 years ago. His whole life flashing through his mind. All the great memories stepping to the front. No matter what he decides from here, he will always have those memories, and they've made everything worth it. Are those memories enough? Are they worth fighting it out for the next few months and taking those with him? Or does he want another decade of watching his family make new memories?

Tom Chaplin was never one to doubt much of anything. He knew from the second he saw his wife that he wanted to spend his life with her. He knew from a young age he loved numbers and wanted a career involving them. He knew everything he ever wanted.

Until now.

Dr. Adnoto sat in silence as Tom traveled through time in his own mind, reliving everything from childhood to now. Dr. Adnoto smiled to himself as he saw the joy in Tom's eyes, which even let a few small smirks leak out onto his face. He knew the enormity of the decision and always made a point to never make his patients feel as if they were rushed into a choice. It was, after all, their choice, and one of the biggest they'd ever have to make.

"OK," Tom said, breaking his own silence.

"Have you come to a decision, Mr. Chaplin?"

"I have."

"Great," Dr. Adnoto said as he reorganized the files that had been sitting in front of him.

"Here's how it goes, I don't want justification, I don't want you to feel like you need to sell me on your decision. I don't want it to feel like you're talking yourself into it one way or the other. I don't want any explanation. I just want you to simply say 'Yes' or 'No' and then we'll proceed from there. Do you understand that?"

"Yes," Tom answered.

"Do you need more time to determine your answer?"

"No. I'm ready."

Dr. Adnoto lifted his pencil and pressed it to a paper with 'Tom Chaplin' written across the top. "Great, Mr. Chaplin. It truly was a pleasure meeting you. Now's the time, Tom. Yes or No?"

Tom looked Dr. Adnoto right in the eyes, smiled, and opened his mouth, ready to answer this question more confidently than he's ever answered anything before.