

EXCERPT FROM *DOC IN A BOX*, Robert Burton, M.D.

NARRATOR I: A patient appeared. Webb felt a sense of relief. Something to do, someone to treat. But he was wrong. It was another headache.

WEBB: You must learn to relax.

NARRATOR I: The middle-aged man held his head in his hands. Webb wished the man had a laceration or a sprained ankle, something concrete that could be resolved with sutures or a splint. He turned to the man's wife, a short, stocky woman who stood defiantly, her hands on her hips, and gave her a packet of four Tylenol with codeine.

WEBB: He needs a full work-up.

WIFE: (shrill and demanding) He's had these headaches twenty years. We've been to the best: Scripps, Mayo's, even Mass General. We know all about you doctors. What he needs is relief, not to have someone tell him it's all in his head.

NARRATOR I: She did all the talking, her husband occasionally looking up at her; otherwise he remained focused on his hands or the sheet of the examining table. She turned to her husband.

WIFE: Tell him. Tell him how much it hurts. Go on, don't just sit there. Tell him how much you're suffering.

NARRATOR I: She reached out and smoothed down a flap of upturned collar on her husband's jacket. Then she folded her arms across her chest. The man looked up as though to speak, but instead he rubbed his forehead and massaged his temples with his thumb and index finger.

WEBB: I don't know what else to offer. Headaches are tough to treat, worse to have.

NARRATOR I: He put his arm around the man's shoulder, not sure of his own sincerity, wishing it were different. But he was tired and the man's passivity grated. He stuck the brochure for the newly opened headache clinic in the man's hand.

WEBB: There's nothing more I can do.

WIFE: Aren't you going to at least examine him? Maybe there's something wrong.

NARRATOR I: The woman's face was round yet hawk-like, like a well-fed bird of prey. Her head moved forward from the shoulders, darting and biting at the space in front of her. Webb had seen cockfights in Ensenada. Her husband had been mortally wounded long ago, but in some strange dance of ambivalence, his wife would blow a breath of life into him each time he was down, waiting until he was up again before resuming her

attack. The curious thing was that she seemed genuinely worried and concerned about him, as though afraid she might lose her favorite sparring partner.

NARRATOR II: Webb dutifully went through the motions. He picked up an ophthalmoscope and looked in the man's eyes. Webb reminded himself that he was looking at the man's retina, not his soul. Up close the parts seemed normal. At a distance, as Webb put the ophthalmoscope back on the instrument tray, he could perceive the red blur of sadness that covered all that the man saw. He tapped, testing the man's reflexes. His arms, then his legs, responded appropriately, little kicks against the hammer. The exam was a waste of time. The man could see it in Webb's eyes. Webb could see it in the man's eyes. The man wanted to use the hammer on his wife, but he never would. When Webb finished the exam, he stood for a moment, directly in front of the man, and grasped his hands. They were cold and lifeless.

WEBB: Okay. Tell me what helps. What do you normally take?

NARRATOR I: The man was wrapped in his protective blanket of pain. The man just looked at him, then at his wife.

WIFE: You're the doctor.

WEBB: (patting the man on the hand) Take the codeine and try to get some sleep.

WIFE: Come on dear (tugging his sleeve).

NARRATOR I: And she shot Webb the look that he knew was coming, the combination of hatred and defiance.

WIFE: Whenever you guys don't know something, or can't do anything, it's in the head. Well, we're not paying for this visit. Not a cent. You didn't do anything. Send me to collection, see if we care.

NARRATOR I: She took the headache clinic pamphlet from her husband, crumpled it in a ball, and threw it in the sink.

WIFE: I wouldn't wish my husband's headaches on my worst enemy, not even on you, Dr. Smith.

NARRATOR I: Her husband wiped his brow as she spoke. He did not look at Webb. Together they trundled out the door.

NARRATOR II: Webb jotted down a few notes in the patient's chart. A few minutes ago he had resolved to be more charitable, more compassionate. He had tried, but compassion was not a role to be performed. They saw through him. Son of a bitch, they would be saying to each other. That's not true, he wanted to shout after them.