NIGHTSHADE

Brennan M. Barney

Brennan Barney is a Creative Director residing in Michigan. Recently his fiction "Maureen" was published in *Whiskey Island Magazine*.

"It's like my own personal Kevorkian."

John said, swirling the device around within his palm. He tossed it from one hand to the other. Beneath the sapphire crystal glass, intricate patterns blossomed and diffused as the word "DEMO" bounced from edge-to-edge within the bezel.

"—John!"

"...I'm just kidding around, Diane."

"Honestly, you're not the first person to make that reference," the saleswoman said, leaning in toward the couple. "I've even heard them called *Fit-LESS* bracelets."

"Oh, no," Diane huffed. "Who would say such a thing?"

"It's true," said the saleswoman, shaking her head. "Nothing surprises me anymore."

"... We prefer to view our product as a Life Enhancement Device—technology that broadly improves our clients' physical and mental health, fosters stronger relationships, inspires focus, desire, intention, clarity of purpose, and meaning. These are benefits not just for our individual client, but in turn—their families, their communities, the whole world ... *Creating a Better Tomorrow*, we like to say."

"That's the line from the commercial!" John said. "I saw it during halftime—rewound it, watched it three times! The ad was better than the game, let me tell ya"

"... The, *Better Tomorrow*," said Diane. "That's exactly why we're interested."

"And—" John said, extending his arms as if he was shooting a commercial himself. "*A New Beginning, Every Day*. That's from the other commercial," he said.

"The marketing team will be thrilled to hear such positive feedback," the saleswoman said, and continued on.

"Our peer-reviewed clinical trials include large-scale intervention studies—which is to say, one group is outfitted with our product, and a second group with a standard fitness band. We have extensive data showing immediate and lasting improvements for those wearing our device, in all sorts of metrics—enhanced energy and mood, productivity, quality of sleep ... even increased pleasure to physical sensation."

John raised his eyebrows and glanced at Diane.

"We're also seeing significant relief in clients with major depressive disorders, all without the risks associated with traditional medications."

"All because, you might not ... wake up tomorrow?" John asked.

The saleswoman considered his question.

"All because, it's a reminder of ... how precious *today* is."

"I can tell you firsthand," the saleswoman said, rolling up her sleeve. "The benefits are nearly limitless—between us ... it saved my marriage."

The saleswoman handed them each a brochure. "These are yours to keep, of course. Inside you'll find comprehensive details on all our product models, as well as case studies and testimonials."

John and Diane read their brochures, and the saleswoman matched their pace.

"Each of our product models include GPS for ultra-precise location tracking, a full suite of fitness and exercise modes, and biotracking monitors for oxygen levels, heart rate, body temperature, blood pressure, and glucose—along with basic functionality like multiple alarms, chronograph—and, of course, a display of the local time."

John ran his fingertips over the glossy photos.

"I think you'll find colorways and finishes to suit any style, and our design team can work with you on any bespoke requests. We also offer traditional materials like silver, gold, and stainless-steel—for those interested in discretion. We're assigning a quarter million new units each month," the saleswoman said. "Frankly, we're having a hard time keeping up with the demand."

"And, I can't just take it off?" John asked.

"Correct—it is not removable. Each device is water, impact, shock, and cut-resistant—they are fully tamper-proof. Any significant stresses to the device framework or wristband will take most features offline until a technician comes out to you," the saleswoman said. "The wristband automatically adjusts tension for body weight and temperature fluctuations. I'm sure you'll find it's very comfortable, and the battery charges through your movement and body heat, so there's no need for recharging or service."

"So, how does it ... you know?" John asked.

"I'm sure she'll get to that," said Diane.

"Of course," the saleswoman said. "The hardware."

"In order to activate, the device first ensures that the client is in stage four sleep, located at home, in their own bed. The wristband contracts, and two injections take place from beneath the device casing, in rapid succession—one, a powerful general anesthetic and sedative—and the second, our proprietary Nightshade solution."

The saleswoman leaned in toward John and Diane.

"To be perfectly clear, this is referred to as an LD100, or lethal dose 100%—it produces lethal cardiac arrest, without fail. The entire process is completed within seconds, entirely pain-free ... you're at peace before you can open your eyes."

"... So, what are the—uh, chances?" John asked.

"The exact activation rate isn't something we disclose—but, what I can tell you, is we've found ideal product efficacy to be around one per one thousand units—over the course of a year," the saleswoman said. "And, if you choose, we can arrange for your devices to be in sync."

"Meaning—we'd go at the same time?" Diane asked.

"Precisely," the saleswoman said.

"And ... *if* that happens, what happens after?"

"Your devices will be registered with local law enforcement, your primary care physicians, and the hospital of your choosing—which will have a do-not-resuscitate order on file ... they will all be notified automatically upon activation. The device will also sound an audible alert for first responders, and display a text message of your choosing. Our processing department will reach out to your emergency contacts."

All three of them took a deep breath.

"I understand this is a big decision," the saleswoman said. "Take as much—"

"We're in," John and Diane said.

"Wonderful!" The saleswoman smiled, and began to review their information. "You're both over 40 years old—"

"Just had my 40th, actually," John joked.

"No children expected and none under 21, so no problems there. No prescriptions or medical concerns that would pose an issue. We'll work with your health insurers to amend your policies—that's something we do every day, no cost to you. In fact, you may even see a reduction in your health insurance premiums."

The saleswoman looked at John and Diane.

"I believe you're ideal candidates," she said, and handed them each a folder.

"Inside is a checklist of the documents and signatures we require—our standard terms and conditions, consent forms and legal waivers, that sort of thing—you can complete these at home, take as much time as you need. I've logged an approval into the system which will remain good for 90 days, subject to any changes in your health. Once the paperwork is in order, all that's left is to process payment and schedule the setup and consultation at your home—I'll be present for that entire process. My card is stapled, please call my direct line with questions, at any time."

* * *

"I'm not sure I'll sleep a wink," Diane said.

"Come on now, a night the same as any other," John said.

They spent the evening talking ... laughing. It had been decades since they had spent an entire evening just doing that. Diane sat on the living room floor in a spot she never sat, and finished a book that she had started months ago. John lay beside her with his head resting on her hip, watching the blades on the ceiling fan spin—he hadn't bothered to turn on the game. They opened a bottle of wine that had been aging in the cellar, and sat together until it was quite late.

"How does a walk sound tomorrow?" John asked, his eyes shut now.

"A morning walk sounds lovely," Diane said, closing her book. "Coffee first?"

"Coffee first," John agreed.

"Let's get to bed then, dear—hold me close?" she said.

"There's nothing I'd rather do," John said, taking her hand in his.

* * *

John watched the daylight cast abstract shadows along the bedroom walls, savoring the warmth beneath the blankets, and the kiss of the cool air moving across his face above them. He tasted the sweetness of last night's wine, still lingering in the corners of his lips. He listened to something four-legged skitter atop the roof, and to distant traffic that budged off to somewhere that didn't matter.

The coffee began to drip and fill the house with invitation.

John breathed the aroma in and held it until he no longer could—

"Looks like we made it," he said, to no immediate answer.