**Dead Babies**

Lawrence Watt-Evans

Allie’s baby was coming, wasn’t any doubt of it as her water had broke, so I put her in the truck and jumped in myself. My hands was trembling so hard I could hardly turn the key, but I got it started somehow and backed it out the driveway so as not to take the time to turn it around, and I clipped one of the posts at the end of the driveway but I didn’t stop. I got us out on the road and put ’er in first and tore across the ford so fast the water was spraying twenty feet on each side.

“Bill, take it easy,” Allie said as I upshifted. “Won’t do us no good to hurry if you put us in a ditch somewheres.”

I saw that she was right, so I tried to slow down and watch the road as we passed Miller’s Grocery and turned onto the pavement, but every so often she’d breathe funny, give a little gasp or something, and every time she did that I’d look over at her and my foot would just tromp down a bit more on the gas.

About halfway to town I remembered that I should’ve called the doctor and told him to meet us at the hospital in Lexington, but I wan’t about to go back to do that, and there weren’t exactly a lot of pay phones on Becket’s Fork Road, so I figured I’d stop by Doc Everett’s house in Dawsonville and tell him in person, as it wasn’t more than a mile or two out of our way.

But by the time we hit the blinker at the south end of Main Street in Dawsonville Allie was gasping and sort of heaving up from the seat every minute or so, and I wasn’t any too sure we were going to make it to the hospital anyways — that was a good twenty-five miles yet, and the interstate didn’t cover but half of it. So when we stopped in front of the Everetts’ house I went around to her side and got her down out of the truck and I walked her up to the door of the house and rung the bell.

A woman answered, and I asked her where the doc was, and she said, “Why, he’s still in bed.”

It was gone seven by then, but some folks do sleep in late, so I didn’t wonder too much, I just asked, polite as I could, “Could you wake him, please? I think it’s an emergency.”

“Of course,” she said. “Wait right here.”

And she closed the door.

Allie sat down right there on the porch, gasping.

A moment later the door opened again, and the woman said, “You just come right on in.” She showed us in and turned us sharp right in the foyer there, into a smallish room like an old-fashioned parlor, and sat us down on a fancy couch, then went to fetch the doctor. We sat there, and I noticed this weird nasty smell, and I hoped it was from the house, all the medicines and stuff, and not from something wrong with the baby.

A minute later Doc Everett came in in his bathrobe with his doctor’s bag. He took one look at Allie and shooed the woman and me out and closed the door behind us.

So there we were in the foyer, and I looked around and saw a telephone on a little table and a big fancy mirror on the wall, but there wasn’t nowhere to sit except maybe the stairs. There was a big sliding door across from that little parlor, and I sort of looked at it hopefully, I guess, because the woman looked at it, too, and said, “We can’t go in there, I’m afraid; the baby’s asleep and I don’t want to wake him.”

Well, right then I wouldn’t have minded playing with a baby, what with our own about to be born by the look of it, but I didn’t want to be rude, and besides, the woman seemed a little on edge, sorta, so I didn’t say that. I said, “How old is he, Mrs. Everett?”

“Oh, it’s Miss Everett,” she said, all flustered. “Laura Everett. I’m Doctor Everett’s sister.”

“Bill Sellers,” I said, holding out a hand. I figured it might not be a real good idea to inquire as to just whose baby it was that was sleeping, if Miss Everett weren’t married, and besides, there was something about her made me think I didn’t want to have too much to do with her, so after we shook I just leaned against the wall a little and waited.

I waited for what seemed like hours. We didn’t talk; Miss Everett seemed sort of caught up in herself, the way some people get, and not much interested in me, and I didn’t see any call to bother her.

That nasty smell was still there, so I knew it was the house. I wondered what it was, but I didn’t ask; I figured it wouldn’t be polite to mention it.

I could hear Doc Everett’s voice from the parlor, too low to make out the words, and sometimes I could hear Allie answering him, or making sounds. I waited for the sound of the baby crying.

It didn’t come. Instead, finally, I heard Allie scream.

I jumped up off that wall, and took a look at Miss Everett, but she wan’t doing a thing, she was just standing there.

I knocked on the door. “What’s going on in there?” I called.

I could hear Allie crying, and I opened the door without waiting for any by your leave.

Allie was sitting on the couch with her dress all rucked up, and there were bloody towels piled on the floor, and... and other things. Before I got a good look Allie wailed, “The baby’s dead! Bill, our baby’s dead!”

“I’m afraid so,” Doc Everett said. “Listen, I really think we had better get your wife to the hospital; would you tell my sister to call an ambulance?”

I sort of froze for a moment, trying to take it in, but then I turned and went back out to the foyer, and there was Miss Everett dialing the phone.

“I heard what he said,” she told me.

And then it was just waiting, and trying to comfort Allie and not to look at the poor little dead thing there on the towels, until the ambulance came. I rode in the back with Allie, and Doc Everett followed in his car.

They kept Allie for observation, they called it, and sent her home with me the next morning.

Somewhere in there, I don’t remember when, I asked Doc Everett what had happened, and he told me that the baby had got tangled in the cord and strangled while it was being born, that it happens sometimes and there wasn’t anything he could do, it was too late by the time he saw what was happening.

It wasn’t until after I brought Allie home that she asked what had happened to the baby’s body, and I realized I didn’t know.

Wasn’t an easy question to ask anyone, neither.

Finally, though, I called Doc Everett, and he told me he’d sent the body to Tuchman’s Funeral Home, seeing as that’s the only one in town and he didn’t figure we’d be wanting to go to Lexington for it.

Allie wanted to see it, before she made any plans for the burying, so I called up Tuchman’s and asked if that’d be possible, and Henry Tuchman, on the other end of the line, sorta cleared his throat and said how it would be possible, all right, but he sure wouldn’t advise it, as the baby didn’t look too good, what with being strangled.

I’d gotten a look at it back at Doc Everett’s place, and I hadn’t thought it looked so bad as all that, but I told Allie what he’d said, and she broke out crying again, and I don’t know what I told Henry but I got off the phone and tried to comfort her, which didn’t do either of us a damn bit of good.

That afternoon Henry called back, and asked if we’d want to make the funeral arrangements or whether he should just take care of it, as he figured we were pretty broke up. Allie overheard, and she said we’d be right there to look at the baby and make the plans.

That didn’t sound good to me, but she wan’t taking any argument on it, so off we went.

At the funeral home, there was Henry Tuchman with his mournin’ face on, which made him look more like a pompous asshole of a salesman than like anything decent, and he showed us to a room where this little coffin was set up on a table that Henry called a bier, and there were a few flowers around it.

I asked Henry, “Who picked it?” ’Cause I’d always heard that funeral homes are practically like auto showrooms, with a dozen different models of coffins and all that shit.

“Doc Everett chose it; he’s volunteered to cover some of the costs for you, seein’ as he knows the two of you han’t got all that much set aside.”

Now, I knew I ought to be grateful at that, but I wan’t, as it seemed damn pushy to have put up that money and picked out that box without asking us first. I was trying to think of something to say about it that wouldn’t sound too bad when Allie said, “Open it.”

Henry blinked at us and said, like some goddamn Englishman on TV, “I beg your pardon?”

“Open the box, Henry,” I said. “We want to see our baby.”

Henry got all upset at that. “You really don’t want to, Bill,” he said.

“The hell we don’t.”

“The coffin has been sealed,” he said.

“That’s bullshit. Unseal it.”

“I can’t.”

I was beginning to lose my temper. I’d been standing around feeling helpless while other people did everything, at the doc’s house and the hospital and all, and it wan’t goin’ down well.

“Henry,” I said, “you told me on the phone this mornin’ that we could see our baby, and now we want to see our damn baby.”

“If you insist,” Henry said, “I can have the coffin unsealed for a private viewing. If you could come back in an hour?”

I’d had enough. “Open the damn thing now, Henry,” I said.

“I can’t, Bill,” he said. “Honest.”

I might’ve cooled down at that, ’cause he looked as if he meant it, but Allie wasn’t having it.

’Bout two years back, after that idiot Jim Bryce raped the Miller girl down on Greenman’s Creek, Allie got worried about crazies, so she got herself a .38 revolver and I showed her how to use it, and after that she’d carry it in her purse as a regular thing. I hadn’t given it a thought in months — until she pulled it out and stuck the barrel under Henry Tuchman’s nose.

“I am not leaving this room,” she said, “until I see my baby. If you don’t open that coffin right now, Bill’s gonna get a wrecking bar from the truck and bust it to flinders.”

Henry just sort of stared, and wan’t saying anything sensible, and I figured maybe I could save us all some trouble. I didn’t know just what all this talk of “sealing” was, so I went and took a look and it looked to me like that coffin just would open right up if you pushed the latch.

So I did, and it did.

Son of a bitch was empty.

I sort of stared at it for a moment, trying to figure it out, and I was still doing that when Allie came up beside me and saw it was empty and pointed the gun at Henry again and shrieked, “Where is she?”

Henry threw his hands in the air like Allie was trying to rob him. “I don’t know,” he said, “I swear I don’t! Doc Everett never brought her, told me to fake it, same as he does any time a baby dies.”

I stared at him and said, “And you do it?”

“He pays me,” Henry said. “Pays good.”

“Jesus God, Henry,” I said, “you mean Doc Everett’s been stealing dead babies?”

Henry nodded. “Been doin’ it for years.”

“What for?” I asked.

Henry shrugged and started to say he didn’t know, but he didn’t have the words out when Allie asked, “Did he kill my baby? So he could take her?”

Henry blinked at her like a startled owl.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I never thought about it.”

I hadn’t thought about it either, never would have thought of it, but once Allie asked that I saw how it might be, the doc wanting dead babies for God knows what, and there’s our baby right in his own house, no one around to see if he just loops the cord over and tugs...

I felt sick.

“Come on,” I told Allie, “we’re gonna go see the sheriff.”

“No, we aren’t,” she said.

“Why the hell not?” I wanted to know. “Stealing dead babies is a crime!”

“Of course it is,” she said, “but who do you think the sheriff’s gonna believe, a nineteen-year-old farm kid and his hysterical wife, or the doctor who’s been lookin’ after this town for the past twenty years?”

I could see how she had a point, but I wan’t too sure it was that important — there’d be evidence, wouldn’t there?

“So what do you want to do about it?” I asked.

“We’re going to Doc Everett’s house, and we’re going to get our baby back,” she said. “And Henry, I swear to God, if you call to warn him we’re coming, I’m going to shoot you dead if it’s the last thing I ever do.”

I was beginning to regret ever teaching Allie how to shoot, about then, but it was done, and she was the one with the gun, and I hadn’t even left my .22 in the pick-up’s gun rack.

“Nobody’s gonna do any shooting,” I said. “We’ll get this straightened out. Come on.”

She headed for the door, and I paused just long enough to tell Henry, “All the same, don’t you call that son of a bitch.”

I drove, and Allie sat there with the .38 in her lap. I wished she’d put it away, but she didn’t and I wan’t about to argue with her. We’d been married long enough that I knew better than to mess with her when she was in a mood like that.

The whole way down Main Street I was thinking about what Doc Everett might want with dead babies. Did he do some sort of experiments on them? Did he sell ’em for parts? I’d heard there was cosmetics made out of unborn babies; maybe newborns were close enough.

It made me feel sick again, thinking about it.

It was getting on to five o’clock when we pulled up in front of the Everett house, but I saw there wasn’t a car in the driveway.

“He’s not home yet,” I said, pointing.

“Then we wait,” Allie said.

I was almost ready to argue about it when I heard a car coming, slow, and I looked up and there was Doc Everett’s blue Olds coming down Main Street.

The doc saw us there and waved, and when he pulled into the driveway he got out and came over toward us. Allie kept the gun down out of sight, and we tried to look like nothing was troubling us.

Then when he was about to lean in the window, when he was saying, “What can I do for you folks?” Allie stuck the gun in his face.

“You can give me back my baby, you bastard,” she said.

He got this astonished look on his face and took a step back. “Your baby’s dead, Mrs. Sellers,” he said. He turned to me. “You tell her, Bill.”

“We know the baby’s dead, Doc,” I said, “but we want the body.”

“Well, it’s at Tuchman’s Funeral Home...”

“No, t’ain’t,” Allie said, pulling back the hammer on the revolver. “You kept her. And if you don’t start telling us why, I might just think you killed her.”

Doc Everett threw up his hands — guess that’s something everyone’s picked up from TV or something. “I didn’t kill her!” he said.

“Then why’d you take the body?”

“For my sister!”

Allie lowered the gun a little. “What?” she said. She sounded mighty puzzled, which was about how I felt.

Doc Everett took that as a good sign, that she’d lowered the gun, though to me all it meant was she was pointing at his gut instead of between his eyes and I wan’t sure I wouldn’t rather have it over quick than get gut-shot, but he lowered his hands a bit, too. “For my sister,” he said.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked. “What the hell would your sister want with our baby? She’s got her own, don’t she? And alive?”

Allie threw me a surprised glance at that, and the doc shook his head. “No,” he said. “She don’t. Doesn’t.”

“Bill, Miss Everett ain’t married,” Allie said, “and I never heard tell she had a baby.”

I was beginning to wonder if I was going crazy. This was all so weird. “She said she did,” I insisted.

Doc Everett nodded. “She thinks she does,” he said. “Laura... Laura’s not right.”

“First I’ve heard of it,” Allie said.

“Well, it’s true,” Doc said. “Not for five years. Not since the baby died.”

“So there was a baby?” I asked.

He nodded.

“There was?” Allie was pretty startled by that. She’d been keeping up on the gossip around Dawsonville since she was thirteen, but I guess she’d never heard this one.

“Stillborn,” Doc said. “Never had a chance. Probably just as well. But Laura couldn’t take it.”

I glanced at Allie, but if she thought Doc was saying anything about her, she didn’t pay any mind to it.

“We’d managed to keep it all quiet — she never went out much, and she carried small, and I performed the delivery right here at home, so no one ever knew,” Doc explained. “When he was born dead, I figured it was a blessing, and I buried him in the back yard and thought that was an end to it.”

“It wasn’t?”

He shook his head. “Laura dug him up,” he said.

Allie’s mouth came open at that, and the gun drooped a bit further.

“She brought the body back in the house and treated it like a live baby, and I didn’t know how to make her stop,” Doc went on. “I tried to talk sense to her, but she wouldn’t listen, and if I tried to take it away she’d throw a screaming fit until I gave it back.”

“Couldn’t... didn’t anyone else know?” I asked. “Couldn’t you take her to a psychiatrist or something?”

“Didn’t dare,” he said. “If it came out that there’d been a baby and I’d kept it quiet, and who the father was...”

“Who was the father?”

He looked startled, as if he thought we’d figured that out already. “I was,” he said.

Maybe I had figured it out, because I wan’t really surprised, but Allie was.

“Your sister?” she said.

“Two lonely people alone in the house together,” Doc said. “Yes, my sister.”

“What’s this got to do with our baby?” I demanded.

“Well, hell, son, dead bodies don’t keep,” he said. “When the baby got too far gone, Laura said it was sick and told me to make it better — I was a doctor, couldn’t I fix it up? Nagged at me day and night, and ’bout then Mrs. Kelliher’s little Josie died — crib death, what they’re calling SIDS now. So I got an idea and I talked to Henry Tuchman and switched ours for Josie Kelliher. Been doing it ever since.” He shrugged. “After all, one dead baby’s a lot like another.”

“So... but then why isn’t there another one in our girl’s coffin?”

The doc grimaced. “Last one was too far gone,” he said. “It’s buried out back. Told Laura it was sleeping, managed to keep her away for three days — don’t know what I’d have done if you poor folks hadn’t come along.”

“You killed my baby,” Allie said, and the gun came up again. “You killed her so you could give her to your sister.”

“No, Mrs. Sellers,” he said, “I swear I didn’t. I’d never do that. I took an oath, and I meant it.”

The gun wavered some.

“Come on,” I said, getting out of the truck. “We’re getting our daughter back. I feel sorry for your sister, Doc, but that’s our baby’s body, and we’re taking it.”

“Right,” Allie said, opening her own door.

Together, we marched up the porch steps, right past Doc Everett, and on into the house — front door wasn’t locked, not in Dawsonville.

The doc ran after us, shouting, “No, wait! Wait! I didn’t tell you... you can’t... let me explain!”

I reckoned we’d heard enough; we didn’t stop, marched right into the house. I pointed to the big sliding door. “In there,” I said.

Allie tried to open it, but it wouldn’t move.

“It’s locked,” she said.

I turned to Doc Everett. “Open it,” I said.

“No,” he said. “Listen, you can’t just barge in here. I’ll give you back your baby, I’ll give Laura a doll or something, but don’t...”

“Open it, or we’ll shoot the fucking lock off!” I shouted.

He hesitated, and Allie took the revolver two-handed and pointed it, but then the door opened by itself, and there was Miss Everett, asking, “What’s all the noise? You’re disturbing the baby!”

She had a bundle in her arms, wrapped up in a white-and-pink baby blanket. It wasn’t moving, didn’t make a sound.

Allie started to grab for it, then realized she still had the gun in her hand, and got confused.

“Miss Everett,” I said, “could we see him? Just for a moment?” I held out my arms.

She looked at me strangely, then smiled, and gave me the bundle.

It was cold and dead, like a bundle of laundry, but I took a look under a flap of blanket.

It was our baby, all right.

“There,” Doc said, “you’ve got what you want. Take it out for some air.”

I nodded. I thought that was the end of it.

Then I looked in through the sliding door, into the old drawing room, and saw them, lined up on shelves, on the mantelpiece, on the couch, dried-out little things, skin stretched tight over bone, a dozen or more, all mummified.

“Oh, my God,” I said.

Allie screamed.

And Doc Everett, standing in the front door, seemed to slump down into himself.

“Laura always wanted a big family,” he said.

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