

Social Medicine

by Christopher Ripley

The first-time father was an imp of a man, wiry looking, diminished, with thinning hair and a thin beard to match. A geek, Mr. Davison probably seemed harmless from a distance. But whatever he lacked in more traditional qualities—a boyish grin, solid looking build, an overall strapping handsomeness—he made up for in a personality laced with entitlement. His gift to the world was the gift of himself. People were name tags to Mr. Davison; they were beneath him.

He yelled “action” through a hospital mask. Dr. Beck, the OBGYN, formed a fist. He wanted to throw it through Mr. Davison's mask, which was dainty and made Mr. Davison look like a woman. From a sterile, black-walled operating room adjacent to the flowery soft labor and delivery wing, Mr. Davison was “directing” the live birth of his first born child, Arlee. Davison stood near the operating room door waving a free hand, gesturing the doctor to move it along.

A few loose teeth, Beck muttered. Reaching for the scalpel, he turned for the patient. “Everyone ready?” he said, looking around his operating room with its dark walls and cold floors. His team nodded. “Is the live feed ready? How many are online?”

“We're rolling, Doc,” Mr. Davison said. His mask fluttered when he spoke, limp over his face like a loose Kleenex. Thick, black glasses kept the mask from flying off his face. “Over a thousand people online and tuned in,” Davison said. The soon-to-be dad surveyed monitors, pecked at keyboards, and clicked mouses from his fortress of gadgets.

“Fantastic,” Beck said, to no one. He regarded the nerd across the room standing behind a command center of toys. Unaware of his hands again, he clenched a fist around the shaft of the scalpel. Beck didn't like nerds, he never had. The pop of knuckles brought his attention back.

The patient was anxious. Mrs. Davison shifted her gaze between the doctor, her husband, and camera one—giving most of the sparkle in her eye to camera one. The C-section was elective.

"I'm not putting up with unknowns," she'd said. "It's too important."

Her nails were done Friday and her hair done early Saturday morning before the webcast, before going under the knife. She looked stunning. Dr. Beck thought so, too. He'd always considered her attractive, physically, though she put a lot of unnecessary effort into her looks. Her body bore the pregnancy exceptionally well, so far. He thought it a shame to cut this woman open, not when all her parts were good to go.

Still in the womb, Arlee Davison was famous before she was even born. She was a Facebook baby. Comments flooded in under the her mother's status update, which read: "Vrooom! Vrooom! Friends: please join us as we welcome Arlee Davison into our lives. Birth is scheduled for 11:00 AM Saturday. Don't be late!" 173 people liked it. Voyeuers and Internet strangers friended Mrs. Davison just to watch. She accepted the requests on the spot, flattered.

Beck was dismayed by the openness of it all, the utter lack of privacy. Times had changed. Mrs. Davison said she didn't want to miss anything, that this was her big moment. She was the lead actress in her own little corner of the Internet, on her own reality TV show. She'd feasted on the attention heaved upon her during pregnancy. For nine months—first, second, and third trimesters—her Facebook profile featured ultrasound pictures, nursery color swatches, baby clothes, teddy bears, themes, breast milk pumps, carpet, crib and changing table placement, baby shower idea pictures, actual baby shower picture pictures, stroller reviews, car seat reviews, blankets, diapers, binky brands, bottles, books, and tens of dozens of bathroom mirror self portraits of her bump-to-basketball sized tummy, taken with and immediately uploaded with her BlackBerry. Comments and likes flooded in with each post. Her Facebook profile was bursting with persistent prenatal posturing. She adored the adoration. And now Mrs.

Davison's pregnancy was almost over. This was her big, overblown, look-at-me-everyone, mind boggling finish!

Beck maintained that people generally gave the Davisons whatever they wanted. They were well-educated, well-liked. Worse, well connected. They asked, and they got. It was a creed. Downstairs in legal, heads spun about how this whole production was even possible. But there it was. Medicine meets social media. A new kind of social medicine was the future, and the future was now.

"Are you ready over there, honey?" Mrs. Davison peeped, unsure. She probed for her mate beyond the hot, bright surgical lights. "Honey?" Her calls went unanswered.

Mr. Davison sat pouting on a stool, consumed. He was irked by the surgical lighting.

"This is shit," he said, "it's too harsh." His lack of skill was suspended in the spotlight—exposed under the glare like his wife's protuberant belly. As a filmmaker he was clueless, an amateur. But technology made him an expert, much like blogs made writers out of housewives.

The surgeon's ire grew. Dr. Beck had ordered Davison to stand clear ahead of time. Now, his presence overtook the room. That morning, Beck was pissed when he spotted the Davison's minivan, abandoned and blocking the emergency room entrance. The tailgate door was flung open, hazard lights flashing like an ambulance. Outraged, Beck traipsed toward the entrance. Davison intercepted him.

"Dr. Beck, good timing," he said. "Hey, grab those two laptop bags, the big black duffle bag, and that red backpack in the back seat. You know where they're going, right?" Davison slapped the doctor's back. Incredulous, Beck stood there. Should he hold out a hand for a tip?

"Ya know, Mr. Davison, you shouldn't park here."

"Shit, I know it now." Davison jerked a thumb over his shoulder, "they're giving me hell about it inside."

Beck waived his finger around at the air, at the walls, the doors, ceiling. "NO PARKING; the signs? See?" What the hell was the point? He wrestled the gear from the minivan and waited for Davison to pull away. Davison made off for the parking lot, frantic, fast but kind of misguided like a rabbit. Beck plopped the bags down on the walkway as soon as the minivan lurched out of sight. The muffled clunk of gear hitting pavement creased a rare smile on the doctor's stony face. He went inside almost cheerful.

His good mood wouldn't last. Beck soured again before the procedure, where he and Davison got along like cold war diplomats. Each were adamant about how things would go. Davison stalked the physician around the room asking about camera angles, where could he stand, why was the Internet so slow, could he ask Beck questions during the procedure, how long would it take, where did Beck go to medical school. Beck cut him off, "Stay the hell out of my way, Mr. Davison, it's an operating room for Chrissake."

Beck, the medical staff, Mrs. Davison, and over a thousand Facebookers online waited for "The Director" now, his head buried in the glow of a laptop screen.

"Honey? We're ready over here," Ms. Davison said again. She waited. They all waited. "He can get so focused sometimes." She loved the man, obtuse as he was. His firstborn child was poised to enter the world on a blood red tide, and Davison was locked in the embrace of the shiny blue masthead on Facebook, watching the live feed.

"This goddamn light is killing the mood," Mr. Davison groaned, he was absorbed. "Where's the magic?" He said it felt like a fucking tire store in here, and that all of them looked like glorified mechanics in scrubs.

Beck had had it. He wanted to take a tire iron to Davison's shiny toys, and when he was through with them, go smack some rubber-gloved sense into the father-to-be, the little shit.

"You're killing my patience, Davison."

“Beck, you're lucky we picked you for the catch,” Davison said. “Just do your part and watch all the fertile Facebook mothers line up for prenatal care.”

“Shutting you down, Davison.”

Here was a man suffering from acute unawareness. No oaths would be broken, not in Beck's mind, even if he took to beating the shit out of the man. The hospital and state medical board might see differently, sure. He would plead temporary insanity and hope for the best.

Beck calmly removed his hospital mask and cap and walked into the camera shot, filling the frame with the sky blue tint of his surgical scrub. “You missed something here today,” Beck said. The surgeon hung a right hook squarely into Mr. Davison's jaw, framed behind the dainty hospital mask. Davison hit the floor, his nerd glasses skidding across the black tile. Viewers could only guess what had happened because it happened off screen.

Beck walked out the door—cool and confident, without a damn care in the whole world. The medical team scrambled out after him.

Chat windows opened in rapid succession like machine gun pops. Mrs. Davison waited there alone, lit-up by the surgical lights and prepped for her C-section, a single camera trained on her sour face, streaming live on Facebook.

