

Drive

by [Jack Ravenwood](#) (November 2018)



Jimmy Barnes—there but for the grace of God no. 2, Ben Quilty, 2009

Ernest Mueller was an osteopath with a little office near County Stadium. He opened his practice in '58, back when the Milwaukee Braves were the best damn team in baseball, so good that a boy who had a ticket to opening day signed by his father could show it to the principal and take the day off school with it.

A couple guys from the team used to come in sometimes when they had problems—a bad back, bum knee, things like that. Doctor Mueller would feel around for what was out of place, and when he found it, he'd pop it back in, and sometimes the pain would just evaporate instantly, like it was

only a gas bubble that was stuck in there, just waiting to be let out.

One time the Braves' star pitcher Warren Spahn came into the office with a stiff shoulder. He'd heard about Mueller from one of the batting coaches, who said he was a miracle worker. Doc did his mojo, and Warren went back to work, but not before getting a picture taken with Mueller standing in the office. He swung that famous left arm around Doc's shoulders and gave a big grin as the secretary took the photo.

That picture hung on the office wall, on a nail stuck into the wood paneling that covered the brick underneath. There were other photos as well, of Doc with other patients, but that was the only celebrity. The way Doc told the story, that was the day Spahn threw his second no-hitter in '61, and it wouldn't have happened if he hadn't fixed that frozen shoulder for him. Truth was, though, he wasn't really sure if they happened on the same day or not.

Most of his patients over the years were working men from Allis-Chalmers and other factories in town. They'd throw their back out at work, or get hurt some other way, and Doc would fix them up. Most of the time he would just do the osteopathic manipulation that he was trained in, which he preferred to medication, even though he was licensed to prescribe anything he wanted. He'd been treated by an osteopath himself when he was a boy, for a slight spinal deformity, and it had helped him a lot. That was his inspiration for going into medicine—to help people the way he'd been helped.

His practice started out good. He built up a steady base of patients, from the neighborhood, from friends and family, and all throughout the early 60s he was a happy man; young, with a successful business and a good reputation in the community. The business grew every year.

Doc Mueller was a quiet man who mostly kept to himself, but because of the nature of his work, he knew a lot of people, and most seemed to like him. When he walked to the grocery store or to the bar, it wasn't uncommon to run into a patient.

"Hey Doc!" somebody'd yell from across the street.

"Hello Marvin!"

"The back feels great! I even played catch with my boy yesterday, you believe that?"

"Glad to hear it Marvin. You have a nice night!"

"You too, Doc."

These little exchanges gave him a good feeling, made him feel validated, connected, useful. Such a moment was really all the human contact he needed in a day—the rest of it he could spend alone and still feel perfectly content.

The building that his office was in was a little two-story mixed use, with a two-bedroom apartment on the second floor. In '62 he arranged a loan with the bank to buy it, and moved in upstairs. In his mind was a plan: one of these days he'd get married. The second bedroom would change from his office to the baby's room when they had their first. Then, after the business grew even more, the family would move out to a big house in the country. They'd rent out the upstairs, and Mueller would drive in to work every day.

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Ernie Mueller had loved baseball since before he could remember. His father would take him to minor league games at Borchert Field when he was still a baby. In '53 the Braves moved from Boston to Milwaukee, and the city built County Stadium for them. Opening day, Mueller and his old man were there to cheer on the new team against the Cardinals. The

game went into overtime, but in the 10th inning Bill Bruton knocked one out of the park and won the game. The Cardinals' right fielder almost caught it—it actually bounced off his glove, it was that close—but over the fence it went. At first the umpire called it a ground-rule double, but the Braves' manager got in his face and somehow convinced him to change his call. Bruton was waved across home plate, and the whole stadium went nuts. It was Milwaukee's first major league home game, and they won. Ernie and pop were overjoyed, and had a beer together afterwards to celebrate.

The old man was already sick then, and died a few years later. But Ernie was always glad that they were able to go to that game together. It was one of his most cherished memories.

The Braves moved to Atlanta in '66. That was the year everything started to go to shit. County Stadium stood empty and alone, like the Roman Coliseum—disused, a ghost of a former glory. Then, to add insult to injury, they started letting the Chicago White Sox play there, which was like Rome giving the Coliseum to the Carthaginians. Seemingly overnight, everything changed. The war in Vietnam escalated, and more and more boys from town were drafted and shipped out to fight and die. Some of them Mueller knew, usually sons of patients. There were protests, and Beatles, and hippies, and in '67 there were race riots and a citywide curfew.

Mueller watched it all with an air of incomprehension. There was no way to make sense of it, because nothing like it had ever happened before, at least not that he knew. By the end of the decade, everything had changed—music fashion, hairstyles, movies, politics, language, even men and women.

In 1970 the city got a new baseball team when Bud Selig bought the Seattle Pilots and transformed them into the Milwaukee Brewers. Mueller thought they were ridiculous. The

new players, with their long hair and sideburns sticking out from under their caps, looked like clowns who'd be more at home juggling the balls and bats than using them to play a real game. How could we go from Eddie Matthews and Hank Aaron to *this*, and in less than ten years?

The economy stagnated, and Mueller's practice along with it. He had to cut corners just to stay afloat. When the war finally ended in '75, he thought maybe things would settle down and go back the way they were before. The promise he'd felt some ten years before had been delayed, but there was still hope. It wasn't too late.

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There were always a few patients with serious injuries or problems that just didn't respond to anything except painkillers. Doctor Mueller's first was a roofer named Steve, who'd fallen off an A-frame in the winter of '59. He suffered numerous fractured vertebrae and came close to being completely paralyzed, but he got lucky—if you can call partial disability and constant pain 'luck.' Mueller tried everything he knew but nothing worked, so finally he gave him a Demerol injection one day when the pain was even worse than usual. It worked. He gave the man a referral to another doctor, who would likely give him more shots or maybe a regular prescription for Eukodal or something similar. Mueller could have given him the prescription himself, but he didn't want to.

There were other patients like that over the years, but only ever a few, maybe two or three in a year. Mueller knew they had no other option besides simply being stoic about the pain, and he could hardly expect that of them. Still, he thought to himself, if it was him, he would try, try his damndest to take it. Whenever he had to give a patient drugs, he always saw how their eyes went dim. They were more relaxed, sure, but it seemed like something inside of them got turned

off, or killed. Mueller saw it, and it unnerved him.

Then sometime during the 70s, when the money was tight because of the recession, he stopped giving referrals to these people and just wrote the prescriptions himself. The patients would come back for refills, and he'd write another prescription and get a few bucks for the office visit. It was just extra cash to pay the bills. Plus, he reasoned, if he didn't do it some other doc would, and most importantly, these were legit patients with real problems.

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The whole 1970s passed by in a haze. It felt like nothing was moving, even though time kept passing as usual. It was a decade-long hangover from the chaos of the late 60s. Mueller made enough money to get by, but the business never grew the way he'd hoped it would. In his spare time, sometimes he went to see the Brewers play. But he just couldn't muster the same enthusiasm for them. When he told this to friends and patients, they said he was just getting old. But it wasn't that—something else had changed, and not just for himself, he thought. Slowly, he stopped going to ball games and started going to the bar or the cinema instead.

But in 1982 the Brewers went to the World Series. It was the first time Milwaukee had been in the Series since '57 and '58. Mueller had gone to a few of those games back then—in '57 he was finishing medical school and didn't have any time, but in '58, the same year he opened his practice just a mile down the road from the stadium, he went to every home game. In '57, the Braves won. In '58, they made it there again to defend their crown, but they lost to Mickey Mantle and the Yankees.

The '82 Brewers were an all-star team. Not as good as the old Braves lineup, but when you looked at Robin Yount, Paul Molitor, Gorman Thomas and Rollie Fingers, you had to

give credit where it was due. Even though Mueller hadn't been to a game in years, he couldn't help but feel excited. The Brewers were up against the Cardinals, just like that first game in '53.

The first game was away in St. Louis. Mike Caldwell, a left-hander like Warren Spahn, pitched a complete shutout. The Brewers destroyed the Cardinals 10-0. Mueller watched the game in a bar on Greenfield Avenue, along with a large crowd of other fans. The cheers and the toasts and the victory celebration gave him a feeling he hadn't felt in a long time.

Game 2 was also away, and the team played well, but lost by only one run. No matter, though. The next three games were at home, and Mueller was convinced that the Brewers would win them all. He bought tickets for every game.

Game 3 was at County, and the crowd was massive. The Brewers should have won, but goddamn Willie McGee played like Willie Mays that day, knocking two out of the park and robbing Gorman Thomas of a home run in the 9th.

Game 4, however, was the payback. The Cardinals were ahead 5-1 at the beginning of the 7th inning. But by the end of the inning, they were losing 7-5, and so it stayed for the rest of the game.

Game 5, the third to be played at County, was another solid victory for Milwaukee. The Brewers dominated from the beginning. St. Louis tied the score in the 3rd inning, but the Brewers took the lead again in the 5th and never lost it. Mueller was so happy that the next day he treated all of his patients for free. Just one more game and it would be total victory, just like in '57.

But Game 6 was back on the Cardinals' home turf, and they got their revenge for Game 1. From the beginning, there were bad omens, with a rain delay of over two hours. After that, it was a slaughter. Inning after inning of multiple

runs, and the Brewers getting only one measly run in the 9th—as if it even mattered next to the Cardinals' 13.

There was still one more game. But somehow, by that time, Mueller already knew what would happen. It seemed predestined—part of the curse that had befallen the city since the Braves left.

On that night of the last game, after they lost, Mueller went out for a drink at a little jazz club on the south side. He'd been a rock n' roller in his youth, but ever since the 60s he'd found that he couldn't stomach anything except jazz anymore. He sat at the bar and drank a few Manhattans, thinking to himself in silence. The crowd was thin and the mood was somber, most of the city sulking from the Brewers' defeat. After a couple hours he left and started the drive home.

On the way he collided with another car. Neither he nor the other driver were seriously hurt, but both cars were banged up pretty bad. He wasn't drunk, he knew perfectly well that he could drive home in his condition. But the cops showed up, and the officer ended up giving both drivers DUIs and having both cars impounded. Mueller spent the night in the drunk tank. The next morning he woke up feeling humiliated, with a hangover and a bad case of whiplash.

He had treated dozens of whiplash patients in his clinic. He knew exactly where trigger points tended to form on the trapezius and the spinal muscles, and how the cervical vertebrae should be adjusted. He could usually control the pain with just the trigger points, and then he would prescribe some exercises to facilitate the body's natural healing. But now he was the patient, and he couldn't very well reach around and do work on his own back. Nor did he have good relationships with other doctors in the city, most of whom he thought weren't any good anyway.

So he did nothing, not even the exercises he would have prescribed to any other patient with his injury. When he went to court for his DUI a month and a half later, the pain was still there. Eventually, it subsided somewhat—or he just got used to it, he wasn't sure which—but it never went away completely. One day when the pain seemed especially bad, he took a sample box of Demerol out of the cabinet at the office, and took one. His pain lessened, and he relaxed. A burden seemed to lift from his chest, and his spirit felt lighter, almost like happiness. Sonofabitch, he thought, this stuff really works.

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He took Demerol on and off for a while, but stopped because it was starting to give him hand tremors. That was the same time that Allis-Chalmers closed for good. A lot of Mueller's patients lost their jobs, which meant that Mueller lost a lot of his patients, because when a man's not working, a bad back becomes something to endure rather than something to fix.

By that time, about a quarter of his patients were receiving pain medication. There just seemed to be more and more cases that didn't respond to anything else. The old osteopathic techniques that he'd been trained in were fading not only in popularity but in effectiveness. Or maybe it was laziness—maybe he just didn't have the will or energy to attack each new case with the same verve as before.

Maybe his own pain was getting in the way. After he stopped taking Demerol, he tried some of the other pills—Percodan, Eukodal, Hycodan. He'd kept away from bars since the accident, and he didn't like the idea of drinking at home by himself, so sometimes after a bad day he'd take a pill and it would help him relax and forget about the whole city falling down around him. He bought a VCR and started renting old movies from the video section at Van's Pharmacy downtown.

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The 80s closed out. Mueller got older, and so did his regular patients. New patients came in, not quite as often as he would've liked. They didn't come from factories anymore, but from desk jobs and retail jobs and restaurants. There was Gloria, a human resources manager at a printing company who needed pills for her carpal tunnel syndrome. And Sam, who'd had a knee replacement and now had chronic pain. More and more of them were overweight, which was often a contributing factor to their pain, but of course there was no way to say so without being indiscreet.

"What's wrong, lady?"

"My back hurts."

"I'm not surprised with that spare tire you're carryin' around all day."

This conversation happened in Mueller's head quite often, for his own amusement. But in the end he smiled nicely and gave them the sympathy that they wanted. And the pills.

In 1987 someone had the bright idea to add some Tylenol to Hycodan, so that patients with chronic pain could become patients with chronic pain and liver problems. The new pill was called Vicodin. A sales rep from the pharmaceutical company came by the office and gave Mueller some free samples. He took them and put them with the others. That was where he always got the pills for himself, from the samples that the drug reps had given him. He'd amassed quite a stockpile over the years.

That was also the year Mueller met Isaac Lipkin. Lipkin was an attorney in downtown Milwaukee with an office on 3rd Street. He handled all kinds of cases—worker's compensation, Social Security disability, divorce, criminal—but his real specialty was personal injury cases.

Mueller had dealt with the occasional lawyer here and there over the years, because certain patients had lawsuits connected to their injuries. Usually he just had to provide copies of the medical bills; occasionally, he'd be asked to write a report about the case.

In '87 a patient by the name of Winston Jones III presented himself for treatment. A thin black man in his late forties with graying hair, he wore a cheap suit that looked like it had come from a thrift shop, an old Stetson hat, and a neck brace. He'd slipped and fallen on ice outside of a department store, and was now suffering what he termed a "major injury, a major disability."

He walked into the office one day and went up to the secretary. "Yes hello, I'm here to see Dr. Mueller. I need to see Dr. Mueller right away, it's very important because I'm in serious pain. *Serious* pain. *Oh!* My neck, it hurts just *talkin'* to you right now! *Please*, ma'am, I need to see the doctor right away!"

Mueller examined him and couldn't find much wrong with him, apart from having liquor on his breath and yellowing, bloodshot eyes which indicated that his liver wasn't in the best shape. Everywhere Mueller palpated, looking for trigger points and tender spots, Winston recoiled in pain, sometimes even before being touched.

"Can you move your neck right or left, Mr. Jones?"

"No, not at all. It hurts just holding it still and if I move it right or left or up or down or sideways it sends a terrible shooting pain all through my entire body. Oohhh, my God . . . " he moaned at the end.

"Doctor, can you please give me some medicine for the pain. I can't sleep, I can't eat, I can't do anything at all since this terrible accident has befallen me."

Mueller looked at him slightly askance. That the man was faking was fairly obvious, even to someone half-stoned on Vicodin. But it was a simple matter of taking his money or kicking him out, which just meant that someone else would get his money. He wrote him a prescription for Percocet.

When it came time to pay the bill, Winston handed the secretary a business card for Lipkin & Howard, attorneys at law.

"The medical bills are all part of my case. My attorneys are handling this for me, so please contact them in regard to all matters pertaining to my treatment."

The office was not in the habit of taking patients on credit. The secretary conferred with Mueller, who picked up the phone and called the lawyer.

"Mr. Lipkin, this is Dr. Ernest Mueller. I've just seen a client of yours here at my office, and he's asked me to contact you in regards to the payment of the bill."

"Yes, Dr. Mueller, thank you so much for contacting me, and for treating Mr. Jones. We all really appreciate your help. As Mr. Jones may have told you, his injuries are the direct result of the negligence of another party. Now, we are in the process of seeking restitution and compensation from that party, and all of Mr. Jones's medical bills will be completely paid for in the settlement of this case when the time comes."

"Well, that's all fine and good Mr. Lipkin but someone has to pay for my services now."

"Yes, of course, doctor, of course. Listen, have your assistant call my assistant and she will arrange a check for your services to be mailed out to you right away, today. But I'd like to talk to you about this case, so I wonder if you're free for lunch tomorrow afternoon?"

After some reluctance on Mueller's part, they met for lunch later that week. Lipkin was a smooth talker, and also fairly good at getting a read on people. He could see that Mueller was a bit vulnerable, perhaps a bit compromised, and perhaps a man that he could work with.

"Listen," Lipkin said, affecting a less professional tone after his second martini, "you and I both know that Jones is full of shit."

"It's rather obvious, yes. I think he was drunk when he came in."

"Hah! I don't think he's come to my office sober once the whole time I've known him."

"And how long has that been?"

"Oh, years now. I represented him for his Social Security disability case a few years ago. Once for a worker's compensation case, which we lost, but that's how it goes."

"He gets SSI disability?"

"Sure does. Mr. Jones has forty percent permanent disability according to professional medical opinion."

Mueller wondered if some of this conversation was a violation of attorney-client privilege, or for that matter, doctor-patient confidentiality.

"With this new case," Lipkin continued, "we're shooting for the other sixty percent—full disability. With that, he gets a fat chunk of cash from Gimbel's and the Social Security board upgrades his disability payments."

"And you get a hefty fee, is that right?"

"Of course. And you get your medical bills paid. Listen, I do these kinds of cases for a living. I know a good

case from a bad one, I have a very good track record in court, you can look it up. I'm telling you, I guarantee you that you will get paid on this case."

"You mean, when the case finally finishes in court."

"Look, if you really want to, I can have my office cut you a check each and every time Jones comes to see you, and then I'll just recoup my expenses after the trial, it doesn't really make any difference to me. But if you bide your time, you can submit all your bills at once, and get a nice big check, no questions asked."

"And if you lose the case?"

"Well then neither one of us gets paid. But the thing is, the ball's in your court on that one, doc. You're the medical professional. He's disabled if *you* say he's disabled, not if I say so."

"The other side will have doctors as well."

"Sure. Which is why your report has to be better than theirs."

Mueller thought for a moment as they each took a sip of their drinks.

"You know," Lipkin continued, "my uncle went to see you years ago."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yep. Bad back. Said you fixed him right up, moved something around and all of a sudden the pain was gone, like a miracle."

"Hmm. Well, sometimes you get lucky," Mueller said.

"Ain't that the truth. Listen, guys like Jones are just bread and butter. I'm not Perry Mason, and you're not

some Beverly Hills plastic surgeon giving boob jobs to starlets."

"Too bad for me!"

"Yeah! Too bad for me too! But we still gotta make a living, right?"

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Mueller and Lipkin developed a good working relationship. Lipkin sent the patients in, and Mueller wrote the reports. Sometimes they lost the cases anyway—that was just a hazard of doing business—but most of the time they didn't, and the bills, padded as much as they could be, got paid. Eventually, Mueller had a kind of blank form letter that he used for writing the reports, and he'd have his secretary just fill in the blanks with the new patient's name and information.

"Mr./Ms. _____ came to my office on _____ presenting with complaints of severe pain stemming from an injury on _____.

"Treatment was conservative and consisted of blah-blah-blah, and it is my professional medical opinion that _____ has suffered permanent disability of _____%"

Mueller rewarded himself with a pill every time he signed one.

Though they worked together and met for drinks or dinner on a semi-regular basis, Lipkin and Mueller never really became friends. Lipkin was essentially a happy-go-lucky guy. Even though there were things about his job he didn't like—not least of all the scummy people he had to represent—he liked the prestige of being a lawyer, and of having money, and spending it around town at clubs and nice restaurants and expensive tailors. He had a wife, whom he placated with gifts

and occasional vacations while he fooled around on the side with secretaries and clients and waitresses and whoever else he could find. When he thought about his life, on the whole, it made him smile and feel satisfied.

Mueller, on the other hand, was morose. Lipkin could feel it—most everybody could—and he didn't like being around him. He was a bummer, a bring-down, plain and simple. But they had a profitable business relationship, and Lipkin thought that socializing was necessary to maintain it, as with the other doctors he had working relationships with. Little did he know that, in actuality, Mueller would have preferred to just stay home, take some pills and watch tv.

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In the early 90s everybody wanted Vicodin. Mueller knew that some of his patients were addicted to it, and for reasons other than physical pain, but then so was he. Somehow that evened it out and made it all ok. Or maybe it was the Vicodin itself that was doing that.

In 1995 the FDA approved a time-release version of Eukodal called Oxycontin. When the sales rep dropped off samples, Mueller tried one. Work-related research, he reasoned: Physician, heal thyself! He took it mid-morning the next day, and found that he felt quite nice well into the evening. Normally he took Vicodin two or three times daily, but this new pill lasted all day. He started prescribing it to patients soon thereafter.

For the first time in over thirty years, business picked up. Mueller had developed a reputation among certain segments of the population as a doctor who had great sympathy for people in pain, and who didn't ask too many questions. In they came, from West Allis, West Milwaukee, the south side, the north side. He even had people coming in from the far suburbs. Each day Mueller saw them, gave them prescriptions,

took their money, and then went home.

In '96 the city of Milwaukee announced that they were going to build a new baseball stadium. County Stadium was old and out of style. The city needed something new and flashy, or so people said. Even though the new stadium would be privately owned, the government instituted a new sales tax to help pay for it. The tax was unpopular, and there was a lot of public opposition to it, but in the end they passed it anyway. After a while, people just forgot about it. Ain't that how it always goes, Mueller thought.

Lipkin sent in a new patient, a young guy named Adam who worked construction and had a worker's comp claim. He found that he really liked the pills Doctor Mueller gave him, and so did his friends, to whom he started selling them on the side. He was an enterprising lad, but dumb as a pile of bricks.

Adam's case settled, and Mueller got paid, but Adam kept coming in for new prescriptions even though it was obvious that his injury had healed a long time ago. Once he even brought one of his customers into the clinic with him, and they talked in the waiting room about how many pills he would sell him and for how much. The secretary told Mueller about it, but when Adam came in, he wrote him a new Oxy scrip anyway. Off they went to the pharmacy to fill it, two grinning junky idiots.

With the money he was making from lawsuits and Oxy prescriptions, Mueller treated himself to the one thing he'd wanted for as long as he could remember: a 1958 Ford Fairlane. The Solid Gold McDonald's on 76th Street had vintage car shows in their parking lot on the weekends, and Mueller found a guy who had one for sale. They settled on a price, and Mueller paid cash.

Lipkin kept sending new patients, but over time the

two of them stopped meeting for dinner and drinks. They simply didn't have anything to talk about besides work, and Lipkin got tired of trying to entertain Mueller and make him laugh, only to be met with vacant indifference most of the time.

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On Sundays, his day off, Mueller took long drives out of town. He never had a particular destination in mind, at least not a physical one. He would take a pill, turn on the jazz or oldies station and just drive, sometimes well into the late night. Sometimes he'd go north, sometimes west or south. In the end, he always felt like he just made a big circle, because he always ended up back where he started.

But it was a vicious circle, a cruel one. He came back, but never the way he wanted to, never to the home that he wanted to return to. The things he wished different were still the same. Everything he wanted gone was still there, while everything he wanted back was still missing, gone to that far-off land where the past goes to die.

On those lonely old county roads that line the countryside outside the city, sometimes he would close his eyes as he cruised on down the road, letting the feel of the car and the sound of the music become his entire reality, if only for that moment.

At times he thought he could see in his mind's eye the life that should have been. And maybe if he kept driving, he could find the wrong turn that he must have made, somewhere, sometime long ago, and finally get back on the right road, finally get to where he was supposed to be. Or maybe if he just kept his eyes closed long enough.

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