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Does the Doctor Know I'm Here?

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IT'S IN THE SUNDAY PAPER. Saturday night a woman was picking up her teenage son from a rock concert at the coliseum. On the way home, two teenagers ran the red light and the woman's car hit theirs near the back end. Then her car veered off the road into the streetlight pole. Her son was decapitated but the article didn't say how. I know it's awful, but I couldn't figure that out. The kids were drunk, but I didn't think a mother would be driving fast enough to put her son through the windshield. I mean, sure there are lousy mothers, but this one picked the kid up instead of letting him take a bus home at midnight and they live right in Buffalo.

I have to go see Dr. Mendel, so I put on my heels, finish my coffee, and put down the newspaper. When I get to the Medical Plaza, there is a parking spot right in front and I park carefully. Even though the Plaza has no windows, I always imagine that if I'm within half a mile of the building, he (the shrink) can see what I'm doing.

The receptionist is not at her desk which is fine with me—they always look at you like they're casing you for a shot of valium—but here is this odd woman in the waiting room. She is sitting cross-legged in a chair eating some yogurt. As I sit down, this woman looks up and smiles at me the way those Moonies do when you pass them on the street. He must be running late because I've never seen anybody else waiting before.

After a few minutes, I hear the receptionist come in the outer office door and I walk around to her desk.

"Hi," I say to her. "I'm Mrs. Wells. Cynthia."

"Fine," she smiles. "The doctor will be with you soon."

When I get back to the waiting room, this other woman has taken off her sandals and her shawl and tucked one leg up underneath her. She keeps smiling at me that same way, like she knows me from somewhere. I'm sure I've never seen her before.

The teenager and the accident pass through my mind, and so do my Joanie and Tommy. Soon they'll be teenagers.

It's already after 1:00 and I begin to wonder why this strange woman is here. My appointment is for 12:45. I hope she doesn't think just because she got here early she can go in first. The kids will be home from school soon and I can't hang around here all day.

I feel her watching me but I pretend not to notice. From the corner of my eye, I see her hair, dark and bushy. Soon she opens a cloth bag, one of those homemade jobs, and starts taking things out: first a box of wheat crackers, and then some pieces of cheese. She is making little hors d'oeuvres on the magazine table, and lining them up on a napkin. It reminds me of the way my Tommy used to line up his peas on his plate before he would eat them. You'd think she was on her front porch in the spring.

I go back to the receptionist. "Is Dr. Mendel very busy today?" I say.

"Oh, yes," she says, flashing me a smile of even white teeth. That may work on the men, I think.

"Does the doctor know I'm here?" I say.

The receptionist gives me an odd look, and nods her head.

Back in the waiting room, the banquet is still going on.

"Like to try one?" the woman says, holding up a cracker with cheese on it.

While I'm wondering how long she's been dragging the cheese around in the dirty old cloth bag, the receptionist comes in.

"The doctor will see you now, Mrs. Jenkins," she says.

The woman, Mrs. Jenkins, pulls the picnic together and looks at me apologetically as she leaves.

I don't mind so much her getting in to see the doctor first—I figure some of these people are right on the edge—but I wonder if the receptionist has forgotten about me.

I clear my throat as she turns to go back to her desk.

"Do you think it will be long before he gets to me?" I say.

Instead of answering, she goes to the doctor's office and brings him back with her. He is over six feet tall, and I always feel like standing when he comes into a room. This time, though, I don't.

"Hello, Cynthia," he says. "You're early today. We've got you down for 1:45. I'll be with you right after this consultation."

"Fine," I say, wondering why the receptionist didn't tell me herself. Consultation, I think. Tell me that woman is a therapist.

By the time the doctor can see me, I've read something in the *New Yorker* and looked at all the cartoons. I sit in the chair nearest to him.

"How are you feeling today?" he says.

"Good," I say.

"How are things with Bobby?" the doctor says.

"Better." Bobby is my husband. "He's still out of town a lot, but I'm managing. Maybe I'll get a job soon," I say.

I know he is waiting for more. So I go on.

"I still get lonely for him. All day long, I pile up things to tell him about the kids or the house, but he's not there. Most of all," I say, looking up and seeing that he is watching me, "I miss him at night when I get into bed. I miss putting my head against his shoulder to go to sleep."

"But you're sleeping all right?" he says.

"Yes. Most of the time." Twice a week, I think.

"I had a patient once," the doctor says, "who dreamt one night that she was in a big circle with all the members of the family, holding hands. She said it was the best night's sleep she'd had in years."

"Really?" I say. What does that mean, I wonder?

"You might try that," he says. "Think about everyone you care for being together, and safe. Pretend there is a big circle that doesn't end."

I'd rather pretend I'm taking a librium. "Yes," I say, "I'll try that."

"Cynthia," Dr. Mendel says, "What else?"

The man reads me like a book. I wonder what kind of car that woman was driving. Probably a small one.

"The other night I was sitting on the couch reading when this tiny mouse jumped over my foot and ran under the TV. It scared the shit out of me," I say.

"Go on," he says.

"I'm really not that afraid of mice," I say, "but I started worrying about him going into the kids' rooms. Rabies, and all that. So I got out the broom and stood there waiting for him to come out. I yelled to scare him, figuring he might make a run for the basement door. But he didn't, so I had to stand there with the broom and wait."

Dr. Mendel is tapping his lip with his forefinger. He doesn't say anything.

"The longer I stood there, the angrier I got. I yelled and whooped, but he stayed under the TV. I passed the living room mirror, and saw myself with the broom poised. Like Lizzy Borden with her hatchet."

"Why did you think that?" the doctor says.

"I'm an incurable romantic," I say, winking. You're the goddamn shrink, you figure it out.

He smiles quickly, and rearranges himself in his chair. "Well, I think what you did after seeing yourself that way is what's important. What happened next?"

I decided it might be better to leave out the part about seeing myself as a giant crazed mouse, running through a living room maze and trying to find my way out.

"Then I went to bed," I say. "Well, first I set a mousetrap with a piece of cheese. We were out of peanut butter."

"And that was really the best way to deal with the problem, don't you think, Cynthia? The mouse never really harmed you at all, did he?" Dr. Mendel says.

"No," I say. "Except the next morning I found that he had gotten the cheese without springing the trap." We both smile, and then we sober up for goodbyes. I want to tell him about the accident, but it is late now and anyways, I don't know how to begin.

In the elevator I think about what a nice doctor he is and wish again that I had told him about the accident. I begin to cry, and realize that Joanie and Tommy will be home from school any minute. When I get to the lobby, I call Louise, my neighbor, and ask her to take them for an hour or so. Next, I call the police station and tell them I'm from an insurance company. I tell them I've got time to appraise the damaged car from the Webster accident and ask where it's been towed. The officer on the phone gives me the information, and tells me to speak to Henry Jarulinski.

In my car, I find the newspaper section with the article in it on the

passenger seat, and I read it again. . . . tragedy striking at the corner of Summitt and Main Streets. . . .” It’s on the way to Tonawanda, where the car has been towed, so I decide to swing by. When I get to Summitt, all the buildings and lots look familiar to me. On one corner, there is a stop sign nailed to the utility pole, and where the stoplight should be there is only the broad stainless steel base. Cars are honking at me so I drive on to the garage.

I find an old clipboard in the glove box and take it in with me. Henry, the owner, is also the man who towed the car in.

“Just let me know, whatever you need to find out, Mrs. Wells. It was an awful shame,” Henry says, shaking his head.

“Cynthia. Please call me Cynthia. What kind of car is. . . .” Maybe this is a mistake, I think, looking for a name on the back end.

“Oh, I know. It’s such a mess it’s hard to even tell what make it is. Fiat. You don’t see them much anymore because they rust out so fast in this weather. It’s an old four seater, and it wasn’t in the greatest shape before the accident,” Henry says.

The back end doesn’t have much damage, but the front end has an oval hole carved into it. Lights and radiator are in shreds. I take a deep breath and close my eyes for a minute.

“You all right, ma’am? Want some water or something?”

“Thank you, no. I’m fine.” I take a pen out of my purse. “Henry, can you give me some information about how the boy was. . . .” I can’t say the word. Henry doesn’t seem to notice that for an auto insurance appraiser, I’m pretty squeamish.

“It has a lot to do with the unibody construction of the car,” Henry says. “Really, an accident like this is not so unusual. The car doesn’t have a real frame, like most American cars do. That’s why the impact of hitting the other car and then the pole pushed the engine into the firewall. It popped off the hinges that held the front hood, pushing it right through the windshield into the front seat.”

We walk over to the driver’s side and look in. It’s crazy, but I have to figure the whole thing out. The blood doesn’t even bother me that much. I can see in the front seat where they had to cut the seat belt and shoulder harness with something very sharp to get the kid out. I wonder if the mother was still in her seat when they did it. Her belt hadn’t been cut so I figure that she must have been conscious.

I look around but I don’t see the front hood anywhere and I don’t ask about it. I wonder if the teenager died because he had his seatbelt on and couldn’t get out of the way fast enough.

Henry is looking at me and I realize I am gritting my teeth and making a clicking sound that always drives Bobby crazy.

I stand up straighter and write on the clipboard. “Now, when you got to the scene,” I say to Henry, “I’m sure there was a lot of confusion, but is there anything else I should know? For the company?”

Henry scratches his head and wipes his forehead with a clean shop towel. “To tell the truth, ma’am, by the time I got there, the confusion was over. The ambulance had already been and gone, and all that was left were the wrecked Fiat, the bent street light pole, and the blood. It was the blood that got to me this time.” He gets a strange look on his face.

“I tow for lots of accidents, ma’am, but I noticed the blood this

time because it looked so eerie. The traffic lights, part way up the pole, were broken on the ground, but the street light, on top of the pole, was hanging over a few feet from the road. It made this pink glow. . .”

Henry isn't looking at me now, and I don't know what to say. Finally, I thank him for clearing things up for the company. I am shaken when he asks me if they can tow it over to the junkyard, but I don't think he notices. Telling him I'll get back to him about it when I've spoken to the police, I begin to leave.

That's when I see it. Lying on the floor of the back seat is an old cloth bag. There are green ducks imprinted on it that look like they've been made with a wood block, the kind you carve in art class when you're a kid. They are lined up perfectly, the ducks, one after the other, exactly the same. You can tell they are the same because each one has a tiny nick in its tail feathers, where the person who made the block must have slipped and cut by mistake.

It is the kind of bag that a kid makes for his mother and that a mother drags around because the kid made it for her. As I get in my car and drive off, I think how this whole thing just seems to be getting closer and closer to me.

Later that night, when Tommy and Joanie are asleep, I call Mrs. Webster, the mother of the teenager. A child answers the phone, a child so young that I can't even tell if it is a boy or a girl.

“Hello?” Mrs. Webster says.

I freeze at the sound of her voice.

“Hello?” she says again.

“Mrs. Webster? You don't know me. My name is Cynthia Wells.”

“Yes?” Her voice is so calm, I think maybe it really is OK that I called.

“I read about your son in the newspaper. I. . . I'm sorry.”

“Thank you,” she says, calmly.

Then I hang up. I don't know what else to say. After a while, I call Dr. Mendel at his home.

“Yes, Cynthia? What is it?” he says.

“Doctor, there's something I wanted to tell you about this afternoon.” I tell him about the accident and the phone call to Mrs. Webster.

“What was it you wanted to say to her, Cynthia? Besides that you were sorry?” Dr. Mendel says.

“I'm not sure. Why did I call her?” I say.

“Because you were sorry. Is there anything else you can do?”

“I don't know.” I thank him and hang up.

Dear Mrs. Webster,

I hope my phone call didn't alarm or disturb you yesterday. I have two children, and I can't totally visualize what you have been through in the last few days, but I do imagine some of the pain. When I called, I wanted to tell you that a death like that does not go unnoticed, not even by strangers. I wanted to tell you how truly sorry I am. Truly. I wanted to tell you

*“They have remained precisely
intact in their present state of
picturesque decay for three years
short of two centuries”*
TROIS-FONTAINES ABBEY



*“You will talk to all who pass by;
and all those little sympathies, those freaks of fancy,
those jests in stone, those workings-out
of problems in caprice, will occupy mind after mind of utterly
countless multitudes, long after you are gone.
You have not, like authors, to plead for a hearing,
or to fear oblivion.
Do but build large enough, and carve boldly enough,
and all the world will hear you;
they cannot choose but look.”*

(John Ruskin, addressing members of the
Architectural Association in 1857.)¹