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Questioning the Tree

Here's a story that quite obviously reflects my frustration with the growing trend of trying to diminish the role of the physician in medical care in favor of technology, rather than having technology augment the capabilities of the physician.

Questioning the Tree was meant as a bit of a tongue-in-cheek caricaturization of this type of technocentric system of health care, flavored with the paranoia of a litigation system run amok. Much to my dismay, this story seems a lot less far-fetched today than it did when I wrote it.

It wasn't such an unusual sight, but it was the first time I'd seen it live, the first time they'd snared one of my own colleagues.

I had just come through the revolving doors that deposit visitors into the opulent lobby of the Metro Towers building like a Pez dispenser, from nine to five every day. Across the white Italian marble floor at the far side of the atrium, camera crews for every major news company lay in wait for something deliciously ominous; had to be, to draw this kind of attention.

An elevator door slid open in front of the throng and flood lights poured into the space revealing a middle-aged man with tightly cropped gray hair twisting away from the brightness. His hands were cuffed behind his back, each arm in the grasp of a uniformed federal officer. As he turned in my direction, the familiarity of his bushy gray eyebrows, ruddy complexion and paunchy abdominal girth sent a chill up my spine; it was Arnie Hirsch, an old friend who'd joined my practice at the District 13 Medical Clinic 7 years ago.

A familiar voice behind my right shoulder startled me. "Veered from the answer tree."

I turned toward my new assistant, Carma Johnson. "What?"

"They got Dr. Hirsch on an answer tree violation. His third one."

I knew what she meant, of course. We were only allowed to say certain things, specifically scripted responses to questions that were always variations of the same things: *What do I have, Doc? Am I going to get better? What's the treatment? Could the scanner be wrong?* We were told from our first day on the job that there was simply too much liability to let us make up our own

answers and that any violation of this policy would be considered a federal offense; this was, after all, a government clinic.

I looked at Ms. Johnson. "How do you know?"

"My friend Wanda is his assistant. She just texted me."

"She the one who turned him in?"

I felt the brief hesitation in her voice. "Nah, not Wanda. She'd never do something like that."

My attention was drawn back to Arnie as he snapped at a reporter, "And I'd do it again, God *damnit*. I'm sick of seeing my patients suffer just because I have to listen to some damn machine."

I knew exactly how he felt. We'd had that conversation over lunch at least a dozen times. The only reason that *I* had managed to stay out of trouble was because I didn't have the guts to do what Arnie did. I felt sorry for the poor bastard, but I admired him.

The crowd followed my beleaguered colleague out into the street where a black sedan was waiting. I hated myself for not trying to help, but what could I do?

We stood in the now sparsely populated lobby, staring at the scene on the other side of the picture window by the revolving doors. "Guess we'd better get to work," I said.

She gave a quick nod and we headed up to the 37th floor to begin our daily routine. By the time I got into my lab coat and made my way over to the exam room, she had already started the first medscan. Within minutes, a white plinth slid out from the mouth of the giant machine.

"Mornin', Doc," Mr. Winthorp greeted me, grabbing the back of his neck as he sat up from the exam table that had just emerged from the tube of the Medtron 3000.

Ms. Johnson looked up from the control monitor on the scanner. "No motion artifacts, Doctor. The report's coming up now."

"Thanks." I looked at my first patient of the day. "Good morning, Mr. Winthorp." I did not reach out to shake his hand. "I'm Doctor Jenkins."

He glanced up at the plaque on the wall displaying my diploma, barely legible behind a coat of fading yellow urethane. "Centerville class of 2012, huh?" He looked impressed. "Good school."

I hadn't looked at that piece of paper in a long time. "It *was*."

"So what are you going to do about my pain?"

I studied the report on the monitor. "The scanner has diagnosed you with a stomach ulcer and entered a prescription into the pharmacy system."

"Stomach ulcer? I got neck pain, Doc."

I pulled out my e-pad to consult the company manual and scrolled to the appropriate response grid. "I'm sorry, but the scanner says that your problem is a stomach ulcer. It doesn't mention anything about your neck."

"My stomach feels fine."

I scrolled further. Even though I knew most of the acceptable answers by now, it was best to be cautious, especially with a new assistant hanging on my every word. "Some illnesses have no discernable symptoms," I quoted.

Winthorp was too busy massaging his neck to notice that I was reading a script. "OK, maybe I do have an ulcer, but this damn neck pain is what brought me in here, not my stomach."

"Just the same, if you don't pick up your prescription, the insurance company will drop you from their plan."

Mr. Winthorp let out a huff through blowfish cheeks. He knew there was no point in arguing with a medscan. "OK, but can you just take a look at my neck? It's killing me."

The eyebrows on Ms. Johnson's fresh young face crested noticeably.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Winthorp," I recited dutifully, "but physical contact is strictly prohibited."

"Come on, Doc. I won't tell anyone."

My demeanor softened. "Now, Mr. Winthorp, you know I can't do that. I could lose my license."

He shook his head—with difficulty—and walked out the door.

I felt sorry for the poor sap. There was a time I'd have ignored the rules, taken a look at his neck. But that was before I watched a bunch of my colleagues go bankrupt from lawsuits for doing that sort of thing, or worse yet, get carted off in handcuffs like Arnie Hirsch.

But this was a new world. When I graduated from the prestigious Center-ville Medical School 33 years ago, I couldn't have been more proud. Sir William Osler once said, "The transition from layman to physician is the most awesome transition in the universe." At least that's what we were told by our first clinical preceptor. And we believed him; thought we were special. After all, we'd gone from sniveling preppies to workaholics whose days were filled with making life or death decisions. That kind of thing changes a person. Changes you in ways you can't see, can't feel, can't notice until one day you wake up, look at an old picture of yourself and think, *Was I ever really that naïve?*

But it jades you, too. Rearranges your priorities. Makes it hard to maintain a normal sense of empathy, though most could; it's what made us good at our profession.

Or used to.

Ms. Johnson looked over my shoulder as I stood in the doorway watching Mr. Winthrop make his way out of the office. “Do you get many like that?” she asked.

“Nah. The scanner usually picks up the right thing; you know, whatever it is that’s causing the symptoms.”

“I can’t believe that guy actually wanted you to *touch* him.” She shuddered as she spit out the words.

I kept silent. The Board of Medicine was notorious for infiltrating practices with young trainees who were trying to weed out doctors who didn’t follow the rules, and I didn’t know my new assistant all that well yet.

She turned and looked at me. “I mean, I can understand how some of the older people might think that way; it’s what they grew up with. But Winthrop’s only 42. Why would *he* think a doctor could find something that a scanner couldn’t?”

The poor guy was just looking for a little relief and we didn’t give it to him; she had to see that. I wasn’t going to fall for the bait. “Guess some people just long for nostalgia,” I said. “Stories they hear from their parents, an old movie, some viral story running around the Web. There are lots of ways to hear about how things used to be. Some people still believe it was better back then.”

“Are you one of them?”

I raised an eyebrow and used my slight height advantage to convey my answer without having to resort to an outright lie.

She seemed to accept that. “They don’t know how good they really have it nowadays.”

I nodded.

“It’s just not analytical. Don’t they know that people can make mistakes?”

“Spoken like a new graduate, Ms. Johnson.”

Her lids narrowed. “You don’t agree?”

“That people can make mistakes? Sure.”

She shook me off. “That machines are the only way to examine a patient, that there’s no need to ever touch a sick person as long as they can get into a scanner or surg unit by themselves.”

I let out a deep breath. “Scanners are faster, more accurate and completely disregard emotion. No time wasted dealing with a person’s feelings.”

She looked relieved. “Exactly.”

“But they can’t empathize, can’t connect to the psyche. There’s a lot more to pain than nerve endings firing willy-nilly. The same pathology can cause different symptoms, different degrees of pain in different people.”

Her eyes widened and I could feel my skin start to crawl.

I forced out a *hah* and said, “Gotcha.”

Her demeanor eased, but her guard didn’t drop.

"No, I've been down that road," I said. "You can't imagine the time it takes to deal with someone's feelings, much less the emotional stress that weighs on you. I'll take a scanner over that any day." I gave the Medtron 3000 a gentle pat on its cold, titanium side. "Thanks to these babies and the folks who came up with those answer trees, modern medicine has really evolved to a whole new level."

A relieved Ms. Johnson was back in amiable sidekick mode. "Makes the shift goes by pretty quickly, too."

I shot her a smile. I'd gotten pretty good at this game. I, too, had sunk to a whole new level; survival instinct is strong.

"Ms. Johnson?"

She turned.

"Bring in the next patient."

"Yes, Doctor."

Doctor. I sure as hell didn't feel like one anymore.

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Another shift endured, I stepped out into the cool breeze of a late October evening and squinted up at the sunlight reflecting off the glass façade of the Unity Health Insurance building that dominated the downtown skyline, as I pulled my collar up and gripped it tightly against the wind. It would be a short walk home.

I'd been living in the city almost five years. The day Nan informed me that she couldn't tolerate having me around the house anymore, I decided to seek out an apartment within walking distance of the clinic. Oppressive crowds thronging in and out of mettube stations were not conducive to the mental well being of anyone, particularly those of my generation, and besides, I enjoyed taking in the...well, you couldn't really call it fresh air anymore, but I loved the atmosphere of the grimy city streets; preferred it to the sterility of modern buildings.

I made my way past *Hot Beanz*, my morning coffee spot; the aroma slowed my pace, but the thought of coming back out into the streets after warming up again kept me on my path. I turned the corner and approached the front door of my building, faced the camera embedded above the front door, and said, "Entry."

The oversized glass doors swished open and I hurried in out of the chill that my body would soon adjust to as the season progressed. I nodded at the animatronic receptionist in the lobby, which greeted me by name and summoned an elevator to the ground floor. As I entered, a perfectly pitched voice, the kind you hear on the 6 o'clock news, greeted me. "Going home, Dr. Jenkins?"

“Yes. Home.”

“Very good.” The door slid shut and I was escorted to the thirteenth floor, where I exited and made my way down the hall to the door where another *entry* command would grant me access to my little sanctuary.

I threw my coat over one of the checkered cloth-covered dining chairs, walked into the living room and looked out at the modest view of Centennial Park provided by the wall to wall windows that gave this place its charm.

“Play music,” I commanded, just before flopping down into my favorite overstuffed black leather easy chair by the window; I pushed the little black button by my right hand and a foot rest popped up to the perfect height. “Petrushka.”

As the music started to play, I closed my eyes and let it take me back to the day this album was recorded, a live performance in which my daughter had played the brief but famously recognizable trumpet solo the piece was known for, in her debut with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. It had been one of the proudest days of my life; a life that was once filled with proud moments.

Medical school, marriage to my college sweetheart, three wonderful children, suburban bliss; all memories that now seemed more like someone else’s life than one I had led myself. I should have seen it coming, should have noticed the signs, but I was blinded by the drive to succeed and failed to pay attention to the world evolving around me. The changes had been so gradual that they crept up on me like age, one wrinkle at a time. And then one day Nan asked me to leave. It wasn’t really until that day that I realized just how *much* had changed; everything but me. The kids were all grown and scattered around the country; each a success in their chosen lines of work, but none a part of our daily lives anymore. Nan had managed to stay in sync with the pulse of the city; she had become a community activist, a prolific volunteer; she was doing things that mattered.

And I was but a shadow of what I’d been, increasingly disgruntled with a medical system that had long ago crumbled, a system that had lost its way from what it was meant to do—take care of people. I’d become so bitter that I was poisoning Nan’s life, but never had a clue until the day she shattered my world.

It wasn’t until that day that I realized Nan had been the one constant in my life that kept things real, that shielded me from the endless alterations reshaping the world around us; that *she* was the one who had been taking care of *me* all those years, not the reverse I had always taken as granted.

And on that day, I was lost.

After the divorce, it took me a few years to get a grip on life again; not joy, you couldn't really call it that, but I was beginning to discover things that fulfilled me, that gave me pleasure, that gave me a reason to live. I was starting to feel comfortable again until the day Arnie Hirsch got hauled away, then the questions of what I was doing with my life began to tear at me once more.

Stumbling in for my Saturday morning pick-me-up at Hot Beanz, an outing I looked forward to every week, a call of, "Jenks!" greeted me as I walked through the door. I hadn't been called that in a long time.

I looked up and smiled feebly. "Doug. How are you?"

Doug Barnes and I had gone to med school together and started a family practice soon after graduating. It was a thriving practice for a while, but the bureaucracy eventually caught up with us. Insurance companies only wanted to contract with doctors they could control, and we weren't willing to play the game. We thought we were better than that, but time wore us down. We were eventually forced to liquidate the practice and seek out clinic jobs like the rest of them. I hadn't seen him in years.

"Better than you from the looks of it," he said, waving me over to a table. "You look like hell."

I hadn't realized my desolation was that transparent.

We sat down, facing each other across a small round table. I smiled feebly. "Quite the coincidence bumping into each other here, huh?"

The edge of Doug's mouth curled up. "Nah, not really. It was Carma."

I peered at him over the rim of my glasses.

He waved his hands, and with a chuckle said, "*Carma Johnson*, your assistant."

"Really. Ms. Johnson?"

He gave me a nod. "She's one of *us*."

"Us?"

"Let me explain."

He went on to tell me that he'd been stuck in a clinic across town since we closed the practice, that he found it every bit as unrewarding as I found my job, and that the only reason he kept going in there every day was because he needed the money. Familiar story, but I still wasn't sure where Carma Johnson fit in.

Doug glanced around the room, then leaned in toward me. "Look, there's a group of us who get together every week. You know, people who feel the same way as you and me."

"And Ms. Johnson's one of them?"

He gave a single nod. "It's mostly physicians, but some nurses and techs have joined in too. We call it The Old Codger's Club, though it's been attracting a few of the more recent grads like Carma who thought they were getting into medicine for the same antiquated reasons you and I did."

"What the hell can you do besides bitch and moan to each other?"

"We run a clinic out of the back of a strip mall shop in the Libertyville area."

My eyes widened. The Feds didn't take to kindly to black market clinics.

"It's a nice blue collar neighborhood, not much crime, doesn't attract a lot of cops. We steer a few patients there, the ones we know we can trust. It's like the old days; we get to treat patients the way we were trained to instead of the way we're legislated to perform now."

"Jesus, Doug. What if you get caught?"

"Hell, it's worth the risk. Gives me a chance to shake the rust off, feel useful again. You should try it. We could use someone like you."

I knew exactly what he meant. You can only do so much pencil-pushing before you feel like you're starting to rot away. It was a tempting offer.

"How do you hide it?"

"Carefully. Don't talk about it to anyone you don't know, don't mention it at work even to those you trust. The walls have eyes."

"Tell me about it. Every time I get someone new in the office, I feel like I've got to spend all day looking over my shoulder. These kids coming out of school...they're brainwashing them young these days."

Doug laughed. "Carma got to you, didn't she?"

"Damn straight. I'd have sworn she was a mole for the Feds."

"Nah. Just feeling you out. Plays the part well, though, don't you think?"

I had to agree. She'd figured *me* out without even a hint at what she was up to.

"So what do you say, Jenks? Our next meeting's tonight. Why don't you come check it out."

I rubbed at a stain on the table. I wanted to say yes, but I kept picturing Arnie Hirsch being dragged off in handcuffs.

"Well, at least think about it." Doug synced the info onto my PDA phone.

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That's all I *did* do the rest of that day, think about it. Something he said had struck a chord. The idea of being part of a real clinic again made my blood flow in a way I hadn't felt in a long time.

I drove by the address Doug had given me. A quiet neighborhood strip mall. The storefront said *Fine Tailoring*, which I supposed was provided by a relative of someone in the Old Codgers Club. The information he had uploaded to me included a password that would grant access to the clinic in the back of the shop.

I pulled up in front and sat there with the engine running as I stared blindly at the store. My car was relatively new, but no air conditioning would have

been able to keep the sweat from soaking through my shirt. Office hours were from six till nine; I still had a few hours to make my decision.

I stopped by a Starbucks on the way home and grabbed a burger, cream soda and chips; carry-out bag. By the time I got back to my apartment, the food was luke-warm, but I preferred the confines of my home to a fast food joint. I wolfed it down, then jumped in the shower.

Most people sing in the shower; I think. In fact, it's where I do some of my best thinking. But even the hot steam swirling around me couldn't clear the fog inside my brain.

It would be so easy, I thought. Drive to the strip mall, go to the clinic and get a chance to be a real doctor again.

I pictured myself in handcuffs. What am I, nuts?

Hey, Doug's been doing it for God knows how long. How dangerous can it be?

Then a terrible thought occurred to me. Maybe he's just setting me up.

It's Doug, for Christ's sake.

Hey, I don't know what he's been up to for the last decade.

So what else are you going to do, rot away at Thirteen for the rest of your life? Show some stones, man.

I towed off and glanced at the clock. Decision time.

At quarter after six, I left my apartment headed back to *Fine Tailoring*. My heart pounded faster with each turn and as I pulled into the lot the wheel slipped through my damp hands; only the car's proximity braking system saved me from plowing into a line of parked cars. I numbly listened to the electronic voice admonishing me for reckless driving until I had recovered enough to disengage the safety, then corrected course and crept along past the storefronts until I spotted an empty space directly in front of the tailor shop.

I hesitated, then tapped on the accelerator and turned out of the lot without looking back. A half hour later, I was home.

A bottle of wine kept me company that evening. I nursed it slowly, staring at the walls until finally deciding to go to bed whether sleep was in my immediate future or not. Dozing on and off, snippets of dreams flitted through my mind: med school, the old practice, nightmares of Carma Johnson walking in to my office with a team of uniformed agents. Doug had convinced me she was one of the good guys, but dreams don't always ride on facts and emotions don't erase that easily.

I was rattled out of my dreams a little after midnight by the shrill ring tone of an unprogrammed caller and stabbed out for the phone more in an effort to silence it than from any real curiosity about who was on the other end.

"Jenks? Jenks, that you? Why's your vid off?"

"I keep it that way when I'm in the buff," I rasped.

"Oh. Oh, yeah." I could see the stress lines around Doug's eyes as he looked down at his phone to check the time. "Jesus, I didn't realize how late it was. Sorry." He glanced back over his shoulder. "Listen, I don't know how much time I've got."

I squinted, trying to study his face through my blurry eyes.

"You were right."

"About what?"

"Carma. She turned us in. The cops raided our place tonight, just before closing. I had stepped out to take a break and when I got back there were half a dozen police cars out front. I've been trying to lay low, but you can only troll the streets for so long. It's just a matter of time..." I heard the sirens approaching his spot. "Jesus. Gotta go. Be careful, Jenks."

I reached for the remote control on my night stand and flipped on the monitor suspended from the far wall, then searched the web for local news. "Shit." There it was, plain as day. A bunch of doctors and nurses being hauled outside in handcuffs through the same door I'd been staring at only a few hours ago from the comfort of my car, the same door I'd almost walked through in a moment of rebellious false confidence.

"God, how could I have been so *stupid*? What was I thinking?"

I was too stunned to make out what they were saying before the picture faded to a live chase scene; Doug's car. I turned it off and tossed the remote back onto the table. I didn't want to watch the inevitable conclusion.

I flopped back and stared at the ceiling. My first glimmer of hope for a brighter, more productive existence in a very long time had been smeared all over the Net. All I had to look forward to now was District Clinic 13.

The phone rang. Doug's number again.

"Doug?"

"Dr. Jenkins?" A monotonal, unharried voice that was clearly not Doug's.

"Yes?"

A face came up on the screen, a generic clean-cut young male face adorned with a police cap. "This is Officer Harvey Cornell. Turn your vid on, sir."

I pulled a sheet around me and complied. Only my face would show on his phone, but it was still discomfiting to sit there with nothing on talking into a vid phone. "What's this all about, officer? Is Dr. Barnes OK?"

"He's fine, sir. Your number was the last one he called, just a few minutes ago, and we want to know why."

"Why don't you ask him?"

"We got his version, sir. We want yours."

I knew they'd review the transcript of Doug's phone call. *Don't be stupid*, I reminded myself before answering. "He's my old partner. I ran in to him yesterday for the first time in years and gave him my number, so I guess it was at

the top of his recent calls list. He sounded like he was in some kind of trouble. I guess in his rush to call someone he hit my number first.”

“What do you know about the clinic, sir?”

“Uh, he told me about it yesterday, you know, when we were catching up on each other’s lives.” I fought against my instinct to wipe the sweat off my brow. The screen was small, maybe he wouldn’t notice the gleam. I turned from the light.

“And you didn’t turn him in?”

“I wanted to give him a chance to right it himself first. Warned him about one of his people, that she’s a straight shooter. I guess he didn’t take my advice, huh?”

“You’ll need to come down to the station, sir. I’ll be there in ten minutes to pick you up.”

“But...” the line went dead.

Ten minutes.

Crap.

I threw on some jeans and a relatively clean shirt, brushed the stale wine breath off my teeth and paced in front of the door until the chime sounded, sending my heart crashing against the inside of my chest wall.

“Intercom on.” The green light next to the door came on. “Hello?”

The animatronic receptionist from the lobby greeted me. “Good morning, Dr. Jenkins. There’s an Officer Cornell here to see you. Shall I let him in?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“My pleasure, doctor.”

I damped the sweat off my brow and rubbed the palms of my hands against my pants.

The chime sounded again. “Yes?”

“It’s me, doctor. Officer Cornell.”

“Front door, open,” I commanded.

The door responded dutifully, and Officer Harvey Cornell entered with a vague scent of musk preceding him. A neatly pressed navy blue uniform accented his athletic physique, right down to the gleaming patent leather boots.

“Dr. Jenkins,” he said, removing his hat and smoothing back the neatly cropped black hair held in place with a hint of gel. “Ready, sir?”

“Am I under arrest?”

“Not yet, sir.”

“Then why can’t we just talk here?”

He motioned to the door. “You’ll want to come with me, sir.”

Sometimes no answer is an answer you don’t ignore.

The animatronic offered a cheery good-bye as we passed and made our way to the unmarked car waiting by the front entrance. A female officer sat

perched in the driver's seat. Cornell opened the back door and I ducked in. He shut it behind me and I instinctively tried the handle, which of course did nothing.

On the way back to the station, he rode shotgun and didn't say another word to me. I could see the two of them conversing on the other side of the translucent barrier that separated us, but I don't know how to lip read. I only had the chatter of my own mind to keep me company.

As I sat there, every possible scenario flashed through my mind. Maybe they spotted me casing the clinic that afternoon, but that wouldn't be enough to arrest me on. They must have seen me pull up that evening, almost go in. But they can't arrest you for *almost*, can they? Hell, they didn't have anything they could pin on me. I'd been a damn boy scout at the clinic all these years; I hated myself for it, but I never gave them anything to hang me with. And what did they have now? My name in Doug's phone, a call, a drive by at the mall during clinic hours? Nothing. They had nothing. Still, they could make my life miserable if they wanted. I'd been a damn poster boy for the District Clinic System, ignored what I knew was right to spite the health of my psyche, and they were going to screw me anyway. Great.

The flashes of panic were knocked from my thoughts by the sound of the car coming to a stop. We were parked outside the station. Cornell opened the door and escorted me into the building, where we wound our way through a maze of busy cubicles and into a sealed interrogation room. There was no mirrored glass, but there was no doubt we were being recorded.

He sat across a polished steel desk, facing me, but staring intently at a computer screen to his right. His face remained expressionless as he read silently and periodically tapped on the screen.

I cleared my throat, quite unintentionally, and was speared by a 'don't do that again' look from across the table. A few minutes later, Officer Cornell sat back against his chair.

"Doesn't look too good for you, doctor."

"What doesn't look good? What are you accusing me of, being friends with Dr. Barnes?"

"You should be more careful who you associate with."

"Since when did that become a crime?"

He stared me further back into my seat, then stepped out of the room. I squinted in all directions trying to locate the camera. *Christ, they can't lock me up just for thinking about going to that damn clinic, can they?* I pulled a tissue out of my pocket and damped off my face. *Stay calm*, I coaxed, but my body wasn't listening. I tucked the fraying wet tissue into my pants pocket as the door popped open and Officer Cornell re-entered.

He sat down and tapped on the screen, looked at me for an excruciatingly long 3 or 4 seconds, then focused his attention back on the monitor.

I scooted around on the cold steel seat of my chair in a futile effort to get comfortable.

Cornell looked up again. "Look, doctor. Let me be blunt."

Finally, I'd have rather been arrested than have to sit in that seat any longer, staring at the machine that called himself Officer Cornell.

"We've got video surveillance that shows you hanging out in front of Barnes' clinic this afternoon, and then driving by again tonight, just before we got there."

I could feel the heat rising up from under my shirt and thanked my lucky stars he didn't have me hooked up to an autonomic monitor to graph my anxiety. Not that he needed one.

"He was my friend. I was just curious."

"Don't insult me, doctor."

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

"Look, we may not have anything damning on you, but with the video, the phone call, your connection to Doctor Barnes, well let's just say it's pretty clear what your intentions were. You were more than a little tempted to join his party, weren't you?"

Before I could answer that every-chamber-loaded question, he stopped me. "You were lucky as hell tonight, but don't count on luck to strike twice. That space you have been flying under the radar in has just gotten considerably smaller."

The tension permeating every fiber of my being had begun to ease. They were going to have to let me go. "So I'm your new assignment?"

"Even if I had the time to stay on your ass, which I don't, I don't believe in entrapment. But I'm not the only one with this information. Consider tonight a friendly warning."

This kind of friendship I could do without. I felt a chill as the sweat began to cool against my skin.

He stood. "You can see yourself out. I've got to get started on those damn reports. That's the penalty for working with the Federal Health Care Task Force; paperwork's a killer." He pointed the way out. "We can have someone drive you home if you'd like."

"I'll cab it, thanks."

"Thought you might." He started to walk toward a cubicle to the right of the interrogation room, then hesitated and turned. "Be smart, doctor."

I couldn't get out of there fast enough.

Monday morning came, as it inevitably did. I made my way up to the thirty-seventh floor where Ms. Johnson was waiting for me.

"So you didn't take the bait," she said wryly.

"No. I did not. You know I don't go for that sort of thing."

"I do now, but I could have sworn you'd go for it and I'm usually pretty good at reading people."

My task had become doubly burdensome. I felt like I was working under even more of a microscope than I had before. But I endured. And I thought about Doug. Constantly.

A couple of weeks later, Mr. Winthorp came by again on a Friday afternoon, still in pain and still begging me to examine his neck. There was nowhere else for him to go; I was his assigned provider. Once again, I turned him down and it ate me up inside.

It was getting harder to look at myself in the mirror, harder to accept what I'd become after seeing that there was another way for those willing to do what needed to be done. Sure, they'd caught Doug, but there were dozens of clinics that managed to stay under the radar, if you believed the blogs. I never had. I desperately wanted to now.

Still, it was tough to ignore Officer Cornell's warning.

That night, the pros and cons played in my head a hundred times over as I lay in bed praying to be mercifully overtaken by sleep. For once in my life, I had a decision to make for which I wished there *was* an answer tree to guide me.

At 2 AM, I awakened with a bolt. "Doc Tramer's place...*of course*." The image was plain as day now, the obituary from last Saturday; my old family doctor, the one who used to see me at the office in his house had passed away at the ripe old age of 97. A paragraph of accolades and a statement expressing how sad it was that he had no survivors; his house would be going up for sale.

I pulled up the number of an old realtor friend of mine first thing in the morning, then jotted it down and left it on the table while I made some coffee. As I munched on a bagel and sipped my java, my gaze kept straying from the news on the monitor back to that little scrap of paper.

But they're watching you.

Bullshit. You really think you're that important? They don't have time to bother with you. It was just scare tactics.

You willing to take that chance?

I tilted my cup to get one last rush of caffeine, then started to rise from the table. "Ah, *hell*." I spun back and grabbed the note.

The realtor was already waiting in the driveway when I pulled up to the old Tramer place. Doc had been retired for a couple of decades, but his home office was still intact; a veritable shrine to the medical era I grew up in. It looked like he'd taken a lot of pride keeping it that way until the past few years when he'd undoubtedly had to occupy his time just trying to survive.

It was perfect. The office had been out of commission long before the District Clinic system was a glimmer in the eye of the jackasses who created it; the Feds wouldn't even know this place existed.

A scent of mold hung in the air and the house looked like hell: faded paper peeling off the walls, archaic appliances, incandescent light fixtures; a realtor's nightmare. But mostly cosmetic stuff I could deal with myself. I made an offer on the spot. She couldn't get the contract to me fast enough.

*

Weekends had always been my cherished time, the outdoors my playground. Whether it was people-watching in town, or escaping to the little park land that remained within commuting distance, I'd spend my days trying to commune with the things that made life worth living.

But now, I had the perfect retreat. The quaint house was nestled next to a neighborhood park, with a beautiful view of the foliage from the second floor master bedroom window. I began spending my weekends there and the renovations went quickly. Within a month, I was ready for my first visitors.

Boredom and security were about to be replaced by fulfillment and paranoia.

I had kept the décor very retro. Faux-oak paneling warmed the walls in the foyer; the leather sofas were real. I admired my handiwork as I prepared for my first Sunday afternoon clinic. Taking a page from Doug's failed attempt, I was determined to fly solo on this.

Easing back into a well worn sofa cushion and relishing the faint moldy scent of the period throw rug scavenged at a flea market, I folded back the sports pages of the January issue of the New York Times, the last newspaper still printed in hard copy. The monthly edition didn't even try to keep up with the kind of breaking news coverage you could get on the Net, but the in-depth human interest stories were compelling, and there was no substitute for the satisfying feel of brittle pages of newsprint crinkling through your fingers.

The nostalgia of a simpler time, a more *humane* time, soothed my soul.

As I sat enjoying the moment, a mellifluous chime reminiscent of the period redirected my attention to the double front doors, where an adjacent monitor lit up with the familiar face of Mr. Winthrop.

I smiled and buzzed him in.

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