The Dedicated Doctor

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The Dedicated Doctor smiled reflectively as he straightened his blue-striped tie and immaculately pressed white shirt with the care of one prone to a slight tendency of obsessiveness. *Thank God it's Wednesday*, he thought with an internal feeling of heartening anticipation. *Teaching rounds break up an otherwise tedious week of wandering these white corridors.*

"Jenny, how's my favorite nurse?" he inquired mischievously as he approached the slightly built woman seated at the main desk. Penny, a senior nurse who had worked on the floor for over thirty years, correctly assumed that this was directed at her and smiled indulgently at the veteran neurologist. Her kind face, with fine lines drawn by years of experience and nights of labor, contrasted against the fresh-faced male recruit who sat next to her, looking rather discomfited and, the Doctor thought, much too young to be a nurse. But perhaps it was just he who was getting old.

"Here's your list for rounds, Doctor," Penny said, handing him a typewritten sheet and warily observing a wandering male patient who appeared to be headed into a room occupied by two elderly women.

"I'll try not to be too hard on the residents today," he replied, giving her a quick wink.

"You'd better not be—they come just to spend time with you!" She glanced back toward the roaming patient. "Mr. Parker, why don't we go visit Mr. James instead?" she called, dashing off.

Walking toward the visitor's area, he saw two young women and a young man before him. They were all dressed in identical white coats, with Queen's Square hammers looped through the button holes and stethoscopes adorning the lapels. First, there was Jennifer, a pretty brunette with a sweet disposition who was always the first to reach out and hold a patient's hand or give a soothing pat on the shoulder. Margaret, whose shirt and skirt were tucked even more obsessively than his, had the strongest aptitude for neurology of the three. He had encouraged her on more than one occasion to consider entering the neurology training program; she would smile at him indulgently and assure him she was considering it. Finally, there was James, who, beyond a doubt, was one of the most hopeless residents that the Doctor had ever come across. James' Queen's Square hammer was sticking pointed-end straight up in the air, such that he had already stuck himself twice since the Doctor had approached. Yet he looked a lot like an older version of the Doctor's

son, who also happened to have the same name, so he found it hard to be tough on the boy.

As they walked along the ward, Margaret gently guided the Doctor toward the first door on the right. There they found a tremulous woman with ethereal-looking blue hair, blue eye shadow, and blue painted nails, lying lopsided in bed covered with a homemade blue blanket. Her bright "barn-red" lipstick lined an expressionless mouth that uprighted itself when she saw the Doctor. "Good-afternoon," he smiled. "Jenny, could you tell us about our patient?" he asked, looking at Margaret.

"Mrs. Caplan has predominantly left-sided Parkinson disease," Margaret replied tolerantly. "She has left hand and leg tremor, cogwheeling, bradykinesia, and a shuffling gait. Recently she's been prone to falling and fractured her hip." Her summaries were always succinct, the Doctor thought, as if she had said them many times over.

"James, can you show us how to test her reflexes?" As the boy did so, he was so very awkward that the Doctor wondered if he was trying to elicit a reflex, or hammer poor Mrs. Caplan's elbow back in place. Turning his attention to the understanding elderly woman, who was patiently offering up her arm for sacrifice, he asked with an appreciative smile, "And how are you, young lady?"

"Pretty good, Doctor." Her quivering voice was nonetheless surprisingly strong for one with late-stage Parkinson disease. "How do you like my blue hair today?" she asked, her red lips forming into a maniacal grin.

The Doctor took a deep breath, summoning up his greatest diplomacy. "It matches your blanket well."

"Ah, you noticed!" she chortled, delighted. "I like a little flourish to make me stand out. Comes from my days as a stage actress." She motioned toward several dramatically posed pictures sitting on the table beside the bed.

"Were there a lot of roles for blue hair?" James asked teasingly.

She laughed with obvious enjoyment. "Oh, a few!" she exclaimed, and described several memorable "blue hair" performances. As she finished, she asked, "You know the 'Blue Man' group? Why, they got it all from Edith Caplan."

The team laughed. Jennifer smiled, "It sounds like you were quite a famous lady in your day!"

"Yes." Her eyes turned slightly downcast. "You know," her nonblinking eyes were distant and reflective, "I would give anything to go back to that time.

It's not fair." She looked at the Doctor with an introspective look. "But at least I have my memories," she whispered. "I'm luckier than many."

He smiled softly at her, and they sat quietly for a moment, upon which Mrs. Caplan brightened and said, "Perhaps I will have green hair for you next week."

"We'll look forward to that!" He winked, and gave her hand a quick squeeze. They left her with a reminiscent gaze of one lost in vivid memories of the distant past.

They saw five more patients that day. Mrs. Grant had an ischemic stroke; Mr. Albert, ALS; Mrs. Dawson, a cerebral hemorrhage; and Mrs. Allan, primary progressive multiple sclerosis. As the Doctor and the group finished with the last patient, they stood in the hallway and reviewed the afternoon. He felt pride in this group for their kind and compassionate attitudes, and he told them so.

"Thank you, sir," Margaret replied quietly.

As he watched them leave the ward, he found himself feeling strangely empty. He always greatly looked forward to these Wednesday afternoons of teaching. But why did he suddenly feel so lost?

Penny looked up at him as he passed the desk. "Thank you, Doctor."

The new nurse, whose name was Timothy, looked on with uncertainty as the distinguished-looking Doctor proceeded to walk slowly down the hallway. Timothy hadn't worked in a ward like this before. "You don't mind that, Penny?"

Penny glanced up from her paperwork. "No, not at all." Looking over at him, and then at the immaculately dressed doctor, she commented, "He's quite amazing, isn't he? One of the most dedicated and kindest neurologists I have ever known."

"The people he visited certainly seem to love him," Timothy replied.

"Yes," Penny said softly. "It was always that way.

For forty years, every Wednesday afternoon, he would come to do teaching rounds in this hospital. *Forty years*. And so it wasn't surprising when, one Wednesday, he came to the nurse's desk and asked for his patient list. Well, we walked around and visited with the patients and I've never seen anyone light up so, and the other long-term patients did too. They love it even more when they have a whole audience of 'residents.'"

"Who are they?" Timothy asked, gazing after the three white-coated visitors who were now leaving the ward.

"Why, they're his three children," Penny smiled. "He doesn't really recognize them on a daily basis, but this is one time of the week when they get back their father." She paused and looked as if her thoughts were miles away. "He would be so proud of them, you know. Jenny's become a nurse, Margaret, a neurologist, and James . . . I think he does pretty well at rounding for a lawyer, doesn't he?" she grinned. "I wonder, Timothy," she looked pensive. "Who helps more . . . the 'real' doctor who stops by here once a month and changes a medication or two, or our Doctor, who every week sits by his 'patients' beds, holding their hands and listening to their stories."

Timothy sat back thoughtfully. "Every face here has a whole life history, doesn't it? But how ironic that the disease he made his life's work was the one that took everything away."

Penny smiled. "You know, I think it's the other way around. Perhaps the Doctor was destined to get Alzheimer's, but in some ways, it is his life's work that has been his greatest gift and salvation."

They both looked after the Dedicated Doctor as he walked down the hallway. He now had a spring in his step and a smile on his face. In just one week, it would be Wednesday again, and this made him happy indeed.

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