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The 9 o'clock patient

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We could talk about his Parkinson disease, but he does not seem to notice it much. He wants to tell me about the fish he caught in the farm pond, a 6-pound bass, 21 inches long, with a mouth so big you could put your fist in it.

"They can fight," I say.

"Oh, he didn't fight much. My daughter grabbed the rod and pulled him right up to the bank."

It turns out she got a picture, too, on her phone, and helped put up the beans and bring in wood from the oaks downed in the last storm.

He points to a box. "You like tomatoes?"

Six beautiful late-season tomatoes are lined up in a box that once held "pink snowballs," a species of cupcake I thought was extinct. I thank him and set it on the desk. We talk about cabbage and cauliflower, and the 200-pound pumpkins at the farmer's market in Pennsylvania. He makes the trip regularly, loading up the truck so full of produce that he has not had room to bring back the tractor tires he had had his eye on.

"You like cauliflower? I'll bring you some. And cabbage. They've got cabbage as big as your head." I nod.

"Got to get back and cut some marble," he goes on.

Before, it was granite to replace the old Formica counters. I remember our discussion at his last visit on the pros and cons of the chainsaw. This requires a skill saw, it turns out, with a safety.

His wife has been watching this exchange from the side, smiling and nodding as his excitement mounts.

"He doesn't set much," she adds.

The 30 minutes is passing quickly. I motion him to the examination table. Knees bent, he moves slowly, still smiling.

"You look good," I tell him after a brief examination. "I don't think we need to change anything."

I see them out.

"I'll bring you that cauliflower," he says with a parting wave.

A few weeks later, the nurse appears at my desk in the back room.

"There's something for you at the front," she says. "I'll help you carry it."

On the check-in counter sit 2 cartons, one filled with apples, the other with cabbage and cauliflower. I share the bounty with the staff. At the end of clinic, I send a thank you note.

October 2015

He is more subdued this morning. Looking straight ahead, he starts to speak as soon as I walk in, before the handshake or the hello. He is harder to understand, I notice, and for a moment I don't.

"You lost a patient," he says, and I pause, confused. As I stand, gathering a response, it comes to me.

"Mr. White. Yes, I know, I saw it in the paper. I saw him not long before he died. It was just after they gave him his Purple Heart. We talked about that."

Two old friends, they discovered each other in my waiting room the day I first met them both. For years after they retired, they made furniture, sharing a workshop. That was before Parkinson disease.

"Yeah, Frank said he hardly did nothing that day, said he got to the beach after the fighting was mostly over."

I suspected there was more to the story. I had seen his picture, standing with another veteran from World War II, receiving his medal and a handshake.

Today, besides his old friend, my patient does want to talk about Parkinson disease.

"Seems like I'm slowing down. After about 3 hours, I can't hardly do nothing. Seems like my legs won't move under me. Sometimes I just have to sit in my chair."

He offers a few more observations: he is stiffer, it takes him longer to get where he is going. No tremor though. We talk about the medicine and I suggest adding another, and maybe changing the dose later if he needs it.

He smiles for the first time.

"I'd like to get up to Lancaster this weekend. She [with a nod towards his wife] won't let me go up there by myself. I'm trying to talk her into going with me. You know, they got pumpkins so big you need a forklift to move them. Got to put 'em on a pallet first. They put their stems in milk, that's how come they get so big."

I am skeptical but say nothing, no expert in the matter of pumpkins. He does not wait for an answer; he is talking now about the wood that needs cutting.

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"Are you still using that chainsaw?" I ask. "I'm not sure I like that chainsaw."

He nods. Another smile.

"Do you wear gloves?"

"No, just get your hands caught is all. More likely to get hurt, wearing those gloves."

"Chaps?"

"No, don't need 'em. The trees are down anyway. I just saw the branches off and cut them up before they load them."

I am relieved to hear he has help. "Let those young guys use the saw. You can supervise, tell them what to do."

He shakes his head. "The fellow who helps me, he's the slowest man I ever saw, slower than me. I can't stand working with him. Got to find someone else to help." He shakes his head again. "I never saw a man who could get less work done in a day than that fellow."

He moves to the examination table. He is slower, stiffer. I ask him to raise his arms.

"Can't get 'em but so high," he says, "Had operations on both of them."

At least he can't lift the chainsaw but so high, I think to myself.

We finish and as I am writing his prescriptions, he says, smiling again, "Maybe I'll find some cauliflower."

As far as cauliflower is concerned, I can take it or leave it, but I do hope he gets to the farmer's market this fall. For a while, I keep watch for the cartons. Fall turns to winter and I find myself thinking of him, especially when driving through the country. I pass small farms and orchards named after the families that have lived in this county for years, as much a part of the land as the mountains and streams. The farmers are aging now, weathered like the barns I see by the side of the road, paint faded but still standing, hay stacked to the rafters. A tractor moves slowly through a field, turning over the dirt. I think of pumpkins, and of wood that needs stacking now that the hay is in.

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