

3,200 words

The Doctor Won't See You Now.

Had an appointment with my new doctor the other day, been seeing him for about a year now. Young guy, foreign, bright-eyes and eager, came highly recommended from a nurse who deals with doctors day in and day out. Needed to find a new one ever since my old one retired. Her practice was 30 miles away and while I loved the service and for sure her replacement would be just as good, I didn't want to travel 30 miles any more, even if it was only twice a year. A lot had changed over the past ten years, the drive downtown wasn't as nice, parking was harder each time and the price of gas wasn't ever going to get any cheaper. So, that's how I became a patient of... we'll call him Doctor Younger.

My last appointment was my 8th or 10th in the past 13 months depending on who's counting. It was the 4th or 5th time I'd been to his new offices in the brand new medical building this side of town. His office – indeed, the entire building – still had that new-paint smell as I walked in at 9:25 for my 9:30 appointment, prescription card and list of medications in hand as the voicemail message yesterday had instructed. I couldn't help but notice that several of the offices were still not occupied. Doctor Younger and his associates had been in here for six months now.

Several patients were already in the waiting area, some thumbing through one of several different kinds of magazines. Each magazine was protected in a clear plastic sleeve and I knew from past visits they were all the most recent issues. A few folks were watching one of the two closed-caption flat screen television that

hung on either wall. It was dead-quiet with the sound turned off and a sign above each TV said to ask the receptionist to change channels. A teenage gal was thumbing her blackberry in one corner of the room while a silver-haired couple sat in the other corner holding hands and wearing long faces. It was the most patients I'd seen in either his old office or new. I noticed the wallpaper had changed since my last visit eight weeks ago, it was now a peculiar shade of purple that seemed to change shades depending on the angle I observed it. Mounted on the wallpaper were several new posters, too, all depicting various bodily systems in full-color cutaway fashion. Blood was depicted red, not blue, in every cutaway except for the circulatory poster. There, the blood was either red or gray depending on what side of the aorta you were on. I thought about my old doctor's office – we'll call her Doctor Older. It had knockoff Rembrandts and Picassos to look at and WJR to listen to. There were no televisions, not a one, and all her magazines were donated Boy's Life, Autoweek, Glamour, Ebony and Doctor Seuss books – all of them months old and some without covers. Most of the new posters in Younger's waiting area were thinly framed in matt gray iodized aluminum, the kind of a frame you'd find in Aisle-4 of any Posters-R-Us Store, but two were framed much larger in a thick, dark mahogany border. It looked like real wood but the Mylar sticker on the side said it was made in China from recycled, color-impregnated, light-weight, scratch-proof and dust-resistant PVC plastic. These two ornately framed posters were further distinguished with the drug maker's name on a brass plaque commemorating the Grand Opening of

Doctor Younger & Associates new offices. Funny, its pill was the same shade as the new wallpaper.

I walked up to the window under the hand-lettered red sign that said Start Here. A red arrow pointed down to the sign-in pad in front of the receptionist's sliding glass window. The window was open but no one was sitting there and I noticed a hand-written letter taped to the glass. It started out, *My Dearest Patients...* I read enough to learn that this practice-of-three was now a practice-of-two due to some pregnancy complication that required Doctor The Third to leave abruptly for Minnesota.

Sign in, please. Is this your first visit? The receptionist more stated than asked as he appeared at the station and took a seat. I'd never seen him before but he spoke perfect, Harvard-type English. Nope, I answered, adding my name to the clipboard and turning it around for him. Ah, you have an appointment with Doctor Younger, he said, like *that* was unusual. Then he handed me a different clipboard, one with several forms on it and said, we need you to confirm your information. I smiled back, took a pen from a ceramic mug full of them and noticed the mug was sponsored by yet another drug manufacturer. So was the pen. I suddenly felt the urge to pee. I turned for the sitting area when I noticed the top form was blank. I thumbed through them and all the forms were blank. I turned around and said, these are all blank. The young man never looked up and just replied, we need you to fill in the information.

I thought for a second then said, but nothing has changed in the two months since I last saw the Doctor. What you have now *is* the most current. I tried to hand him back the clipboard thinking I was done, but he wouldn't take it. He stared me right in the eye and said, we haven't received your file from Mount Clemens yet. What? I asked, almost laughing. I've never been to Mount Clemens Hospital. What name do you have on that file? I figured it was an honest mistake until he insisted; we just need you to fill out these forms. He turned his attention back to the headset and the voice in his ear. Alarms and sirens played between my ears. Why? I said in a slow cadence so there would be no misunderstanding my words, just in case he wasn't as educated as he articulated himself to be. *You-already-have-all-of-this-information. Okay? It-hasn't-changed-in-the-past-two-months-since-I-was-last-here.* To which he mocked, *we-just-need-you-to-fill-out-these-forms- please!* I took in a slow breath and said, probably too loud looking back on it now, but I was facing someone, a much younger man, a stranger, who only knew how to repeat the same words – only in a more disrespectful tone. More importantly, he was disgracing his profession, a profession my insurance premium was paying damn good money for! Either that or he was lying. After a few uncomfortable seconds during which time I could feel my neck getting hot I said rather loudly, you've lost my records, haven't you?

The young man got up and walked away without saying another word.

He returned a few minutes later with the office manager. Now, the office manager was woman whom I had been dealing with since the old office. We'd

talked and laughed on a few occasions about how much nicer it would be once she was in her new digs. I remember she kept an architect's rendering of it on her calendar, and sure enough her new domain was set up exactly as she had described it six months before. I was sure we were about to clear up the whole situation when she stated coldly, I just spoke with the Doctor and he said if you can't fill out the forms you can get another doctor. She said it loud enough so anyone who had heard my comment about lost records would have her official response, as well. Okay, I said, turned and walked out with my head high. I glanced past the silver-haired couple. They were still holding hands, only now they were staring at me, now wide-eyed and white knuckled. As I reached the door I realized they must be former patients of Doctor Third.

In America, anyway, when the truth breaks down everything else implodes with it. Like a big black hole, trust, respect, caring and professionalism all get sucked in with any remaining credibility. Whether or not they lost my files no longer mattered. They were lying about *something*, maybe not about losing my records but *something* and to me it no longer matter what. I heard a Judge once tell someone, *If you'll lie about something when the truth will do you'll lie about anything* and denied the man permission to leave the state. I'll make a formal request to have my records transferred and what comes back to me will tell whether or not they really lost the file or were just too busy to find it and lying was just more convenient.

This was my 10th appointment with Doctor Younger and every time he had been late. Twice, I had to walk out after waiting over an hour because of appointments of my own. Both times he called; apologized, said it was an emergency at the hospital. Both times I said I understood that's fine, appreciate you taking the time to call, sorry I couldn't wait any longer, had my own commitments. He understood and both times we just re-scheduled. Doctor Older never missed an appointment in ten years that I could remember as my footsteps echoed down the hall, out into an almost empty parking lot under a bright, fall day.

It had been a day much like this when I first met Doctor Younger a little over a year ago. That first time, in his old office, he rushed into the small examination room, sleeves rolled up, tie knotted but loose, laptop opened and cradled in his left arm, right hand flying across the keyboard. Hello, I'm Doctor Younger, he introduced himself with the briefest of eye contact. And you are... He pronounced my name with a hard E as he took the chair opposite me. All business-like, I remembered as I got to my car, started it and turned off the radio. Instantly, I liked him back then. First thing he wanted to know was what brought me in? I smiled, introduced myself, subtly correcting the pronunciation of my name and held out my hand. He one-armed the computer and gave me a limp handshake, no smile, but said my name right. I related my leg-knotting up story, starting with what happened a few weeks prior to that first appointment and worked the story back to the first time I remembered it knotting up some 30-odd years ago. But the last two times the leg knotted the pain became so unbearable

that I passed out. Only for a few seconds, though, I explained to Younger, and when I came to, it was like I dreamt the whole thing. There was no pain whatsoever, just a hint of throbbing and a hot feeling where the knot had been just seconds prior. That had never happened before, I told him. In the past, I'd have to limp around to walk it out and a dull, chronic pain would persist sometimes for days. Except, it wasn't a dream because my son saw me both times and my wife heard me fall the second time. Doctor Younger just typed all this into his computer and, looking back on it, I don't think he ever even asked me which leg. He did asked several family history questions, keying my answers into his computer then looking up at me before asking the next question. He asked me about the cholesterol drug I had been taking for years and spoke softly and slowly so I could understand everything through his accent. After several minutes of Q&A, he told the first thing he was going to do was change my cholesterol medication to the newest drug that treats the problem much more efficiently. Coincidentally, it was the drug featured in the faux-framed poster. He explained the dosage would be one-eighth what I had been taking. I asked him if it was more expensive and he said it was a little more but not to worry; insurance would cover it. Then he shocked me when he told me he wanted me to see a neurologist. A head doctor? I said, what for? For your passing out, I want to be sure we're not dealing with a larger issue, he explained. But, it's my leg, I said with some reservation, tapping my leg, in case leg and head somehow got transposed in his native tongue. I might just as well have been talking to one of the posters.

As my car warmed up in the parking lot, I thought back on that first day, how clearly things came back to me... He told me to pick up a stool kit from the receptionist and to follow the instructions with it. He was adamant about mailing it back only in the provided, bio-sealable, postage-paid envelope that was coated with the same stuff that protects juice boxes. He said someone would be in to draw my blood in a minute, asked me if I ever passed out when I gave blood. I shook my head and continued that he was going to send it out to be spectra-something-or-other analyzed but assured me the insurance was covering it as he handed me a referral slip with the other doctor's name and phone number on it. He said he'd see me again after the tests were back and he and the referring doctor had spoken. He sat quiet for a second to see if I had something to say and when I didn't, he got up with his computer still cradled in his arm and his right hand still dancing across the keys and was gone. The cosmopolitan, globe-trotting 21st Century Doctor. I thought he was kinda cool back then.... I took a deep sigh as the car warmed up a lot more than it needed it to, but I wasn't ready to pull into traffic yet. I thought about that referral note, remembered his handwriting was atrocious, remembered, too, that the slip was more like a peal off Post-it note that had been pre-printed with a pharmaceutical company and its product boldly printed on top, remembered, too, that my wife told me the new cholesterol drug was twice as expensive that the old Zocor, and yes the insurance company did pay for it. I put my car in gear thankful to be leaving this cosmopolitan, state-of-the-art parking lot for the last time. I'll find an older doctor, someone not so busy, a practice that realizes quantity without quality is nothing

but bulk. I noticed the elderly couple who had been holding hands; they were leaving, bundled up like it was 30 below. They gave up on him, too, I said to myself and nodded in their direction. They didn't see me; both kept their focus only a few feet in front of her walker. I wondered who they could recommend, thought about asking them but didn't.

As I drove home, past yet another medical building being constructed on this side of town, I remembered my first visit to Start Here and the red arrow, and the first time I'd heard bells and alarms in Younger's office. That was back when the lawn was still dirt, before the parking lot had yellow curbs and geo-friendly green lights, before the dedication and the faux-framed posters. I had been waited to pay behind the patient at the counter. Or, I thought she was a patient anyway, until I overhead the twenty-something with shapely legs tell the receptionist to get a phone book and she would show her. I watched as she reached through the window with a red pen but couldn't hear the rest of the conversation because she'd lowered her voice. When it was my turn I handed her Dr Younger's referral note, paid my \$15 co-pay and glanced at the phone book which was still open on her side of the window. There was a big red check mark next to a ½-page Yellow Pages ad and a red note that said, *This Size*.

I had some reservations last Spring but I did see the neurologist. Once. He ordered up some x-rays then called me the very next day and said he saw something he didn't like, said he wanted to do an MRI. That's about a \$10,000 test, he explained, but said not to worry because the insurance company would

cover it. Like, open-wallet-surgery was my only concern. I showed up for the MRI but walked out when one of the technicians got coy with her answers about what was the worst I could expect to experience, you know, worse case. She said it was better if I don't know that. Whistles, alarms, I said goodbye.

Doctor Younger never did call the next day, or the day after that as I was kinda expecting. I guess he's too busy with the overload of Doctor #3 dumping her patients on him. Her loyalties lie elsewhere now, and his practice and her patients will have to carry the burdened of that truth now. I got some other advice last year from my nurse friend when I told her I needed to find a new doctor, and why. She said, that sounds like a potassium-deficient diet, and told me eat four dried apricots and one banana a day. I told Doctor Younger that, told him the nurse who told me that. His replay was one word: Interesting. As I pulled into my driveway, I realized that I hadn't had an excruciating leg knot in over a year and wonder how much 1,200 dried apricots and 50 bunch of bananas cost compared to one MRI.

Doctor Younger's family practice is not for me or for my family. He may be the best damn doctor this side of a House script, but a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Doctor Younger's practice is clearly more concerned with its own financial wellbeing than its patient's health, and maybe that's not wrong. But it's no reason to lie. The young man that last day could have just as easily said, sorry, we're swamped with Doc-3's patients, no one has had the time to dig out

your file, but if you can give us this much information we can still keep today's appointment, otherwise we'll have to reschedule. But he didn't. He chose instead to set off an unnecessary alarm. His boss, the office manager had a chance to redeem him but she chose instead to trump her own self importance, and maybe she was right, too, in the larger picture it was better to cut this cancer and concentrate on healing the influx of new cells from Doctor The Third. Much better for the bottom line of the practice. I'm sure Younger was pleased with her decision. Me too.

My wife was surprised to see me back so soon. That didn't take long, she said. How'd it go? Better than I could have expected, I said, smiled, and reached for the jar of apricots.

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