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The Ritual

by Rosalyn Hurst

Sitting at his desk which had been rammed into a corner, dominated by the computer, he realised how much he loathed these fortnightly sessions. However, needs must and he would not relinquish his generous NHS pension for the time being, although the drug trials at the clinic were developing nicely. His mood was worsened on learning that he, the top consultant, was supposed to take his morning coffee in a disposable cup. Not him, his professional day would always begin with coffee in his Wedgewood cup and saucer, now by his left hand as usual. He checked his desk, pen to his right, notepad, screen set to the notes of the first patient.

While musing on the future, not so much the acclaim but the financial reward the successful launch of the drug would bring, he noticed with a start, the words at the top of the next patient's sheet. He needed to keep an eye out for potential 'guinea pigs' for the trial and this one looked a real beauty. He pressed his call button and four minutes later she walked in. Perfect. But she had a carer with her.

A quick look, this particular carer might be trouble. He did not like anyone else to attend his consultation, it was not allowed in the private clinic of course, but this, he thought, was yet another indication that consultants could no longer control even their own space. He knew their presence diminished his authority, upset the order of the consultation. To prove the point, he did not get up as they entered, but turned his chair so he could face the patient directly intending to exclude the carer, though she drew her chair into his range of view.

"Mrs Carew, good morning. Can I call you Anna?"

"No you can't," came a swift interjection from the carer.

"And you are?" he asked.

"Susan Smith, I am Mrs Carew's daughter and carer. My mother does not like anyone using the name Anna."

He could have suggested that this was the formal name on the patient's sheet, but instead raised an eyebrow, which conveyed more than words. This was the ritual that patients were reduced to, a first name while he retained his title.

He looked at them both in silence for just a moment, weighing up just how much trouble the daughter could be, but neither looked, how to put it, particularly well educated, not very well spoken and their clothes, just a trifle shabby. Could be alright if handled well, so he continued.

"Anna," he began, but was interrupted by a cough, "apologies," a little laugh, a joke just between us, his eyes twinkled at the patient and she returned a shy smile as if to say, 'Daughters!'

"Mrs Carew you have been referred to me, though you know the prognosis by my colleagues," a small shrug of the shoulders indicating that they were lower beings, not at the top of their game, "and I believe they have talked to you about end of life."

No one spoke, which was unnerving, normally there were sobs or voices of disbelief. He took a brochure, "we believe you might consider volunteering to trial a new drug which might have huge beneficial outcomes."

Quick as any rapier. faster than an assassin's knife, from that daughter, "beneficial for whom?"

He noted the very correct use of English, hmm definitely trouble.

Susan Carew looked at this smooth consultant with undisguised hostility. 'Smooth bastard,' she thought reflecting on the lost weeks during the lock down the Covid epidemic, the useless telephone consultations and what an oxymoron they were. Then last week an actual hospital appointment followed by full scale panic, increasingly sympathetic interviews and a gentle crawl up the hospital hierarchy to be given a clinic with this self proclaimed little god. It was the way the harassed front line staff told her mother she was being referred to The Top Man, This was the pinnacle, and how privileged they should be that He should see them.

And, she thought, no way was he going to experiment on her mum. She saw the calculation going on in his eyes, Mum wasn't more than a lab rat to him And calling her Anna, what a give away. Susan knew it was in all the notes, she had checked herself, her mum hated being called Anna, she was Nancy and had been Nancy since she had left home over sixty years ago. No, she and Mum were going to have the remaining days together, fulfill a modest bucket list.

Nancy looked around the consulting room with some curiosity. Though still very much an office like others, it was the little touches that indicated they were in the presence of The Top Man, as the young doctor had said, it was the china cup and saucer, so no Covid obeying disposable plastic cup, a photograph of The Top Man shaking hands with, 'Oh my god that's Camilla, lovely hat,' and such a nice frame.

She spoke, “you have a lovely view of the Downs, don’t you Doctor Medbalm?”

He replied, “Mr Medbalm actually, I like a view but I like to sit with my back turned to it. I can concentrate on my patients.” He gave a minor wave with his hands, he had regained control, the proper relationship of respect was recognised.

She looked at his hands, were they the hands of a surgeon? definitely didn’t help at home with the washing up that was clear. And Susan, always so argumentative, never really understood the girl, and guiltily thought that her remaining days with her daughter would be so exhausting, endless days out that was for sure.

A little cough and Nancy turned in her seat to see a nurse standing by the door. With all the hustle of the introductions and now Susan and the doctor locked in some argument, she hadn’t noticed her before. The nurse just smiled the most lovely kindly and warm smile.

“Its so difficult isn’t it, when people argue over you, or about you. All these procedures, all these stupid rituals.’

Nancy gave a little nod, this nurse was so understanding, so gentle and yet to competent. The nurse leant nearer to Nancy and whispered in her ear, her breath as gentle as an afternoon breeze in May, a scent of flowers she could remember now so clearly, the ones her grandmother grew, “I could come to you tonight, so more medicines, not more treatments,” “And no more outings” Nancy said aloud with a chuckle.

Susan turned to her mother, “What did you say Mum?”

A might sharply, Mum was apt these days to ramble. The Doctor thought, ‘might be too late, missed the boat with that one, bloody juniors if I had been alerted earlier she would have been perfect.’

And the nurse looked at Nancy and just put her finger to her lips, and then must have slipped out of the room without any one noticing.