

THAT WHICH IS LEFT UNSAID (short version)

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Cast of Characters:

Narrator

Carol/Carol's Thoughts

Mrs. Collins/Mrs. Collins' Thoughts

Mr. Collins/Mr. Collins' Thoughts

Dr. Goldberg/Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts

Narrator: An elderly couple makes their way carefully to the crowded waiting room. Mr. Collins shuffles to the only chair with an empty one next to it while Mrs. Collins goes to sign his name. The nurse, Carol, sees her coming and smiles.

Carol's Thoughts: Won't be seeing them much longer.

Carol: Hello, Mrs. Collins. And how is Mr. Collins today?

Narrator: She doesn't wait for an answer, she knows how he is today, she heard in the coffee room. His treatment failed. Mrs. Collins smiles and nods and signs her husband's name. She turns and watches him look at his feet as he repositions them nearer to the chair.

Mrs. Collins's Thoughts: Peripheral neuropathy. Bill has peripheral neuropathy. That's what they call it. The nerves in his feet and hands have gone to sleep because of the chemotherapy medicines. They said it might happen... prayed that it wouldn't. But nerves grow back. Until then, I need to remember to touch his arm or shoulder or back so that he can feel that I am with him, that I love him.

Mr. Collins's Thoughts: Here to meet with the nice lady doc. Looks like that Jennifer Lopez woman. Mexican or something. Nice to see a woman with some heft to her nowadays.

Narrator: They wait. Their oncologist is in the middle of her clinic schedule at the time of day when she should be done with clinic and on to other consults, then to the floor to see her inpatients. She'll be lucky to get out of here by nine o'clock tonight. She is a middle-aged woman who looks vaguely Middle Eastern or Latina depending on her expression or tilt of

head, the lighting or your prejudices. She scribbles notes in a chart while glancing at the hands on her watch. She does the math and the day elongates. ‘Complete remission,’ she writes in the chart.

Dr. Goldberg’s Thoughts: (not unkindly) Happy next birthday.

Narrator: She flips open the next chart and reads ‘Relapsed’ and the date.

Dr. Goldberg’s Thoughts: If you need tires, buy re-treads.

Narrator: It is a very old joke. Two hours and ten minutes later, she finishes her clinic and moves through the waiting room as fast as she can without breaking into a sprint. She has to pee and it’s going to be close this time.

Mrs. Collins: Doctor!

Narrator: The oncologist turns and sees Mrs. Collins struggling to stand.

Dr. Goldberg’s Thoughts: Damn! I forgot about the Collins consult.

Dr. Goldberg: Please, remain seated. I will be with you in just one moment. Carol? Please see them to my office in five minutes.

Dr. Goldberg’s Thoughts: Gotta pee, gotta pee, gonna make it. I’ll be peeing in ten minutes.

Narrator: The oncologist trots into the bathroom, closes the stall door, and hangs her lab coat on the hook as she feels a little urine leaking.

Dr. Goldberg’s Thoughts: Damn it!

Narrator: She pulls down her dressy pants and underwear, sits and pees for a very long time.

Dr. Goldberg’s Thoughts: I’m going to blow out my bladder one of these days... kidney infection. Should get on a broad-spectrum antibiotic, just to cover. Or maybe just take a break during clinic to freakin’ pee!

Narrator: As she washes her hands in the sink, she takes the first deep breath of the day. She is glad to get all of the talc from the inside of the examination gloves off her hands.

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: Oh my hands.

Narrator: She turns off the tap and shakes off the water. She can see the cracks even when they are wet.

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: I used to have beautiful hands.

Narrator: She swats a moist hand at the misshapen parts of her hair and then just stops looking. There is no time to look. She notices that her lab coat is lying in a puddle of water on the sink counter. She snatches it up, spilling everything out of the pockets.

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: Damn it!

Narrator: She is a person who rarely swears out loud, but often has a running stream of obscenities in her mind. Only once in the last year had she slipped in front of the kids and the au pair, saying 'shit' instead of 'shoot.' She promptly apologized, paid the dollar fine into the swear jar on the kitchen counter next to the stack of take-out menus, and left for work. Now she is on her knees in the employee bathroom, picking up everything that has fallen out of her sodden lab coat.

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: Not the best day. Not for me. Not for Mr. and Mrs. Collins.

Narrator: Carol watches the clock and is able to give the oncologist eight minutes. That's when Mrs. Collins stops staring at the second hand sweeping on the clock, starts tapping her foot, then wakes her husband.

Mrs. Collins' Thoughts: The doctor said five minutes.

Mrs. Collins (sweetly) May we go in now, Carol?

Narrator: Mr. Collins is having trouble locating himself in time because in his dreams he is a young man. He looks down at his wrinkled hands.

Mr. Collins' Thoughts: Old man hands. Old man. Can't feel 'em. Old man hands. Right... look at the woman doctor... bad news coming. But I've seen war. I can take it.

Narrator: The oncologist rushes into her office hoping they are not there yet, but they are.

Dr. Goldberg: I'm sorry – waiting so long – my clinic.

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: Get a grip.

Narrator: The oncologist slips on a new, sharply creased lab coat over her fine knit sweater.

Mrs. Collins' Thoughts: Oh, look at her sweater. I used to be able to knit that fine before I got the arthritis.

Narrator: Mrs. Collins looks down at her crooked fingers and large knuckles covered with papery, spotted skin. Then she looks enviously at the oncologist's hands.

Mr. Collins' Thoughts: She's got heft, this lady doctor. Like Rita Hayworth. Caboose like Jennifer Lopez.

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: Settle yourself. Rough one.

Mrs. Collins' Thoughts: I used to be young and pretty. Had three boys, lost Bill Jr. in Vietnam. Lost another boy to the gay cancer. Bill never talks about Peter, but I remember. One son left. Lives on the coast. Saw him, what was it, two years ago now? My lovely boy. Mark.

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: Calm. Hospice cards in top desk drawer. Give them each a card. Two cards. Sit down and remember that you are the oncologist. You can do this; it is the freaking awful part of the job.

Narrator: The oncologist sits in her large desk chair and feels the sharp crease on the arms of her bright white lab coat.

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: Make it clear. Restate.

Dr. Goldberg: I am sorry, but the course of treatment that you just completed has had no effect on your disease. In fact, the lymphoma has spread. There is no conventional treatment left for you.

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: There, I told them that he will die; now I must wait for it to sink in. I will fold my hands, and wait.

Mr. Collins' Thoughts: I should call my boys. Tell 'em man to man.

Mrs. Collins' Thoughts: If there's no conventional treatment there must be some unconventional type. She'll explain it, this wonderful Mexican doctor. Then we'll sign the papers and start taking the medicine, or come in for the drip medicine like we had to do last time.

Mr. Collins' Thoughts: Maybe I have time to visit them. Last trip. Mark is out on the coast. Other boys are...

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: Give them time. Get this done, then you can go to the floor, see your seven inpatients. Give them time, it's sinking in now. Neuro had better have gotten to Mrs. Wisnewski. If I have to wait for a consult again...Give them more time. Jeez! This is taking a long time.

Mrs. Collins: Bill?

Mr. Collins: (startled) What?

Mrs. Collins: Did you hear what the doctor said?

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: Jeez, he didn't even hear me. Five minutes of my life I'll never get back. Seven patients waiting on the floor. Damn, there are eight...

Mr. Collins: What?

Narrator: Mrs. Collins smiles sweetly at the oncologist, a smile that she would have given her granddaughter if she had ever had a granddaughter.

Mrs. Collins: Tell him again, dear, especially the part about the unconventional treatments.

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: What the – They want more options? I just told them they are out of options!

Mrs. Collins: Surely there must be some new drug that he can try. He's so strong and his nerves are growing back more each day.

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: Peripheral neuropathy is irreversible. I tell every patient.

Dr. Goldberg: As I've explained, Mr. and Mrs. Collins, the cancer is aggressive and I think it's time that we –

Mrs. Collins: Exactly, dear, we must get more aggressive with the cancer. Right, Bill? And Bill did so well with the last treatments. He hardly remembers the sickness!

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: That's because I doubled the dose of his anti-anxiety meds the day of chemo. He doesn't remember because he can't. That's the beauty of that drug. The patient forgets, so I don't have to waste fifteen minutes of my day hearing about how much they threw up...

Narrator: The oncologist turns and pulls a large file drawer open and leafs through some papers, finally pulling a wad out of a hanging folder.

Dr. Goldberg: There is one drug that has recently come to trial for lymphomas.

Mrs. Collins: Bill, isn't that wonderful? A brand new drug!

Mr. Collins: Another round, doc? Okay.

Mr. Collins' Thoughts: I've been to war, I can take another round of chemo.

Mr. Collins: Where are the boys living now, Emma? We should make a trip. Go see 'em.

Mrs. Collins' Thoughts: Don't talk like that – you know that two of them are dead – you won't get into the study if you sound like you have Alzheimer's on top of everything else.

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: Damn it. They don't want people in this study who have higher than grade two peripheral neuropathy. Did I chart that? **(flipping through chart)** I didn't. I can call him grade two, sure, and get him into this study – damn! It's a toxicity study.

Dr. Goldberg: (taking a deep breath) Okay. There is one study that you qualify for, Mr. Collins, but I need to tell you that it is a Phase One trial. That means that it is very new.

Mrs. Collins' Thoughts: Bill will get a brand new drug!

Mr. Collins' Thoughts: I can get a new drug that will fix me up, then the boys will all come home. We can go duck hunting again. I'll even take Peter this time – get him over his sensitive side.

Mrs. Collins' Thoughts: Wait until I call Mark! He'll probably come home to learn all about the new drug! I'll make a turkey. And that stuffing he likes so much. Or was that Peter? We'll have a wonderful meal – mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans. We won't talk about Peter or Bill Jr. this time. No fighting.

Doctor Goldberg: ... that you understand that there could be toxicity issues here. That's actually what the study is all about: finding how much drug a patient can take before there are unacceptable side effects.

Doctor Goldberg's Thoughts: My job is to dispense poisons. I try to almost kill people and hope that they hold out long enough so that only the cancer dies, not the rest of them. It is a fine line to walk, and I have seven patients (damn – eight!) in hospital beds on that line right now. I have to get out of here to see if I've crossed the line, if they will die because of my poisons.

Mrs. Collins: Bill's strong. His nerves are growing back. He can take it.

Mr. Collins: I've been to war.

Mr. Collins' Thoughts: Sent a son to war, too. He came back. Oh, no. And Peter is... gone.

Dr. Goldberg: I'm aware of your service, Mr. Collins. Do you understand what this study entails?

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: Please say yes, then I'm done. Damn, restate.

Dr. Goldberg: Because you should know that hospice is an option now. One you should consider.

Narrator: The oncologist opens her desk drawer and puts her hand on the hospice cards.

Mrs. Collins: No, doctor, Bill wants the treatment. He's strong.

Mrs. Collins' Thoughts: If she mentions 'hospice' again – I swear – as God is my witness, I will slap her across her face.

Mrs. Collins: Please. Let us sign the papers for the study and tell us where to go and when.

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: Nerves do not grow back... need bodies for this study. The last patient we signed up died of a brain hemorrhage. Disease or the drug?

Dr. Goldberg: Here is the consent form. Here is the information about the drug and the Phase One trial. Why don't you take these home and look them over carefully.

Mrs. Collins' Thoughts: If Bill does all the steps, if he does everything just right then God will forgive him for hating Peter, for sending Bill Jr. off to war. God will heal...

Dr. Goldberg: If you decide to participate, I'd like Bill to start on Monday.

Dr. Goldberg's Thoughts: Fine. Another body in the study. Now I can get to the floor, see my inpatients, eight on that line. Have I crossed the line?

Mr. Collins: Hat. Emma, get my hat from the waiting room. Meet you at the elevators.

Narrator: Mrs. Collins smiles at Bill, then at the doctor. She tucks the papers into her large purse, then places her gnarled hand lightly on her husband's forearm so that he can feel that she loves him. Then she listens to her husband of fifty-six years and leaves the room.

Mr. Collins: The wife and me appreciate all your help. But I know it's bad and that this study is more to help this place than me.

Dr. Goldberg: There may be –

Mr. Collins: I may not know all the medical talk, or the long words on the forms, but since you've treated me for a few years, I can read your nice face. So, I'm not sayin' I won't be in the study, and I'm not sayin' I will, but I'd like a hospice card so I can think on it.

Narrator: The oncologist opens her desk drawer and takes a card from the stack. She extends it to Mr. Collins. He walks around the side of her desk and points to his shirt pocket. She slips the card into the pocket.

Mr. Collins: (looking at his hands) Numb. You warned me it could happen. I know it won't get any better. Ever. Can you take a stab? How much time? Good time? So I can visit my boy? Maybe try to fish?

Dr. Goldberg: Two months at the outside.

Mr. Collins: Then it gets... rough?

Dr. Goldberg: Yes.

Mr. Collins: I thank you. I'll say goodbye now in case I don't come Monday.

Narrator: Mr. Collins extends his right hand and the oncologist moves to shake it, but she knows that he won't feel it. So, instead, she slides her body past his outstretched hand, raises her arms and gently hugs him around his neck. And he hugs her back, more with his arms than his useless hands.

