

DR. CAHN'S VISIT (adapted from a short story by Richard Stern)

Dr. Cahn: How far is it now, George?

Narrator 1: The old man was riding next to his son, Will. George was his brother, dead many years.

Will: Almost there, Dad.

Dr. Cahn: What does "almost" mean?

Will: We're on Eighty-sixth and Park. The hospital's at Ninety-ninth and Fifth. Mother's in the Klingenstein Pavilion.

Dr. Cahn: Mother's not well?

Will: No, she's not well. Liss and I took her to the hospital a couple of weeks ago.

Dr. Cahn: It must have slipped my mind. I'm sure you did the right thing. Is it a good hospital?

Will: Very good. You were on staff there for half a century.

Dr. Cahn: Of course I was. For many years, I believe.

Will: Fifty.

Dr. Cahn: Really? As many as that? (Pause) Are we nearly there, George?

Will: Two minutes more.

Dr. Cahn: The day isn't friendly. I don't remember such... such... heat?

Will: It's damn hot. In the nineties. Like you.

Dr. Cahn: What's that?

Will: It's as hot as you are old. Ninety-one.

Dr. Cahn: Ninety-one. That's not good.

Will: It's a grand age.

Dr. Cahn: That's your view.

Will: And mother's eighty. You've lived good, long lives.

Dr. Cahn: Mother's not well, son?

Will: Not too well. That's why Liss and I thought you ought to see her. Mother's looking forward to seeing you.

Dr. Cahn: Of course. I should be with her. Is thi the first time I've come to visit.

Will: Yes.

Dr. Cahn: I should be with her.

**Narrator 1:** The last weeks at home had been difficult. Dr. Cahn had been the center of the household. Suddenly his wife was. Two nurses looked after her. And when he talked, she didn't answer. He grew angry, sullen. When her ulcerous mouth improved, her voice was rough and her thought harsh.

**Mrs. Cahn:** I wish you'd stop smoking for five minutes. Look at the ashes on your shirt. Please stop smoking.

**Dr. Cahn:** Of course dear. I didn't know I was annoying you. I'll smoke outside.

**Narrator 2:** And he was off, but, in two minutes, back. Lighting up. Sometimes he lit two cigarettes at once. Or lit the unfiltered end. The odor was foul, and sometimes his wife was too weak to register her disgust.

**Narrator 3:** They sat and lay within silent yards of each other. Dr. Cahn was in his favorite armchair, the Times bridge column inches from his cigarette. A voracious player, he read it all day long. The vocabulary of the game deformed his speech.

**Dr. Cahn:** I need some clubs.

**Narrator 1:** This might mean he was hungry.

**Dr. Cahn:** My spades are tired.

**Narrator 1:** This meant *he* was tired.

**Narrator 2:** Dr. Cahn's exasperating habits became intensified. His long-term penny-pinching grew worse, especially around the carton of cigarettes he sent the nurse he liked best to buy.

**Dr. Cahn:** They shouldn't charge so much for cigarettes, it's highway robbery!

**Mrs. Cahn:** You're such a penny pincher! Just give her the money.

**Dr. Cahn:** Are you telling me what's trump? I've played this game all my life.

**Mrs. Cahn:** You certainly have. And I can't bear it.

**Narrator 3:** In sixty marital years there had never been such anger. When Will came from Chicago to persuade his mother into the hospital, the bitterness dismayed him.

**Narrator 1:** It was therefore not so clear that Dr. Cahn should visit his wife. Why disturb her last days? Besides, Dr. Cahn seldom went out anywhere. Even his favorite nurse had trouble persuading him.

**Dr. Cahn:** I'll go out later. My feet aren't friendly today. My legs aren't trump.

**Narrator 2:** Liss opposed his visit.

**Liss:** Mother's afraid he'll make a scene.

**Will:** It doesn't matter. He has to have some sense of what's happening. They've been the center of each other's lives. It wouldn't be right.

**Narrator 3:** The hope had been that Dr. Cahn would die first. He was eleven years older, his mind had begun slipping its moorings years ago. Mrs. Cahn was clearheaded, and except near the end,

energetic. She loved to travel, wanted especially to visit Will in Chicago. But she wouldn't leave her husband even for a day.

Mrs. Cahn: Suppose something happened.

Will: Bring him along.

Mrs. Cahn: He can't travel. He'd make an awful seen. It's just too hard.

Narrator 1: Only old friends tolerated him, played bridge with him, forgiving his lapses and muddled critiques of their play.

Dr. Cahn: If you don't understand a two bid now, you never will.

Narrator 2: Dr. Cahn was the most gentlemanly of men, but his tongue roughened with his memory. It was as if a lifetime of restraint were only the rind of a wicked impatience.

Will: Here we are, Dad.

Dr. Cahn: This is a weak elevator.

Will: Mother's on eight.

Dr. Cahn: Minnie is here?

Will: Yes. She's ill. Step out now.

Dr. Cahn: I don't need your hand.

Narrator 3: Will thought each day his mother filled less of the bed. Her face, unsupported by dentures, seemed shot away. Asleep, it looked to Will as if the universe leaned on the crumpled cheeks. When he kissed them, he feared they'd turn to dust, so astonishingly delicate was the flesh.

Narrator 1: How she appreciated the nurses and her children. They = who'd never before seen their mother's naked body – would change her nightgown if the nurse was gone. They brought her the bedpan and, though she usually suggested they leave the room, sat beside her while, under the sheets, her weak body emptied its small waste.

Narrator 2: For the first time in his adult life, Will found her beautiful. It was human beauty. Each day, more and more dropped away. She was down to what she was.

Narrator 3: Each day, she had renounced more therapy.

Mrs. Cahn: Dr. Vacarian was in, he wanted to give me another treatment. I told him, "No more. And no more medicine."

Narrator 1: An unspoken decision had been made after a five-hour barium treatment that usurped the last of her strength (Will thought that might have been its point). After that she made up her mind to go. There was no more talk of going home.

Mrs. Cahn: Hello, darling. How are you today.

**Narrator 2:** Will bent over and kissed her cheek. He didn't know how she'd react to her husband's visit.

**Will:** Mother, Dad's here.

**Narrator 3:** To his relief, she seemed pleased.

**Mrs. Cahn:** Where is he?

**Narrator 1:** Dr. Cahn had waited at the door. Now he came in, looked at the bed, realized where he was and who was there.

**Mrs. Cahn:** Dolph, dear. How are you, my love? I'm so happy you came to see me.

**Narrator 2:** The old man stooped over and took her face in his hand. For seconds there was silence.

**Dr. Cahn:** My dearest. I didn't know. I had no idea. I've been so worried about you. But don't worry now. You look wonderful. A little thin, perhaps. We'll fix that. We'll have you out in no time.

**Narrator 3:** The old man's pounding heart must have driven blood through the clogged vessels. There was no talk of trumps.

**Mrs. Cahn:** You can kiss me, dear.

**Narrator 1:** Dr. Cahn put his lips on hers. Then he sat next to the bed and held his wife's hand through the low rail. Over and over he told her she'd be well. She asked about home and the nurses. He answered well for a while.

**Narrator 2:** Then they both saw him grow vague and tired.

**Dr. Cahn:** Will, I don't like the way she's looking. Are you sure she has a good doctor?

**Narrator 3:** Of course Mrs. Cahn heard. Her happiness wilted a bit, but still she held on. She knew he could not sit so long in a strange room.

**Mrs. Cahn:** I'm so glad you came, darling.

**Dr. Cahn:** We mustn't tire you, Minnie dear. We'll come back soon.

**Narrator 1:** She held out her small arms. He managed to lean over, and they kissed again. In the taxi he was very tired.

**Dr. Cahn:** Are we home?

**Will:** Almost Dad. You're happy you saw Mother, aren't you?

**Dr. Cahn:** Of course I'm happy. But it's not a good day. It's a very poor day. Not a good bid at all.