

Admonitions

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CHARACTERS

WOMAN – A Registered Nurse. White. 30s – 40s.

SETTING

A stage

NOTES

This play takes place in a kind of liminal space.

WOMAN speaks to the audience.

Although she is a nurse, she should not wear a costume that readily identifies her as such.

This is a Kavli Science Play commissioned by Stony Brook University.

Special thanks to Dr. Clare Whitney.

Lights come up.

A woman is standing onstage.

She's not happy to be here.

She takes in the audience for a few beats.

WOMAN

I would say that there's, um.

I would say that there's layers.

Yeah. That's what I'd say.

Do you mind if I smoke?

She lights a cigarette.

I miss, um. I miss Europe.

Paris, especially.

Not that I've been there. But, you know. As a place that I once thought I might go?

And you know, smoke in a café. Next to a man with a five o'clock shadow?

Yeah I miss that.

I missed that. I missed that potential episode of my life that never happened.

I missed it so I could go to nursing school, so I could work, so that, ultimately, I could, I guess, end up here. And have my character questioned by you.

About choices that I made.

Not even choices. No. Not choices.

Decisions.

But not even decisions.

Reflexes.

I would say it's more like reflexes.

No one died. No one was hurt. You realize that, right?

Jesus.

Nonmaleficence. You heard of it?

Nonmaleficence. It means do no harm. That's my main principle. In work, in life. That's what I'm about. If you knew me you'd know that.

Nonmaleficence. Look it the fuck up if you want to. N O N. M A L. Like Mal. Meaning bad. So Non bad. Meaning good. Eficence. Good effing science is what I call it. Don't hurt anyone. Don't do anything stupid. Rule number one.

So, yeah. And I live by that.

I do.

You should really, just, not listen. To things people say about me.

I'm sorry, but if you have a problem with me, or with something I've supposedly done, you've been lied to.

How does that feel?

How does it feel to know you've been lied to?

I'm saying to *know* it. For a fact. That you've been lied to.

How's that feel?

Not good, right?

Pretty fucking terrible, right?

Yeah.

I know.

I would know.

She takes a drink from a water bottle.

Hydration.

She continues smoking her cigarette.

I've, uh,

I've *saved* some lives. If that interests you.

I mean, not that it should be surprising.

Yeah, I've saved a shit ton of lives. What do you think I'm doing all day?

I've saved all kinds of lives.

I've added a lot of years to a lot of lives.

But nurses, you know, we don't care about getting *credit* for it. If our patients appreciate us, the good patients, if they appreciate us, that's all we care about.

That's all any of us cares about, honestly. Being good at our jobs and being good to our families and our friends, and just, being *good*. That's all that matters to us.

Not all of us.

There are exceptions.

There are always exceptions. But there's always the exceptions, right? The exception that proves the rule? I'm not the exception. I'm the rule. I can assure you.

Doctors, I can't really comment on. In terms of what they care about.

In terms of recognition or whatever. I don't know.

They're wired different.

They're like . . . (*whispered*) they're a little conceited.

Not all of them.

Definitely not all.

But, like, a lot of them.

I mean they do really important shit, don't get me wrong.

And you know. They're the ones that get sued. Or blamed. When someone dies. So.

Fine.

If someone had died, that's who you'd be talking to. Right?

You'd be mad at the doctor if somebody *died*. Or if somebody was actually *hurt*. You'd be looking for a doctor to blame.

But, uh, yeah I guess back to me.

Back to your judgment of me.

Your bullshit judgment of me. As if you have the expertise, or the knowledge, or the right... I mean yes. You are absolutely entitled to stand knee deep in the horse shit of your own truth, if that's what makes you happy. If that's what makes you feel superior.

Anyway.

Yes, there are protocols. And yes we break them.

All the time. And yes I have deviated from protocol on numerous occasions. And no, nobody has ever been harmed by it. And no, recommending that a new mother use Similac rather than breast feed her baby is not a crime. Every woman is not the same. Every mother is not the same. You want me to administer care by the book? Okay, well, when all my patients start living their lives by the book, then I'll do that.

The best way I can explain it is, like. Okay, say you're going backpacking.

In, I don't know,

Europe.

Let's just say you're doing that.

Living out this fantasy that never happened for me and never will happen.

I've considered going. I've considered taking a vacation. I could almost afford it now. Especially now that flights are cheap as shit. Let's hope that lasts for a while. But like. I feel like it would be a letdown.

Like, I'm old.

Older. Older than backpackers are supposed to be. I've missed my window to do random shit like that. I have kids. I'd miss them. I'd be stressed. I'd end up having sex with somebody. I'd regret it immediately. I'd honestly rather stay home and complain.

But yeah, okay, back to the scenario. Say you're young, and say you're backpacking.

And you go to some, I guess, forest. Like an old Europe forest. If they still have those. Anyway, a place with trails. A place backpackers go to carry their backpacks around. And you've never been there before.

And I'm there.

—I'm not *me* in this scenario, I'm like a European. Like a tour guide. Like I know the lay of the land, okay?—

And I'm like, Hey, welcome to Europe. Welcome to the forest. And you're like, Thanks.

And I'm like, Where are you planning on going?

And you pull out a map.

Okay, the map in this metaphor is the protocol. You get me?

The medical protocols. The policies. The procedures. The rules. "Breast is best." That's what the map represents.

You get me.

She puts out her cigarette.

Do you mind if I light another cigarette?

Do you mind if I just act like a fucking chain smoker for the duration of this bullshit that you're putting me through? Thanks.

She lights another cigarette.

I'm not this mean, by the way.

I'm very nurturing. Mean people don't really become nurses. It's too hard and too stressful to *pretend* to care about people. I truly do care about people. All people. If God forbid you suddenly became a patient of mine tomorrow, I'd give you the best possible care I could. No matter who you are. No matter what color you are. I'd give you my best. I would. Just so we're clear.

Okay, so there you are in Europe.

And I'm your tour guide. And you show me your map.

And I look at it and I'm like, Yeah actually, you should probably know, the trails are really dangerous this time of year. There are a lot of muggers on these trails. And they prey on idiot tourists like you. And you don't look like you can fight off a mugger or a forest monster or whatever is lurking in the woods. So I'd recommend that instead you go—

And then some fucking med student pokes their head in and they're like **WHY AREN'T YOU FOLLOWING THE PROTOCOL!!**

I mean?? RIGHT!?

And now I have to stop doing my job and explain that to blindly follow the protocol every time regardless of whether or not a given patient looks like they can handle it, is fucking stupid.

Do. No. Harm.

Nonmaleficence. Remember?

So anyway the moral of the backpacking story is: You're the tour guide for a reason. You've got to know more than just what's on the map. And you've got to follow your gut. About what to tell your patients.

AKA where to send your tourists.
And where *not* to send them.

And I'm sorry it's this way but . . . sometimes you have to save people from themselves.
And when those people are new mothers?

Work in an ER for a little while. I promise you. Work in a maternity ward. The first time you have to treat a newborn that's going through withdrawal?
Or a baby, or a toddler that's been hurt? And nobody will give you a straight answer?

I know some people are dealing with a lot of shit.
I get it.
But at a certain point, you do get numb to it.
You have to. You can't not go numb eventually.
To the sad truth
That you just can't trust some people.

Like the way you don't trust me.

Because you think I didn't follow the rules.
Or at that I'm some kind of...
I don't even know what. I don't know what you think. Or why you think it.

You know who breaks rules all the time? On the fly?
Surgeons.
There's a plan before you start cutting. There's a roadmap. There are predetermined procedures. And then when you're in there you see what's really going on and what do you know? Some surgeons decide they need to improvise.
And who questions them? If the patient survives and recovers who questions them?

NOBODY. DIED.

NOBODY EVEN GOT THEIR FEELINGS HURT.

THE BAD PATIENTS DON'T CARE. AT ALL. NONE OF THEM DO. HALF OF THEM DON'T EVEN LOOK ME IN THE EYE.

THEY TELL ME THEIR LIES, I ROLL MY EYES, THEY ROLL THEIRS, THEY GET DISCHARGED, THEY GO HOME.

IT'S OVER.

That should be the end of it, right?

I'm not arguing against "breast is best." Okay? So if you're like a bunch of boob crusaders, calm down. I'm not arguing with you. You're right. It's been proven. Everyone knows the science.

But the idea that I'm hurting someone. Because I suggested that a woman going through heroin withdrawal try Similac? Instead of risking whatever she puts into her system being passed on through her milk?

You have to be *kidding* me.

My patient who ended up *complaining*? Actually it wasn't her directly, the complaint came from the family, apparently.

She never once looked me in the eye.

I'd ask her if she was taking her prenatal vitamins. She'd say, "Yeah."

No eye contact.

None. Like, she didn't even bother to try to sound convincing. She just decided, when I walked into the room, she decided, You know what, I'm gonna lie to this bitch. And there's nothing she can do about it.

And she was right.

I don't have any recourse. If a patient lies, they lie.

She happened to be black. This woman. Which, if I'm honest, I was probably trying even harder to trust her. Because, like.

I get it.

I get that there's

You know,

A divide.

White women, if they're ghetto, and if they're lying to me, I don't even try. Black women, I'll try. White women, no. Like this one white girl—she tells me she's taking her iron supplements. I check her hemoglobin. She's low.

I tell her that I know she's lying. She doubles down. She's like, Maybe someone tainted the test results.

Can you believe that?

I'm smoking another cigarette.

She lights another cigarette

If my doctor asked me if I smoked, and how much I smoked,
I would tell the truth.

I wouldn't lie.

They need to know.

They need to know so they can take care of me properly.

So, I talk to a friend of mine. Who also happens to be an RN. And who happens to be black. And I don't do that thing where I casually drop the fact that I have black friends as a way to like, prove anything. What I'm saying is – I asked for my friend's perspective on this. Because she also knew this patient. The black patient.

'Cause I wanna know, you know, is it me?

Why is the family complaining about me?

Why is this a thing?

Is it something I said?

Or did?

Is there something about the way I interact with her that puts her off?

And it turns out,

My black friend,

Does not like being put in the position of having to speak for other black people.

She refuses to speculate.

Refuses even to give me her impressions of the patient.

Well, no, she did kind of say one thing:

She kind of,

When I mentioned the patient's name,

She rolled her eyes.

So, um.

That's what I have to go on.

In terms of an outside perspective.

And uh...

...

And I guess yours.

Your perspective.

...

I don't know if I'd listen to you, honestly.

If you had something to share?

Yeah, no. Probably not. Probably definitely not.

There were a few years. Just after I started. There were a few years there. Where I, like, was really really nice to everyone even when they weren't nice back. And I felt pretty happy. Most of the time. On the whole, I remember being a lot happier. Maybe that's just the way memory

works. Because in the end happiness is more real. I don't know, someone told me that once and it made sense.

I honestly can't remember what I thought of the patients. At the time.

I think I just kind of told myself that my patients were good people. Even if that was later proved otherwise.

And I guess it was just... eventually it was proven otherwise a lot of times.

Or at least, enough times.

To make an impression.

And my reflexes adjusted, I guess.

Does that mean I sometimes treat a patient unfairly? Through no fault of their own? I'd like to think the answer is no.

But I don't know how to totally avoid,

You know,

Reality.

Everything seems a little impossible right now.

I mean.

Could I be better at my job?

I could.

Sure I could.

I mean I used to be.

I think.

But.

Well.

I'm not.

I'm just.

I'm uh . . .

I'm going to keep smoking now.

She smokes.

And smokes.

And smokes.

END