Twelve Years and a Doctor

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Abstract

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He stood up, and from where I lay, he looked like a very tall column holding up the ceiling. His deep gray eyes looked down on me thoughtfully.

"Where's your doll?" he said.

"Which one?"

"The one you take when you're going some place."

"Where am I going?"

Just like that. I looked at him hard—as hard as my twelve years had taught me to look—but his face hadn't changed a bit. He was still Dr. Larson. He was smiling just a little and the light bulb was making deep shadows around his mouth and eyes. He looked like my father did after a meeting with the board of directors.

"Can my daddy go?"

"Sure." The smile faded slowly and he sat down again. "But your daddy won't be able to stay with you all the time."

"Oh." I didn't know what else to say. I could see he wanted me to say it would be all right. After all, I was twelve years old—I was a big girl. But I didn't feel big; I didn't feel the least little bit brave. And just then the pain came again, and I didn't think of much of anything at all until later.

There was a nurse standing there. I was on a higher bed and someone had changed my pajamas—but Dr. Larson stood there just as before, only taller it seemed. One of his big, square hands was on my forehead. It was firm and smooth and cool.

"It hurt, didn't it." He said it very softly, so the nurse couldn't hear.

"Yes." I made a tear squeeze out and wander down my cheek.

"It's going to hurt again."

"Oh."

"I'm going to make it hurt."

"You mean you're going to do it on purpose?"

"That's right." His voice was easy and slow. "You see, if I don't make it hurt, it'll hurt by itself for a long time."

"Oh."
I wondered what would happen if I said no. I didn't want him to hurt me.

* * *

I remembered the time I had the measles and he came to put up the big orange sign and look at my tongue and told me not to scratch. I didn't like him. I wanted to scratch. But I didn't. Dr. Larson said not to, so I couldn't.

I remembered the time when he had to sign a little pink card for me so I could go to camp. I had been painfully humiliated and spent the whole fifteen minutes, while he punched and poked, concentrating on the most evil expression. At the end he had smiled his slow way and signed the card, and I very deliberately had not thanked him and put my whole heart and soul into slamming the door.

I never wanted to see him again, but yesterday he had come again to the house.

"Hi, there," he had said. I had turned my head away but he ignored me and started rubbing my leg and asking where it hurt and drawing big purple circles and lines on it. Another doctor had come, who was round and bald and whose hands were fat. He kept shaking his head and he reminded me of a fish that I watched Dad clean once. Dr. Larson hadn't liked him either, I could tell by the way his hands fidgeted, and finally he sent him away.

* * *

"Where's daddy?"

"He's out in the hall." He was leaning over the bed with his grey eyes half closed and speculative.

"Can he come in?"

"No."

It didn't occur to me to ask why. He had said no. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I won't hurt you anymore than I can help. You know that."

"Of course."

He took a deep, sudden breath and straightened up, laughing.

"Women," he said. "God!"

But I knew it wasn't me. And it wasn't God. It was Dr. Larson.