

“So, what brings you in today?”

She sets aside a battered, outdated issue of *People* magazine and adjusting the small gold cross hanging around her neck begins to speak in her low, slightly southern drawl. She interrupts each sentence to crack jokes at herself and sigh at how she really needs to start exercising again. Her short, curly hair has been box dyed an orangey red and combed through so that it hangs in cotton ball poofs at each side of her face. She flicks the ends of her chipped pink manicure against the corner of the magazine as she talks. Amidst the small talk about her work as a secretary at a local middle school and her long drive to the hospital in the early fall rain, I take notes on Linda Humphrey’s story.

Yes, her symptoms have been improving. No, they have not gone away altogether. Yes, she uses the suppositories she was given at the last visit and has been using the cream we’d suggested religiously. No, she and her husband have not been sexually active in the past four months since we last saw her. She has been feeling better, but still a little “off, ya know, down there.”

“I just really want to exercise, ya know? It helps my depression and I just don’t feel up to it when I’m dealing with this—it’s just so *messy*. And, well, I need to lose some weight.” She laughs nervously and gestures vaguely at her abdomen.

I can feel minutes passing to the cadence of her slow and garbled twang and I know that I’ve been in the room for too long. “I understand. Well, let me talk to Dr. Cook and we’ll see what we can do to get you back to the gym. Do you have any other questions or concerns?”

I immediately regret my offer of assistance as she launches into yet another cycle of self-deprecation, wistfulness and finally weak humor. I am physically backing out of the room and Linda has twisted 180 degrees at the waist just to maintain eye contact as she rattles again through her story in her train track voice.

“Okay. Sounds good. I’ll be right back.” I close the door on Linda’s expectant gaze and hustle down the hallway toward the workroom. It’s been too long. I know that Dr. Cook will tell me it’s been too long.

Dr. Cook smiles at me mirthfully as I sit down to begin my report.

“I’m sorry that took so long,” I begin. “She was chatty.”

“Yes, she is,” says Dr. Cook, lifting her chin and peering down her nose at me. “She’s very depressed and she’s been dealing with this infection for a long time.”

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We enter the room together. Linda is sitting with her back to us on the exam table, drape sheet wrapped tightly across her legs leaving a wide stripe of her bare, pale backside clearly visible from the doorway. Dr. Cook opens with her normal string of pleasantries

and expertly dodges Linda's attempts to re-launch additional accounts of her recent challenges and victories, and determination to resume physical activity. I stand with my back plastered against the cool wall, waiting to be told what to do. Linda's floral print turtle neck and faded jeans sit folded neatly on top of her walking shoes on a chair in the corner.

"I'm not going to have you do a pelvic exam, Rachel," Dr. Cook says to me as she positions herself between Linda's legs and raises the sheet covering her. "Her vagina is already irritated. Would you want two pelvic exams if your vagina was irritated?"

I shake my head.

Dr. Cook inserts two fingers into Linda's vagina and paws methodically around her abdomen, as I've seen her do with so many other patients before. But then, her face changes. Her chin drops, and her gaze turns from me to Linda. "What is in your vagina?" she asks.

"Um, nothing?" she rattles, with an uneasy laugh, her eyes darting back and forth between Dr. Cook and myself.

"Yes...yes, there's something in there..." Dr. Cook slows and her eyes shift. She stands up from her stool and looks Linda directly in the face. "What did you put in your vagina?"

"Nothing!" Linda is blushing and there is a note of panic in her voice, which is now faster and higher pitched. "I haven't put anything up there!"

I try to stay stoic, but can feel my heart beat quicken and my eyes get wider. I think that maybe if I stand very still, everyone will forget that I am in the room.

Dr. Cook grabs a speculum and expertly maneuvers it into place. She grabs the adjustable light from the side of the exam table and focuses it between Linda's legs. "Yes, there's something in there. Are those—oh! Are those the suppositories I gave you?"

"Oh, hahaha, yeah, I guess I did put those up there."

I feel the breath I didn't know I was holding quickly rush out between my pursed lips and Dr. Cook turns to me, smiling.

"Rachel—Rachel come here. Sit down. Do you see that? Those are the suppositories we prescribed. They are still in the wrapper."

I sit down at the stool between Linda's legs and peer down the still open speculum. At the end of her vagina I can see very clearly a not-a-cervix.

“So you’ve inserted the suppositories with the wrappers on—you need to take the wrappers off before you insert them.” Dr. Cook’s chin raises again as she speaks to Linda, who is flushed with embarrassment. I can see tears gather in the corners of her eyes.

“Oh gosh. How stupid. I’m so stupid!” She laughs, and her voice cracks--a deep, sad sound.

“That’s okay!” Dr. Cook goes on. “It could happen to anyone. I’m just going to have Rachel take them out.” She hands me long handled forceps and pulls out the drawer at the end of the exam table, placing a towel in the bottom of the built in metal bucket for me to dump the offending objects.

I inhale sharply and look up at Linda as I reposition myself on the stool, my smile grasping desperately for “reassuring.”

I grab for the first plastic edge. Success. I tug gently and it dislodges from the tangle of two months’ worth of weekly suppositories. I drop it in the metal bucket. The blister packs have sharp edges, ever so slightly scalloped where they had been torn from their boxmates at perforation. As I pull them out, one after another, a ribbon of blood begins to trickle from Linda into the bucket at the end of the table. I find myself wincing with each pull, but Linda doesn’t flinch—she just continues to mutter about how stupid she is in that slow, sad twang. Dr. Cook assures her kindly that it could have happened to anyone.

“Well, I think you’re going to feel like a new woman!” Dr. Cook exclaims, tilting her head to the side and smiling warmly. “Let’s just do a quick wet prep and see if that yeast is all gone.”

She hands me long handled cotton swab, which I try to touch to a place unscathed by sharp plastic edges and we are out the door to the lab. “Oh, yep—do you see what that is?” Dr. Cook steps back from the microscope and gestures for me to look. I see a fuzzy mess of nothing. “Hmmm...” I say, trying to remain non-committal.

“That’s candida. Don’t you see the yeast cells?”

*No.* “Um, yes! There they are.”

“Well, we’re going to have to treat with gentian violet. Gosh—you’re having a good day! You’re probably having the best day of any of the students in clinic this week!”

I follow Dr. Cook back to the workroom where she sits down next to her nurse, Dana. “Dana, ask Rachel what she just pulled out of Ms. Humphrey’s vagina!” she exclaims. Dana turns to me with a smile and wide eyes. As I tell her, she bursts into peals of laughter.

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When we reenter the exam room, Linda is exactly as we left her, legs still in stirrups and head back against the exam table. Her magazine lays forgotten on the floor below the chair with her folded-up turtleneck.

“Alright Linda,” says Dr. Cook. “We did see some yeast under the microscope, so I’m going to have Rachel paint on the gentian violet like Dana did for you last time, okay?” Linda nods. “I know this is kind of messy, but it does seem to be helping. Did you bring some underwear you don’t mind staining?” Linda nods again.

“Alright, Rachel. Sit down.” Dr. Cook gestures for me to sit down on the stool at the foot of the exam table.

I position myself between Linda’s legs and raise the sheet. I carefully insert the speculum and using the long handled cotton swabs Dr. Cook hands me, begin to paint the walls of Linda’s vagina a deep, vibrant hue of purple.

“Don’t get any of this on your clothes. It will never come out,” Dr. Cook warns me as she hands me a fresh, purple swab.

“Now,” Dr. Cook continues, “you’ve painted both *sides* of her vagina, but the speculum is covering up the *top and bottom*. How do you think you can get the gentian violet on the *top and bottom*?”

I pause, waiting for an answer.

“I want you to pull the speculum out just a little bit, then paint above and below,” she says.

“Above and below?” I am incredulous. *If I paint this woman above and below the speculum, I am going to ruin a lot more than her underwear*, I think.

“Yes!” Dr. Cook says with a hint of exasperation. “Now pull the speculum out just a little bit...”

Not wanting to torture Linda any more than she already has been, I decide to feign confidence as best I know how and gingerly pull the speculum out about an inch. Sucking in my breath I reach around the handle of the speculum with my left hand to paint Linda’s vulva purple.

“*NO.*” Dr. Cook grabs my hand. “Above and below *in the vagina.*” She takes my hand, places the cotton swab inside the vagina and paints the upper and lower walls in the inch exposed by the slowly regressing speculum. I can feel my cheeks burn. Of *course* she meant in the vagina. *How could I be so dumb?*

“Good. Keep going like that,” Dr. Cook coaches from over my shoulder as I continue pulling back an inch at a time and painting the newly exposed bits of pink skin.

And then we are done and it is over and Linda sits up and covers her lap with the sheet and we fold the stirrups up and put the speculum in bucket of tools to be cleaned and it is like it never happened.

“So I’m sorry the yeast isn’t gone all the way yet but it sounds as if it *is* getting a lot better,” Dr. Cook says to Linda. “Let’s have you come back in two months and see Dana for another wet prep and in the meantime you can keep using the same treatments. I’ll bet they work a lot better with the wrapper off!”

Linda drops her gaze and laughs. “Yeah, probably. Thank you, Dr. Cook.”

“No problem!” Dr. Cook answers cheerfully. We leave the room and hurry to the last patient of the day, who is a well-coiffed, elderly woman with a warm smile and a rhinestone-studded broach clipping her scarf across her shoulders. She has brought her husband to discuss the success of ongoing treatment for vaginal dryness.

“Have you been using the suppositories I prescribed to you?” Dr. Cook asks.

“Yes,” she answers.

“Do you take them out of the wrapper?”

The patient pauses and raises her eyebrows, “No! I just pop them in there, wrapper and all!” she scoffs, rolling her eyes with a good-natured laugh.

“You’d be surprised!” Dr. Cook says, chin up. “Ask Rachel here about the patient she just saw!”

The woman and her husband both turn to me, smiling. I pause, then quickly recount my tale. “Oh my goodness!” the patient exclaims through laughter, “of *course* you unwrap them!”

I think of Linda, who has likely begun her long drive home in purple stained underwear. I wonder when she will be able to exercise again.