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A Human Face

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Annabelle Braxton broke the first rule of doctor-patient relationships when she did not meet the girl’s eyes. The girl was sixteen, and she reminded Annabelle of herself at that age, quiet and focused on her own thoughts. Annabelle was twenty-six years old, a doctor for only a year and not old enough, she felt, to say anything that would comfort the girl, whose name was Laura. Nor could she stand up to the girl’s mother, who was ready to take her agitation out on anyone.

“The pregnancy test is positive,” Annabelle announced.

“Are you sure?” the girl’s mother asked sharply. Annabelle was in the middle of taking off her glasses and removing a sleeper from the corner of her eye. It saved her from having to look at the mother, Mrs. Fields.

“Yes,” Annabelle replied. She put her glasses back on to find Laura just raising her eyes.

“I’m pregnant?” the girl whispered. Her eyes fastened on Annabelle’s and held them for a moment. Annabelle wanted to talk to her like that, eye to eye, but again the doctor found she had to look away in order to speak.

“I’m afraid so,” Annabelle said.

“What if there’s been a mistake?” Mrs. Fields asked.

“It’s an accurate test.”

“Well, maybe we should schedule another one, just in case. I told you, Laura is often irregular, and she’s prone to the flu.”

Annabelle didn’t answer; she was preoccupied with watching Laura herself who sat with her head down, clasping and unclasping her hands. Annabelle had the routine things to say, but she could not find the correct tone of voice. It was not her first encounter with teen pregnancy. Annabelle had worked in an emergency room and family planning clinic as a resident, but these places were different. They moved quickly, and most of the people who came in, the girls, were underprivileged and remote from Annabelle. If Annabelle had gotten pregnant at sixteen, she would not have gone to such a place. She would have come here with her own mother, as Laura did, to a quiet obstetrics and gynecology office where most of the patients were older and hoping for babies (or if they were not, sighed and said it was a pleasant surprise).

“Excuse me, I’d like to schedule another test,” Mrs. Fields repeated, louder.
"Yes, I heard you. I really don’t think it’s necessary."
"You can’t make a mistake? I see, the doctors in this office are infallible."
Mrs. Fields folded her arms and turned towards the wall.
"No," Annabelle replied. "Not infallible." She didn’t know what else to say. She felt her handling of the present situation indicated fallibility.
"Well, I’d like to make sure," Mrs. Fields said.
"Mother, can we go?" Laura separated her hands and put them on either side of her, hooking them on the table. She was inscrutable, and Annabelle searched rather desperately for the line that would compel her to react, a word of comfort, reassurance. But the more Annabelle panicked, the more she found herself sticking to a doctor’s script.
"I need to give you some things before you go: pamphlets, instructions, things like that. And you need to make another appointment for a month from now."
"Wait a minute, wait a minute," her mother said. "You’ve run one test. We’re making another appointment for tomorrow."
"You can certainly do that, Mrs. Fields, but it will be another charge."
"I threw up five times today," Laura said abruptly. "Five times. That’s morning sickness, right?"
"Yes, I can make some suggestions to alleviate that," Annabelle replied.
"I can’t keep anything down, but I’m still gaining weight."
Annabelle nodded in the girl’s direction, and Laura looked down at the floor.
"You might try reducing your intake of starches, for one—"
"Did you say starches?" Laura’s mother interrupted.
"Yes."
"You mean carbohydrates? What is she going to eat?"
"We’ll go over that."
"I didn’t worry about my starches when I was pregnant with her." The mother stopped when she heard herself say that, and Annabelle thought she heard the woman gasp. Perhaps it had just come home to her that her child was going to have a child, that the experience of motherhood no longer separated her from her daughter. The hush in the room called for a confident, rallying, compassionate voice, and Annabelle opened her mouth, hoping to provide it.
"The nurse has everything you need," she said. "And the receptionist’s name is Terry. She can schedule another appointment for you. Do you have any questions?" It was a customary inquiry, but Annabelle hated herself for the terseness with which she said it. Laura just shook her head and slid off the table. They did not look at Annabelle as they were leaving.

Outside her office, Annabelle sat on the curb and took off her shoes. She extended her legs, put her hands back behind her, palm down on the warm concrete, and turned her face up to the late afternoon sun. Sara, one of the technicians, had invited her to dinner. Annabelle was waiting for her
to finish cleaning up the lab. Annabelle liked small intimate gatherings, and the idea of eating dinner with Sara and her family appealed to her, or it would have appealed to her had she not felt unsettled by the scene earlier that day. Annabelle closed her eyes and, for a moment, thought of nothing. Then she remembered Laura’s features—brown hair, long thin face, bony wrists, and a class ring wrapped in fuzz on one of her fingers, a boyfriend’s ring, too big for her little hand. Annabelle tried to imagine a teenage boy who was going to be a father, but Laura seemed to exist alone, sitting on the edge of the examining table, all the components of life combined and contained in her body now. The thought made Annabelle shiver, even though it was warm. She wasn’t sure if it was the miracle of life or the terrifying idea of motherhood, even more frightening given Laura’s age. Annabelle remembered the girl’s clothing, typical of a teenager: jeans and a high school sweatshirt, a cluster of earrings in each of her ears. Then she tried to remember the color of her eyes, but here Annabelle drew a blank, as though the girl had only empty sockets, as though she were merely a collection of clothing and accessories. Annabelle wanted to see her again, at once, to rectify this failure of observation. Knowing that was impossible, she felt helpless.

Annabelle, a first year medical student, could feel Dr. Miriam Blacksmith looking at her. Even with her eyes closed, she was acutely aware of Dr. Blacksmith’s presence. The doctor and instructor had almost attained the status of a deity in her mind, and Annabelle wanted to please her. In anatomy, Annabelle had fought her way to the front of the class, successfully identifying, memorizing, recognizing, and regurgitating hundreds of human anatomical features. But this was not anatomy. It was a class on doctor-patient relationships, and Annabelle was on the spot.

“Would you repeat your answer for the class?” Dr. Blacksmith requested.

“I said I don’t know,” Annabelle replied. The class was scattered all over the room, eyes closed. A moment ago, they’d been walking around at random, looking at one another.

“You don’t know anyone’s eye color?” Dr. Blacksmith asked.

“No.”

“Can someone help her out?” Miriam asked.

“Megan has brown eyes,” a voice said. Annabelle could place the voice; it belonged to Jim.

“Yes, you’re right. Megan has brown eyes.” Megan also had brown hair tied up in a bun with one little bobby pin just barely sticking out; Annabelle remembered that.

“So does Kevin,” Jim went on.

“Yes, yes. Anyone else?”

Other voices chimed in with names, colors. Annabelle had not even noticed one girl’s purple color contacts. She had been looking at the girl’s
hands, instead, memorizing her rings in the hope that Dr. Blacksmith would ask about jewelry. If she had only known what she was supposed to be observing, Annabelle would have memorized everyone's eyes. She would have made it a point.

"Does anyone know Annabelle's eye color?" Dr. Blacksmith asked. She received no response.

"Perhaps, Annabelle," Dr. Blacksmith began, "you should start making eye contact with people."

Annabelle jumped when Sara, the technician, touched her shoulder. "I'm sorry," Sara said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's all right," Annabelle replied. She stood up and brushed herself off.

"What are you doing in bare feet? Put your shoes on," Sara said.

"My car's right over there."

"My daughter cut herself on sidewalk glass once, walking barefoot." Sara was a mother of three, and that made everyone younger than her part child. Annabelle liked the feeling of the warm pavement beneath her feet, but she put on her shoes to humor the older woman.

"Sara," she began.

"Yes?" Annabelle wanted to say something about Laura, ask something about the test, pregnancy, motherhood, anything, but no question came to mind. She realized she wasn't ready to talk about it.

"I think I should stay at the office tonight," Annabelle said. It had just occurred to her. She suddenly felt, here in the parking lot, preparing to leave, her thoughts still full of the day, that she could not go and enjoy herself at Sara's. It was wrong after her failure that afternoon. She wanted to do something, perhaps call Laura, apologize, answer questions the girl hadn't asked.

"Oh, you do that enough," Sara protested. "Come get a good dinner. We're having chicken cordon bleu tonight."

"I really appreciate it, Sara—"

"And apple pie a la mode. A sort of celebration." Sara smiled.

"What are you celebrating?" Annabelle asked.

"Let's see, we're celebrating no football practice, no band practice, no ballet, and the fact that George is cooking dinner." Sara tossed her bags into the back seat of her car.

"All the more reason why I should leave you alone tonight," Annabelle said. "Just the family."

"Oh, no, we like company. Puts the children on their best behavior."

"I can't, Sara. I've just been thinking of things I need to do."

"Everything can wait until tomorrow."

"No, there's—"

"I'm not taking no for an answer," Sara said. She folded her arms and almost glared. The action reminded Annabelle of Mrs. Fields, bringing a pang
of remorse. She hated to leave the situation with Laura unresolved, yet she felt she was offending Sara by refusing. Either way, she thought, someone was going to think less of her.

"All right," Annabelle replied. "Just let me grab something." She turned abruptly on her heel and walked back to the office. Once inside, she went to the filing cabinet and searched for Fields; she had decided to take Laura’s file with her. The decision went no further than that, and even this action struck Annabelle as whimsical and sudden. She found the F’s and leafed through them, but Laura’s file was not there. She looked all over the counters and in the boxes but to no avail. Sara reentered and talked to Annabelle through the receptionist’s window.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

"A patient’s file," Annabelle said. She did not want to say anymore. "It’s not in the cabinet."

"Then maybe you’re not supposed to do anything about it tonight."

Annabelle sat down in the receptionist’s chair, tired and troubled.

"Come on. George will have dinner ready soon."

"I can’t imagine what happened to it," Annabelle remarked, half to herself. Sara came around and leaned on the desk in front of her.

"What’s wrong?" she asked Annabelle.

"I have to find this file."

"It will be here—or not be here—tomorrow. You can ask Terry."

"I don’t think I’d be very good company tonight."

"Well, I can’t leave you here. I don’t know what time it is you leave every night, but it’s not right. Come on. I told George 6:30." Sara walked resolutely to the door. "Annabelle!" she called when she got there. Annabelle stood up and cast one last look around the reception area, then followed Sara to the parking lot.

Sara lived 15 minutes from the office in a house surrounded by green. A shock of woods grew up behind it and drooped over it, and someone had taken great pains with the garden. Annabelle noted a small front porch where one could enjoy the evening. The children probably played baseball in the yard, made tree houses in the back, hung swings from branches, set traps for squirrels and chipmunks, and hid under the garden’s weeping willow. In fact, Annabelle didn’t know how Sara could make herself leave it every morning for work. It had a calming influence that settled over Annabelle as soon as she got out of the car. Annabelle wanted a week at this house, alone. She would forget that anything else existed.

"Do you like it?" Sara asked.

"It’s beautiful."

"I kept saying you needed to come. I’ve lived here 15 years. The house is small, but you can’t beat the property."

"No."

"Come inside."
Sara led her to the front door, which struck Annabelle as odd since Sara had parked her car in the garage. She turned to give Annabelle one last look before entering, and then Annabelle found herself in the foyer, surrounded by more people than she had expected. They were yelling "Surprise," and most of them were laughing because they had truly surprised her.

“What is this?” she asked.

“It’s a party,” Sara said. “You know the occasion, don’t you?”

Annabelle cracked an uncomfortable smile. She’d joined the practice a year ago, when she officially became a doctor. The actual anniversary of her graduation and subsequent arrival in the office had fallen in the previous week, but Annabelle had not told anyone. She took herself out to dinner, and over her favorite meal of chicken pot pie declared herself a success. She remembered feeling particularly satisfied with her work then. Now she looked around at her associates, receptionists and technicians, including Sara, and felt uneasy. She didn’t know any of them very well, and she found it hard to meet their eyes.

Derrick, one of the other doctors, gave her a wine glass and offered her the choice between two bottles.

“I don’t drink,” she said.

“It’s just for a toast, “ he persisted. “You can have a little drink to toast yourself, can’t you?”

“I don’t think so,” she replied. “I’d rather not.” He frowned then and looked a little more intently at her.

“Rough day?”

“You could say that.”

“I heard you got your first obstetrics patient today,” he said. Annabelle looked at him for a moment, registering the remark. She hadn’t thought to look at it this way, but Derrick was right. Annabelle had been seeing patients for a year, but she had not yet seen a woman through the entire term of her pregnancy or attended a delivery as the doctor in charge. Laura, if the girl chose to continue seeing Annabelle, would be her first mother. Annabelle didn’t know whether to shudder or smile at the fact. A teenage pregnancy seemed an inauspicious way to begin, and the thought of her performance earlier made her feel even less confident.

“She’s sixteen,” Annabelle said abruptly, forgetting to censor herself.

“She looked young,” Derrick said. “Tough one. You can’t let it get under your skin.”

“I know.”

“Listen, if you want to talk—”

“No, no, I’m fine. Really.” Annabelle knew she couldn’t discuss it with Derrick. He was the epitome of professional, and she felt certain he would disapprove of both her performance earlier and her feelings now.

“Well, I’m going to see if anyone else wants any wine,” he said. “Let me know if you change your mind.” He walked away, a bottle in each hand, and
Annabelle wasn’t sure if he’d been referring to the wine or his offer to talk. Probably both, she thought. She tried to imagine how Derrick would have handled Laura’s situation. He was all business with his patients, especially the younger ones. He considered even bantering with them dangerous, a breach of professionalism. Derrick would have met Laura’s eyes with a serious stare, the hint of a reprimand, probably unintentional, in his gaze. He would have told her the news, looking at her like that, and he would have informed Mrs. Fields firmly of the test’s accuracy. Then he would have lectured Laura on how to take care of herself and ended by telling her she could call him anytime with questions. This would be his one friendly and nurturing advance, this opening of himself to answer any question at any hour, though by that point she would have turned him off for sounding too much like a stern and reproving father. Annabelle wished she could say her way was better, gentler, but she had not been any more human than Derrick and far less informative.

“Still stunned?” someone asked. Annabelle looked up to see Terry, smiling at her.

“A little,” she answered. “Listen, I have to ask you something. That girl who came in today, Laura Fields, do you know what happened to her file?”

As soon as she said it, Annabelle knew it was rude to bring this up. They were throwing her a party, all of them, and she was accusing Terry, known for her organization, of losing something.

“I put it in the cabinet,” Terry said. (Annabelle thought she heard a note of defensiveness in her voice.) “It should be there.” Annabelle didn’t want to pursue it; she glanced down at her hands, embarrassed.

“I’ll look again,” she said quickly. “I didn’t mean to imply—”

“Where did you look?” Terry asked.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sorry I brought it up.”

“No, no, listen,” Terry said, “I remember now. She has a different last name than her mother. You probably looked in the F’s, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it’s not there. It’s in the K’s. Knox, that’s the name. Laura Knox.”

“Yes, that’s right. I remember now.” Annabelle smiled a little weakly. Terry didn’t seem to be offended, but Annabelle was still trying to gauge that. Then there was this new information. Mrs. Fields was remarried; her daughter had a different last name. The shadowy world of fathers came to mind again.

“Are you all right?” Terry asked. With an effort Annabelle made eye-contact with the woman.

“Yes,” she said.

“Relax a little,” Terry suggested. “We’re out of the office now.”

Annabelle smiled, glancing at her hands. They were dry and rough from much washing. In the winter, she and Terry commiserated about dry skin, the painful little cracks that opened all over their hands and burned. It
was the one personal note in their relationship. Annabelle thought she should get to know this woman—and all the people in the office—better, but she didn’t know how.

Sara approached them.

“We’re all ready to eat,” she announced. “Annabelle, head of the table.”

“Oh, Sara, I don’t need—”

“I have to get the chicken out of the oven. Have a seat and no complaining.” Sara grinned, and Annabelle, left without a choice, parted from Terry and took her conspicuous place.

While she ate, she looked around at the faces, thinking for a moment about each one. It was, she realized, a large circle of acquaintances, or colleagues, perhaps, but not friends. Annabelle did not have many friends. For some reason, she never reached that stage with people, and she always felt she was living among strangers, all the more remote because she knew their names and what they did for a large part of each day but nothing more.

“You don’t make the effort with people,” her mother always said, but Annabelle could not imagine making any more of an effort than she already made. After all, time was such a limited commodity, and she always had so much work. When she was in medical school, it hurt her to take even a minute from her studying. She walked to classes with her eyes on the ground, thinking about everything she had to do. If someone said hello, she looked up at once and smiled and felt for a moment like she had it all, friends and success and a promising career ahead of her. But when informal groups gathered together after class or went for drinks after exams, Annabelle found she didn’t know anyone very well and felt awkward inviting herself. It was then that she had some notion of the sacrifices she was making.

They toasted her at the end of the meal, and Annabelle allowed Derrick to pour her a sip of wine that colored only the bottom of her glass. Her face became as red as the wine when they congratulated her, and she wished she could excuse herself without appearing rude. After they’d eaten, people asked her to reflect on her first year as an MD. Annabelle observed that it was far less stressful than being a resident and joked about the loans she was still paying off. They were in a group, and Annabelle didn’t feel she was getting to know any one individual. The next day, she would greet them all as she always did, briefly, with a smile that was sincere but overused. Right now, they were sharing a little wine, a little small talk, nothing more. She felt tired, and her face was warm. When she went to the bathroom, she thought she looked haggard. The blemishes in her skin stood out more, and circles had gathered under her eyes. They were green—her eyes. In fact, they looked particularly green tonight because she had on a green scarf with her white blouse. Laura had been wearing a blue sweatshirt, so Annabelle would have noticed if her eyes were blue. She wondered if she could hit upon the girl’s eye-color by process of elimination.

When she returned, people were starting to leave, and before long it was just her and Sara and the dishes.
"I'll help you," Annabelle said.

"No need. I can manage. It was your party."

"All the more reason why I should help." Annabelle paused a moment.

"Thank you," she said. "I didn't expect it at all."

"You're welcome. Most welcome."

They rinsed dishes for a few moments in silence.

"I'm sorry it fell on a bad day," Sara said suddenly. Annabelle stopped rinsing, then started again. She didn't know if she wanted to talk about it or what to say. She could feel Sara looking at her, but Annabelle did not meet her gaze.

"I know you were upset about that girl," Sara went on. "I was upset too. What does she want to do?"

Annabelle was caught off guard; she hadn't thought of any course of action other than the normal one. She had simply told Laura to make another appointment.

"I don't know," Annabelle said.

"She didn't ask you any questions about her options?" Sara asked.

"She didn't ask me anything," Annabelle replied.

"How did she take it?" Sara asked.

"Quietly, I guess. She didn't say much; the mother did most of the talking."

"It must be awful. If Lisa ever—" Sara stopped. "Well, I suppose we'd manage, but I hate to think of it."

"Where is everyone tonight?" Annabelle asked to change the subject.

"Various places. Lisa's on a school trip for the whole week; Robert had a game—he should be getting home soon—and George took Kelly out to dinner after ballet. It's Friday, so they're going to paint the town."

"Father and daughter?"

"Yes."

Annabelle immersed the dishes and then her hands in the warm, soapy water.

"Oh, put everything in the dishwasher," Sara said. "We're not washing by hand."

"They look like good dishes."

"They'll be fine. We'll get this done quickly. Then we can have coffee."

Annabelle remained silent while they loaded the dish washer, wiped the table and counters, and swept the floor. She was awkward in her movements because it was a strange house and she hesitated a little in handling other people's things. Sara, on the other hand, worked efficiently, entirely focused and adept. In twenty minutes, they were sitting over their cups in the family room, Sara sinking into her chair and Annabelle on the edge of her seat, anxious without a task to complete and trying to think of something to say.

"So," Sara said, taking the initiative, "how did you decide to become a doctor?"
Annabelle studied her cup of coffee, cloudy with cream.

"It was something I wanted for a long time."

"Childhood dream."

"I guess you could say that." She took a sip. "Actually, I was always afraid of doctors when I was younger."

"Isn’t everyone?"

"My mother thought it approached phobia. They just seemed to have so much power. You never knew what they would want to do next—give you a shot, draw blood. I hated the doctor’s office." She stopped a moment, hesitating. "Then, when I was eleven, I think, I had a little accident." Annabelle took another sip of her coffee. She seldom told this story, and she still wasn’t sure she wanted to tell it now. She concentrated on her hands and cup, aware of Sara looking at her. Then she raised her eyes and found not a hard, piercing stare but a gentle, patient look, a languid curiosity. Annabelle drew confidence from it, and her voice, when she spoke, came out naturally.

"My father used to drive buses," she said. "He was a social historian, and for a while, that’s how he had to make ends meet, until he established himself in academia. Then he only drove part time."

"Couldn’t give it up?"

"No, he loved it. He used to tell us stories about the regulars, and sometimes he took me with him. I rode right behind his seat." She paused to let the memory come into focus. "Anyway, there was one man who rode every day. He was very tall, and he always wore the same suit—reddish-brown with a pocket handkerchief on the right shoulder. He was balding too, but he had a goatee on his chin. He never smiled, just sat and stared. Stiff as a board." Annabelle drew her body up in a reflexive imitation. "He had such a hard expression. I was afraid of him. I didn’t like it when he sat down beside me."

"Did he ever say anything?"

"No. But one day I was going to meet my mother somewhere along the route, and when my father opened the door to let me out, I tripped on the steps and fell. It was actually rather serious. I slashed my arm on a stop sign, and I hit my head. I had a concussion. But I can still remember this man getting out of the bus to help me, except I couldn’t believe it was him. His whole manner had changed. He was softer, and when he got to me, he spoke in the most gentle voice. He told my father he was a doctor. He knew exactly what to do, and he was... calm about it, looked at me the whole time, smiled, asked me questions about school to keep me awake while my mother drove us to the hospital. I had never really needed a doctor for anything other than routine checkups before that, and he—he surprised me." She rotated the coffee cup in her hand. "I wanted to treat people that way," she said. Annabelle thought of her teacher, Miriam Blacksmith, and what she had gone to such pains to teach. But it was not something that could be taught with drills and tests. You could not memorize the right expression, the right tone of voice, the right words for a difficult situation. If you could, Annabelle would have learned
these things like she had learned everything else. She thought of the old
doctor standing in front of the mirror and practicing his human face for the
children who hit their heads, cut their arms, needed shots. The thought made
her sigh.

"Were you looking for the girl's file today in the office?" Sara asked. The
remark had no introduction, but Annabelle had been on that page all day, so
she understood.

"Yes," Annabelle admitted. "I think I should call her."

"Tonight?"

"Well—" Annabelle looked at her watch. It was 9:30. "Tomorrow
maybe. As soon as possible."

"I would give her a couple days," Sara said. "Let her think it all over."

"But I didn't tell her anything today," Annabelle said.

"You told her she was pregnant. That's enough."

"But I—I didn't tell her she could call me if she has questions. I didn't offer
my number." Annabelle stopped and made herself take a drink, not a sip, of her
coffee. She didn't mean to be saying these things, and she had to stop herself.
Sara thought she was a good doctor. Annabelle did not want her to change her
opinion. Sara said nothing, while Annabelle drained her cup, and as soon as she
was finished, almost without meaning to, Annabelle spoke again.

"I felt like a student today," she said abruptly. "I couldn't even look at
her." Annabelle couldn't look at Sara, either, after saying that.

"It's all right," she heard Sara say. "Maybe she didn't want you to look
at her."

Annabelle hadn't thought of that, but then she remembered Laura
raising her eyes when she asked if she was pregnant.

"No, she—That's no excuse," Annabelle replied.

"Well, make it a point from now on." Sara reminded Annabelle of her
mother, who always had an answer to everything and half the time a
suggestion. It annoyed Annabelle in her mother, but she saw it differently
with Sara. Responses did not come easily. When someone was doing their
best to say the right thing, it meant they were concerned, just as Annabelle
had been concerned about Laura. She glanced at Sara who was staring at
some point on the wall or up into a corner of the room. Her face hadn't
changed. She did not look disapproving, but Annabelle could not be sure.
One could hide disapproval.

Annabelle's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the garage door
opening, and a moment later Kelly, Sara's youngest child, entered the room
with her father. She was a little ballerina, her hair drawn up into a ball on top
of her head and her movements light and graceful. She skipped across the
room, spending more time in the air than on the ground, and landed in Sara's
lap. Sara transferred her cup to the coffee table just in time. Annabelle looked
away as they embraced—displays of affection between any two people
always made her feel like an intruder—and rose to introduce herself to Sara's
husband, George.
"Annabelle Braxton," she said.

"George Reynolds. It's nice to have a face to put with the name. Sara talks about you all the time."

Annabelle blinked, surprised and flattered to learn that Sara thought of her, even talked about her, when she was not present.

"It's nice to meet you too," she said. "Was that your chicken cordon bleu by any chance?"

"It was. I put it in before I left. Didn't get to eat it, though."

"I saved a piece for you," Sara said from her seat where Kelly was trying to monopolize her attention. "And there's coffee if you'd like some, George."

"Mommy," the girl said plaintively. She had taken hold of her mother's chin and was forcefully trying to turn Sara's face, demanding eye-contact.

"Yes, yes, I'm listening," Sara said.

George said something else, but Annabelle was preoccupied by mother and daughter, the girl's chattering and Sara's quiet, calm responses. Something about the scene attracted and repulsed her at the same time. She thought she could never help loving someone who wanted her attention that much (Kelly was giving her mother every detail of dance class and dinner), and yet Annabelle abhorred the thought of such constant invasion of her personal space. Sara, she could see, had given up even the small luxury of an uninterrupted cup of coffee, and someday these confidences would go beyond ballet slippers and meatballs. The possibilities were endless, many of them unsettling. She remembered the color draining out of Laura's mother's face and did not envy Mrs. Fields her position.

"I hear you're a very good doctor," George was saying.

Annabelle felt her face growing red. "I do my job."

"Oh, she does more than that." Sara said. "She was going to stay late tonight, but I twisted her arm."

"How did you like the party?"

"It was a wonderful gesture." Annabelle turned and looked at Sara and Kelly, both of whom also turned their heads just at that moment. Blushing yet more deeply, Annabelle's eyes went to the arm of the chair, then to the coffee table, where they took in Sara's blue mug, an issue of *Time* magazine, and a pair of glasses beside a faded brown case. "Thank you again."

"Well, I hope you liked it," Sara said. She was getting up with Kelly in her arms. "And now it's bed-time for you. Say hello—and good night—to Annabelle." Now that her stories were over and her mother had asked her to speak to the stranger in the room, the child became shy and hid her face on Sara's shoulder. A few more attempts to get her to speak, attempts that embarrassed Annabelle, yielded nothing, and Sara excused herself to take her upstairs.

"I think I'll get going," Annabelle said as Sara was leaving.

"Do you want any more coffee?"

"No, I'm fine, thanks. You have a beautiful home." She paused, turned to George. "It was nice meeting you."
"You too. Come over again sometime. Anytime."
"I'll take you up on that."
"I'm sure Sara won't give you any choice."

George opened the front door for her, and when it closed behind her, Annabelle felt bereft for a moment. She could do nothing about Laura tonight, and the situation still weighed on her mind. Sara's house was so wonderful, but she had to leave it. Sara was a friend; that thought occurred to Annabelle, but friends seemed like temporary distractions. Here she was, on her own, with her own problems to solve. She walked down to her car, wondering what Sara thought about her now. She was flattered that Sara talked about her with George, but she felt the attention like a burden, more expectations she had to fulfill.

"Annabelle, just a minute," Sara called. She was coming down the porch steps, waving her arm. Annabelle stared for a moment, then started back up the walk to meet her, wondering if she'd left something in Sara's house.

"I wanted to give you a hug," Sara said. Annabelle stopped, and her face changed. "Is that all right?" Sara asked, laughing at her expression.

"Yes," Annabelle said. She was surprised, surprised that Sara wanted to hug her, that Sara was really going to hug her. It wasn't something Annabelle felt comfortable initiating. She stayed in her own space, unless someone approached her, usually at a graduation or family gathering. But Sara's gesture had neither of these reasons behind it. In one stride, Sara had crossed the gulf between her and Annabelle. They were hugging now, and Annabelle was almost crying. Sara didn't say anything; she was as silent as Annabelle had been that afternoon, but the hug spoke for itself. The fact that Sara had followed her out of the house with such a request spoke for itself. Annabelle wanted to be able to communicate like that, in a word, in an act. She wondered if motherhood gave one that sense of how to respond, or if it was even more basic than that, a human impulse Annabelle merely had to stop suppressing.

When they pulled away, Annabelle looked at Sara directly, no longer worried about Sara judging her. Sara, she realized, would give her room to be human. It was too dark for Annabelle to observe Sara's eye color, but then it was never about eye color. It was about looking. The details would reveal themselves. Annabelle waited for the moment to give her something to say. It didn't give her much. Her comfort lay in knowing there was no need to force out words.

"Thank you," she said simply, "for thinking of me." Sara had been thinking of her while she took her daughter upstairs, had decided to give her a hug, to comfort her. And she had come out and done it and made a difference, a huge difference. But it all began with the thought, something Annabelle couldn't see but which she now knew existed all the same. For the first time, it made her feel warm to know she had a place in someone else's thoughts.
"You're welcome," Sara replied, squeezing Annabelle's hands. "Good night."

Driving home, Annabelle thought about calling Laura, but she no longer felt the urgency. She would give her a couple days, as Sara suggested, time to come to terms, think of questions. After all, Annabelle could not fix the girl’s situation. Pressing information, even support, on her at this point might only make things more difficult. Yes, a grace period, just a few days, was in order. Alone in the dark, with the memory of Sara’s warmth, Annabelle already knew how she would begin the conversation.

"Laura? This is Dr. Braxton. I've been thinking about you."