**CAUSA MORTIS**

**OR**

**THE MEDICAL STUDENT**

**CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY**

**0 MALE / 6 FEMALE**

**ELEANOR**, a neurology patient (**F—50s/60s**)

**PAIGE**, Eleanor’s older daughter **(F-30s)**

**GLORIA**, Eleanor’s younger daughter **(F-20s/30s)**

**ROBYN**, a medical student (**F-20s**)

**THE AMNESIAC**, a quadriplegic **(F—20s/30s)**

**DR. GWENDOLYN FALK**, a brain surgeon (**F—50s**)

**SETTING**

The neurology ward of private hospital in a major American city. The present.

**ACT ONE**

*1. Paige and Robyn. A hospital corridor. Robyn carries a towering stack of patients’ charts.*

**PAIGE**

Let me ask you something, doctor.

**ROBYN**

I’m *not* a doctor. I’m a medical student.

**PAIGE**

That’s all right. So here’s my question—

**ROBYN**

Honestly, I’m probably not the best person to ask. This is my first day at the hospital….I’ve only been working here for three hours….

**PAIGE**

Don’t worry. It’s an easy question, doctor. Let’s say you’d been having debilitating headaches every afternoon for the past six months. Headaches so bad that you thought your brain was on fire. What would you do?

**ROBYN**

I suppose I’d see a doctor….*which, for the record, I am not*.

**PAIGE**

So you wouldn’t try to work through the pain?

**ROBYN**

I’m a medical student. They expect me to work until I keel over….

**PAIGE**

Very well. But let’s pretend you aren’t a doctor. Let’s say—hypothetically speaking—you’re a senior marine biologist at the city aquarium. Now would you seek medical attention? Or would you put it off until one day, when you were halfway through feeding the dolphins, you ended up keeling over into a tank of salt water with dozens of schoolchildren looking on?

**ROBYN**

Oh, no. I wouldn’t do that.

**PAIGE**

I didn’t think so. Now tell me this, doctor: If you had a serious and longstanding medical condition, would you tell your daughters, your daughters who love you more than any other human beings on the entire planet? Or would you tell nobody?

**ROBYN**

Please don’t call me *doctor*….My name’s Robyn.

**PAIGE**Very well, Robyn. You’d tell your daughters, wouldn’t you?

**ROBYN**

I don’t have any daughters….

**PAIGE**

But if you did.

**ROBYN**

….I guess I would….

**PAIGE**

Of course, you would. You’ve only been a doctor three hours and *already* you know that.

**ROBYN**

Listen to me. I am a medical student. *NOT* a doctor. We’re required by law to make that clear to the patients and their families….It’s the very first thing they tell you when they give you your white coat. Honestly, it’s the *only* thing that they tell you. That *under absolutely no circumstances* are you allowed to pass yourself off as a physician. Otherwise, you can get expelled—or sued—or you can even go to jail for practicing medicine without a license….So *please* don’t keep calling me doctor. Because I’m only a layperson. An ordinary citizen, just like you. There is *nobody* in the world who is less a doctor than I am!

*(Robyn loses her grip on the patients’ charts and they topple to the*

*ground. Pages fly in all directions.)*

Oh God!

*(Robyn falls to her knees and begins to sort through the charts,*

*attempting to guess which pages belong to which patients. Paige*

*kneels down alongside her and assists her as best she can.)*

**PAIGE**

It’s okay. I know you’re not a doctor….

**ROBYN**

And I’m never going to become one at this rate.

**PAIGE**

What should I do with the torn pages?

*(She holds up two halves of a ripped page from a patient’s chart. Robyn*

*takes the scraps from her and examines them. Then she stuffs them inside*

*her blouse.)*

**PAIGE**

It’s just that it’s so hard to find a *real* doctor to talk to around here….

**ROBYN**

Please don’t tell anybody I got the charts mixed up.

**PAIGE**

—I suppose I’d have better luck on a golf course—

**ROBYN**

—Dr. Falk would have my head if she ever found out.

**PAIGE**

—Or maybe a carwash….Doctors always drive such clean cars. Have you noticed that?

**ROBYN**

*(Breaking into sobs.)*

I didn’t go to medical school to play golf….or to drive a shiny car….All I wanted to do was help people, as old-fashioned as that sounds…and now I’m going to get expelled on my first day in the hospital….

**PAIGE**

Oh, honey…..It’s not such a big deal, is it? The pages don’t even seem to be *so* mixed up. All of *these* over here are for the same patient. Sally Brown….and she sounds like a very sick woman anyway….although I suppose I shouldn’t be reading through her records…..

**ROBYN**

*(Robyn uses the chart pages as tissues: first she dabs her eyes,*

*then she blows her nose.)*

All of these charts are for *different* patients named Sally Brown. Dr. Falk sent me to get Ms. Brown’s files from medical records…but there were nineteen different patients named Sally Brown who’ve been treated in this hospital at one time or another….and I didn’t know which one she wanted, so I brought them all….

**PAIGE**

Damn. This is serious.

**ROBYN**

You don’t know the half of it. Dr. Falk sent a medical student home last year for *slouching*….

*(Robyn stuffs additional pages into her blouse until papers are*

*poking out of her clothing from all sides.)*

**PAIGE**

Do you know what else is a serious matter?

**ROBYN**

….No. I’m afraid I don’t.

**PAIGE**

My mother’s health is a serious matter.

**ROBYN**

Of course, it is.

**PAIGE**

*You* know that. *I* know that. The only person who doesn’t appear to understand that is my mother. Has anybody told you *why* my mother’s head hurts?

*(Robyn gathers the charts and stands up. Several pages fall out of*

*her blouse. She tucks them into her pants.)*

**ROBYN**

Who is your mother again?

**PAIGE**

Eleanor Powell. Room 125, Bed 2. Do you know why Eleanor Powell’s head hurts?

**ROBYN**

Honestly, I don’t.

**PAIGE**

My mother has a wrist watch lodged inside her skull.

**ROBYN**

A wrist watch?

**PAIGE**

A *man’s* wrist watch….

**ROBYN**

I didn’t know that was possible. Last year, they showed us slides of a drunk musician who tried to swallow a clarinet on a dare. You could see all the tiny gauges on the X-ray of his stomach.

**PAIGE**

Well, my mother didn’t swallow anything….My mother had a benign brain tumor removed as a teenager….while she was at boarding school in Switzerland….and it appears one of the Swiss surgeons accidentally left his watch inside her cranium….

**ROBYN**

That *does* sound painful.

**PAIGE**

So much for Swiss precision.

**ROBYN**

At least it wasn’t a cuckoo clock.

**PAIGE**

Although who can be certain it was even an accident? Maybe the surgeon did it *intentionally*.

**ROBYN**

Or a clarinet. Can you imagine having a clarinet lodged in your skull?

**PAIGE**

All sorts of crazy people become doctors. You’d have to be rather crazy to spend your life cutting open other people’s skulls, if you ask me….

**ROBYN**But I guess nobody brings a clarinet into an operating room.

**PAIGE**

Are you listening to me? My mother has a forty-year-old timepiece trapped inside her head. I’ll bet they didn’t teach you about that in medical school….

**ROBYN**

I’m not done with medical school yet.

**PAIGE**

The bottom line is that my mother has been keeping this a secret. She found out about the watch in the 1970s, when they installed metal detectors at the airports….But since it didn’t cause her any discomfort her, she didn’t bother to tell anybody….

**ROBYN**

Maybe you should be telling this to someone with a medical degree….

**PAIGE**

It’s easier to tell you know and wait for you to graduate….Besides, it’s not very complicated: After minding its business all these years, the watch has started encroaching on things inside my mother’s head. Important things: Arteries, ventricles, gray matter.

**ROBYN**

Those are important.

**PAIGE**

So I’m told. If she doesn’t have surgery soon, the watch may cut off the blood supply to her cerebral cortex—and I’m sure you understand what that means….

**ROBYN**

It doesn’t sound very promising.

**PAIGE**

Precisely, Robyn. It doesn’t sound very promising….Needless to say, when Mom collapsed, my sister and I consulted the leading neurologists in the country and they all recommended the same surgeon. I’m sure you’ve heard of him: Dr. Hiram T. Luxby.

**ROBYN**

You mean the Dr. Luxby who—

**PAIGE**

I swear that man’s résumé weighed more than I do. Harvard Medical School, surgical residency at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, a fellowship at the Mayo Clinic, specializing in the removal of foreign objects from within the cranium. The ideal candidate for the job….So we sent Dr. Luxby my mother’s X-rays….He was so intrigued by her case that he flew in from Heidelberg four days later to perform the procedure.….and then he dropped dead.

*2. Hospital room 125. Eleanor and the Amnesiac, in adjacent beds.*

**ELEANOR**

Right there in the operating room….One minute he was holding the scalpel and the next he was what the doctors call R.A.R.T.

**AMNESIAC**

R.A.R.T?  
 **ELEANOR**

Rapidly Assuming Room Temperature….Not that I actually saw him collapse, you understand. I was still under anesthesia. But I knew I was in trouble when I woke up and the bandages were on my chest, not my head….During his heart attack, Dr. Luxby fell on the scalpel….

**AMNESIAC**

That’s just awful….

**ELEANOR**

So then my daughters brought in another surgeon, Dr. Lawrence Spatnick, who was Luxby’s protégé at Harvard. He’s such a decent, likeable young man, this Dr. Spatnick—nothing at all like a surgeon. He even plays the harp in a chamber quartet….I’ll confess I was hoping that I’d wake up from the surgery and he’d be having coffee with Paige. She’s my single daughter, the one there’s still hope for….Gloria threw herself away on a….Oh, I can’t bear to say it….

**AMNESIAC**

It can’t be *that* bad, can it?

**ELEANOR**

A professional grave robber....

**AMNESIAC**

I’m sorry.

**ELEANOR**

The man was a real life body-snatcher. He’d slink around cemeteries, waiting for the mourners to leave, and then he’d shovel out the corpses, strip them of their valuables, and sell the bodies to medical schools in California. You can’t imagine how mortifying it was for Gloria to give back all that jewelry….

**AMNESIAC**

At least she found out while she was young….She’ll have a second change with someone else….

**ELEANOR**

She’s *still* with him!

**AMNESIAC**

At least there’s hope for your other daughter and Dr. Spatnick.

**ELEANOR**

Unfortunately, there isn’t. Instead of waking up from surgery with a future son-in-law who doesn’t pinch wedding bands from cadavers, I found myself in the recovery room with another chest wound. That poor man, Dr. Spatnick…surrounded by all those doctors and all that equipment…and nobody could do anything for him.

**AMNESIAC**

Another heart attack?

**ELEANOR**

So you understand why I won’t let them try again. It’s not only that I’ve killed two leading neurosurgeons in the prime of their careers, but you have to consider all of the future patients whose lives they might have gone on to save….I could be indirectly responsible for hundreds of deaths….even thousands….

**AMNESIAC**

I hadn’t thought of that.

**ELEANOR**

So that’s *my* story, honey. I won’t let them operate and my daughters won’t agree to take me home without the operation….And what about you? What’s your name?

**AMNESIAC**

I don’t know.

**ELEANOR**

For real?

**AMNESIAC**

I wish I did know. All they can tell me is that a road crew found me at the side of the interstate with a bullet in my neck and another lodged in my brain. So I could have been the victim of a carjacking or a drive-by shooting. Or someone close to me—maybe even my own husband—might have abandoned me for dead….You can’t imagine how horrific this is! My own husband might have tried to murder me, and I don’t even remember whether I’m married.

**ELEANOR**

So you honestly don’t know who you are…?

**AMNESIAC**

*(Suddenly angry.)*

I know exactly who I am. You heard the doctors this morning. I’m Jane Doe. Quadriplegia with Retrograde Amnesia.

**ELEANOR**

I never cared for the name Jane….You look more like an Amanda. I think I’m going to call you Amanda, if that’s all right. Until you remember who you are.

**AMNESIAC**

And what if I *never* remember?

**ELEANOR**

Then at least you’ll have a name that suits you….Now, quick! It’s nearly four o’clock. Pretend you’re in a coma.

**AMNESIAC**

I don’t understand.

**ELEANOR**

Just trust me, Amanda. The new medical student is coming.

*(Robyn enters, carrying a clipboard, and approaches Eleanor’s*

*bed. Eleanor and the Amnesiac play dead.)*

**ROBYN**

Sorry to disturb you, Mrs. Powell. Would you mind if I asked you a few questions?

*(Robyn attempts to rouse Eleanor. Eleanor does not move.)*

Mrs. Powell? Do you know where you are, Mrs. Powell…?

*(Eleanor says nothing.)*

You’re in a hospital, Mrs. Powell. Please wake up. I only have a few questions and then I’ll let you go back to sleep. I promise.

*(Eleanor remains silent.)*

Do you know who the President is, Mrs. Powell? Try to answer me….

*(The room remains silent. Robyn grows desperate.)*

So I read your chart, Mrs. Powell. And *yesterday*, you were oriented to time and place and knew the name of the President. Nothing has changed since then, has it?

*(Eleanor continues to play dead. Robyn writes on her clipboard)*

“Oriented to time and place….Knows the name of the President. Patient reports that she is well, without any complaints, but sleepy during the afternoon.”

*(Robyn attempts to place her stethoscope on Eleanor’s chest, but*

*Eleanor rolls over without warning. Then Robyn attempts to take*

*Eleanor’s pulse, but Eleanor yanks her hand away. Finally,*

*Robyn removes her reflex hammer from the pocket of her white*

*lab coat and taps Eleanor’s knee. Eleanor’s leg does not move.*

*Robyn hits her harder. Still no response. As a last measure,*

*Robyn swings down her reflex hammer and pounds Eleanor on the*

*kneecap. Eleanor “reflexively” kicks Robyn in the stomach, still*

*without “waking.” When Robyn regains her composure, she*

*writes on the clipboard as she speaks:*

“Powell, Eleanor. Heart sounds normal. Regular rate and rhythm. Lungs clear. Abdomen non-tender. Reflexes moderately brisk…..”

*(Robyn crosses out these last words.)*

“Reflexes significantly brisk.”

*(Robyn approaches the Amnesiac’s bed. The Amnesiac follows*

*Eleanor’s example and pretends to be sleeping. Robyn is unable*

*to rouse her.)*

How about you, Ms. Doe? Do you know where *you* are?

*(The Amnesiac says nothing.)*

Fine, be that way.

*(Robyn writes on her clipboard)*

“Oriented to time and place….Knows the name of the President. Patient reports that she is well, without any complaints, but sleepy during the afternoon.”

*(Robyn takes her reflex hammer out of her white coat, then*

*changes her mind and returns it to her pocket.)*

“Doe, Jane. Heart sounds normal. Regular rate and rhythm. Lungs clear. Abdomen non-tender. Reflexes moderately brisk…..”

*(Robyn exits. Eleanor opens her eyes.)*

**ELEANOR**

All clear, Amanda.

**AMNESIAC**

*(The Amnesiac opens her eyes.)*

What was *that* about?

**ELEANOR**

We get a new medical student every two weeks. They’re supposed to practice taking histories and physicals on us….but if you pretend you’re in a coma, eventually they give up and find a different patient.

**AMNESIAC**

You know a lot about this place.

**ELEANOR**

I’ve been here sixty-six days. Shared this room with nine different women. When you’ve been here sixty-six days, you’ll know an awful lot too.

**AMNESIAC**

I don’t want to be here at all.

**ELEANOR**

Better than a nursing home.

**AMNESIAC**

If I knew who my family was, at least I could ask them to kill me.....

**ELEANOR**

You don’t mean that.

**AMNESIAC**

I mean every word of it, goddamit.

**ELEANOR**

Oh, honey....

**AMNESIAC**

Ever since last night, I’ve been lying here, thinking of all the things I’ll never be able to do....Dancing and ice-skating and holding my own children. There might already be children out there somewhere, waiting for me to come home….

**ELEANOR**

You can borrow my daughters anytime you want.

**AMNESIAC**

You know what I wish for, Eleanor. I wish *I* could perform the surgery on you—and keel over right there on the operating table….But the best thing I can hope for now is that one night you’ll cross over to this side of the room and cover my face with a pillow.

**ELEANOR**

Don’t talk nonsense.

**AMNESIAC**

That’s what I want, Eleanor….I’ll go to sleep one night and you’ll make it so I don’t wake up….

*3. Paige and Dr. Falk. Dr. Falk’s office.*

**DR. FALK**

Your mother’s case is really quite marvelous—from a medical standpoint, that is. In my fifteen years as chief of neurosurgery, I’ve seen wedding rings, I’ve seen clamps, I’ve seen Latex gloves ….but I’ve done an extensive search of the relevant literature and I couldn’t find any watches. Mrs. Powell is a genuine first. One of the students should get a great original paper out of her.

**PAIGE**

But do you think you can remove it safely?

**DR. FALK**

Remove what?

**PAIGE**

*The watch*. The watch in my mother’s brain!

**DR. FALK**

Are you familiar with the case of Phineas Gage, Ms. Powell?

**PAIGE**

I’m afraid I’m not.

**DR. FALK**

Phineas Gage was a twenty-five year old railroad foreman from Cavendish, Vermont, who had an iron spike driven through his head during a blasting accident. The spike pierced his maxilla, sliced through both lobes of his anterior cortex, and popped out the other side of his cranium. Fortunately for Gage, the spike missed his sagittal sinus and he survived another twelve years.

**PAIGE**

What does this have to do with my mother?

**DR. FALK**

Before this blasting accident, Phineas Gage was a mild-mannered, church-going family man....*After* the accident, he cursed like a sailor, took to fighting in bars, and propositioned any woman he encountered between the ages of fifteen and fifty. Somehow, that spike must have knocked out his inhibition control center.

**PAIGE**

So you’re saying that my mother’s going to end up a bar-fighting sex fiend?

**DR. FALK**

Oh, not at all. Quite the opposite, Ms. Powell. What’s remarkable about your mother’s case is how few cognitive symptoms she has. Except for the motor difficulties with her extremities, and her balance, and her headaches, of course, and her blind spells—other than those specific complaints, she is, neurologically speaking, quite intact.

**PAIGE**

Aren’t you forgetting that this watch could clot off her brain and kill her at any moment?

**DR. FALK**

There is that, yes. Quite unfortunate. But I was thinking of the case from more of a scientific vantage point than a personal one.

**PAIGE**

If you don’t mind, Dr. Falk, *I’d* like to talk about the personal aspects of the case….

**DR. FALK**

Very well. Talk.

**PAIGE**

When are you planning to take the watch out of my mother’s skull?

**DR. FALK**

Oh, I’m not.

**PAIGE**

You’re not?

**DR. FALK**

She hasn’t consented, Ms. Powell. I can’t go cutting open your mother’s head without her permission.

**PAIGE**

Why the hell can’t you?

**DR. FALK**

The law is rather clear on that point.

**PAIGE**

Laws are meant to be broken. I’m a lawyer. I know what I’m talking about…..Why don’t you let me consent for her? She is *my* mother.

**DR. FALK**

Be reasonable. Your mother is a competent adult. She’s capable of making her own decisions….

**PAIGE**

She’s not thinking clearly. How is she supposed to think clearly with a watch cutting off the blood supply to her brain?

**DR. FALK**

I understand what you’re going through. When my own mother turned ninety, she decided that she didn’t want to be on dialysis anymore, and there was no convincing her otherwise.…

**PAIGE**

My mother’s not ninety, she’s fifty-six. And she’s mad as a hatter.

**DR. FALK**

I’ll be candid with you, Ms. Powell. I’m not sure how much longer your mother can remain in the hospital under these circumstances. This isn’t a hotel. If she doesn’t want the operation, it’s honestly time to think about taking her home…or finding a facility that can look after her for the long-term….

**PAIGE**

You mean you want to ship her off to a nursing home while we wait for her brain to shrivel up.

**DR. FALK**

I’m sorry that you have to go through this, Ms. Powell—

**PAIGE**

My mother is convinced that she’s responsible for the deaths of Dr. Luxby and Dr. Spatnick and that she’s going to murder you if you try to operate on her….She’s delusional, Dr. Falk.

**DR. FALK**

Possibly.

**PAIGE**

What do you mean: “Possibly”?

**DR. FALK**

I don’t actually believe she killed Hiram or Larry, but it *is* a mystery. Are you aware of the difference between Christian Scientists and Jehovah’s Witnesses in regard to their views of medical assistance, Ms. Powell?

**PAIGE**

What on earth are you talking about?

**DR. FALK**

I’m trying to explain the limits of modern medicine….Christian Scientists believe that prayer cures illness. So, for example, if they come down with bacterial pneumonia, they refuse treatment with penicillin and place their faith in God. In other words, they doubt the *efficacy* of antibiotics. That, from a medical standpoint, is a delusion. As a surgeon, I can’t say whether prayer helps to cure disease—I imagine it very well might—but I am quite confident that antibiotics are effective in treating bacterial infections.

**PAIGE**

My mother’s not a Christian Scientist. She’s a Unitarian. If she believes in a god at all, it’s not a god who can *do* much of anything.

**DR. FALK**

Please, let me finish. Jehovah’s Witnesses, in contrast, turn down blood transfusions because they believe that accepting another person’s blood leads to eternal damnation. They acknowledge that turning down donor blood may kill them….but they care more about their salvation. In other words, they don’t doubt the *efficacy* of medical intervention, merely its *morality*. I may not agree with Jehovah’s Witnesses on this, but I can’t say they’re delusional. There is no scientific consensus on the subject of eternal damnation….

**PAIGE**

Can you please get to the point, doctor…?

**DR. FALK**

What I’m telling you is that I cannot be *certain* your mother, in some tangential way, isn’t responsible for the deaths of Dr. Luxby and Dr. Spatnick. Maybe the unique pattern in the irises of her eyes provokes seizures in genetically predisposed individuals, and this, in turn, leads to cardiac arrhythmias….Who can say? For years, the medical community mistakenly prescribed bed rest for heart attacks and, as a result, thousands of people died from deep vein thromboses. We used to believe ulcers were caused by worrying, and now we think they’re the product of infectious agents….So until we understand why two of the world’s leading neurosurgeons collapsed while the same patient was on the table, I can’t say you mother is truly delusional. For the present, she’s more like a Jehovah’s Witness than a Christian Scientist….

**PAIGE**

Are you out of your mind? It was a coincidence. Bad luck.

**DR. FALK**

Most likely….

**PAIGE**

People drop dead all the time….

**DR. FALK**

I’m not disagreeing with you. People *do* drop dead all of the time.

**PAIGE**

You’re afraid, aren’t you! You’re *hoping* my mother won’t consent to the operation, because you think she might kill *you* too…..

**DR. FALK**

I’m going to have to excuse myself, Ms. Powell. I have patients to see….

*(Dr. Falk walks toward the door.)*

You’re welcome to stay here and compose yourself for as long as you need….But please be sure to pull the door shut behind you….

**PAIGE**

You goddam coward! I swear you’re going to saw open my mother’s skull, even if it’s the last thing you ever do!

*4. Hospital room 125. Gloria and Eleanor. Gloria sits beside Eleanor’s bed with a notepad.*

**ELEANOR**

Are you sure you’re getting all of this down, dear?

**GLORIA**

I told you I’m getting it all down. Why can’t you ever give me the benefit of the doubt?

**ELEANOR**

Because I’m your mother. I love you far too much to have any confidence in you….Now can you please read the guest list back to me?

**GLORIA**

Okay, but first, there’s something I want to tell you.

**ELEANOR**

What?

**GLORIA**

I just want you to know how happy I am—and how happy Phil will be—that you’ve decided to go through with the operation.

**ELEANOR**

Why will Phil be so happy? It’s one less body that he can ship to California.

**GLORIA**

That’s cruel and uncalled for. Phil never did anything to you.

**ELEANOR**

He never had a chance.

**GLORIA**

It was all a misunderstanding. I’ve already explained this you to a thousand times: Phil had to admit to those things in court or the judge wouldn’t have accepted his plea deal. It was a matter of serving two years or risking twenty….

**ELEANOR**

Believe what you’d like, dear. But I want the high-end coffin with the Kryptonite lock.

**GLORIA**

I’m too happy right now to let you upset me….So when is the operation?

**ELEANOR**

There isn’t going to be an operation.

**GLORIA**

I don’t understand….What about the party? I thought this party was to celebrate your recovery after you went through with the surgery.

**ELEANOR**

There isn’t going to be a party either.

**GLORIA**

But the guest list?

**ELEANOR**

That’s the guest list for my funeral, dear.

**GLORIA**

You lied to me!

**ELEANOR**

Otherwise you wouldn’t have written out that list….Now read it back to me, please….

**GLORIA**

I will not.

*(Gloria tears the list in half.)*

Plan your own damn funeral. I don’t want any part of this.

**ELEANOR**

You’re starting to sound like your sister. “You’ll do *this*.” “I won’t have any part of *that*.” Now be a dear and read that list back to me. There should be some tape in my purse.

**GLORIA**

I don’t understand what’s wrong with you. You have a wonderful job and a loving family….and as soon as Phil gets out of prison, you’ll have grandchildren… Four of them….Two boys and two girls…

**ELEANOR**

I wanted three boys and only one girl….That way I won’t have to divide your grandmother’s jewelry….

**GLORIA**

I don’t understand why you want to die all of a sudden.

**ELEANOR**

I don’t *want* to die, honey. But I’m sure Dr. Luxby and Dr. Spatnick didn’t either….

**GLORIA**

You can’t blame yourself like that. Do you think I blame myself for not working harder at the beauty parlor so Phil didn’t have to do business with certain people…?

**ELEANOR**

You mean mobsters?

**GLORIA**

Please have the operation. For your future grandchildren.

**ELEANOR**

I can’t. Every time I consider signing the forms, I find myself thinking about Dr. Luxby’s grandchildren….and Dr. Spatnick’s elderly mother in New Hampshire….I had Paige clip their obituaries out of the *Times* for me….

**GLORIA**

That’s morbid.

**ELEANOR**

I don’t think it’s a coincidence that it’s a wrist watch that’s going to kill me…..It’s a very feminine way to go….So much of my life has been about timing….menstruation, ovulation, menopause….counting up, counting down….Men just go from one end of life to the other—like sperm. But for a woman it’s a constant cycle, an ebb and a flow…..

**GLORIA**

You’re thinking way too much.

**ELEANOR**

Did you realize that women who share the same hospital rooms end up synchronizing their menstrual cycles….? That’s the way it is with us girls. We may not get along with each other on the surface, but deep down we share a certain solidarity. We’re all sisters in blood.

**GLORIA**

Paige isn’t going to let you get away with this.

**ELEANOR**

With what? Dying? Anyway, it’s not as though I’m deciding between dying or *not* dying. It’s more a matter of timing….You girls must have realized that I’d have to die eventually….

**GLORIA**

I don’t see how you can be so blasé about this.

**ELEANOR**

That’s because you’re twenty-five and I’m fifty-six. When my mother died, I thought the sun was going to come crashing into the earth in a fiery Armageddon…but it didn’t. We went to the funeral and said our farewells and the next morning they still delivered the newspaper, and the trains still ran, and the world carried on with its business as it always had. And when your father had his unfortunate incident with the polar bear, I could barely get out of bed for a year. You remember. So maybe I’m all suffered out, and now I’ve developed an immunity….There was a time, you know, when I would have been willing to sacrifice ten thousand brain surgeons—to bankrupt the entire health care system—if it could earn me a few extra hours of life….and somehow I’ve lost that. Not my will to live—but my will to live *at any expense*….Besides, if I wasn’t so blasé about dying, I wouldn’t be able to go through with it.

**GLORIA**

Maybe somebody poisoned those doctors and is trying to pin the blame on you….I saw that once on a made-for-television movie….

**ELEANOR**

Life is so much like a made-for-television movie, isn’t it?....Now will you be a dear and go over that list with me before my roommate gets back from her CT-scan.

*(Gloria retrieves the tape from Eleanor’s purse reluctantly,*

*patches up the list, and begins reading names….)*

**GLORIA**

Arnold & Patti Powell….Cousin Freddie…Dr. Serspkinski….Annie Beck and Emma Beck….

**ELEANOR**

—You and Paige don’t have to make all these calls yourself, of course…. The easiest approach would be to set up a telephone tree….like on snow days at the aquarium….

*5. Dr. Falk’s Office. Dr. Falk and Robyn.*

**DR. FALK**

*(Looking up from a stack of charts.)*

You’re Robyn, right?

**ROBYN**

Yes, Dr. Falk. Robyn Pastarnack with a “ck” at the end.

**DR. FALK**

With a “ck” at the end? You don’t say. And how long have you been working here in the hospital, Ms. Robyn Pastarnack with a “ck” at the end?

**ROBYN**

Seven hours, Dr. Falk.

**DR. FALK**

Do you know how long I’ve been working in this hospital, Robyn?

**ROBYN**

No, Dr. Falk.

**DR. FALK**

Six hundred years.

**ROBYN**

*(Uncertain)*

Really, Dr. Falk?

**DR. FALK**

No, not really….But it feels that way sometimes.

**ROBYN**

Yes, Dr. Falk.

**DR. FALK**

I’ve actually only been here thirty years….What do you think of that?

**ROBYN**

Thirty years is a long time.

**DR. FALK**

Damn right, thirty years is a long time. And do you know how many mistakes I’ve made in those thirty years, Robyn?

**ROBYN**

No, Dr. Falk.

**DR. FALK**

Guess.

**ROBYN**

I couldn’t, really….

**DR. FALK**

*(More forcefully.)*

Guess a number.

**ROBYN**

Two or three.

**DR. FALK**

Thousands….

**ROBYN**

I’m sorry.

**DR. FALK**

Don’t be sorry. Mistakes come with the territory. You have to crack eggs to make omelets, and you have to crack skulls to scoop out tumors. The unfortunate truth of the matter is that if you don’t kill a patient now and again, you’re not doing your job well. You show me a neurosurgeon afraid of taking risks and I’ll show you a body trail as long as the Erie Canal….I’ve severed the wrong arteries, I’ve punctured the wrong chambers, I’ve even left a gauze pad inside a patient’s tentorium…But I’ve never been sued. Not once. Do you know why?

**ROBYN**

Because people are afraid of you?

**DR. FALK**

Because I always admit when I’m wrong. I never try to cover anything up. Do you understand what I’m saying, Robyn with a “ck”?

**ROBYN**

Don’t lie to the patients, Dr. Falk?

**DR. FALK**

Screw the patients. Don’t lie to me….

**ROBYN**

I’m not sure—

**DR. FALK**

Of course, you’re not sure. You don’t have any idea at all. According to your report, the patient in room 104 is oriented to time and place….The patient in room 104 is brain dead, Robyn. They’re keeping him on life support until this evening so they can harvest his organs.

**ROBYN**

I must have been confused.

**DR. FALK**

And Mrs. Powell in room 125 can’t possibly have shown you that she was oriented to time and place or have told you the name of the president. She pretended she was in a coma. How do I know that? Because she’s been pretending she’s in a coma for sixty-six days, every time I send in a fresh medical student to examine her.

**ROBYN**

I’m sorry, Dr. Falk. It won’t happen again

**DR. FALK**

You bet it won’t happen again. There are only two ways you’re going to make it through this clerkship, Robyn with a “ck”. Do you know what they are?

**ROBYN**

No, Dr. Falk.

**DR. FALK**

Either you can work your ass off twenty-four hours a day until you know your patients so well that you can predict three days in advance when their noses are going to itch–until you forget that there’s a world outside this hospital building—or you can grow a penis and a pair of testicles and start screwing the nurses in the linen closets.

**ROBYN**

Dr. Falk?

**DR. FALK**

I was the first female surgeon on the faculty here. On *my* first day as a medical resident in the hospital, the senior surgeon looked through my progress notes on the patients…and then dropped his pants and urinated on them….That’s the way it is for women in surgery. If you do a great job, your patients appreciate you and your male colleagues tolerate you. But if you screw up—and believe me, you *will* screw up—it’s going to be because you can’t urinate standing up. Am I making myself clear?

**ROBYN**

You’re saying that there’s a double standard.

**DR. FALK**

There’s only one standard around here. Excellence.

**ROBYN**

Yes, Dr. Falk.

**DR. FALK.**

You’ve managed to make more mistakes in seven hours that I have in six hundred years. Now go back and get *thorough* histories and physicals from your patients.

**ROBYN**

Yes, Dr. Falk.

*(Robyn backs toward the door.)*

**DR. FALK**

And don’t slouch. People pay thousands of dollars for health insurance in this country. They’re entitled to physicians with good posture.

*6. Hospital room 125. Eleanor and the Amnesiac.*

**ELEANOR**

How was your CT-scan?

**AMNESIAC**

Awful. The lab technician kept asking me questions about my medical history….Have I ever had cancer? Do I have a drug problem? I don’t even know if I have a drug problem….

*(Sobbing)*

….I keep talking about myself, don’t I? How are *you*?

**ELEANOR**

I spent the afternoon planning my funeral….

**AMNESIAC**

I’m sorry.

**ELEANOR**

Don’t be. It’s not nearly as difficult as you might think. Much easier than planning a wedding…and there’s no obligation to invite anybody you don’t like….

**AMNESIAC**

I’m not sure I’d care what happens to me after I’m dead….But for your sake, Eleanor, I do hope the funeral lives up to your expectations.

**ELEANOR**

We make a pretty pair, don’t we? All gloom and death.

**AMNESIAC**

I’m not gloomy. I’m jealous. It’s not fair that you’re going to die and I’m going to be stuck like this….

**ELEANOR**

Who said anything about life being fair?

**AMNESIAC**

You’ve got to help me!

**ELEANOR**

*(Ignoring the Amnesiac’s plea)*

My late husband and I saw this play one time called *The Replacement*, about a middle-aged mother who finds out that she’s dying, so she recruits a lonely, childless woman to stand in for her and to raise her children. Like in *The Sound of Music*, only the first Mrs. Von Trapp is still alive. So the “replacement” moves in with the family for a month-long trial run—to learn the ropes of the household. The only problem is that this “replacement” proves to be so much more effective as a wife and mother than the first woman, that the original woman wants to fire her—but by then she’s already insinuated herself into their household and it’s too late….At least *my* husband is dead and *my* daughters are grown. Nobody’s going to replace me and show me up.

**AMNESIAC**

I’m begging you….

**ELEANOR**

I can’t, Amanda….I’ve killed two innocent people already.

**AMNESIAC**

Look at me. Ask yourself: Would you want to live in my condition?

**ELEANOR**

I don’t know….

**AMNESIAC**

Would you want to keep going if your daughters walked into this room and you didn’t know who they were…?

**ELEANOR**

Don’t torture yourself, dear—

**AMNESIAC**

Or if I told you that you’d never see them again, because you’d have no way of finding them…. You wouldn’t even know they existed….

**ELEANOR**

Don’t do this….

**AMNESIAC**

*(Increasingly upset)*

What if somebody would replace you! Somebody would take over your job and raise your children and make love to your husband and you’d be a pale shadow receding into memory! Don’t torture myself, Eleanor?! Every waking minute is torture for me, Eleanor. And you’re the only person in the world who can help me, because you’re the only person in this world other than the doctors who even knows I exist.

**ELEANOR**

….Okay, I’ll do it.

**AMNESIAC**

I’m not asking so much. You don’t even have to warn me. Just take a pillow one night when I’m sleeping and press it over my face.

**ELEANOR**

You have my word. Now let’s not talk about it.

**AMNESIAC**

*(A long pause.)*

Thank you.

*7. Hospital room 125. History and Physical, Take Two.*

*(Robyn enters, carrying her clipboard. Eleanor and the Amnesiac*

*play dead. Robyn approaches Eleanor’s bed.)*

**ROBYN**

I’m sorry to bother you again, Mrs. Powell, but you really have to wake up this time.

*(Eleanor does not move.)*

I’m not leaving this room until you answer my questions….All you have to do is tell me where you are, and what day of the week it is, and the name of the President of the United States, and I promise I’ll leave you alone….

*(Eleanor still does not move. Robyn paces the room, her anxiety*

*increasing. She pauses before the Amnesiac.)*

How about you? Are you willing to talk?

*(The Amnesiac does not move.)*

Goddamit. I didn’t spend four years of college memorizing molecular formulas so that a pair of crazy sick people could get in the way of my becoming a doctor. Now one of you had better say something or I swear to God I’ll inject myself with an overdose of insulin, or morphine, or toner from the photocopier, and I’ll do it right here in the middle of your room so that this will become an active crime scene, and the police will be in here asking you questions, day and night, never giving you a moment’s peace. Now this is your last goddam chance: Who is the President of the United States?

**ELEANOR**

*(Eleanor speaks without opening her eyes.)*

Harry Truman.

**ROBYN**

That’s better. Now we’re getting somewhere.

*(Robyn writes on her clipboard)*

“Patient Powell identifies U.S. President as Harry Truman.”

**THE AMNESIAC**

Lyndon Johnson

**ROBYN**

*(Robyn continues to write on her clipboard)*

“Patient Doe identifies U.S. President as Lyndon Johnson”

**ELEANOR**

Gerald Ford.

**ROBYN**

You already said Truman. Do you want to change your answer?

**THE AMNESIAC**

Herbert Hoover.

**ELEANOR**

Dwight Eisenhower.

**ROBYN**

Stop! Please stop!

**THE AMNESIAC**

Richard Nixon

**ELEANOR**

Teddy Roosevelt

**THE AMNESIAC**

Woodrow Wilson

**ELEANOR**

Abraham Lincoln.

**ROBYN**

Why are you doing this to me?

**ELEANOR**

James Garfield.

**THE AMNESIAC**James Buchanan

**ELEANOR**

Grover Cleveland.

**THE AMNESIAC**

Grover Cleveland. Again.

**ROBYN**

*(On the verge of tears)*

You two are the worst patients ever!

*(Robyn runs from the room.)*

**ELEANOR**

Well done. I knew I was going to like you…

**THE AMNESIAC**

How very strange. I can remember James Buchanan and Woodrow Wilson, but not my own name….You don’t think we were too hard on that girl, do you?

**ELEANOR**

Don’t go soft on me, Amanda. It’s us against them. Once you let the medical students get the upper hand, they’ll spend all day long in here asking you to count backwards by nines.

You might as well sign up to be a laboratory rat….But I have a bad feeling about this new girl….I can’t tell whether she’s extremely clever or extremely naïve, but we’d best be careful….

**THE AMNESIAC**She’s not really going to kill herself in our room, is she?

**ELEANOR**

I don’t think so, but that’s the problem with medical students. They seem so calm and detached and then, every so often, one of them jumps out a window.

*8. Paige and Gloria. The Family Waiting Room.*

**PAIGE**

*(Paige opens the window and pokes her head out. She takes a*

*deep breath.)*

I’d almost forgotten.

**GLORIA**

Forgotten what?

**PAIGE**

That there’s a world out there. That there are people who don’t spend all of their time arguing with doctors and insurance companies….

**GLORIA**

I wish I could be more helpful. Are you sure there isn’t anything I can do?

**PAIGE**

It’s generous of you to offer….but, quite frankly, no.

**GLORIA**

Because you’re afraid I’ll mess up.

**PAIGE**

I didn’t say that.

**GLORIA**

But you’re thinking it….

**PAIGE**

I’m not the one who deposited her Publishers Clearinghouse check in the automated teller machine and ended up being banned from the bank….

**GLORIA**

It was an honest mistake.

**PAIGE**

Like when you tried to convince mom that women didn’t have to pay income taxes because the tax laws dated from before women gained the right to vote.

**GLORIA**

It made sense at the time. No taxation without representation. I read about it in a magazine.

**PAIGE**

You and your magazines, I swear….Look at it this way. You’re an artist—aren’t you always telling me that styling hair is as much an art form as painting or sculpting? Well, at times like this, the best thing an artist can do is stay out of the way….

**GLORIA**

Don’t patronize me, Paige.

**PAIGE**

I’m sorry….I just keep thinking about how quickly everything has changed. It seems like only a few years ago that I was shouting for help because I thought the shadows in my bedroom were pirates, and Mom would come running to tuck me in….

**GLORIA**

You used to scare *me* too. I’d hear you shouting about pirates and I’d also start crying….

**PAIGE**

And all those times I called her at the aquarium when I needed help with my biology homework, or when I maxed out my credit cards at college, or when I went to visit Tommy Phelps at Cornell and my car rolled down that embankment into the gorge….She always managed to fix things….

**GLORIA**

You’re talking about Mom in the past tense….You’re scaring me….

**PAIGE**

I’m scaring myself. Part of Mom is already in the past tense….Do you ever have the desire to lean out the window and scream for help? Not for anything in particular—just help with everything. With life.

**GLORIA**

All the time.

**PAIGE**

That’s how I feel right now….Only I won’t. Because nobody is going to help….I phoned nineteen neurosurgeons today, but the minute they heard Mom’s name, they wanted nothing to do with her. One of them even said that he’d like to help, but that he has his own wife and children to think of….They’re all as crazy as Mom is.

**GLORIA**

You don’t think she could be right, do you? I saw a television movie once where this woman killed men by sleeping with them. Every time she took a new lover, he had a heart attack….

**PAIGE**

*No, I don’t think she’s right!* I think she’s cuckoo….We have to stick together on this. Promise me you won’t take Mom’s side.

**GLORIA**

I’m not taking Mom’s side—

**PAIGE**

Promise! Promise or I swear I’ll hold you accountable for whatever happens.

**GLORIA**

Okay….I promise.

**PAIGE**

Good. Mom hasn’t killed anyone and I won’t have people suggesting otherwise.

*9. Hospital room 125. Night. The Amnesiac is sleeping.*

*(Eleanor climbs out bed, takes hold of her pillow, and inches*

*across the room with the help of her walker. She arrives at the*

*Amnesiac’s bed, lift’s the pillow above her head in preparation to*

*suffocate the Amnesiac—and she loses her balance. She shouts*

*for help and the stage goes dark.)*

*10*. *Hospital room 125. Eleanor and Paige. Eleanor has a bandage wrapped around her head.*

**PAIGE**

What were you thinking? You could have died.

**ELEANOR**

There’s no reason to make a federal case out of this. I’m fine.

**PAIGE**

You’re *not* fine. If you were fine, you wouldn’t have a six-inch gash in your scalp.

**ELEANOR**

Don’t blow this out of proportion, Paige. I fainted. People faint all the time. In your grandmother’s day, it was considered fashionable.

**PAIGE**

When I heard Dr. Falk’s voice on the telephone last night, my first thought was that you *had* died….

**ELEANOR**

And what if I had? I’d be dead. And that would be that….Why do you have to take everything so seriously? I can still remember that morning I came downstairs to the kitchen—you couldn’t have been more than ten years old—and there you were, reading the obituaries and sobbing because a bunch of strangers had died. Meanwhile, Gloria’s a glorified hairdresser married to a common criminal and she’s as content as a pig in mud….Anyway, the bottom line is that I’m still alive. So let’s have some breakfast.

**PAIGE**

How difficult is it to call the nurse if you want to get up?

**ELEANOR**

I didn’t want to call the nurse. I was conducting personal business.

**PAIGE**

Couldn’t it have waited until the morning? I would have helped you.

**ELEANOR**

I’m not so sure.

**PAIGE**

I’ll make you a deal. If you promise not to go traipsing about the hospital alone at night, I’ll be glad to help you with any personal business you might have.

**ELEANOR**

Promise?

**PAIGE**

Promise. Now what was so personal that you couldn’t ask the nurse for help?

**ELEANOR**

You know my roommate, Amanda? The paralyzed girl with amnesia.

**PAIGE**

It’s so awful, isn’t it?

**ELEANOR**

My roommate asked me to adjust her pillows. She can’t do it on her own, you understand.

**PAIGE**

That’s all?

**ELEANOR**

More or less….She was hoping I might adjust one of the pillows over her face and push down on it as hard as I can….

**PAIGE**

You don’t mean…?

**ELEANOR**

She can’t do it on her own.

**PAIGE**

But that’s….For the love of God, Mom, I don’t understand you. You’re going to let yourself have a stroke because you’re afraid of killing your surgeon, but you’re willing to suffocate an innocent woman in cold blood.

**ELEANOR**

She *wants* me to….But I can’t do it on my own either. I don’t have the strength.

**PAIGE**

Thank heavens for small blessings.

**ELEANOR**

You’ve got to help me, honey….It’s the only way.

**PAIGE**

Are you out of your mind?

**ELEANOR**

One night, while she’s sleeping…You can hide in the bathroom after visiting hours end….

**PAIGE**

This is insane. Neither of us is going to kill anybody.

**ELEANOR**

If you do this for me, I’ll go through with the operation.

**PAIGE**

*(A long pause. Paige is dumbfounded.)*

I can’t….I’d kill someone to defend you….I swear I would….but not like this…

*(Eleanor realizes that Paige will not help, so she feigns laughter.)*

Hold on. This is another one of your games, isn’t it?

**ELEANOR**

You really do take things too seriously, Paige. You know what I was doing when I fell down? I was going to the vending machine in the corridor for a candy bar…Did you really think I’d kill that poor sweet girl?

**PAIGE**

I don’t know what to think anymore.

**ELEANOR**

Maybe you should have a wrist watch implanted. It seems to have a calming effect.

11. *Dr. Falk’s office. Robyn and Dr. Falk.*

*(Dr. Falk is seated at her desk, reading a hospital chart. She looks*

*up when Robyn enters.)*

**ROBYN**

You wanted to see me, Dr. Falk?

**DR. FALK.**

Robyn with a “ck,” right? So I have a case for you to write up….

**ROBYN**

Yes, doctor?

**DR. FALK**

A truly remarkable case…It’s our patient Sally Brown.

**ROBYN**

Sally Brown?

**DR. FALK**

Surely, you remember. I sent you to retrieve her old records earlier this week….Well I was reading through them over breakfast, and I discovered the most unusual phenomenon. It turns out that Miss Brown had a radical hysterectomy last year at the age of eighty-six….and that five months later, if the chart is to be believed, she gave birth to quadruplets….Do you have any idea how that might have happened?

**ROBYN**

Look, I can explain…I tripped and….Mrs. Powell’s daughter….and I don’t know….

*(Robyn starts sobbing.)*

**DR. FALK**

This is unacceptable. You are going to kill somebody….

**ROBYN**

Give me another chance….I worked so hard to get here….

**DR. FALK**

Do you know what the airplane pilot said to the control tower after she confused her flight plans and took off from the wrong runway?

**ROBYN**

I don’t know…

**DR. FALK**

Nothing. She was dead.

**ROBYN**

You’re going to have me expelled, aren’t you?

**DR. FALK**

I’m not sure what I’m going to do….What I suggest, young lady, is that you think long and hard about the damage you might have caused with your carelessness…and then you do something to convince me you’re not a one woman menace to the public health. Got it?

**ROBYN**

Yes, Dr. Falk.

**DR. FALK**

And stop slouching, for God’s sake. You’re a medical student, not an orangutan. If you’re not going to read your textbooks, at least go balance one on your head.

12. *Hospital room 125. Eleanor and Gloria, while the Amnesiac sleeps.*

**ELEANOR**

Gloria, dear, how would you feel about doing a small favor for your sick mother?

**GLORIA**

I’m not making any more lists.

**ELEANOR**

No more lists. I swear.

**GLORIA**

Because if Paige ever finds out I made that list for you, she’s going to plan *my* funeral…

**ELEANOR**

I’m done planning funerals. One is enough for me….What I need your help with is much easier than all that….

*(Eleanor whispers her request in Gloria’s ear.)*

**ELEANOR**

If you’ll do this for me, I’ll go through with the operation.

**GLORIA**

You’re serious, aren’t you?

**ELEANOR**

Phil can even have the body….

**GLORIA**

*(On the verge of hysterics.)*

Paige is right. You really have gone mad!

**ELEANOR**

Calm down. You’ll wake up Amanda.

**GLORIA**

I have to find Paige. *She’ll* know how to handle this….

*(Gloria runs toward the door, then stops.)*

You’re not going to do anything…to her…while I’m gone, are you?

**ELEANOR**

Not a thing. I swear. But I might club the day nurse over the head with my bed pan when she’s not looking….

**GLORIA**Oh, Mom!

*(Gloria runs out of the room. The amnesiac wakes up.)*

**AMNESIAC**

What was that all about?

**ELEANOR**

I read somewhere that the Ancient Spartans believed children were a form of property. You could buy them, sell them, trade them. And they had to do anything that you asked them to do, because they were your children. Such a simple philosophy…makes you wonder why we bother with all those self-righteous Athenians… Socrates, Aristotle….when the Spartans already had the key to happiness all figured out.

**AMNESIAC**

I was sleeping.

**ELEANOR**

I’m sorry if we woke you.

**AMNESIAC**

I was *sleeping*, Eleanor….You haven’t forgotten, have you?

**ELEANOR**

I gave you my word, Amanda. Consider yourself dead.

*13. Robyn. To the Audience.*

It’s nothing like I expected. I thought medicine was all about helping people…going from room to room with good cheer and a bag of pills….Nobody warned me about the people who don’t want good cheer…. The angry, tired, abusive people who come seeking free food and shelter, seeking narcotics, trying to squeeze the breasts of the medical student while she’s taking their temperature, sliding their lecherous fingers inside her white coat while she’s drawing blood….Nobody told me about the caverns of paperwork, in duplicate, in triplicate, about the notes that nobody ever reads documenting examinations that didn’t need to take place….Nobody told me about the waiting time in the emergency room, about the patients on gurneys in hallways, for hours, for days, about the ninety-five year old widows groaning on gurneys and the hospital staff walking by them, indifferent, telling themselves, she’s not my patient, she’s not my responsibility. Sometimes I think that if God spent Christmas Eve in a hospital emergency room instead of church, He’d take his mighty, wrathful Old Testament arm and obliterate us all!...

*14. Hospital room 125. Robyn and Eleanor.*

**ELEANOR**

You’re back.

**ROBYN**

You’re not comatose.

**ELEANOR**

Touché.

**ROBYN**

Where’s your roommate?

**ELEANOR**

She went for a jog.

**ROBYN**

Excuse me?

**ELEANOR**

She’s having an MRI.

**ROBYN**

Look, Mrs. Powell…I’m not sure what I’ve done to upset you, but I’m hoping we can start over again, because I really need your help.

**ELEANOR**

Then we’re in the same boat. Because I need *your* help.

**ROBYN**

Here’s the thing, Mrs. Powell. I have to do something to convince my supervisor, Dr. Falk, that I’m not utterly incompetent. Something big. Like curing cancer or performing a brain transplant—only I’m not capable of anything like that. But I thought maybe I could convince you to let Dr. Falk take that watch out of your head, and that might count as something impressive…. I’m begging you—

**ELEANOR**

Sure. I’ll do it.

**ROBYN**

You will?

**ELEANOR**

Of course, I will.

**ROBYN**

Thank you!

**ELEANOR**

But on one condition.

**ROBYN**Anything….I’ll give you free medical care for life….I’ll come home with you and clean your garage—

*(Eleanor whispers her request in Robyn’s ear.)*

**ROBYN**

I can’t do that.

**ELEANOR**

I’m afraid you don’t have a choice, young lady.

**ROBYN**

I can’t….I won’t.

**ELEANOR**

But you will. Otherwise, I’ll complain to Dr. Falk that you’re the worst medical student I’ve ever had….Which, at this hospital, is saying quite a lot.

**ROBYN**

Please don’t put me in this situation, Mrs. Powell. It’s not fair.

**ELEANOR**

Whoever said life was fair, my dear? My husband was mauled to death by a polar bear at the age of forty-seven. Was *that* fair? The world is full of babies born without eyes, and families massacred by rabid wolves, and pianos that fall out of windows onto busloads of unsuspecting schoolchildren. Life is, at its essence, highly unfair. Unjust. Unreasonable. If life were fair, we wouldn’t need hospitals. If life were fair, we wouldn’t need medical students.

**ROBYN**

Why are you doing this *to me*?

**ELEANOR**

Nobody made you go to medical school. You could have been a lawyer or a flight attendant or one of those young women who wear black skirts and hand out napkins at art shows….But you chose to become a medical student, and fate or chance or the divine hand of a wrathful god put you in the wrong place at the wrong time, and right now I need your help….So go tell Dr. Falk that she can cut my skull open tomorrow. And while I’m in the operating room, you’ll sneak back in here with a some morphine and an extra-soft pillow. Got it? Let’s get all the killing and dying over with as quickly as possible….

*15. Dr. Falk’s Office. Dr. Falk is adjusting her diplomas*.

*(Robyn enters, glowing with excitement.)*

**ROBYN**

So I did it! I convinced her.

**DR. FALK**What are you talking about?

**ROBYN**

I convinced Mrs. Powell in room 125 to let you remove the watch from her brain?

**DR. FALK**

How in the world did you do that?

**ROBYN**

I told her how talented a surgeon you were….

**DR. FALK**

And she agreed?

**ROBYN**

She wants it done as quickly as possible….tomorrow, if you’re willing….

**DR. FALK**

Jesus Christ. I can’t believe you did that.

**ROBYN**

I had to redeem myself somehow….

**DR. FALK**

*(After a long, reflective pause)*

You’ve done well. We might make a passable physician of you yet.

**ROBYN**Thank you, Dr. Falk….Does this mean you’re not going to have me expelled?

**DR. FALK**

I was never going to have you expelled. I’m not nearly that powerful….I’ll tell you a secret….Even if you killed someone, they probably wouldn’t throw you out of medical school. It would take too much effort—and the inertia is already on your side. You’d probably have to kill someone *intentionally* to get thrown out of medical school….

**ROBYN**

Thank you, Dr. Falk.

**DR. FALK**

Now get out of here before I change my mind and report you to the dean….

**ROBYN**

Yes, Dr. Falk.

*(Robyn exits. Dr. Falk paces her office nervously.)*

**DR. FALK**

*(To herself.)*

Am I afraid? Of course, I’m not afraid…..I’m *terrified*. And I have to do it, don’t I? There’s really no two ways about it….

*(She sits down at her desk, her face in her hands.)*

Oh, God. I don’t want to die….

**END OF ACT ONE**

**ACT TWO**

*16. Dr. Falk’s Office. Dr. Falk and Paige.*

*(Dr. Falk is seated at her desk. She appears to be dead. Paige*

*knocks on the door and then enters.)*

**PAIGE**

Dr. Falk….

*(Paige approaches Dr. Falk’s body.)*

Dr. Falk? Are you all right?

*(Paige nudges Dr. Falk’s body. No response. She pushes harder.*

*Dr. Falk’s body responds at though she is dead.)*

Oh my God! You’re dead!....Now we’re never going to find a surgeon….

*(She pushes Dr. Falk’s body harder.)*

Don’t be dead. Please don’t be dead.

*(Paige hits Dr. Falk in the shoulder as hard as she can. Dr. Falk*

*jolts upright.)*

**DR. FALK**

Enough already. You could hurt someone.

**PAIGE**

I thought you were dead.

**DR. FALK**

Well, I’m not.

**PAIGE**

But you weren’t….I mean….

**DR. FALK**

I was *pretending* to be dead, Ms. Powell.

**PAIGE**

Oh. I can come back later….

**DR. FALK**

No need. Have you ever pretended to be dead, Ms. Powell?

**PAIGE**

Not since I was a little girl. I used to read the obituaries every morning….and there were days when I’d pretend that I found my name and that I didn’t have to go to school….

**DR. FALK**

You should try again sometime. From a medical standpoint, I highly encourage it. People spend far more of their time dead than alive. It can’t hurt to practice.

**PAIGE**

I suppose not.

**DR. FALK**

You don’t think it’s *that* bad, do you? Being dead?

**PAIGE**

Actually, I think it’s awful.

**DR. FALK**

I was afraid you’d say that. I also think it’s awful.

**PAIGE**

Not existing.

**DR. FALK**

Not being able to speak, or think, or read the morning paper….

**PAIGE**

Not knowing what’s happened to your loved ones….whether they’ve found romance or had children…whether they’re safe….

**DR. FALK**

Not knowing if we’ve cured cancer….if we’ve transplanted brain tissue….

**PAIGE**

Rotting….

**DR. FALK**

Decaying….

**PAIGE**

Nothing….

**DR. FALK**

Nothing….

*(A long, tragic pause.)*

So can we keep the watch?

**PAIGE**

Excuse me?

**DR. FALK**

If I take out the watch in your mother’s skull, can the surgery department keep it? I thought it might make a promising souvenir for our display case….

**PAIGE**

You can’t be serious?

**DR. FALK**

I’ve been searching the internet and there’s an abdominal surgeon from Belfast, Maine, who claims that he once removed a clock from the stomach of a retired dentist. You could apparently hear the device ticking if you placed your ear against the patient’s umbilicus. Dr. Ingram emailed me a photo of the timepiece…. one of those small travel clocks from the days before digital watches….So I’ve arranged for my secretary to send him photos of the ticker in your mother’s brain….a bit of surgical one-upsmanship. And then I thought an exhibit on your mother’s case might be a valuable legacy to leave the department….So you don’t mind if we keep the watch, do you?

**PAIGE**

Only if she survives.

**DR. FALK**

I’m not sure I follow.

**PAIGE**

If my mother lives, you keep the watch. If she dies, we bury it with her.

**DR. FALK**

But what good will that do?

**PAIGE**

It will give you an added incentive to cut carefully.

**DR. FALK**

I *always* cut carefully.

**PAIGE**

Then you have nothing to worry about….Now when exactly are you planning to operate?

**DR. FALK**

As soon as I get my affairs in order.

**PAIGE**

Every day that goes by is another day that my mother might die….She’s got a time bomb ticking in her head, for God’s sake!

**DR. FALK**

*(Standing and walking toward the door, visibly upset.)*

This isn’t a fast food restaurant, Ms. Powell. I’ll cut when I’m good and ready to cut…..

*17. Hospital room 125. Eleanor and the Amnesiac. They have exchanged beds.*

**THE AMNESIAC**

It feels so odd being on this side of the room….

**ELEANOR**

One summer, we relocated the artificial island in the seal tank and the fur seals suffered a collective mental breakdown. Barking like hounds, slapping the keepers with their flippers.

**THE AMNESIAC**

It’s amazing how easily you can get attached to a small corner in a hospital room—even to a prison cell, I imagine—if you don’t have anything else.

**ELEANOR**

I didn’t understand those seals until my husband died. Suddenly, I had this giant bed all to myself….

**THE AMNESIAC**

Can we trade places again?

**ELEANOR**

Tomorrow morning, dear….Thank you for being such a sport. I’ve shared this room with eight other women, and none of them was willing to switch beds….

**THE AMNESIAC**

I suppose they were worried they’d get the wrong medication.

**ELEANOR**

In this hospital, they’d be more likely to get the *right* medication by mistake….But that wasn’t what they objected to. They just didn’t understand that the nursing students are not our friends….That you need to go out of your way to confuse them—to scare them off like crows—or they’ll keep coming back forever ….Oh, this is so exciting.

**THE AMNESIAC**

Are you sure someone’s going to come?

**ELEANOR**

It’s Wednesday afternoon. We get a new nursing student *every* Wednesday afternoon…. They’re as bad as the medical students…..Worse! They’re honest.

**THE AMNESIAC**

I don’t know if I’m up to this.

**ELEANOR**

Of course you are, dear. Now let’s practice. How are you feeling today, Mrs. Powell?

**THE AMNESIAC**

Not so bad….Except I’m having a touch of nausea…and I am coughing up some blood now and then….oh, and I keep having these sudden bouts of blindness….and deafness….and yesterday my tongue and my toes turned blue simultaneously….and I’m afraid my tuberculosis may be flaring up again….and I keep hearing voices….I’m not sure what language they’re speaking….for some reason I think it might be Norwegian….I don’t actually speak Norwegian, you understand, so I can’t be certain….but their tone sounds hostile…as though they were urging me to set my mattress on fire….and then last night I had this awful dream in which I was a patient in a hospital, and one of the nursing students asked me how I was feeling, so I wrapped by hands around her throat and I strangled her….

*(To Eleanor)*

How was that?

**ELEANOR**

Brilliant. But when you mention the tuberculosis, make sure you cough at her.

*18. Paige and Gloria. The Family Waiting Room.*

**PAIGE**

Hospital. It’s a strange word, isn’t it?

**GLORIA**

What do you mean?

**PAIGE**

Just the way it sounds. *Hosp-it-al.* There’s nothing in the sound of it that tells you people are suffering and dying inside.

**GLORIA**

You’re thinking too much.

**PAIGE**

Hospitals could actually be fun places—if not for all the sick people. Where else do you cross paths with men and women from all backgrounds and walks of life? Only airports and hospitals. Even in cemeteries they divide you up by religion.

**GLORIA**

Now *that’s* a strange word. Cemetery. *Cem-et-er-y.* Every time I hear it, it reminds me how much I miss Phil….

**PAIGE**

Do you remember when we were in high school and they had “Backwards Day” during the final week of the year, and the teachers traded places with the top students? Well, I think they should do that at the hospital. Once in a while, they should have the doctors trade places with the best patients….

**GLORIA**

I’m not an idiot, you know. I’m fully aware of what Phil was doing at those cemeteries….Just because I’m a loyal wife, and I *pretend* I don’t know, doesn’t make me an idiot.

**PAIGE**

Nobody thinks you’re an idiot.

**GLORIA**

And just because you’re a high-powered lawyer and Mom has a Ph.D. in marine biology doesn’t give you two the right to look down on me. Cutting hair is as much a form of art as composing symphonies.

**PAIGE**

Nobody said otherwise.

**GLORIA**

But you *think* it. I know you do. You think that just because you spend all of your time in an oak-paneled office full of artificial fruit and plastic flowers, pushing papers clockwise and counterclockwise, it makes you better than me. Well, you’re not, Paige Powell. I’m a highly skilled professional who brings piece of mind to thousands of desperate women. I don’t merely cut hair. I’m a hair surgeon. Hell, I’m practically a doctor.

**PAIGE**

I do love you, Gloria. But honestly, *now* you sound like an idiot….

*(Dr. Falk enters.)*

**DR. FALK**

Ms. Powell. I’m glad I caught you.

**PAIGE**This is my sister, Gloria….She’s also a surgeon.

**DR. FALK**Good to meet you, doctor. What’s your specialty?

**GLORIA**Hair.

**DR. FALK**

I see….

**PAIGE**

Any word about my mother?

**DR. FALK**

She’s on the schedule for tomorrow.

**PAIGE**

You mean she’s actually agreed to go through with it?

**DR. FALK**

So it seems.

**GLORIA**Thank you, doctor. Phil will be so relieved….

**DR. FALK**

Don’t thank me. Thank the medical student….On second thought, please *don’t* thank her. It might go to her head.

*19. Hospital room 125. Night. Eleanor and the Amnesiac are asleep.*

*(Robyn enters, carrying a pillow. She tiptoes to the bed in which*

*Eleanor is now resting, believing that it contains the Amnesiac.*

*However, the audience recognizes Eleanor—possible through*

*distinctive slippers or even distinctive feet. Robyn appears*

*anguished. She raises the pillow over her head and squeezes her*

*eyes shut.)*

**ROBYN**

Get all the killing and dying over with as quickly as possible….

*(Robyn begins to lower the pillow over Eleanor’s face. At the last*

*moment, she drops the pillow and flees the room. Eleanor awakens with*

*a start. She notices the pillow.)*

**ELEANOR**

An extra pillow….I must remember to leave it out for that medical student….

*20. The Operation. Dr. Falk and Robyn enter in surgical scrubs.*

**DR. FALK**

Now don’t forget. It’s a skull. Not a person. If you think of it as part of a live human being, you won’t be able to saw through it.

**ROBYN**

Yes, Dr. Falk.

**DR. FALK**

I do have one more thing to ask of you, Robin with a “ck.” A personal favor…

**ROBYN**

Yes, Dr. Falk. Anything.

**DR. FALK**

Well, I imagine you’ve studied CPR and basic lifesaving skills in medical school…And in the *unlikely* event that something should happen to me during the procedure….I mean, if I were to keel over and stop breathing….I would find it immeasurably comforting and reassuring to know that you’d be staying as far away from my body as possible….

**ROBYN**

Yes, Dr. Falk.

**DR. FALK**

Thank you. You’ve taken a weight off my mind….Now let’s cut!

*(The operation is performed behind a screen. We see a body wheeled*

*behind the screen from one direction, then Dr. Falk and Robyn entering*

*from the other. We witness the operation taking place in silhouettes,*

*possibly with incongruous music, such as a John Phillip Souza march or*

*the Battle Hymn of the Republic. Then we hear a blood-curdling scream.*

*Robyn staggers out from behind the screen.)*

**ROBYN**

She’s dead!

*21. The Family Waiting Room. Paige and Gloria. Dr. Falk enters, covered in blood.*

**GLORIA**

Is it over?

**DR. FALK**

Yes, it’s over. But it didn’t go as well as I would have liked.

**PAIGE**

She’s all right, isn’t she? I mean: She’s alive?

*(Dr. Falk says nothing. She appears dazed.)*

Oh my god! She’s dead! You killed my mother!

*(Paige attempts to strangle Dr. Falk. Gloria restrains her.)*

**GLORIA**

Please forgive her. She’s in shock.

**DR. FALK**

It’s all right. Really….

*(Dr. Falk composes herself.)*

It started off like any other procedure. The nurses draped the patient before I entered the operating room, and I pretended that the body in front of me was already dead. Just a cadaver’s skull. Not a living human being….That’s the only way to get through it. So I was cutting along, not so different from carving a turkey or a ham…although brains tend to be a bit more tender….maybe a bit like venison….But then—without any warning—the patient had a massive allergic reaction to the anesthesia, and her blood vessels all dilated simultaneously…and then I really was just mucking about inside a cadaver’s skull.

**PAIGE**That doesn’t make any sense. Mom’s had surgery countless times before. How did she suddenly become allergic to the anesthesia?

**DR. FALK**

That’s the worst part. From the hospital’s point-of-view, at least. It wasn’t your mother.

**GLORIA**I don’t understand.

**DR. FALK**They brought in the wrong patient. Something about changing beds during the night. It’s really quite unconscionable….

**PAIGE**

So Mom is still alive?

**DR. FALK**

I’m afraid she is….

**PAIGE**She’s alive! Thank God!

*(Paige and Gloria hug and dance around the room.)*

**DR. FALK**

I’m not sure what you’re both so festive about….The patient may not have been your mother, but she’s still dead….which means we’ll have to report the episode to the state….and it was that poor amnesiac girl too. We don’t even have someone to claim the body…..

**GLORIA**

I should go call Phil….To tell him that Mom survived the operation.

**PAIGE**

But there’s still a watch in her brain….When do you intend to try again, Dr. Falk?

**DR. FALK**

That’s just the thing. I did some reflecting while I was scooping through that poor girl’s brain and I don’t think I do intend to try again. I think you should find yourself another surgeon….In all fairness, I’m far too talented a physician to throw my skills away on one patient, no matter how intriguing a case she may be….

**PAIGE**

But you’re our only hope….

**DR. FALK**

I’m sorry.

**PAIGE**

You’re a coward!

**DR. FALK**

Yes, Ms. Powell. I’m a coward. I can live with that.

**PAIGE**But what about your moral duty as a physician? Your Hippocratic Oath?

**DR. FALK**

Quite frankly, I’ve had it up to here with my Hippocratic Oath….I’ll have you know that I haven’t turned down a case in thirty-one years. I’ve operated on child killers, war criminals, even the cretin who divorced my sister. I’ve skipped birthdays, college reunions, free vacations in the Caribbean on the tab of the pharmaceutical industry…..I’ve also skipped marriage and childbirth and carpooling and college applications and just about everything that normal women enjoy between the ages of twenty-five and sixty. And I’ve skipped it all in order to save the lives of total strangers. So don’t you go lecturing me on my Hippocratic Oath! I’m truly sorry about your mother, but not sorry enough that I’m willing to skip old age for her sake….Now if you’ll excuse me—Ms. Powell, Dr. Powell—I’m going to go have my car washed and then I’m going to learn how to play golf.

*(Dr. Falk exits.)*

**PAIGE**

*(On the verge of tears.)*

Oh, God. Now what do we do?

**GLORIA**Did you see all that anger, Paige? All that frustration? That’s what comes from a lifetime of second-rate haircuts….

*22. Hospital room 125. Eleanor and Robyn.*

**ELEANOR**

I’m sorry, but we had a bargain—and you didn’t uphold your end.

**ROBYN**

Please, Mrs. Powell. I didn’t have a chance.

**ELEANOR**

And that seems unfair to you, doesn’t it?

**ROBYN**

I know exactly what you’re going to say, Mrs. Powell. *Life* is unfair….But that doesn’t mean you can’t go out of your way to make it a little bit fairer….You got what *you* wanted, didn’t you? She’s dead.

**ELEANOR**

Something of a windfall, isn’t it?

**ROBYN**

I’m begging you. If Dr. Falk finds out you won’t consent to the operation, she’s going to blame me. She’s already blaming me for sawing open the wrong patient….

**ELEANOR**

You’re as good a person to blame as any. Don’t you look before you cut?

**ROBYN**

I was afraid to….Honestly, blood makes me a little bit queasy….

**ELEANOR**

And you want to be a doctor?

**ROBYN**

I have a confession to make….

**ELEANOR**

I’m not a priest.

**ROBYN**

Please listen to me, Mrs. Powell….I’ve never wanted to be a *real* doctor….I want to be a…psychiatrist….If it were up to me, I wouldn’t set foot in the operating room again.

**ELEANOR**

Then let’s make a deal. From now on, we’ll both stay out of the operating room.

**ROBYN**

I don’t have a choice. Surgery is a required course….and I really might not pass it if you decide to back out on our agreement. Dr. Falk has already cleared away a space for your watch in the department’s display case. If she can’t operate on you, she’s liable to spontaneously combust.

**ELEANOR**

She’s a very talented surgeon, isn’t she?

**ROBYN**

The best in the world….that is, now that Dr. Luxby and Dr. Spatnick are no longer operating.

**ELEANOR**

I was afraid you’d say that….I am not going to murder the best neurosurgeon in the world.

**ROBYN**

But she *wants* to take the risk….

**ELEANOR**

That’s because she’s not thinking clearly….How many physicians really understand the risks of the procedures they’re performing? Not too many, if you ask me….I’m sorry, but sometimes patients have to make decisions for their doctors….

**ROBYN**

You really are the most unreasonable person I’ve ever met….

**ELEANOR**

Thank you.

**ROBYN**

Please don’t tell anyone I want to be a psychiatrist. Especially Dr. Falk. There’s a rumor that she barbecues psychiatrists for breakfast.

**ELEANOR**

Your secret is safe with me, dear. Now go do me a favor and find my nitwit daughters….I’m going home today, with or without their permission. I don’t have it in me to educate any more medical students….

*23. Dr. Falk’s office. Gloria and Dr. Falk.*

*(Dr. Falk is seated at her desk, wearing an old-fashioned barber’s*

*gown. Gloria cuts and styles the surgeon’s hair.)*

**DR. FALK**

I do appreciate this, but I’m still not going to change my mind.

**GLORIA**

Lean forward, please.

**DR. FALK**

Though I am sorry that I lost my temper with your sister. Please apologize to her for me.

**GLORIA**

Lean back again.

**DR. FALK**

I don’t know what came over me….I suppose I just felt very mortal all of a sudden. I trained with Larry Spatnick, you know….and I did an elective with Hiram Luxby as a medical student. They were cut from the same cloth. Many people don’t realize this but behind their gruff, detached, arrogant exteriors….were two of the meanest sons-of-bitches I ever met in my life….

**GLORIA**

Hold still….

**DR. FALK**

But it’s still hard to believe they’re dead….That means I’m at the top of the field…All alone…which, from a mortality perspective, means I’m next in line.

**GLORIA**

*(Gloria stops cutting and passes Dr. Falk a hand mirror. Dr.*

*Falk’s hairstyle is now quite fashionable.)*

Voila! Now you have nothing to be ashamed of….

**DR. FALK**

Was it really *that* bad?

**GLORIA**

You’d never believe how much anger you can store in your hair. Don’t you feel better now?

**DR. FALK**

Yes. Surprisingly, I feel much better.

**GLORIA**

Good. Now you can perform Mom’s surgery.

**DR. FALK**

But I already told you, I won’t do that.

**GLORIA**

*(Raising her voice, still holding the scissors.)*

Like hell you won’t.

*(She brandishes the blade of the scissors at Dr. Falk’s throat.)*

**DR. FALK**

Please calm down. I’m sure we can work something out.

**GLORIA**

Did you know that I’ve given more than fifty thousand haircuts…?

**DR. FALK**

You must be worn out….You’ll take a vacation and you’ll feel better….

**GLORIA**

How many operations have you performed?

**DR. FALK**

I honestly don’t know….

**GLORIA**

Fifty thousand?

**DR. FALK**

Not that many….

**GLORIA**

You know what the difference is between hair stylists and other surgeons? You don’t need anesthesia to have your hair cut, so people talk to their hair stylists….

**DR. FALK**

I suppose they do.

**GLORIA**

They talk and talk and talk….about the great injustices of their lives….about how their sister-in-law didn’t thank them properly for cooking the Christmas dinner….about how their son’s eighth grade teacher didn’t grade his essay fairly….about how hard it is to live in a world with taxes and jury duty and homeless people begging for change….They talk about *themselves*….Do you know why they talk about themselves?

**DR. FALK**

Because that’s what they know about?

**GLORIA**

Because they’re selfish. Because they think the world revolves around them….And do you know what I do? I listen. Day after day, year after years, fifty thousand times, eighth grade teacher after eighth grade teacher, I listen to these wealthy, beautiful women complaining about how life has given them the short end of the stick. And sometimes, when one of these women says something particularly objectionable, I want to jab my scissors into the flesh of their artificially-tightened necks. But I never do. Do you know why?

**DR. FALK**

Because you’re a reasonable person.

**GLORIA**

Because I’m a *kind* person. A good human being….

*(She snips the scissors open and shut quickly at Dr. Falk’s neck)*

**DR. FALK**

I can tell you’re a good human being….Now please put down that scissors….

**GLORIA**

I may be a good, decent, kind-hearted woman—but I’m not an angel….Everybody has a breaking point….Even hair stylists!

**DR. FALK**

Think clearly, Ms. Powell. What good will you accomplish by hurting me?

**GLORIA**

I’m not going to hurt you. I’m not even going to have Phil’s colleagues taking your for a swim in cinderblock boots. All I’m going to do is phone the state medical board and tell them you *intentionally* operated on the wrong woman….

**DR. FALK**

But that’s crazy! They won’t believe you….

**GLORIA**

They will when I explain that you planned to sell the body to my husband’s former associates….My family has a lot of credibility when it comes to trading in cadavers….And you might win your case in the long run, but that could be months, years….Think of the publicity. That’s the wonderful thing about a reputation. It’s easy to get one and it’s easy to lose one….

**DR. FALK**

It was an honest mistake, for heaven’s sake. Have you no decency?

**GLORIA**

I’ve used up all my decency….And I’m tired of letting people like you and Paige and mother make all the decisions around here. I am taking control of the situation….on behalf of all the ordinary people in the world—the hair cutters, the cab drivers, the men and women who read gas meters, and paint street lines, and deliver bottled water. We have a right to make decisions too, dammit—even where our own healthcare is concerned. So you’re going to cut my mother’s head open this afternoon, and you’re going to take that watch out, and you’re going to make sure she lives to be one hundred twenty, whether she wants to or not. Am I making myself clear?

**DR. FALK**Indeed you are.

**GLORIA**

Good. Now would you like me to do your nails?

*24. Hospital room 125. Eleanor and Dr. Falk.*

**ELEANOR**

Who are you?

**DR. FALK**

I’m Dr. Falk.

**ELEANOR**

Oh, Dr. Falk. I didn’t recognize you.

**DR. FALK**

Your daughter styled my hair.

**ELEANOR**

You hardly look like a doctor anymore.

**DR. FALK**

I’m sure you’re already aware of the mix-up this morning….

**ELEANOR**

I knew something was wrong when I woke up without any stab wounds.

**DR. FALK**

In any case, I wanted to reassure you that this unfortunate incident was an extremely rare occurrence and that it will have no impact on your own care.

**ELEANOR**

Of course, it won’t. I’m going home as soon as I have my lunch.

**DR. FALK**

Actually, you’re not getting lunch today. We’re operating this afternoon.

**ELEANOR**

I’ve changed my mind….I’m not having the surgery..

**DR. FALK**

Let’s not go through all of this again, Mrs. Powell…..*You* know you’re going to have the surgery and *I* know you’re going to have the surgery, so what’s the point of hemming and hawing about it, when at the end of the day we both know that you’re going to stay in the hospital and let me remove the watch?

**ELEANOR**

I don’t think I like your tone….Dr. Luxby and Dr. Spatnick both had lovely bedside manners….

**DR. FALK**

Some good it did them.

**ELEANOR**

Are you insinuating something by that?

**DR. FALK**

Nothing at all.

**ELEANOR**

If you’re going to accuse me of things, I’m going to skip lunch and walk out that door….

**DR. FALK**

Go ahead.

**ELEANOR**

I will. When I’m good and ready.

*(Eleanor folds her arms across her chest. She does not get up.)*

**DR. FALK**

You’ll *never* be ready. Who do you think you are to play tricks on the nursing students and foul up the operating room schedule? I’ve been putting up with your games for sixty-six days and now I’ve done playing. You’re lucky I don’t lobotomize you while I’m taking out that watch.

**ELEANOR**

Nobody has a right to talk to me like that. I don’t care how good a surgeon you are….You’re a very nasty person, Dr. Falk….I feel for your children….

**DR. FALK**

*(Defensively.)*

I don’t have any children, thank-you-very-much. I’ll have you know that a woman can lead a perfectly meaningful, fulfilling life without being a wife or a mother. This is not a one-size fits all world, Mrs. Powell.

**ELEANOR**

You have no children?

**DR. FALK**

And no regrets.

**ELEANOR**

And your parents? You don’t happen to have an elderly mother living in New Hampshire?

**DR. FALK**

My parents are both long gone. My sister too….I have my work. And when I retire, I’ll have a rewarding career to look back upon. How many women of my generation can say that?

**ELEANOR**

All work and no play can make Jane an insufferable bitch.

**DR. FALK**

Excuse me! I’m a doctor. You can’t speak to a doctor like that!

**ELEANOR**

You know what: Go ahead and do the surgery. See if I care….Quite frankly, I’m not going to shed any tears over a woman like you.

**DR. FALK**

Is that a threat?

**ELEANOR**

All I’m saying is that I have a track record in the operating room.

**DR. FALK**

So do I, Mrs. Powell. So do I.

*25. The Operation, Take Two.*

*(The second operation is performed behind a screen. We see a body*

*wheeled behind the screen from one direction, then Dr. Falk and Robyn*

*entering from the other. We again witness the operation taking place in*

*silhouettes, this time more exaggerated, possibly accompanied by*

*incongruous music such as Ella Fitzgerald or Billie Holliday. The music*

*should build to a crescendo. At its conclusion, Robyn staggers from*

*behind the curtain, bloody and dazed. Robyn attempts to address the*

*audience, but no words come out of her mouth. After several attempts at*

*speech, punctuated by desperate gestures, she passed out cold.)*

*26. Hospital room 125. Eleanor with Paige and Gloria. The other bed remains empty.*

**PAIGE**

Wake up, Mom. It’s all over.

*(Eleanor opens her eyes and sits up.)*

**ELEANOR**

Did I kill her?

**PAIGE**

You’re fine. Dr. Falk is fine. Everybody is fine.

**ELEANOR**

Dammit. I thought I might go three-for-three.

**GLORIA**

You’re as good as new, Mom. Better. Phil will be so pleased.

**ELEANOR**

I miss Amanda.

**PAIGE**

Who?

**ELEANOR**

That sweet girl the two of you refused to kill.

**PAIGE**

Her name was Amanda?

**ELEANOR**

No, her name was Sally. Sally Brown….You can learn a lot listening to people talk in their sleep….But I thought Amanda suited her better.

**PAIGE**I can’t believe you. You knew who that woman was and you didn’t tell her? She could have gone back to her family….

**ELEANOR**She didn’t want to. Trust me….Even if half of what she said in her sleep was true, she never wanted to see them again….  
 **PAIGE**So you played God with her life?

**ELEANOR**Don’t be so judgmental. Sometimes playing God is the right thing to do.

**GLORIA**Let’s not fight. Please.

**ELEANOR**

Quick. It’s four o’clock. Pretend I’m dead.

*(Eleanor closes her eyes as though she’s in a coma. Gloria does*

*the same.)*

**PAIGE**

What are you doing?

*(Eleanor does not respond.)*

Gloria, what the hell is going on?

**GLORIA**

If the medical student thinks we’re in a coma, she won’t bother us.

*(Gloria returns to her feigned coma.)*

**PAIGE**

The two of you are truly impossible. Don’t you ever think that it might be *useful* to have the medical student ask you some questions? For instance, to find out whether you need any medical help….She’s a very nice girl, that medical student. Totally clueless, but sweet as sweet can be….

*(A long pause)*

Dammit, mother. Wake-up! You are *not* in a coma.

*(A longer pause.)*

**ELEANOR**

*(Eleanor opens her eyes and looks at her watch.)*

She’s late. How do you like that?.....I hope I didn’t scare her off.

27. *Dr. Falk’s Office. Dr. Falk and Robyn.*

**ROBYN**

You wanted to see me, Dr. Falk?

**DR. FALK**

Relax. You’re not in trouble. Not yet, at least. But I do have a serious question to ask you: Are you sure you want to be a doctor?

**ROBYN**

Yes….I mean I think so….I mean I really don’t know anymore…..

**DR. FALK**

That’s progress. At least, you’re honest….You can always become a nurse.

**ROBYN**

I’m guess I’m just very confused.

**DR. FALK**

Me too. I’m *still* not sure I want to be a doctor and I’ve been practicing surgery for six hundred years….

**ROBYN**

Are you serious?

**DR. FALK**

I’m *always* serious. Haven’t you figured that out yet? But the patients keep showing up, so I keep on cutting…..

**ROBYN**

*(A long pause)*

Is that what you wanted to tell me, Dr. Falk.

**DR. FALK**

More or less. Oh, and I have something for you. Courtesy of Mrs. Powell.

*(Dr. Falk hands Robyn the watch.)*

I’ve even had it engraved.

**ROBYN**

To Robyn with the “ck”.

**DR. FALK**

Don’t leave it inside anybody’s skull….at least not until I retire.

**ROBYN**Wow. Thank you….But I thought you were going to put it on display?

**DR. FALK**

No room anymore. Dr. Navare removed fifty quarters from a psychiatric patient’s stomach last night. One for each of the fifty states—the woman had been collecting them for nearly ten years….

**ROBYN**

I swear I’ll treasure this….I’ll take it with me everywhere, Dr. Falk, even when I’m old like you.

**DR. FALK**

I hope you will…. But call me Gwendolyn from now on…. Just not in front of the patients.

**ROBYN**

Thank you, Dr. Falk. I mean Gwendolyn.

**DR. FALK**

Now get back to work before I come to my senses and have you expelled….I’ll meet you at the nurse’s station in half an hour.

**ROBYN**

Yes, Dr. Falk. Right away, Dr. Falk.

*(Robyn retreats toward the door. Dr. Falk looks at her wrists and calls*

*after Robyn in alarm.)*

**DR. FALK**

Robyn. Have you seen *my* watch?

**ROBYN**

Not since we were in the operating room….

**DR. FALK**

Good God! You don’t think—

**ROBYN**

*(Concerned, but still clueless.)*

Are you alarmed, Gwen?

**DR. FALK**

Never mind. I’m sure it will turn up somewhere eventually….

*(Robyn exit. Dr. Falk, to the audience)*

I thought I’d be lost without my watch, but it actually feels rather liberating.

It gives you the illusion that you have all the time in the world.

**END OF ACT TWO**