

Urgent Care

by Deb Oestreicher

When Carol complained about a pain in her back, Frank didn't think much about it. Her back—especially her shoulders—hurt most of the time he'd known her, almost fifteen years, from sitting in front of a computer all day. It was an old story.

“But this is different,” Carol said. “I can't get comfortable.” She rotated her arm from her shoulder and then reached for her shoulder blade with the opposite hand. “I can't shake it out. It doesn't *hurt*, exactly, but I can't shake it out.”

They were both getting ready to go to work. Frank put his laptop in his knapsack. “I have to catch my bus,” he said.

“I know you think this is normal, but this is not normal,” Carol said.

“So go to the doctor.”

What Carol wanted was sympathy, not advice. “See you later,” she said, and picked up her purse.

Carol sat a long time in the examination room after the x-rays were done. She'd decided to come in because it was a slow morning at the office, but she missed lunch and now she was so hungry she felt weak. You never saw Dr. Ranier without waiting; she was that popular. Carol wished they could have been friends. People on television were friends with their doctors, so maybe real people were, too, but it seemed impossible to start a friendship with someone who already knew so much about you.

She dug in her purse for a mint or a piece of gum. Nothing. She tried lying back on the examination table and closed her eyes, but she just couldn't get comfortable. When she sat up again she noticed a gossip magazine on the chair in the corner. As she flipped through, looking at pictures of pregnant celebrities, Dr. Ranier knocked and came in.

The thing about Dr. RaRanier nier was that she talked really fast. It was this ability, probably, that enabled her to handle so many

appointments in a day. If you were calm, that was fine, but Carol was worried and hungry and the words sped past in a blur. She made the doctor repeat herself several times so when she called Frank, Carol was able to explain that her right lung had collapsed, no reason, it was called a spontaneous pneumothorax, and they would have to go to the hospital and get it fixed.

They stopped to get Carol a fast food burger and some fries before coming to the hospital and after she ate she said she felt better, but then it became harder to breathe, so Frank wondered if the food had been a bad idea.

“No,” Carol said. The effort breathing took weakened her voice and forced her to her pause between words. “I was... really... starving.”

While they were waiting in Urgent Care, Frank suggested calling her mother and sister, and his parents, but Carol shook her head.

“Don't... they'll just... worry.”

He did call Carol's office to let Sumner, her boss, know that she would likely be in the hospital till the weekend. Of course Sumner said that the most important thing was for her to get well; she shouldn't worry about anything, they would manage fine.

“That's just... what... I'm afraid... of,” Carol said, after Frank hung up. “They'll find out... I'm not... indispensable.”

A nurse wheeled Carol into a treatment room behind the triage desk and Frank trailed behind, trying not to let his anxiety show. The nurse helped her onto a bed, gave her oxygen, and connected her to all sorts of monitors. Later a cluster of doctors appeared. They explained they'd be installing a tube to drain the area outside the lung. During the procedure Carol screamed so much that Frank could hardly stand it: he started to cry and she reached for his hand and squeezed it, smiling through her own pain. Then they injected her with Demerol. He didn't know why they couldn't have done that first. As soon as the dose hit, the strain left Carol's face. “It still hurts,” she said, “but I don't care.”

After a few days, Carol's lung re-inflated and the chest tube was removed. She was stitched up, bandaged, and discharged. At home, she sat down next to Frank on the blue living room sofa, touched the side of her chest and said, "I never thought about how scared he must have been."

"Who?"

"My dad." Carol's father had died when she was a teenager. "Never sick and then suddenly he's in the hospital, getting sent home, getting sent back, riding in ambulances. It must have been terrifying. I never thought about that."

"You were a kid," Frank said.

"He never looked scared to me."

"You didn't look scared to me, either."

Carol frowned. "The whole time he was sick I was just thinking about me. And then he died, and I was *still* thinking about me." She held up a finger, counting, and said, "I had to postpone my birthday party." She held up another finger and said, "I wouldn't get to go to the college I wanted." She held up a third finger, but Frank interrupted.

"You were a kid," he said again.

"I *was*, but it's taken me twenty years to figure out that he was probably so frightened..."

Frank moved closer and put his arm around her.

Carol shuddered. "Careful," she said.

