

A GOOD DOCTOR

Characters:

Mark Vogel – A doctor. 40ish (and 10 years earlier)

Mrs. H(odges) – Mark's patient. Mid 80's

Fran Emerson – Mark's wife. Late 30's (and 10 years earlier)

Richard Hodges – Mrs. H's son. 50ish

Note:

The play is set New York City in the present and in South Carolina 10 years earlier. Act I is in the Vogel's apartment and in Mark's office. Act II is in the Vogel apartment and Mrs. Hodge's apartment. The first and final scenes are set in the same room in South Carolina which can be conjured on a small area of the stage.

Act I Scene ii Mark's office – the present

There's a desk with a chair behind it and two chairs in front of it. Behind the desk are bookshelves; there's a photograph of FRAN surrounded by flowers. A patient's chart is on the desk. An xray is up on a view box with the light shining through it. MARK is on the phone.

MARK

Yeah, looks like it's through the wall. Her chemistries say liver mets. Alk phos and enzymes are all up. *(listens) (looking through a chart, listening)* 84. *(listening)* Hypertension, well controlled. That's about it. *(listens)* No. No cardiac history. Weight's down now. *(listens for a while.)* Yeah. The one in the New England Journal? I saw that. I have to say I wasn't very impressed. About one and a half months survival advantage it said. Right? *(listens)* Sounded like a lot of wear and tear for a lot of money with not much to show for either. *(listens. Strong.)* No. Just want to be sensible. *(listens, a little rise)* For her. She lives by herself Not wrong to look at that way, right? *(listens)*. Okay. Well, I'll send her over. Let's see what she wants to do. Thanks.

MARK *(cont'd)*

Can you send Mrs. Hodges in?

MARK walks over to the view box, turns off the light and places the xray films in a folder. MRS. H. knocks and enters.

MARK

I'm sorry I kept you waiting.

MRS. H

No buses to catch today, Doctor Vogel.

MARK

Well, that's good. *(beat)* How are things with you?

MRS. H

Can't complain.

MARK

Good to hear. Are you here alone today?

Just me. MRS. H

Where's Sally? MARK

She moved to Pittsburgh. She took a job there. It's a good job. Good benefits. MRS. H

Since when? MARK

Two months. MRS. H

That must be hard to have her gone. MARK

It is. I'm happy for her though. MRS. H

The weather's been holding, huh? MARK

The trees have their leaves still, isn't that something. MRS. H

It's been warm. Are you getting out? MARK

I do my shopping. I get to church. I get a ride uptown with a neighbor. MRS. H

Keeping busy. MARK

Sitting still is not for me. I'm making a quilt for my granddaughter. Sally's girl. She's expecting. I should have brought it down to show you so you see what I do with my time. MRS. H

I'd like that. MARK

MRS. H

And how's your family, Doctor? Any babies coming?

MARK

One of these days.

MRS. H

That's a new picture you have there. Mrs. Vogel looks so pretty there with all those flowers.

MARK

Yeah. That's right in the conservancy gardens. She likes her lilacs.

MRS. H

You say when and I'll make you up a quilt for a little one. I can put those lilacs all around.

MARK

That would be very nice.

MRS. H

So. Are you going to do some doctoring today?

MARK

Yes. Of course. (beat) You've lost some weight, Mrs. H. Are you eating?

MRS. H

The appetite's a little slow.

MARK

Bowels moving okay? No blood or anything?

MRS. H

That's going just fine. Thank you.

MARK

Are you having any pain?

MRS. H

A little cramping sometimes after I eat. Not too bad.

MARK

On the x-rays we took, Mrs. H, it looks like that tumor is growing again.

MRS. H

I thought maybe that was it.

MARK

The films, the x-rays show....I can show you.

MRS. H

I wouldn't know what I was looking at.

MARK

It looks like there's something bigger there now. And the lab tests indicate, show that –

MRS. H

If you say it's growing than it must be growing.

MARK

I wish I had better news for you. I spoke to Dr. Markowitz. I'm going to send you back to her so you can hear what she thinks.

MRS. H

I don't always keep up with what she has to say.

MARK

Can you take someone with you when you see her. Could Sally come up?

MRS. H

Oh, I wouldn't ask her to come all that way. Maybe my sister can come with me. I don't know. She doesn't get out so much. There's Ricky, I guess. My son, Richard.

MARK

I didn't know...is he around?

MRS. H.

When he needs something. I'll write down what you tell me and I'll talk to Sally and if she has questions, she can call you. Is that okay?

MARK

Sure is.

MRS. H

Okay.

MRS. H takes paper and pen from her handbag.

MARK

The cancer in the intestine, is growing again and it's pushing against things. That's why your appetite is down and you get that cramping after you eat. The blood tests show that the liver is having trouble. And that's a worry because the liver cleans the blood.

MRS. H

Slow.

MRS. H. continues writing.

MARK

The liver cleans the blood. Dr. Markowitz thinks you should go to a surgeon who could take away some of the new cancer growth. And that you get some radiation treatments to try to keep it from growing so fast. And, there's a new medicine to try to keep the cancer out of the liver for a little longer. It may be a little more effective in protecting the liver and the blood cells.

MRS. H

Is it harsh, the medicine?

MARK

It gives people problems with nausea.

MRS. H

Is that what you think I should do?

MARK

That will be your choice. The surgery will put some strain on you. The radiation treatment will go on for a couple more months after that. It's three times a week and it makes a lot of younger people pretty sick and tired. There's the chemotherapy on top of all that. I can't say what that will be like.

MRS. H

And if I don't do all of that.

MARK

You could take a little radiation to shrink the tumor. We could get hospice to help you at home and keep you comfortable.

MRS. H

Mostly leave it be.

MARK

Sort of. Yeah.

MRS. H

I don't know. I've always been a fighter, Doctor.

MARK

It's up to you. You might feel better for longer without all of that. And in the end, with the other.... I don't know how much more time you'd get.

MRS. H

And if I don't do all that?

MARK

Your liver will probably stop working. It would be a quieter way. I don't know how long, Mrs. H.

MRS. H

My first great grandchild is coming in the spring.

MARK

No one can say for you but you.

MRS. H

Would you do all that?

MARK

Me? I don't think so. It ends, Mrs. H. No one's figured out how to stop that yet.

MRS. H

No. I guess I need to think about it.

MARK

Of course. My office can set up an appointment for you to see Dr. Markowitz. See what she has to say. And if you think of questions, whatever... you can call. And I'll see you in a couple of weeks.

MRS. H

I'll tell Sally all we talked about.

MARK

She can call me.

MRS. H

She works late.

MARK

Tell her she can call me in the evening if that's better for her.

MARK writes his number down.

MRS. H

Thank you.

MARK

I'm sorry, Mrs. H.

MRS. H

It's not your fault. You're only a doctor, doctor. It's in the lord's hands anyway.

MARK

You come back and talk to me after you've seen Dr. Markowitz.

He rises to see her out. MRS. H exits. MARK types into the medical record.

End SCENE ii

Scene iii Mark and Fran's Living Room – That evening

A couch/seating area, and a study area, with a table off to the side. The room is illuminated by the glow of a computer screen. FRAN sits at a cluttered desk. She is alternately typing and pausing. She hits "print." As the printing begins, she begins to sniff and jumps up.

Damn.

FRAN

FRAN rushes out of the room. Key in the front door and MARK enters.

Fran? Franny? Is that smoke? Franny?

MARK

An alarm goes off

Under control.

FRAN (O.S.)

You okay? You okay?

MARK

Yeah, yeah.

FRAN (O.S.)

I'm turning off the alarm.

MARK

MARK pulls a chair over to a smoke detector to turn it off

What happened? What are you doing? Huh?

MARK (*cont'd*)

Nothing. It's fine. (*A dish crashes*). Damn. Damn.

FRAN (O.S.)

MARK moves toward the kitchen door

MARK

What's going on?

FRAN emerges with her hand outstretched

FRAN

I burned myself. In solidarity with the chicken.

MARK

Let me see it.

FRAN

It's okay.

MARK

Why are you holding it out like that?

FRAN

It throbs.

MARK

Let me see.

MARK examines her hand and then kisses it.

MARK (cont'd)

Perfectly fine.

FRAN

The balm works better when it's applied directly to the lips of the afflicted.

MARK kisses her and then walks to the couch where he sits, distracted.

FRAN

What's the matter with you?

MARK

Nothing.

FRAN

You're late.

Yeah. Long day. MARK

Drink? FRAN

Yeah. I'll get it. MARK

I can do it. FRAN

You still working? MARK

Ineffectively. FRAN

MARK indicates the sheets in the printer

Looks like product. MARK

Mostly edits. I slept late. FRAN

Slothful. You should come to bed earlier. MARK

And I had to go to the motor vehicle bureau ... FRAN

I said I'd take care of it. MARK

It expired yesterday. FRAN

I was going to do it. MARK

Yeah. FRAN

MARK

So we get a ticket. Not the worst thing in the world.

FRAN

That's not what you'll say when you actually get one.

MARK

Yup.

FRAN

Bad day?

MARK

Lot of walk-ins. There's a nasty GI virus around. And I had to stop by the hospital.

FRAN

I thought Hermans was attending this week.

MARK

Yeah. But there was a patient I wanted to see. Moses Carmichael?

FRAN

That the guy with the track results on his answering machine...

MARK

Yeah. *(beat)* Heart attack. Collapsed on the street.

FRAN

Oh.

MARK

(agitated) Kaput. On a vent. EEG is flat. They'll probably take him off life support tomorrow.

FRAN

Oh.

MARK

He's been coming to me since the beginning.

FRAN

I'm sorry. How old is he?

MARK

Eightyish. His wife died a few years back. He lives...lived by himself. No kids.

FRAN

No one to leave behind.

MARK

No.

FRAN

Maybe not so bad, then.

MARK

(sharp) Why's that?

FRAN

Quick. Quiet. No one bereaved.

MARK

Alone. Lonely.

FRAN

I don't understand...I don't know...

MARK

What?

FRAN

You seem indignant.

MARK

I'm... disturbed.

FRAN

I see that.

MARK

You get attached.

FRAN

Of course. But I am always surprised how unprepared you seem. I always imagine that being a doctor prepares you...that it would be easier to see sickness and death as more in the course of things. Ordinary

MARK

It may be, ordinary but it ain't exactly exalting.

FRAN sorts through a stack of papers and reads aloud

FRAN

Here it is. "All goes onward and outward—nothing collapses; and to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier."

MARK

Lucky, huh?

FRAN

Whitman was a nurse. He took care of soldiers.

MARK

Maybe dying was lucky compared to being bayoneted and lying around with a gangrenous leg. It's religion.

FRAN

Not necessarily. It's setting life in a larger frame. That you merge back into in the end.

MAR

So. Disorganized religion.

FRAN

(softly) "Some keep the Sabbath going to church; I keep it staying at home, With a boblink for a chorister, And an orchard for a dome."

MARK

How do you remember that stuff?

FRAN

How do you remember drug doses?

MARK

I look them up. Truce. I need a drink. Anything to do in there?

FRAN

Nuke the potatoes and make a salad. That's it. The chicken's done.

You think? MARK

Blackened chicken. New method. FRAN

Are we ready to eat? MARK

Have a drink first. FRAN

Okay. MARK

MARK exits. FRAN returns to her desk and fishes the pages she's printed out of the printer, reading them absorbedly. MARK enters with a large tumbler.

Thirsty. FRAN

We're sharing. MARK

FRAN takes a sip and continues to read.

What did you work on today? MARK

"The Next to Last Chapter." FRAN

Catchy title. MARK

FRAN
I'm trying to weave together the different places where they saw human life echoed in the patterns of nature. So I need to do a lot of juxtaposing of imagery. Whose metaphor goes alongside whose....It's making me a little crazy.

It'll be done soon.

MARK

FRAN mimes a cheer

Sis boom bah. Rah, rah, rah.

FRAN

She stumbles and catches herself.

I don't see you as cheerleader material.

MARK

Damn.

FRAN

Come here.

MARK

FRAN moves to the sofa, leaning up against him

FRAN

I was thinking that when I finish this book, if I finish ever this goddamn book...it would be a good time for us to....get started on a/ baby

Yeah? You're ready to do that?

MARK

This seems like a good time.

FRAN

No time like the present.

MARK

My sabbatical will be over though.

FRAN

There is such a thing as maternity leave.

MARK

Will I feel guilty? Taking time so soon after a sabbatical.

FRAN

Absolutely. It's your nature.

MARK

So what, right?

FRAN

You got it.

MARK

Alright then.

FRAN

Alright then. Deal.

MARK

Ready for supper?

FRAN

Yes. I'll change and then I'll help.

MARK

The phone rings.

I'll get it.

FRAN

FRAN exits to the kitchen. MARK exits. There's sharpness in FRAN's off-stage conversation. FRAN enters, agitated. MARK enters.

That was a Richard Hodges.

FRAN

Mrs. Hodge's son. I saw her today. She wanted to know when we were going to have babies.

MARK

Clairvoyent.

FRAN

Yup. (beat) She has metastatic colon cancer. Another of the day's high points. Her daughter usually comes with her but she moved away, so I gave Mrs. H our number.

MARK

FRAN
Well, that was not her daughter.

MARK
I'll call him back after we eat.

FRAN
I wouldn't tonight. He was a little inflamed.

MARK
Huh?

FRAN
He said that you told his mother that she was "terminal" and she shouldn't get treated.

MARK
That's ridiculous. I didn't say that.

FRAN
Then he said something about Dr. Kevorkian.

MARK
He's an asshole, according to Mrs. H.

FRAN
She said that?

MARK
I'm paraphrasing.

FRAN
What did you talk to her about?

MARK
I told her the possibilities for her care. Her oncologist told me the best they could do was buy her some time. Which means surgery, then radiation, then chemo. Jewish Terminal Medicine as practiced at a teaching hospital. An 85 year old woman, living alone is supposed to negotiate all this? The chemo, according to the most recent clinical trial extends the average patient's life exactly 1.7 months compared to what you get when you don't use the new drug. I asked Markowitz – the oncologist – if she thought this made any sense in this context. She gave me the standard line that studies tell you about averages and her focus is on the individual. Like mine isn't? Her *judgment* was that this could be of benefit to Mrs. H.

FRAN

Is judgment a bad thing?

MARK

Christ, Franny. Medicine has to be science-based. You study the effectiveness of a treatment, if it works, fine, if it doesn't then "primum non nocere." Above all do no harm. That little clause of the Hippocratic oath seems to elude a lot of my distinguished colleagues. They're so intent at keeping people alive they miss what happens to the day-to-day for their patients.

FRAN

So did you suggest that she not get treatment?

MARK

I didn't suggest anything. She asked me what I would do. I told her that I didn't see the point of a hard end. I wouldn't take the aggressive route.

FRAN

People want different things.

MARK

They do. And sometimes their doctors aren't all that clear in telling them what lies in store. It's not only the crappy quality of life. Where's the money supposed to come from for all this mostly useless stuff. Medicare's going broke while the private sector soaks up every last dollar. We've got 27 million people who have no insurance at all and all these illnesses that could be prevented but they go untreated. There's a big picture here.

FRAN

People live in little pictures.

MARK

(hot) Yes.

FRAN

It's her choice, right?

MARK

Christ Franny, yes. I told her how I saw it for me. That's all.

FRAN

I guess her son sees it differently.

MARK

It's her call. He needs to hear that.

FRAN

I told him you were out. He isn't expecting you to call back tonight.

MARK

I need her permission to talk with him, anyway. I'll have him come in with her.

FRAN

That sounds good. Ready to eat?

MARK

Yeah. I'll start the salad.

FRAN

Done. Hey. I'm sorry. I only meant to say that people sees these things differently. I'm sorry you had a bad day.

MARK

An early night?

FRAN

Yeah.

MARK

Both of us?

FRAN

So you don't think it would be bad if I didn't finish the chapter tonight?

MARK

The way I heard it, Whitman got some excellen inspiration in bed.

FRAN

You're such a help.

MARK

I try.

End Scene iii

