

Brain Work

Jenny Li-Wang
Rice University

The door to Dr. Vaughn's office is open. Elaine peers out carefully from behind her new manager Caitlyn.

"Dr. Vaughn, this is Elaine," Caitlyn introduces, "our new medical assistant."

Dr. Vaughn immediately perks up from where she's scrunched around her computer.

"Oh, so nice to meet you!"

Elaine's first thought when she sees her is, *So this is the senior neurosurgeon that all the other surgeons get bullied by.* Her second thought: *Wow, she's so small.*

"It's nice to meet you too," Elaine murmurs reluctantly. She shakes her new boss's hand.

"Caitlyn says you're a stellar applicant. God knows we need competent people around here." Dr. Vaughn and Caitlyn share a look.

"Oh," Elaine says, unsure how to respond.

The doctor turns back to the screen and scrolls through her email. "Caitlyn tells me you want to go to medical school. Any particular specialty?"

"I think I'm interested in pediatric neurosurgery."

This isn't technically a lie. Elaine knows she wants to specialize in something surgical where she can work with kids. Neurosurgery is competitive, she knows, so she hopes to get ahead with clinical experience and, if this job goes well, the blessing of one of the most distinguished experts in the field.

Dr. Vaughn hums in approval. "This is the perfect place to learn. I'm not sure if Caitlyn told you, but our clinic is very high-volume. We get sent the most interesting cases in this hospital."

Elaine knows this already. Out of a desire to make a good impression, she obsessively Googled the physician yesterday and could recite the year Dr. Anne Vaughn graduated medical school, the titles of her most widely-read research papers, and the name of her husband. Elaine's boyfriend David had commented that this seemed slightly more than the typical premed neuroticism, and Elaine immediately explained that Dr. Vaughn is one of only a handful of global experts in a certain rare brain cancer. Elaine had jumped through hoops to become acquainted with her scrub nurse, who introduced her to Dr. Vaughn's clinic manager Caitlyn, who interviewed her last week.

"You're not a nurse, so you'll have to work super hard to learn," Caitlyn had warned her during the interview. "We don't usually hire medical assistants. I run a tight ship here. Just so you know."

"It's not a problem," Elaine immediately responded. "I'll do anything for this job."

"I've seen Dr. Vaughn make grown surgeons cry over the smallest mistakes." Caitlyn sounds almost proud. "You up to the pressure?"

Elaine levels Caitlyn's gaze with her best impression of a high-power woman. "That just makes me respect her more. I'm here to learn from the best."

Caitlyn had smiled. "You'll start on Monday."

Elaine's first task as a trainee is to collect medical history on a new intake. The patient is an elderly man named Mr. Ellis with a consult for a glioblastoma. In the exam room, Elaine sits at the computer with Caitlyn hovering over her shoulder, making her neck prickle.

"Did you folks hear about the tornado the other day?" Elaine asks, making conversation while she enters the patient's long medication list.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Ellis responds, "it touched down in our garden!"

"Your garden?" Elaine repeats, glancing up. "That sounds terrifying."

"You should've seen us," Mrs. Ellis laughs, looking at her husband. "We huddled in the hallway like this." She balls herself up as best as she can in her chair.

"Tore up all the roses," Mr. Ellis adds. He points at his wife. "She was upset."

"Of course I was!" she wails. "We worked all year tending that garden."

Elaine finds herself smiling. "I'm sorry about the roses. But thank goodness you two are alright."

"*You misspelled olmesartan,*" Caitlyn suddenly whispers in her ear, making Elaine jump. "*It's an "E" instead of an "O". Also, we try to keep these workups under ten minutes. Just so you know.*"

"Sorry," Elaine mumbles back. She finishes the rest of the visit quickly.

Three months later, Elaine has learned little about the brain but she has learned a lot about Caitlyn and Dr. Vaughn. For example, Caitlyn has worked with Dr. Vaughn for 11 years and senses their boss's mood like a hawk detects the slightest change in barometric pressure.

"She's in a terrible mood today," Caitlyn tells Elaine as they make coffee in the breakroom. "The OR has been giving her a hard time with some slip-ups that happened recently. Just as a warning."

Like a curse, the day progresses in the worst way possible. Elaine mixes up the pathology reports for two patients. She accidentally orders a CT instead of an MRI on someone with a pacemaker. In the afternoon, Elaine follows Dr. Vaughn into an exam room and is asked to pull up an MRI to show the patient—a task Elaine has done literally hundreds of times at this point. But the most recent scan isn't uploaded. Because the radiology team decides today is the day Elaine must suffer.

So, she can only watch as Dr. Vaughn's mouth pinches into a sharp line. When it opens again, Elaine is hit with a scoff and devastating words:

"Can't you even do this? No, it's too much for you. Too much to ask."

Elaine returns home and slams the door.

David leans to peer at her from behind his dual monitors. "Well, hello to you too."

Elaine kicks off her shoes. Collapses onto the couch in her dirty scrubs, startling the cat from his nap. "Not. In the mood."

"I can get dinner started?" her boyfriend offers. "What do you want?"

"Ugh. Whatever. We should have stuff for pasta in the pantry."

David stands and touches her shoulder on his way to the kitchen. His touch is meant to be reassuring, but today it only makes her mood flare up, inflamed. Elaine narrows her eyes at David's desk, behind which he works from home for eight hours a day, with a generous boss who always seems satisfied with his work.

"What sauce do you want?" David calls from the kitchen.

"It's in the cabinet."

"Can't find it."

"The red sauce."

"It's not here."

Elaine groans, frustrated. "Oh my *god*. *Fine*, I'll just do it."

"You don't have to," David protests, but Elaine is already in the kitchen, glaring at the setup. He's using the wrong pot, with the wrong lid on it, on the wrong burner. Elaine is filled with a strange, great fury.

"Can't you even do this one thing right?" she seethes at him. *"Making pasta. Too much to ask."*

The next day, Elaine shuffles into the breakroom and after a brief hesitation, sits next to Caitlyn.

"Do you ever feel like..." Elaine starts.

"Feel like..." Caitlyn glances up at her coworker, undressed salad in her mouth.

"Do you ever feel like...this job is making you less kind?"

"Oh," Caitlyn swallows. "Yeah. 'Course it does."

Elaine blinks. "Isn't that...a bad thing?"

"Mmm. Not necessarily." Caitlyn's eyes dart to the clock, then back to Elaine. "We just have less tolerance for bullshit. The way I see it, Dr. Vaughn's energy is so valuable that she has

zero time to waste on things that aren't important. That's what happens when you become such an expert that there are literally only eight other people in the country who can do your job."

"I guess that makes sense," Elaine concedes hollowly.

Caitlyn softens. "We do incredible work here. We're effective because we're tough. You know, like Machiavelli?"

"Sure," Elaine says. She does not point out that the comparison to Machiavelli does not inspire confidence in her regarding this particular situation. If competency means becoming a tyrant, Elaine is not sure she wants it.

After Caitlyn leaves, Elaine opens her lunchbox in the quiet breakroom. She's greeted by leftovers messily packed by David. Cracking open her Tupperware, she feels a twinge of affection, then guilt. This job has been making her unlike herself. She'll apologize to him properly later.

As she eats, pasta savory on her tongue, Elaine thinks about Mr. and Mrs. Ellis. The story they told her of the tornado touching down in their garden, tearing up their roses. How they huddled up together in their hallway—clinging to each other as chaos roared outside—and she thinks she'll never hear a more apt metaphor for illness and companionship. Their expertly tended garden, demolished. Their wisdom in knowing how to keep what is important closer.