

Marlene Olin

Inside Out

It was June. Half the town was emptied. The streets of Boston smelled like garbage and remorse. It never occurred to Mitchell to leave. He couldn't afford a vacation if he wanted one.

"Good to see you, Garrett."

His first patient was early. The clock flashed 6:45 6:45. There'd be no time to put up the coffee or water the plants. Garrett McCrane provided tech support at a local hospital. Soft and stocky, he wore his pants below his stomach and waddled as he walked. Mitchell quickly closed the blinds. While some of his patients thrived in a sunlit office, others wilted. Garrett preferred psychotherapy in a cave.

"Sleeping any better?"

Each of Mitchell's patients had two options. Sprawl on the black leather sofa or sit in the armchair. Mitchell squinted in the darkness. Garrett always chose the couch.

"Not really. Ambien gives me a hangover. And Halcion? Forget about Halcion. Halcion makes me jumpy. Like a Mexican jumping bean. Put that down. J-U-M-P-Y. Like a pogo stick. Up down. Up down. You know. Jumpy."

"Didn't I give you samples of Lunesta?"

"You mean *la siesta*?"

Mitchell forced a chuckle. Most of his patients had either low self-esteem or hubris bordering on delusional. Garrett believed he was Jerry Seinfeld.

"Nope, no effect at all."

In his notes, Mitchell wrote: *Patient refuses to be medicated again.*

"How's work?"

"I'm encrypting my email. Not that I was putting anything personal in them."

He got up, walked over to Mitchell's desk lamp, and spoke loudly into the fluorescent bulb. "Because this is one tech guy who never watches porn during his lunch break."

Mitchell sighed. "I assure you, Garrett. My office is swept before you get here. No bugs, no hidden cameras." He flipped through his papers. "I believe we were discussing your co-workers."

After ten minutes on the couch, Garrett would start pacing.

"News flash. If you work at St. Mark's Hospital, see Mr. Fixit in person. Last week, an idiot from Pathology calls me. Garrett, I fucked up, he says. Somehow I lost forty-seven cervical smears. One

minute I entered the reports in the computer and the next they were gone.”

Mitchell felt his chest cramp. “So what did you do?”

“You mean after I told him to zip it and come to my office? I said, Listen, Bozo. You’ve got to re-enter the data. Then classify those forty-seven women with low-grade dysplasia. Give them something in the twilight zone. You know. Something not too awful that waves a red flag.”

Mitchell nodded. Every session was a variation on the same theme. It was Garrett’s job both to discover and bury computer glitches. Confidential information that was somehow misplaced or slipped between the cracks. Biopsy results. Lab reports. There was a mind-boggling drumbeat of mistakes, and Garrett’s specialty was fixing them.

Mitchell sat straight in his chair and imagined the chambers of his heart contracting and expanding. He pictured great big globules of blood slogging through his veins. As always, there were two parallel conversations. Inside his head, he was thinking I have to report this. *The Boston Globe. The New York Times.* By God, how many people are dying each day thanks to pure incompetence? But on the outside, he followed a well-rehearsed script.

“No harm, no foul, right? I’d say it was a good week, Garrett. You’re doing a great job.”

His ten o’clock was Simone Smith. Blonde, her skin the color of a bronze medallion, her eyes a startling blue. Simone was a cheerleader at her high school. Popular. Outgoing. But for reasons Mitchell could never fathom, she was hooked on tanning beds. For twelve months a year, three times a week, she entombed herself in a large aluminum tube. At the ripe old age of seventeen, she’s already had three precancerous skin lesions removed.

This week, as usual, she picked the chair. Wearing the shortest of shorts, she flung one leg over the armrest and let the other dangle in the air. As always, she flirted.

“So how was your week, Dr. T.?”

Over the course of his practice, Mitchell had seen addicts of every shape and size. The worst had eating disorders. He was terrified of their twig thin arms, their crucifix collarbones. The slightest touch could make them snap.

Simone’s disorder presented similar challenges. She was built like the prow of a ship and knew it. Posted herself naked on the Internet. Slept her way through the whole football team. There was no doubt that she was bright. College material. But instead of beefing up her grades, she purposely flunked tests.

On the inside Mitchell envied her. No matter the age, no matter

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the story, the traumas of high school repeat themselves in an endless loop. The hollow halls. The endless derision. Looking back, being popular was a gift, not a curse. He would have given the world to have been popular. Mitchell was forty-five years old and still cringed each time a reunion envelope showed up in the mail.

Once more he appraised his patient. The teeth that could signal aircraft. The white rims around her eyes. On the outside, he knew she was sabotaging her life.

“Our new puppy craps in the house,” said Mitchell. “My youngest son refuses to be potty-trained. I lead a pretty shitty life.”

This was part of the warm-up act. Fifteen minutes of mindless banter with Mitchell chattering like an idiot. Meanwhile Simone would study her fingernails and ignore him. Finally, she spoke.

“So I got checked for STDs, Dr. T. Just like you wanted. But instead of going to the Women’s Health Clinic, Mom took me to some specialist in Boston. To some fancy guy at St. Mark’s.”

“St. Mark’s?” said Mitchell.

“You were right, Dr. T.” As if on cue, Simone manufactured a concerned look. “Turns out I have a teeny weeny case of chlamydia.”

On the inside, he felt like shouting. There were at least a dozen boys she could have infected. Boys who could be harboring infections. Boys who could be passing them to others. But on the outside, he kept his poker face. Trust me, it said. I’m not judging.

“We have to look at these things as health issues, right? You have chlamydia. We treat the chlamydia. Chlamydia is manageable. Right?”

His waiting room was set up to offer his clients privacy. While Simone exited a back door, he greeted his next patient.

“Aubrey? Aubrey Sanders?”

He cupped her elbow and gently ushered her into his office. As usual, she slowly walked from the couch to the armchair then back again as if each decision were layered with meaning.

Mitchell glanced at his watch. “How about if you do the armchair today and the couch next week?”

Aubrey shrugged her shoulders. She was fifty years old and had overcome a horrific childhood. Just walking into his office was a minor victory. He opened a tin of cookies on his desk and took a bite. Knowing he was on stage, he rolled his eyes. Aubrey studied him, her mouth making the smallest movements while he chewed.

“So how are we doing?” he threw out for starters.

Aubrey avoided eye contact whenever she spoke. Her face scanned the ceiling, the photos on the wall, a smudge of dirt on her shoe. Finally, she answered.

“It happened only once this week. It was a brush. I was at the

hairdresser's and stole his brush."

There was no telling what strategy would ease a person's pain. For Aubrey, kleptomania was both a disease and a cure.

"But work's good. Hank's hired me to decorate two of his new houses. He says I'll double the value. He says that whatever I touch turns to gold."

This was a new complication. For over twenty years Aubrey has been in a relationship with her partner Rae. Their adopted daughter was graduating high school. Their life together a seeming success. But lately every sentence was punctuated with the name *Hank*.

"And Rae? How's Rae? Last week you decided to tell Rae about the stealing."

On the inside, Mitchell wanted by-gones to be by-gones. Didn't secrets make the whole world spin?

But on the outside, he knew it was the wrong advice. One of these days Aubrey would be caught red-handed. And when it happened she'd be sent to jail or embarrassed or both. All these years her partner had no idea that she was stealing. Aubrey was splintered in two directions. She needed to be truthful in order to be whole.

"The truth?" said Aubrey. "That's right. You wanted me to tell her the truth."

Her voice was calm and velvety. But the words she spoke betrayed it.

"The truth nearly killed her, Dr. Teitleman. I feel better. You were right about that. But I think Rae will be in therapy for the rest of her life."

Then she paused. A white noise machine swooshed like the ocean. The air-conditioner hummed. Mitchell hated pauses. Like quicksand, he rushed into pauses to fill the empty space. He counted to himself *one Mississippi two Mississippi*. Then he waited.

"I mean is this how you shrinks work?" said Aubrey. "Is it like a financial thing? Fix one person and screw up the next?"

He had reserved the last hour of the day for new patients. Clare Epstein had made an appointment three times and three times she had cancelled. Mitchell was shocked when she actually showed up. As he opened the waiting room door, an attractive woman glared back at him. Tall, platinum hair, a rope of pearls. Country club slacks and sweater. Mitchell imagined she was about his age.

"Sit. Make yourself comfortable. Either option is fine."

She took a tissue from the box on his desk and brushed the seat of the armchair.

Mitchell leaned forward. "How can I help?"

She looked at him straight on, her voice level, her face a dare. "I'm a complete fraud, Dr. Teitleman." Then she counted down on her

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fingers. "I cheat on my husband. Gulp three martinis with lunch. Sneak cigarettes when no one's looking."

"And these are secrets?"

A smile slowly swept her face. "My husband Clifford, poor trusting Clifford, is absolutely clueless. I imagine my father knows. You could never fly anything past my father."

Underneath the desk, Mitchell put his fingers on his wrist and took his pulse. A picture of his own father coursed through him. A neurologist from a family of neurologists. Of all the photos in hospital halls, Mitchell's was the empty frame. Mitchell repositioned himself in the chair.

"You know there are health considerations. AIDS. STDs. Are you careful? Are you having yourself checked?"

Her hand flew to her mouth. Was she stifling a laugh?

"I'm not an idiot, Dr. Teitleman."

Again he noticed that sly smirk.

"Teitleman. Is that Jewish? My husband's Jewish. He suffers enough guilt for both of us."

On the inside, Mitchell remembered the one time he had an affair. It was a huge mistake, a blemish on a perfectly respectable report card. When his wife found out, she divorced him. People will forgive anything but infidelity.

But on the outside, he was sitting across from a woman seeking help. Wanting help. *Yes*, he nodded. *Yes, I understand. Yes. Yes. Yes.*

"So again, I'll ask you what I ask all of my new patients. How can I help? You say you're a fraud. Is this something you'd like to work on?"

Suddenly she stood up and marched to his bookcase. Assorted family photos were sandwiched between journals. She picked one up of his wife.

"Did you know that a woman's charm is 50% illusion?"

And there it was. The dialogue straight from Tennessee Williams. The southern accent. The Blanche Dubois grin. Mitchell felt his stomach flip. When she lost interest in the photos, she started scanning the walls. Then she ran her fingers over his diplomas as if she were checking for dust.

"My. My. My. Johns Hopkins. Harvard. I say you are very impressive."

Mitchell hated this feeling. The feeling he was being bushwhacked. Sometimes his patients had truly horrible lives, horrible spouses, and horrible parents. It was a miracle they were walking and talking and functioning at all. Teachers who hated children, doctors who despised their patients, clergymen who despaired of God. He

wished he had answers, a magic pill, something. But most of the time his pockets were empty.

The numbness in Mitchell's fingertips was working its way up. The last phone conversation he had with his own father didn't go well. Mitchell needed money. He had a new wife and a new family. An honest-to-goodness second start. But the divorce had bled him dry.

He glanced up from his notes and looked at Clare. "Fathers can be difficult," he said.

"My father's an angel, an absolute angel." She pulled at a loose thread on her sweater. "Weren't we talking about my husband?"

The rest of Mitchell's day was spent recording his notes in the patients' files. He took his time writing them longhand. Garrett was right. Anything typed on a computer could wind up on a billboard in Times Square. It was nearly eight o'clock when he headed for home.

His dinner was in the oven, the dog in its crate, the kids in bed. His sons were three and five. His wife Natalie never let them out of her sight. Sitting down at the kitchen table, he picked at his food. His wife had already eaten.

"Did you speak with Moochie?" she asked. "I thought Moochie could get you that nursing home gig."

His accountant had made a series of shrewd investments. Geriatric care was a bottomless pit of revenue. If Mitchell jumped on board, his income would be assured for years. It was a scam, a perfectly legal scam. All he had to do was spend a half-day a week scanning patient records and writing scripts for anti-depressants. No face-to-face meetings. No physical exams. He just had to fill in the codes.

Mitchell looked up. Then he took in the framed posters on the walls, the threadbare rugs on the floor. "This apartment isn't so bad, is it?"

Natalie sighed. "It's a two-bedroom, Mitch."

As usual, she looked tattered around the edges. Despite the apron, her clothes were a daily casualty. Tomato sauce, crayon, even blood stains from the boys' tussles, blotched them like a Rorschach test. They sipped their tea in silence. They listened to the clock tick.

Soon it would be time to brush and floss his teeth. When he could think of nothing else to do, he'd lay in bed. Then he'd watch the ceiling turn blue then red then yellow. Finally, it would be dawn.

The following week everything that could go wrong did. Monday morning at eight o'clock he found Garrett pacing the sidewalk in front of his office building.

"Did you read about the E. coli?" Garrett's foot pawed the cement. Instead of looking at Mitchell, he spoke to the street lamp. "They're poisoning our Caesar salads, for Christ's sake."

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Mitchell glanced up and down the street. People were hurrying. Men in suits, mothers with strollers, messengers with totes. They all seemed to have a destination and a purpose. How confidently they put one foot ahead of the other.

“Let’s talk in the office, Garrett.”

Mitchell had never seen him so agitated. He refused to lie on the couch, to even sit.

“There’s no remedy for E. coli, Mitchell. Did you know that? People end up on dialysis. They end up hooked to tubes and peeing in a jar.”

“Garrett, your chances of eating bad lettuce are about the same as getting hit with lightning. You just have to take your chances.”

Garrett circled the floor frantically, flapping his hands like a bird. On the inside, Mitchell pictured himself in the throes of intestinal despair, holding his stomach, writhing in pain. On the outside, he grasped the first desperate idea that popped into his head.

“There’s nothing I can do for E. coli . . . But I can give you a prescription for Cipro.”

Garrett stopped in his tracks. “Cipro?”

“Good for anthrax, MRSA. A pretty good hedge on lots of bad stuff.”

The moment Mitchell put the white slip in his hand, Garrett relaxed. The grooves on his forehead smoothed. The tendons in his neck stopped twitching. Mitchell doubted he would actually go to the pharmacy and have the prescription filled. Just having that little piece of paper in his possession worked its charm.

Five minutes after Garrett left, Mitchell’s nine o’clock showed up. Clare Epstein was as impeccably dressed as she was on her last visit. Over the weekend, he had Googled her name and researched her background. Though her husband was an academic, she came from wealth. Her father owned five car dealerships in South Florida. Her brother was following in his footsteps. This time he examined her more carefully and noticed the Louis Vuitton purse, the three-carat engagement ring. She looked like she walked off a page of *Town and Country*. The sleeveless sweater. The pleated skirt.

“Welcome back,” said Mitchell.

She swiped the seat cushion one more time and fished inside her purse for a package of cigarettes. After nudging one out, she played it between her fingers.

“Don’t worry. I won’t light up. I’ll just sit here and make you nervous.”

Mitchell felt like his chest was shrink-wrapped. *One Mississippi two Mississippi.*

“I’m morally opposed to psychotherapy, you know. Father

always says that people should stand on their own two feet.”

While one hand held the cigarette, the other smoothed her hair, petting herself like a puppy.

“But I find you terribly attractive, Dr. Teitleman.”

Then it happened. Straight out of *Basic Instinct*, she slowly unwrapped her legs and flashed Mitchell a clear view of her private parts.

On the inside he was thinking God help me. On the outside, he calmly assessed the situation.

“You can be whomever you want in your private life. Sharon Stone. Mother Teresa. I don’t care. But I charge too little money and have too little time to be jerked off. So are we going to do some work today? Because I have a list of lunatics a mile long who are clamoring to sit in your seat.”

She reached for her lighter.

“You light that up and you leave,” said Mitchell.

“My, my, my,” said Clare. “Someone skipped his Klonopin today.”

The next half hour passed in a blur. As soon as she left, Mitchell noticed that his message light was blinking. He thrust out a finger.

Beep. Mitchell, it’s Moochie. Call me.

Beep. It’s Natalie. The hot water heater’s on the fritz again. I’ve called the super.

Beep. This is Sonya Smith, Simone’s mother. I’m afraid the news is worse than chlamydia. There were irregularities with Simone’s Pap smear. I’m terrified it’s cancer. Could it be cancer?

Had there been a full moon?

Mitchell locked his door and shut the blinds. Monday afternoons were normally reserved for bookkeeping so he ate lunch by his desk and buried his nose in his paperwork. Natalie was right. He had no idea how to make money. One patient paid him with cookies. Another fixed the carburetor on his car. Meanwhile his father and his third, no fourth wife had just sprung for a ski home in Aspen. Seventy-five years old and still schtupping adolescents and schussing down the slopes.

The clock was blinking 4:45 4:45 when he heard someone knocking at his door.

“Aubrey?”

She looked like she’d been in a monsoon, her long hair blown in all directions, her blouse matted to her chest.

“I know I don’t have an appointment, but I’ve been driving in circles. One minute I was in Waterston then somehow I ended up on the turnpike heading for your office.”

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Again the words contradicted the voice. Her tone was flat, her face lifeless. These were the patients you had to watch out for. The ones who spoke in all black keys.

“I suppose I look a fright,” said Aubrey. “It’s these hot flashes. Is it hot flashes? I get hot and cold. Shaky and sweaty. And all at the same time.”

Mitchell poured her a glass of water and ushered her to the couch. Then he soaked his handkerchief and placed it on her forehead.

On the inside, a guy in an orange jumpsuit was rattling the prison bars. Aubrey was one of those fragile patients he both loved and feared. Her very survival depended on his instincts, instincts he both doubted and relied on.

On the outside, he measured each word. Then he spoke slowly, loudly, clearly. “Whatever the problem is, it’s fixable. You and me. We’ll fix it together.”

“You promise?” she whispered.

“Promise,” he said.

Then it came.

“I’m falling in love with Hank, Dr. Teitleman. I mean . . . I know I’ve been with Rae forever. We’ve raised a great kid. But every minute of the day I’m thinking about him, wanting him, not wanting to wash the smell of him out of my clothes.”

Aubrey and Rae were standard bearers in the gay community. Her confession, if she wasn’t careful, would rip their lives apart.

“You always tell me to honor my feelings,” said Aubrey. “Feelings are good, you always say. Feelings don’t lie. But what happens if my feelings ruin everything?”

Once again, the message light on his phone was blinking. If it wasn’t his wife, it was sure to be Moochie. Mitchell had spent his entire adult life studying the human mind. He went to lectures. Read the latest journals. But not all lessons are easily learned. Some things you can’t take back. Some debts can’t be repaid. Some thoughts must stay unsaid.

Poor Aubrey. Unraveling this knot could easily destroy her. On the inside, Mitchell was screaming, Don’t do it! Whatever you think, whatever you feel, squash it. Kill it. Murder it. You can’t dig your way out of every hole. Sometimes the holes will bury you.

But on the outside, words failed to find him. There was no backup plan, no recourse. The safety was forever stuck on the trigger. Instead he counted *one Mississippi two Mississippi* while he sat and held her hand.

