Some years ago, during a winter that drove even the thieves and addicts indoors, Helen van Home arrived to run the medicine department at City Hospital. Born in Wisconsin and just returned from Africa, she expected to feel at home in the South Bronx.

"Why," she asked Diana, as they rounded on the men’s ward after a meeting of the community board, "do they hate me, so soon?"

"You look very clean," said Diana kindly, "your blouses are always white." She didn’t add, you are so pale, your blue eyes so light they seem a disfigurement. Diana Figueroa was the medical chief resident for the year.
“Are you married?” asked Helen, noticing the gold band on Diana’s smooth brown finger. “Yes,” said Diana, and Helen imagined a home, two children, and a swing set. When Helen chose medical school, the act implied spinsterhood. Aware of her attractiveness, she tried but found herself unable to offer the standard plea for forgiveness: my patients, my students will be my children. Instead, she swept behind the parents who disapproved, the wedded college classmates, the condescending but lecherous professors, in the dust of her flight to Africa.

“What does your husband do?” she asked Diana.

“He said he wanted to be a lawyer.” Diana finished writing in a chart, signed her name, and handed it to Helen.

“Oh,” said Helen. “I suppose one of you might have to work part-time.” She tried to imagine herself, when she was a young doctor, coming home at eight or nine in the evening, on her day off call, to talk to a child instead of throwing herself into bed.

“One of us does work part-time,” said Diana. “When he works at all.” She laughed. “Men,” she said.

Helen began reading the chart. “I suppose that’s fine, then,” she said. She countersigned Diana’s note, which was incisive and succinct. I will help this chief resident, she thought. She is smart, like I was, and young enough to be my daughter. It pleased Helen to think of a daughter, married and a doctor.

In Tanzania, Helen ran a dispensary, single-handed, far into the bush. She operated by automobile headlight, diagnosed by her senses alone, tended the roses next to her well, and learned the language of solitude. “A good summer,” she wrote to her sisters. “Not too much malaria, I’ve got the women to allow tetanus vaccination, now if only the generator doesn’t break down again.” She had two brief love affairs, otherwise the years passed from grassy summer to muddy winter to grassy summer like figures of a dance.

She slipped into relationship with the Masai and the earth: she cleaned the clinic each sunrise, ordered seasonal supplies with the solstice, and stopped numbering days entirely. She menstruated on the full moon, and the villagers came when they came, appearing unexpectedly on the horizon, carrying their sick in hammocks slung horizontally between tall men. After fifteen years, Helen described Tanzanian mountain fever in a clear and intelligent communication to the British journal Lancet, and because the virus was isolated from her
specimens, and because it was interesting in its mode of replication and transmission, Helen's name became known.

On the day she received the letter from City Hospital, Helen folded it carefully into her skirt pocket, slung the rusted clinic shotgun on her back, and took the long path over the ridge. When she had first set up, the missionary nuns who preceded her said to always take the jeep. Lions, they warned earnestly, shaking their heads. Elephants. Rhinoceros.

Helen sat on a rock and watched a pair of gazelles leaping across the bleached grass on the other side of the ridge. In the distance, a giraffe swayed against the trees. I live in a garden of Eden, she thought, why would I ever want to leave? She looked down the way she had come, to the tin roof of her clinic. It was such an insignificant mark on the land, so easily removed. She traced the varicosities on her leg and felt suddenly afraid.

And so Diana became the guide of her return, pointing out the snow that bent the branches of the blue spruce whose roots cracked through the concrete of the long-abandoned formal entry to City Hospital. "I grew up on Willis Avenue," Diana told her, as they sat in the cafeteria.

"I grew up on a farm near Madison," Helen replied, "but my parents are dead. There's no one who knows me there now."

They sat for a moment, surveying the crowd of people, the yellowed linoleum, and the sturdy wooden tables. "Three types of students rotate here: do-gooders, voyeurs, and dropouts sent by the Dean," said Diana. She nodded down the table and Helen saw an extraordinarily beautiful young man with smooth, almost hairless golden skin, laughing and tossing his head. Like the African sun, thought Helen. Like sex.

"Mike Smith," said Diana. "A real goof-off. Kicked out everywhere else, the patients complained." Helen looked down at her lunch, conscious of her grey hair and how long it had been since she worked with men. She stared at the boiled tongue and sauerkraut.

"You'll get used to it," said Diana, "some of the cooks are Puerto Rican, some are from the South."

Helen took a bite of the meat. "I'll write a letter to the Dean," she
it was interesting in its mode of replication of its name became known.

Helen folded an envelope, then pushed the rusted clinic shotgun on its long path over the ridge. When she had finished, she pulled her sleeves over her elbows. She was always punctual and tidied, shaking their heads. Elephants.

and watched a pair of gazelles leap across the other side of the ridge. In the distance, a large tree stood, and she thought about time. I live in a garden of Eden, she should want to leave? She looked down the way of her clinic. It was such an insignificant place. The trace and a bark of her home, pointing out their traces of the blue spruce whose roots cracked at the long-abandoned formal entry to City of Willis Avenue," Diana told her, as they sat near Madison," Helen replied, "but my parents used to be the only one who knows me there now."

Helen, surveying the crowd of people, the yellow-stained wooden tables. "Three types of stuplets, voyeurists, and dropouts sent by the school," she nodded down the table and Helen saw an old man with smooth, almost hairless face and tossing his head. Like the African sun, he nodded. "A real goof-off. Kicked out everyone complained." Helen looked down at her grey hair and how long it had been since she had had a new look. Helen said, "some of the cooks are Puerto Rican, South." "I'll write a letter to the Dean," she said, "about that boy. These patients deserve consideration, too. A failing student should be failed."

"It won't," said Diana, "do any good."

Helen studied Diana's smooth face, her soft black eyebrows, and her neatly organized list of patients clipped to the board next to her lunch. "I hope you have enough time with your husband," said Helen. "I hope you decide to have children, soon, before you get too old."

In the afternoon of the day she came, Helen carried her two suitcases up to the staff quarters and sat on the narrow bed. There was a single bureau in the room, battered but solid oak, standing at a slight tilt on the warped linoleum. In the top drawer she found a tourniquet, a pen, index cards, and several unused needles. She picked them out carefully and dropped them into the garbage, then lined the drawer with paper towels from the sink. Folding her skirts into the bottom drawer, she found a package of condoms, tucked into the back right corner.

The window stuck several times before it finally creaked up. Car horns, salsa music from the local bar, sirens, the sooty yearnings of urban life blasted into the room. Helen wrapped her arms around herself and stood, considering. She looked across at the decaying curve of the expressway, traffic crowded like wildebeest during mating season in the Serengeti. Then, turning back to the task of unpacking, she noticed faint fingernail scratches, hieroglyphics of passion, etched on the green wall at the head of the bed.

——

Over the next few months, Dr. Helen van Horne took charge of the department. She reviewed charts, observed procedures, met everyone including housekeepers and orderlies. "What disinfectant do you use?" she asked. "Why is this man waiting so long at X-ray?" She was on the wards at five in the morning and eleven at night, her hair pulled into a ponytail, starting an intravenous at a cardiac arrest, checking the diabetes' drawers for candy. Sometimes, standing in front of a washbasin, or sitting at a deserted nursing station at the change of shift, she would suddenly find herself watching the papery skin on the backs of her hands. What do I have to show for the years? she asked herself, but then a young woman gasping from rheumatic
heart disease, or an old man bent with cancerous metastases passed by her, and she told herself: it doesn’t matter. And she got back to work.

“What are they doing?” she asked Diana, as they passed a window looking toward the inner courtyard of the hospital. Michael Smith, the contours of his back glistening in the heat, kicked a ball toward some other students, boys and girls, who were encouraging several small children to kick it back.

“Oh,” laughed Diana, “he’s too much, isn’t he?”

“The children will pull out their IVs,” said Helen.

Diana walked around to the door. “Mr. Smith,” she called, “the children will pull out their IVs.”

“Anything you say Dr. Figueroa,” said the boy.

“He played football for Harvard,” said Diana, apologetically, when she came back inside.

“When you are a teacher,” said Helen, looking back to check on the children but involuntarily glancing at Michael Smith’s tight buttocks, “you must be careful about personal relationships. There is the issue of abuse of power.” She looked away quickly, and with humiliation.

“Yes,” said Diana. “But,” she added, “the men do it all the time.”

After that, Helen gave the teaching of the students over to Diana. She herself spent even more hours attending research meetings at the medical school and supervising the medical service. She set up studies and chaired meetings. She read textbooks of molecular biology. “We are beginning to see a new syndrome of infections in IV drug users,” she said in conference, and felt her power as the other doctors listened, because she was the Helen van Horne of Tanzanian mountain fever. She was senior and spoke with authority of microbial isolation and immune alterations. She submitted scholarly articles, and her roots spread into this identity, Chairman of Medicine at City Hospital. She stood taller, her walk grew firmer.

Once, she brought Diana with her to the medical school, to listen to her lecture. Afterwards, the men in the audience, who were division chiefs, but not department chairmen, spoke to her carefully and politely. The dean, who was the same age as Helen, came up to tease
ld man bent with cancerous metastases passed
herself: it doesn't matter. And she got back
ning?” she asked Diana, as they passed a window
ner courtyard of the hospital. Michael Smith,
 glistening in the heat, kicked a ball toward
boys and girls, who were encouraging several
back.
a, “he's too much, isn't he?”
all out their IVs,” said Helen.
ed to the door. “Mr. Smith,” she called, “the
their IVs.”
Dr. Figueria,” said the boy.
or Harvard,” said Diana, apologetically, when
acher,” said Helen, looking back to check on
arily glancing at Michael Smith's tight but
tureful about personal relationships. There is
ower.” She looked away quickly, and with
out,” she added, “the men do it all the time.”
her about her theories, and Helen, who had, despite herself, imagined
the touch of his hands and the feel of his skin, caught each barb and
sent it back, leaning against the podium and laughing. But when she
introduced Diana to him, he widened his stance. When Diana said
how much she admired his research, he put his arm around her and
introduced her to the other men, who, one after another, smiled with
authority and watched her smooth brown cheeks.

Helen threw herself into work. “Examine these patients and report
to me,” she told the students. “Tell me if they are rude,” she told the
patients, “tell me if you think they will make good doctors,” and the
women always remarked on Michael Smith. Oh, they said, his hair,
his eyes, his body. “He's careless,” snapped Helen to Diana, “missed
diagnoses, wrong medications.” But when the boy stood to be re-
buked, Helen felt the speculation in his eyes. She tightened her lips.
“If you don’t work, I will fail you, don’t think I won’t,” she told him.
But he glanced at her breasts and her nipples hardened.

“I don’t want to be any superdoctor,” he said, looking at her seri-
sously. “I want to enjoy my life, you know what I mean?”

She laughed, because she had felt that way, too, then walked away.
You are a fifty-year-old woman, she told herself. You are inapprop-
rate. You are disgusting.

Later, on the wards, she rounded with Diana and set stern rules.
“No more than six units of blood per bleeder,” Helen said, after she
watched an intern run ten units into a cirrhotic.

“But he's a young man,” said Diana.

“He'll vomit up twice as much tomorrow,” said Helen. “We don't
have enough blood.” She felt a pleasure in teaching this resident, after
all the years of solitude. The girl would be a good doctor, she thought,
but she needed disappointment.

“City Hospital,” read the dean’s reply, “has always been an alba-
tross to the Medical School.” It was spring now, and Helen watched
the cornflowers pushing up through the cobbled ramp leading to the
ambulance bay. She wondered if the dean had ever seen an albatross.
Wingspan as wide as a man’s arms, Daedalus, Icarus, she thought,
and remembered the bird that followed them all the way from Dar es
Salaam to Madagascar. Her lover was Indian, son of the supply ship's
owner, a merchant in Dar. “Look,” he said to her, as they were mak-
ing love. His gold necklace lay fallen in a spray of sweat from his
dark chest onto hers, looped around one pink nipple. “You belong to

\[\text{The Good Doctor} \quad 35\]
me," he said. That was when her skin was smooth and firm, her hair a pale sheet of gold. She had wished, suddenly, and just for a moment, that a child, his child, would seed and grow in her womb. A year later, he was gone.

Helen fell into the rhythms of the Bronx. She met with Diana each morning and each evening. "The students," said Diana, "are improving."

"They need to be taught to do good," said Helen. "You are teaching them by example." She surprised herself. She had avoided a moral vocabulary. These had been the words of distance between herself and her parents: duty, family, obligation.

But Diana smiled and tucked back her hair. She had begun to wear it in a ponytail, too, a thick curly fall to complement Helen's thin fair one.

"Stick in the mud," Michael Smith teased her. "Dr. van Horne, Jr." He'd become friendly with the head of housekeeping, a middle-aged black man from Yonkers, and the two of them sat on the steps outside the emergency room talking football and joking, cackling women as they walked by.

Diana stopped in front of him. "You left a patient in the hall last night and went off without signing him out. When I just happened to come by, he was already going into diabetic coma."

Michael Smith paled. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Tell it to the patient," said Diana, and left.

"But is he okay?" called Smith. She didn't answer.

---

Everyone in the hospital knew and respected Helen now. "Good morning, Doctor," she was greeted by the man who ladled out the scrambled eggs. "Good evening," by the woman mopping the women's ward. Sometimes the Spanish workers slipped and called her "Sister" when they stopped to thank her for taking care of a relative. Helen would glance at her own upright reflection in the glassed doors, curious to see how she might be mistaken for a nun.

She became convinced that this was how the people of the hospital saw her, as a nun, a medical missionary to the South Bronx. Bride of Christ, she taunted herself, standing in her room one night as the moonlight spread across the floor and crept up her ankles. Spinster
when her skin was smooth and firm, her hair was thick and shiny, and just for a moment, she wondered if she would ever see her mother again. A year later, back in New York, she met with Diana for a coffee and a chat. “The students,” said Diana, “are a tough crowd,” she said. “You’re doing well,” replied Helen. “You’re teaching them?” She was surprised. She had avoided a relationship with the students, but they had been the best of friends. She had known them. She had been their mentor. She had been their family. Now she was just a teacher.

Slicked back her hair. She had begun to wear her hair in a ponytail, as if to com-plement her thin, delicate face. Michael Smith teased her. “Dr. van Horne, you’re with the head of housekeeping, a middle-aged man, and the two of them sat on the steps of the building, talking football and joking, cat-calling each other. “You left a patient in the hall last night. Go and sign him out. When I happen to go into diabetic coma.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I was busy.”

Diana said. She didn’t answer.

Mother of City Hospital. How had this happened to her? That night she plaited her sheets into dreams: her nails became claws; her arms, wings of a nun’s habit; and she felt the spring air rustle her belly as she swooped on a creature, garbage rat, skittering city mouse, swallowing its body with one snap while its head lay severed and bleeding on the ground.

Yes, she told herself, waking the next morning. The meaning of the years in Africa came to her suddenly as if in revelation. Apprenticeship. Learning to subjugate her will. She would dedicate herself to the patients and the students of City Hospital. Her face took on a pregnant glow, and she felt more content than she could remember in her life.

Because the dean would not remove Michael Smith, Helen decided she would make him into a doctor. She gave him most of the teaching duties to Diana, but she no longer avoided the boy. To Diana she said, “You must think of how you will fit your practice around your family, and how you will choose a job where your husband can find work too.” Diana smiled but said nothing. To Michael Smith, whom she had caught leaving the hospital at five, with a blood sugar level uncontrolled, she said, “You must do whatever is necessary for the patients’ good, even if it means you don’t eat, don’t sleep, or don’t leave the hospital.”

Smith flushed slightly, then looked over his left shoulder at the flurry of young nurses who were leaving, too, and said, “I’m going into radiology.”

“Good,” said Helen. “You’ll make money. But first, you must pass your medicine rotation.” As he walked away, she felt his eyes on the sway of her hips. Students, she told herself, become infatuated with the power of their teachers. Later that night, sitting at the bedside of a dying man, a drug addict infected with a disease he had passed on to his heart, Helen felt herself strengthen her conviction. None of the private hospitals taught the concept of service. It was here the boy would learn to be a doctor, and it was her responsibility to teach him.

The third week of May began the wave of deaths. Death was of course a familiar presence at City Hospital, but like a wild tide, people began dying in unprecedented numbers. First, it was several cardiac failures on the men’s wards, then a medication allergy on the women’s ward, then one of the drug rehabilitation doctors fell out of a
closet one morning, curled in the fetal position with a needle in his arm and stone-cold dead.

Helen called a meeting of the hospital's physicians. "I can't find a pattern," she said, "but I feel a connection, somewhere underneath." She didn't add, and I feel somehow responsible.

The next day *Staphylococcus* broke out in the neonatal nursery, crops of pustules erupted on even the heartiest of infants. Helen stood outside the plate glass of the babies' ward and watched the nurses wrap a tiny corpse, folding the blanket around the child, a flannel shroud. Why, she asked herself, because even Africa had not prepared her for the speed and the sweep of these deaths. Overcome, she paced the streets outside the hospital, walking blindly past the rubble, the garbage, and the deserted streets, in the long twilights of the late spring.

But the final straw was Henry, the chief of maintenance who sat, sighed, and fell over one day at dinner. It was Michael Smith who leapt on his chest and screamed, "Help," because he'd been sitting with Henry, once again, playing poker when he should have been drawing the evening bloods on the men's ward. They all came, residents, students, Helen, Diana. They ran a code in the cafeteria just as they would have in the emergency room: hooked up the EKG machine, pumped the chest, breathed in the slack mouth, started several large-bore IVs, and called to each other pulse, medication, paddles, step back, shock. But it was different, thought Helen, as she pierced the skin over his clavicle for a central line and glanced at his waxy face. It was Henry. She slipped and hit the artery. A geyser of blood sprayed her, Michael Smith, and the girl who was ventilating with the ambu-bag. When she got the vein, on the third try, she pushed it forward, but his blood dotted even as she pushed it in. "What the hell," she shouted, and there was a pause because they realized, inescapably, after fifteen minutes of flopping his flaccid blue arms, cracking his posthumous ribs, and watching the cardiogram read off an unremittingly straight line, that they were working on a dead man.

"Enough," said Helen. "Get a clean sheet. Wipe up this blood. Get these people out of here."

Michael Smith stood behind her, shaking and weeping, staring at Henry's still face. "His wife," he said, "his children."

"I'm sorry," said Helen.
The narrow hall that led to her room seemed longer than usual and peculiarly dry. She licked her lips, but her tongue stuck to the faint moisture on the roof of her mouth. She thought of calling Henry's wife, getting back to the wards, a memorial service, but the image of a corpse she had once found intruded. It was out in the bush at the end of the dry season, a young boy mauled by a lion so that one arm lay at an unnatural angle, connected only by a tendon that had hardened into rawhide. She stood at her door, looking straight ahead at the eroded slats.

The student, Michael Smith, came up behind her quietly. "Please," he said, touching her arm. She turned slowly and noticed that he was taller than she, how young he was, that his cheeks and nose were freckled with blood, and that he was still weeping.

"What do you want?" she asked him gently, but he just stared at her, moving his hand along her arm. "No," she said, seeing her pale face reflected in his eyes. He reached around her with his other arm and opened the door, pressing against her so she could feel the heat of his body radiating into her own. "Smith," she started, as he bent to kiss her neck. She felt revolting by her wave of desire, sick, like she might vomit. "Go away," she said, "now, before I have to report you to the dean." But when he looked up, his eyes wide and unfocused like a sleepwalker's, she pulled him to her breast and slowly licked the sweat that beaded across his face. "I'm sorry," she whispered. Afterwards, as he lay across her, naked and exhausted, she murmured it again, tracing his lips, "I'm sorry."

"I love you," Smith said, rolling over and going back to sleep, curling defenselessly. Helen stared at him, then got up and showered, letting the water run for hours down her face, between her legs. Then she chose her whitest blouse and went out onto the wards.

"Look," she said to the men's ward secretary. "Has the ward been repainted?"

"No," said the woman.

"But," Helen said in the nursery, "the babies are all so plump and healthy."

The Good Doctor
"Yes," said the practical nurse who was bathing a new arrival.
Helen walked a long path through the hospital. The women’s ward
had a new but familiar smell: dust soaked into earth, the beginning
of the rainy season.

When she found Diana, she was going over cardiograms with
Michael Smith in the emergency room.
"I called Henry’s wife," said Diana.
"Yes," said Helen, taking the cardiogram from her. "what’s wrong
with this patient?"

"Thirty-year-old man with chest pain," began Diana, glancing over
at Helen. Michael Smith was looking over Helen’s shoulder at the
strip of paper. Diana frowned. "Came in this morning," she went on.
Michael ran his hand slowly up Helen’s thigh. Diana stopped and
stared at Helen, at her grey hair, at her grooved cheeks. Helen ex-
amined the cardiogram as though nothing had happened.

Diana cleared her throat, her face mottled scarlet. "I understand,
Dr. van Horne," she said, "that you've told Mr. Smith he will pass
his medicine rotation?"

Helen didn’t answer for a moment. "Will you take a fellowship
next year?" she asked. "Of course, it is easier to adjust around a
husband and children if you work in the emergency room."

"I left my husband," said Diana. "I wanted to be like you."

Helen looked down again at the cardiogram, but her hand began to
shake. After a few minutes she said, "And do you think Mr. Smith
should pass?"

"No," said Diana.
"Then fail him," said Helen.

"Christ," said Smith to Helen, "that's unfair." When she didn't
answer, he looked wounded for a moment, then slammed out of the
cubicle.

Diana stared at Helen, embarrassed. "He'll go to the dean," she
started.

"Yes," said Helen, "he would be right to do that." She folded the
cardiogram carefully back into the chart. She thought of Henry's dead
body lying on the gurney waiting for his wife. His lips had turned a
particular shade of blue, like the dusky sapphire of Lake Tanganyika.
Helen sat on the bed in her room. "I regret to inform you," she wrote to the dean. She stopped and got up, staring at her face in the mirror, overcome with self-disgust. She seemed to herself grotesque, an old woman, a sexual vampire. "Is there ever any justification," she wrote on the wall beside the mirror, "for a teacher—" And yet, the deaths had stopped. She started again, "If A is a middle-aged woman, and B is a young male student, and insects grow, must grow in the rotted womb of fallen trees," but she lost interest and turned to the window. Cars honked and revved their engines, beasts of the Serengeti growled and spoke to her. She walked to the window and threw it open, as far as it would go. "It's the rainy season," she shouted to them, "order up the antibiotics, sow the crops." She saw them crowed on the expressway, antelope, giraffe, lions, surrounded by fields of ripened corn. "Yes," she whispered, because she felt at home. She heard the cry of the ambulances, the voices swelling from the emergency room, the beat of the hospital as it trembled with its load of humanity, and for her children, the patients and the students, she obeyed. She spread her arms Daedalus, Icarus, straight at the hot sun of the South Bronx, and hesitated.

Helen climbed down from the window sill and sat at her desk. "The men," she said firmly, to herself, "do it all the time." She listened for a moment, for a rebuttal. Then she pulled on a white coat, to cover herself, and went out onto the wards.

\[ 	ext{The Good Doctor} \]