

Arabia

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Although he feels just fine, Neil still takes the morning off and keeps his appointment. His wife Barbara, who's a fretter, drives over with him. They get there, but Neil has to use the men's room first.

Barbara's not up for standing around in the lobby, so she goes on in to the clinic. She sees a black man wearing a funny hat in there. It's just she and a black man with a funny hat in the waiting room. The nurse slides the Plexiglass over and leans forward. Barbara says that Neil's here for his nine o'clock, and then she looks around for the best seat. She doesn't want to sit anywhere near this man or his hat – she wants to sit away from him. So she parks herself way over on the other side of the room.

Barbara's taking a look at the man there with her. She's trying to be inconspicuous. But almost right away she finds her eyes meeting his, and she's embarrassed because of it. The man is smiling at her with crooked teeth. Also, his eye sockets look very white against his skin. Barbara turns away and looks over at some glossy magazine covers. She's wishing Neil would just finish up. She's wondering what for God's sake could be taking him so long.

Then the nurse pops out again. She's passing a clipboard through the window this time. "Mr. Hakeem?" she says. "I'm going to need you to fill this out for me. No rush," the nurse says. "Take your time," she says.

The man adjusts his funny-looking hat and stands up. He is a tall man, and gaunt. "Shoot," he says. "That's no problem there, Miss

Nurse. I filled out so many forms this morning already, I'm a regular form-filling wonk. Let me have this next one, sure thing." The man sits back down with his paperwork and a fat pen the nurse him lends and once again Barbara goes to sneak a peek at him.

She's thinking about his hat and about the rest of him as well. She's thinks: that sure is an odd hat, never seen one like that before. All things considered, she's thinking, that's a weird shirt, too – it's too long, too long. She also thinks his beard's a little mangy – a little dirty where it's going gray. It reminds her of the photos she's seen of Neil's old terrier. Thinking it through, she's glad to be on her side of the room.

When Neil comes in to the clinic, he says: "Did you check me in already, Barb?"

"Yes. Come sit down here, will you?"

Neil takes a seat beside his wife and then he too starts to size up the other man there, a man Neil can see is muttering his way through a lot of medical jargon on a clipboard. Neil finds the man interesting to look at. He shares one or two of his wife's thoughts about the man here with them. About his hat. About that shirt. He even thinks the same thing about the beard, and then he wonders whether or not Casey really is in dog heaven. Barbara's thumbing through last week's *People*, but every now and again she'll glance up across the top of the magazine.

The man finishes with his forms. "Miss Nurse? Miss Nurse?" he calls out. "I've got your clipboard all completed here. It's all filled out properly," he says. He's tapping the clipboard against the Plexiglass.

When the window slides open, everyone sees that the nurse is

standing. She's got a plastic Dixie cup with her this time. "Thank you very much, Mr. Hakeem," the nurse says. She sticks the clipboard into her armpit. "I need you to take this next dose for me, okay?"

"More of that stuff? Shoot."

"Oh, that's just half as much as you had last time," says the nurse. "You said you didn't mind the taste, anyway."

"True enough, true enough there Miss Nurse. Thank you kindly."

The man gets his Dixie cup and heads back for his seat. On the way, though, he gives a nice toothy smile to Neil and Barbara. "How you folks doing today?" the man asks nicely.

Neil can see that the man's teeth could use some work. "Fine, thanks," Neil says, and he says it with a grin. He wants to do the polite thing here. "Yourself?" Neil asks.

Behind her magazine, Barbara's a little startled. She's crunching the pages together because her fingertips are warm. She can feel the gloss rubbing off on her fingers.

"Oh, not so bad, not so bad," the man says. He's raised the Dixie cup in greeting. "Been worse off, sure enough. You can take that from me. Nurse's right, though – actually, this stuff don't taste half bad. It's like a malt, you know? Either of you two ever have a malt?"

Barbara puts the magazine down on her lap now. She's trying to do the polite thing, too. She says: "That's for your liver, right? They make you take that before they look at your liver?"

The man holds up an index finger; he wants Barbara to wait just one moment, please.

Then he chugs that little cup down. He even smacks his lips together. "Yes, ma'am," he says when he's done. "Liver, pancreas, gall

bladder. You got to drink this stuff in stages before they can look at any of them organs – your liver, your pancreas, your gall bladder. But it's not so bad. It's malty, you know? It's like a malt beverage. The non-alcoholic kind, of course."

This line draws out a round of chuckles. Barbara's chuckling along as well. She turns to Neil. She's still trying to be polite. "Honey," she says, "I think you'll have to take that stuff, too." She turns back to the man. "Neil's also here for his liver. I bet he'll have to drink up just like you. If we'd have known it, we'd have come in earlier. You guys could have sat down and drank together."

The three of them have another little chuckle over this one. The other man chuckles the hardest this time. Then he stands up, stretching off his laughter. "Yes indeedy," he says. "My liver's cutting out though, sure enough, it is. I've been dealing with Hep C for years now. Years and years. Since my honorable discharge. Years ago. But this time it's cutting out. For sure, it is. I know it. I know it in my heart."

The man is pacing the waiting room now. He's circling round the magazine tables and the chairs in there. And he's moving closer and closer to Neil and Barbara.

"That's why I got to pull myself together for this home stretch here. I'm planning a trip, see? A long trip, maybe. Or maybe a short one. We'll see. My last trip, though, come what may. The length don't matter none. I'm going to Arabia, see? Sure enough – I am. You see, I'm going to Arabia to die there."

Neil's face looks a little puzzled, but inside he's really keen to learn more about all of this. Barbara is just really confused.

Really anxious, too. "Arabia!" she says. "What, you have friends and family there?"

The man is right on top of them now. He's standing over them where they sit. "All the family a man could ever want – ever," he answers. "I'm a Muslim, see. And only a Muslim can get into Arabia. They turn you away if you're anything else but a Muslim there."

Barbara says: "Oh! A Muslim! He's Muslim, honey!" She's looking straight at her husband now, and she's rolling the *People* up into a cylinder.

"Yes, I am," the man says. He's taking a little book out from his shirt pocket. "And I can read Arabic, too. See?"

"Wow! Neil and I can't read another language at all, can we honey?"

The man is showing Neil the first page of the text.

"Well, would you believe that? He's a Muslim *and* he reads Arabic. Isn't that just amazing, honey?" Barbara says. "How did you ever learn another language like that one?" she asks the man.

"I taught myself Arabic in ninety days," he says. "But that was years ago. Years ago that was."

"No. No! That's amazing!" Barbara says. "That's incredible!" she says.

"Anybody can learn Arabic in ninety days if you put your heart into it," says the man. "You can learn a little something in five minutes if your heart's in the right place," he says.

Neil's been busy looking at the first page of that little book. Barbara's looking over his shoulder, not knowing what else to do. Neil points and says: "You read it backwards, Barb, see? It's right to left. You read it right to left, like this." He's moving a finger across the

scripture.

“Right to left!” Barbara says. “Well! Who’d have guessed it? Right to left! How did you know that, honey?”

“I saw this thing on the History Channel,” Neil says. He’s a little bashful in saying it.

Then the man says: “That’s right, that’s right, it’s right to left. And I guarantee that if your heart’s right, you can learn something, too. Five short minutes is all it takes.”

Neil’s still looking at the page’s strange print. He feels just fine, but, still. Neil remembers that TV show he’d seen, *Journey to Arabia*. He remembers putting the remote control down, just letting the History Channel run till bedtime, not even clicking over for the weather report. Neil’s been watching a whole lot of the History Channel since that night. Public television, too. And C-SPAN. He’s trying to catch up on things. He feels just fine, but, still.

“Okay, you’re on,” Neil says all of a sudden.

The man claps his hands together and calls out for the nurse again, and again he borrows her pen. He gets her clipboard again, too. There’s some blank copy paper on it this time. He sits down next to Neil and draws a little doodad near the top of a piece of the copy paper. “This here’s an ‘*alif*,” the man says.

“*Alif*,” Neil repeats. He’s studying the tiny hash mark really hard. He feels happy to do it. “*Alif*,” he says again as he takes the pen up from Mr. Hakeem’s hand. □