

This electronic copy of Dr. Tabatabai's stories was produced with permission of the author and Harper Collins Publishers for participants in the October 11, 2023, New York ACP Small Feedings of the Soul event with Dr. Sayed Tabatabai. Permission is for personal use only and this electronic copy should not be reproduced further. The stories were published in **These Vital Signs** by Sayad Tabatabai, MD, FACP.

Titles of the stories to be read and discussed include:

- *Bella*
- *The Red Car*
- *What Did It Take*

## BELLA

The hospital rooms can have a numbing sameness. The same four walls. The same TV. The same bed. The same white sheets, meticulously tucked. The same plastic toothbrushes in the same "hospitality kits." Sterile. Efficient. Drab.

Patients make little personalizations where they can. A get well card on a side table. A blanket of their own. Photographs on a wall. A little speaker to connect to their phone and play music. In this way, they say "I was here. I am here. And I am myself. Unique."

To Bella, however, every room is unique already. The moment a person is inside it, Bella's impossibly refined senses can detect their uniqueness. And in doing so, she can sense what they need from her, intuitively. Bella is a golden retriever. And she is a healer.

Every now and then Bella and her human best friend, Anne, make their rounds together through the hospital. Patients can request to see Bella. And sometimes the nurses make suggestions too; patients who might benefit from Bella's unique brand of medicine. Her love.

The first room today is filled with grief. Bella senses it as she enters, and hears it in the quietness of Anne's voice. Bella's tail doesn't wag briskly. She is subdued. She rests her head on the side of the bed, and the sick human holds her, and weeps. Bella loves them.

Eventually they move on, and in the hallway several of the nurses come to pet Bella. She holds out her paw to "shake hands." She beams, and her tail thumps against the floor as she's petted. She absorbs their love. And she gives it back. Bella loves them.

A visit to see a child always makes Bella's day. Their scent is unique to her. Innocent. Of all the humans, she loves children the most. They bring a surge of protective warmth inside her. They're always so happy to see her, eyes wide with wondrous joy. Bella loves them.

Sometimes the grief touches the children's rooms too. Unbearably. Sometimes Bella doesn't enter right away, but she lingers by the door. Seeking permission to step into this most difficult of places. Sometimes the parents want her there. Sometimes not. Bella loves them.

An elderly patient is always happy to see her. He pets her lovingly and says, "You're a good dog, Bella. You remind me of my dog. She was a good dog too." The old man is deeply alone, in ways that Bella can sense, but Anne can't. She sits by his feet. Bella loves him.

The doctor walking briskly down the hall seems lost in his thoughts. His gaze is distant, and he almost runs into Anne and Bella before seeing them, and laughing. "Hey Anne! Hey Bella! How are the dynamic duo today?" Bella can sense the friendship in his voice.

The doctor reaches down to pet her, before washing his hands with the foamy disinfectant whose scent fills Bella's nostrils all day. She beams up at him, hoping for a treat, but he has no packets of peanut butter to offer her. Bella loves him all the same. And I love her too.

## THE RED CAR

There is a car, in the hospital parking lot. It is a faded red, covered with dust. Other cars have parked and left on either side of it, every day, but this car remains. I pass by it, as I find parking, on my way in to work. I know what it means.

There was a time when it wasn't faded red, covered in dust. There was a time, decades ago now, when it was brand new. "Ruby red metallic!" The car salesman flashes a winning grin. "Isn't she a beauty? And to think, she could be all yours!" The young man smiles.

In the years to come, people will often ask the young man, why did you choose the bright red? It doesn't seem to fit his personality. He is quiet, and withdrawn. His answer is always the same. "It isn't red. It's ruby red. Got Dorothy home safe, it'll do for me."

Many years later he will discover that the original novel, "The Wizard of Oz," made no mention of ruby slippers. They were invented for the movie, to sparkle in new "Technicolor." But that's of no matter. Sorry for the detour. Life is detours, that you take or you don't.

He drives his beloved ruby red car everywhere. Across town. Across the state. Across the country. When he gets married, a "JUST MARRIED" banner is hung from the rear bumper. When his wife goes into labor, that ruby red hot rod breaks every speed record in the state.

With the passage of time, he has to make more practical decisions. But he can't bring himself to sell his car. It's been good to him. He knows he's being silly. It's just a machine. But he's wept behind the steering wheel, and he's laughed, and it's kept his family safe.

So he stores it in his garage. And every now and then, on a weekend, he tinkers with it. Visiting an old friend. One who never passed judgment on him. Who only served him faithfully. His kids grow older. He grows older too. Perhaps he should sell it, maybe it's time.

It's his wife who convinces him to keep it. "If it wasn't for that beautiful car, I would never have married you!" He laughs, but then she says something true. "It's not your car anymore. It's your friend. There's always room for friends." He understands her wisdom.

She dies unexpectedly, several years later, from cancer that had been lurking and managed to escape detection. He has lost his true love, and his best friend. The raw depths of his grief threaten to submerge him, and for a time, they do. And that's okay. He'll be okay.

So now his favorite thing to do is take long drives in his ruby red hot rod. It has become old enough to be cool again. Retro fever. His kids want to move back home, but he assures them he's fine. Not to worry. He finds happiness, and freedom, on the open highway.

One day he wakes up with a strange pain in his chest. It makes his breath catch. He thinks about calling 911, but it subsides. Just to be safe, he decides to go to the local ER and get checked out. He gets into his beloved car, and turns the ignition for the last time.

As he parks, in the hospital parking lot, he feels strangely nervous. Perhaps he should call the kids. But he doesn't want to worry them. He gets out of the car, and notices a blemish on the hood. Spitting onto his palm, he wipes it clean. It is an unassuming farewell.

He will die later that evening. His children don't understand. Why didn't he call them? The reports they're getting make no sense. Massive MI? Heart failure? Kidney failure? Failure? But he was so strong. He was Dad. He is Dad. They fly home that very night, numb.

It will be several weeks before his daughter realizes their dad's beloved hot rod isn't in the garage after she unlocks it. They had all assumed he dialed 911. They didn't realize he drove himself to the ER. Immediately, they make their way back to the hospital to search.

There is a car, in the hospital parking lot. It is a faded red, covered with dust. Other cars have parked and left on either side of it, every day, but this car remains. I pass by it, as I find parking, on my way in to work. I know what it means.

Sometimes I wonder. How much gas is still in the tank? How many journeys were still planned, or unplanned? Where did it go? Where was it going? It was a beautiful car, once, I can see that. As I drive past it, I pray for rain. (For all the love we leave behind.)

## WHAT DID IT TAKE?

"They just told me I have cancer. It's everywhere in my body. And you say you're a kidney doctor? What the hell are you doing here?" His voice is gruff, and as he looks at me, I feel the weight of his gaze. For a moment I hesitate, then ask. "Mind if I sit down?"

"What do I care, you're gonna be gone in ten seconds anyways. Nobody sticks around, tell that chickenshit doctor who hasn't seen me in three days that I know he's gonna bill me anyways." I don't speak. Not now. He continues, "Sit down, tell me how bad my kidneys are."

The harsh truth is that my day would be easier if I didn't sit down. If I just stood at his bedside and spoke fast, did a perfunctory physical exam, and moved on. The system incentivizes me to see more people, faster. And the faster I'm done, the faster I can go home.

Some days, yeah, all I want to do is go home early. Some days. I sit down and make eye contact. His gaze is angry, accusing, and beneath it all, afraid. He is twice my age, and for a moment, I see myself through his eyes. Young. Detached. An agent of the system.

I start talking, and almost immediately I'm interrupted. I knew he was angry, but I underestimated his rage. This isn't just about the cancer. I understand. There's grief here too. An undercurrent of grief, far more than I can know. My instinct is to deflect.

I want to tell him this isn't my fault, and to quickly launch into one of my pre-canned speeches about kidney function and lab values. To face emotion like his, head on, can be terrifying. Instead, a distant memory calms me. My father's voice, "What did it take?"

When I was a child, I was at a party at a friend's house. There was a toy my mom had bought for me before the party. A ninja turtle, the purple one, Donatello. At the party we watched "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles." And my friend said his favorite turtle was Donatello.

As we were leaving the party, my friend saw the toy in my car and asked if he could borrow it. His parents were pretty strict when it came to expenditures on toys. I knew he didn't have any ninja turtles. Impulsively, I gave him Donatello. On the drive home my dad smiled

"Did you see how happy you made that kid? You make someone happy like that, and it's special. And what did it take? Just a toy." I nod. "What did it take?" becomes a mantra for me. How simple kindness can be, how easy, if you're mindful. How positivity can ripple.

My patient's gaze is no longer angry, or scared, but defiant, "So... what do you have to say about my kidneys?" I tell him I'm sorry. That I hear him. And that actually his kidneys are doing pretty well. He laughs sardonically, "Well at least I got that going for me..." As the days pass, I go in and see my gruff patient in the hospital every day. I know visits with him will take longer than any other patient on my list, primarily because I am one of the only docs he gets to see. His other docs tend to round when he's asleep, or sedated.

We start having conversations that extend beyond the scope of his illness. Conversations about life, and our experiences. We have unexpected things in common, and discovering them is a unique joy. The day finally comes where I take a seat in his room for the last time.

He has chosen to pursue hospice care, and will be going home to his family. I am grateful that he will be at peace, surrounded by people who love him. He thanks me for spending time with him, and "facing the music" as he gruffly puts it. I thank him for his kindness.

All I did was sit down in his room every day. Sit down and listen, and eventually talk. There was no great medicine I prescribed, no cure. And yet I faced the music with him, and it was my privilege. As I get up to leave, we say our goodbyes. I feel a wave of grief.

Days later, as I round in the hospital, I find myself glancing at his room number when I walk past it. Remembering. The longer you practice medicine, the more faces never leave you. The more memories linger. "What did it take?" Nothing at all. Time. Every last thing.