Unintended Consequences

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I forget which of your legs burns from your cancer. It's strange, but in some ways, I do not need to know. I will prescribe the same medication no matter which one it is. I will ask, but it will not change what happens.

I do need to know what your favorite flower is—whether the violet splotchy tulips you put in last spring or the yellow marigolds that grow recklessly near your breakfast nook. When you were at home last, you showed them to me, suspending your computer out of the window, so all I could see were petals crushed against your camera, filling my screen.

I do need to know if your mother is watering the tomato plant you potted in a home-schooling session for your daughter on gardening last week. That was before you were stuck with me in the hospital, struggling with your relentless cancer at such a young age.

I do need to know why you have not face-timed your daughter yet. I need to ask if you are afraid that she will see you with a tube in your nose. If you are afraid that she will see you cry. And we need to talk about that, how to cry with a daughter, what to say to a ten-year-old who would rather draw flowers.

I need to know how long she will be in quarantine with COVID exposure with her aunt, and unable to see you. You do not know how few days you have left with her because you told me you do not want to know, that you want to feel like it is

forever until it is not. I respect this request you have made of me.

But I know. And at night, when it is dark and I cannot sleep, I pick my son up out of his crib and with no sheep, I count down the days you have with her, and sob, carrying that knowledge for you.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards:

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