

# Residents' page

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**S**o it is September. Will this month ever be separate from the events of September 11, 2001? I remember where I was that day, that hour, but then again, who does not? It was business as usual at the Jewish General Emergency that morning, the habitual morning rush. Except then people started saying that a plane flew into a building ... and then another ... and then another.... Patients in the waiting room stared at the television screen in awe and horror, and equally incredulous staff rushed out for a minute at a time to see the incomprehensible and incredible confirmed with their own eyes.

There was talk of being on standby for survivors evacuated from New York to Montreal, to Toronto ... except, of course, there were hardly any survivors, and certainly not enough to evacuate. A group of McGill Emergency Medicine residents packed up and drove across the still-porous border to "Ground Zero," to lend skilled hands and open hearts. Suddenly, people stopped taking life for granted. Our thoughts went out to friends, colleagues, and strangers who had lost loved ones that day. In family medicine clinics, we were meeting patients with "9-11" stories: people whose lives were forever changed by losses endured that day.

And what else has changed? Well, some things just stay the same: a year later senseless violence continues all over the globe; only the scale and magnitude varies on each continent. So, a year later, I share this story with you, in a (perhaps naïve) hope that some day soon, the violence will end.

## Unnecessary losses

Watching the huge sunset-tinged cloud glow an unreal pink as it floats gently over Mont-Royal in the twilight blue sky, the calm beauty of this scene seems as surreal as the carnage playing on television screens worldwide since the morning of September 11, 2001. Surely it is all a dream, for how can such peace exist alongside the brutality of impending war?

*Residents are encouraged to e-mail questions, comments, personal articles, and helpful information to [residentpage@cpfc.ca](mailto:residentpage@cpfc.ca).*

It seemed like a madman's fantasy, an illusion, a bad Hollywood joke. Yet for the man who came to see me today, it is surely too real by now.

We had met several times over the last 3 months. A stout man in his mid-40s,\* he was new to Canada and needed a family doctor. He got me. We stopped his foreign diabetes medication in favour of changing his diet and keeping a watchful eye on his blood sugar level. He told me of the difficulty he was having finding work and that he had lived quite comfortably in the Middle East, where he had managed a financial institution. I remembered wondering about his ability to cope with the Canadian (or more precisely, Quebecois) culture, ... the successful businessman reduced to social assistance and occasional blue-collar work to support his family.

Today he tells me that he has been unwell.

"How so?"

"My back hurts ... I feel weak ... I can't concentrate. ... I'm worried because I get angry so easily with my wife and children. ... I know afterward that I'm wrong."

"...But you can't help it at the moment it happens?"

"Yes."

Now my anxiety began to grow anew. Is he abusing his wife and kids? Do I need to call Children's Aid? How do I find out the relevant details? How do I make sure his family is safe? How do I help this man?

The back examination mercifully yields only a mild case of sciatica and no neurologic compromise. The blood sugar level is pretty good for a diabetic. Having taken care of his "medical" issues with acetaminophen and a home glucometer prescription, I tentatively broach the subject of his mood.

He describes a recent episode that sounds very much like a panic attack and confesses to having had something similar a couple of times before.

Does he have any idea what is affecting his mood now?

\*Details and places have been changed to protect patient confidentiality. This story was first written on September 21, 2001.

"I had a friend. ... She lived in New York."

The self-assured façade suddenly dissolves in tears. He goes on to tell me his distress at seeing images on television, finally being able to get through to his friend's mom, and then unable to do anything but listen to the bereaved parent weep on the phone.

Finally able to cry, he tells me his story.

They met on the other side of the world as university students, she Jewish and he Muslim. Friendship and love took up most of the following decade. He followed her to England, where the love they shared was intense and true. They lived for seeing each other and being together—everything else was unimportant. He describes being unable to eat or drink when he could not see her for 2 days.

"Did you marry?"

"No. ... When you have your husband, you will know what I mean. I hope you feel what I felt. ... We loved each other."

Her parents could not bear the thought of an interfaith marriage. Her father threatened, her mother begged, though who was more effective at persuading him to leave the country and the love of his life hardly matters now. He wanted to kill her father. He loved and respected her mother. Finally, he left.

Her father died. She moved to New York with her mother. They married other people, started families,

and kept in touch as only those who shared such deep love can.

"She was beautiful, kind. She loved all people—yellow, black, white, Jewish, Muslim—it did not matter. She cared." Tears slid down his face despite noble efforts with the flimsy hospital tissues. He spoke and wept and spoke. "I am not religious; ... I don't like the exercises. ... My wife is very observant. I cannot tell her. I have never told her. Maybe someone told her about a Jewish girl. She would not understand. Me with a Jewish girl ... I cannot tell my family. They would not speak to me. You are the first person I told."

Past injustices remembered, old anger rekindled, and the inevitable "what-if" finally comes out: "He killed us both! If we had gotten married, she would be here with me."

And treasured memories return: "She always helped me. ... She was my best friend."

A 3-year old boy lost his mom. A man lost his wife.

Another man lost the love of his life, his closest and dearest friend.



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