



Residents' Views

Reflections • Réflexions

The Afghan tailor

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My last patient to see before I could leave was the Afghan tailor. I'd saved him until the end of my morning because he was my favourite, with his gentle, stoic humour. Also, I wanted to spend a few moments with him because his surgery was being delayed yet again and we weren't going to be able to get him into the operating room until Monday.

Feeling hypoglycemic and depleted, I careened toward his tiny room, which had once been a supply closet or a cupboard. I knew that he would have seen no one save the nursing staff and me since his admission.

The tailor had immigrated to Victoria, BC, about 20 years earlier. I knew he had no family in Canada, though I didn't know why. There had been something heartbreakingly resigned in his face when I'd gotten to that point in the history, and it had stopped me from enquiring further.

He brightened as I walked in. "Doc!" he greeted me. I was still unaccustomed to people calling me that, and it normally made me wince like a bad actor caught in a poorly written scene. From him, though, it felt right.

He mustered a smile. "You don't need to come see an old man like me! It's a beautiful day; you should go live some life!" He was trying to be hearty, but I could see that he was having trouble taking deep breaths because his belly was so distended. Whereas the day before he'd looked maybe 6 months pregnant, today he was term with twins, and he was lying almost flat in bed because there just wasn't any room to bend at the waist. The nasogastric tube wasn't decompressing the obstruction. He'd been like this and getting worse for 3 days.

I am always a bit emotionally tipsy after call duty, but this morning his kindness combined with his terrible belly made want to weep. But I smiled brightly, playing, in all honesty, the granddaughter more than the doctor. "Oh, Mr Kalumi,* I wouldn't miss seeing you! How are you doing?" I winced internally as the words emerged—stupid question, the man was clearly miserable. But I burred along, "Are you nauseated? How is your pain control?"

He raised a hand and motioned resignedly, eyebrows raised. He was right. There was no need for words. I looked down at him, wanting to retreat into cowardly

professional detachment but willing myself to meet him head on. I looked into his eyes and said, "Mr Kalumi, I am truly sorry. I know you're very uncomfortable, but someone very ill has come in and we won't be able to do your operation until Monday."

I hated that he just nodded. He lifted the corners of his mouth into a smile to try to make the situation easier for me. For me! But his energy was fading. To save us both, I put my stethoscope to my ears and moved its diaphragm over a chest storied with scars from operations long ago. There was no diagnostic intent. I listened to his breathing and his heart sounds as one would the wind through the trees.

Finally, renewed by the pause, I lowered the stethoscope and stepped back into the moment. But he too had found energy in the interlude: in an abrupt motion, he thrust out his arm, looking up at me, his eyes filled with urgency. "Go! Go live your life!" he cried out, right arm imploring me out the door, fingers splayed and tense with strength.

Startled, I hesitated, torn between wanting to escape into the sunny October day and wanting to ease his pain. In my mind, I weighed antinauseants, analgesics, intravenous rates, and bowel protocols in an effort to find something to offer, words to say as I departed. But his gaze implored me with a piercing intensity and I knew that I could not offer this man anything but the truth.

So I took his hand from the air and closed my fingers around his. I looked into his eyes. "All right," I said. "I will. I'll be in to see you on Monday."

With that he grew calm and gazed at me for a moment. Then, as though he could no longer stand the sight of me standing beside his bed when I could be running or jumping or rolling in an embrace under the open sky, he waved once more toward the door and urged me, "Go! Go live your life!" I nodded. I walked quickly out of the room and down the hall, past the nurses' station, down the old stairs, and out through the automatic doors. I tore off my pager and found myself running in my worn-out call shoes, running fiercely into the bright sunshine. 🌻

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*The patient's name has been changed.