

Ready or Not

By H. Lee Kagan

She was bleeding to death in a private room on the hospital's fifth floor. Inoperable stomach cancer, I'd been told at sign-out rounds. There would be no more transfusions. I didn't know the woman. She was the other team's patient.

It was my second night on call as an intern here in upstate New York. The week before, I had been a medical student. At 9 p.m. the nurse paged me to the floor – some problem with the I.V.

I poked my head into the patient's room. The overhead fluorescents were all on. The T.V. was dark and silent. The old woman lay comatose beneath immaculate white sheets that rose and fell across her distended abdomen. A waxy pallor was on her lips. Her wintry hair had been brushed. I checked her I.V. and saw it was fine. She looked peacefully asleep. But she was alone.

That didn't seem right, her being alone. Wasn't someone supposed to be present at the moment of her death? To witness it?

I was her doctor, but there was no doctoring left to do. Just the noting of her heart's final motion. Do I stay for that last contraction? Twenty-seven years old and I'd never been to a funeral, never had someone close to me die. The patients who died while I was a student had not been alone in their final hours. Or at least I thought so.

I could not bring to mind a lecture that covered this. Back at the nurse's station I found no answer in the patient's chart. The uniformed floor nurse sat bent over her notes, a starched white cap pinned above the tight bun at the back of her head. I was embarrassed to ask her. My gaze drifted back to the door of the patient's room at the end of the gleaming corridor. I heard my mother's voice in my head. "Sit with her. She shouldn't be alone."

"There is nothing for me to do. She won't even know I'm there."

When I took the Hippocratic Oath at my graduation I worried that my mother would hear me swearing by Apollo and all the gods. I didn't think Jews were supposed to do that. My newly minted M.D. degree was now buried in all its hard-earned, Gothic-lettered glory in a manila envelope near the bottom of a cardboard box on the floor of my new apartment. There had been no time to take it to the framer.

"Sit with her. She's alone."

I walked down the empty hall, back to her room, and thought, "I'm not ready to do this." I pulled a steel desk chair alongside the patient's bed and sat down on the padded seat. I was

fulfilling, I thought, some vital ritual, some adult responsibility whose meaning I could only guess at. Like boiling water when a woman goes into labor, it was just something you were supposed to do.

Thirty years later, I still remember that walk, still remember, “I’m not ready to do this.” It happens to us all. You’re on the ward or maybe in an ER bay. It’s just you and an ailing stranger who thinks you’re a doctor. You’ve passed your exams. The license with your name on it came in the mail. But you know you’re not ready. You’re just Harry and Esther’s little boy. And yet you do it, you touch someone, get them to tell you private things, and struggle to puzzle out what’s gone wrong. You know you’re not ready, but circumstances have forced this moment upon you, shoved you across the line from whatever it was you were before, to physician, demanded that now you exercise your judgment, yours alone, and then own the results. No one will countersign your orders. No longer an acolyte, the nurses will do what you’ve written. Ready or not, it’s who you’ve become.

So, my second night on call, I sat on the steel desk chair with the dying patient’s chart open on my lap and wrote out a lengthy, detailed note that no one would read. What was my obligation to stay with a patient as her life drained out of her, an old woman drifting on an ice floe toward an unwitnessed death? It was not the issue that had brought me to the floor, but it was the one that had held me there, pinned. I was young and inexperienced. I knew nothing. I sat at her bedside and filled a page with medical details. It was easier than contemplating a question for which there is no right answer. Pick up a pen and summarize the case. That much I knew how to do that.

It felt stupid.

It felt sacred.

Sacred and stupid, it turns out, are not mutually exclusive. They’re not even very far apart from one another, flip sides of the ethical coin that got tossed to me that night. F. Scott Fitzgerald said that holding contradictory ideas in our heads while continuing to function is a test of our intelligence. So is writing a useless note in a chart considered functioning?

Tolstoy said all we want to do is please our mothers. Or maybe it was Freud who said it.

After maybe ten or fifteen minutes, I got paged away to another floor. And then, from there to another floor. The night got busy.

When I went back later that evening to check on the woman, the room was empty.

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