
NON-FICTION | SPRING 2015

The Identification

By Mari Georgeson

There was a patient who was admitted to the hospital for hypertension, and a couple of other health conditions. His past medical history indicated HIV, so as I made my rounds as a public health educator, offering the HIV test to patients, I decided to check in on him. I wanted to know if he was in treatment for HIV, and if not, whether I could help him set up an appointment.

The patient's name was John. He was an African American man in his mid-50s. I introduced myself, told him I was associated with the hospital's HIV clinic, and that I was there to help him in any way I could. I asked him if he was seeing a doctor and taking HIV medication. He said he wasn't at the moment. In fact, he said he was very happy to meet me, because he had just traveled from his home state, in search of, among other things, government benefits. He had been homeless for some time, and he was trying to improve his life. New York is known for having good programs for those living with HIV, including, in some cases, housing assistance.

We had a friendly conversation. I encouraged him to get into treatment at the clinic where I work. I told him he would meet social workers there who would help him with any benefits he was eligible for. He'd been living a hard life on the streets, and talked about turning over a new leaf. I gave him a makeshift "business card," a torn piece of paper with my name, the name of the hospital, and my phone number on it. I told him if for any reason the hospital didn't give him an appointment when he was discharged, to call me and I would arrange it.

About a week later, I learned he was still in the hospital. Things had taken a turn for the worse. When I went into his room for the second time, I had to make an effort to conceal my shock. It looked like he had lost about 50 pounds, most of it in his face. He looked like a different person. In fact, I wasn't sure if he was the same person until we had talked for a minute or two. According to him, and according to the charts, it wasn't the HIV, but something else, some other complication of hypertension, or diabetes, that he was sick with. He was still very excited about getting into treatment and starting his new life. He had some papers in a pile on his bed and he pulled out my jagged "business card," and said, "See, I still have your number! I'm going to call you as soon as I get out and make an appointment!"

A few days later, I got a call from the hospital social worker assigned to John. Her voice

sounded furious on the phone. "Is this Maoorri Gurrirgeson?" She demanded, mangling my name, as if reading something written in a particularly distasteful foreign language.

"Yes." I said.

"Your patient, John, is trying to leave! He said you approved it!"

"As far as I know, I'm not in charge of discharging anyone." I said. "And he's not 'my' patient. I met with him a few times and talked about getting him into care."

"Well you better come and talk to him and tell him to stay!" She demanded.

I could hear John in the background yelling. He was trying to sign out against medical advice.

"I'll try," I said. But by the time I got to the floor, he was gone. The social worker told me that he told everyone he would only deal with me. He said everyone else treated him horribly, and he was leaving and he was going to call me and I would take care of him. He had waived the little piece of paper with my name and number on it in everyone's face.

Two weeks later, I got a call. It was from a nurse at a nearby hospital. A man had been brought to her emergency room with only an out of state benefits card in his pocket, with no photo, and a ragged piece of paper, with my name and number on it. It was John.

He was dead. He had been found on the street, dead of alcohol poisoning by the time the paramedics arrived.

My heart sank. I knew the state John's life had been in when I met him. I was under no illusions. I knew it wasn't the first time he had talked about changing his life. But, still, the hope in his voice when he'd talked about his plans had been palpable. I'd believed it. He had believed it.

"I'm so sorry," The nurse said.

I told the nurse about my brief encounter with him, how he had been so excited to get into treatment and get his life together, and how he seemed to have gotten very sick very fast, and then signed out against medical advice.

The nurse had a big favor to ask me. "You see," She said, "You're the only person I know of who has seen him alive. I'm so sorry to put this on you, but if no one ID's this man, he will be an unclaimed body and he'll be taken to potter's field, to an unmarked grave, and nobody in

his family will be notified. If we can get a positive ID on him, I will be able to access the Social Security database through his benefits card and notify relatives, if there are any.”

“Are you asking me to ID the body?”

“I’m sorry. I know it’s a lot to ask.”

“I’ll do it.” I said. “I just hope I recognize him. I really didn’t even talk to him for very long.”

“If you could just try.”

The woman on the phone told me she was an admitting nurse, but she had taken on this other job as a personal mission of sorts. On her own time, before and after her shifts, she tried to track down the families of the “John Does” who ended up in her hospital. “You have no idea how many people end up in potter’s field without any relatives being found in time.”

I agreed to go to the morgue the next day.

That night, as I slept, I felt a chill come over my body. I dreamt I was on my way to a very important meeting. I was in a hurry, and I couldn’t get there fast enough. Important things were at stake. I finally arrived at the designated room. There was a man lying on a table – a great man, an important man. He was wearing a dark wool suit, and an African woven hat. He had the bearing of a diplomat or a statesman. But he was worried, incredibly worried. As soon as I arrived, though, his anxiety melted away. I cannot describe the look on his face as he sat up and greeted me. No one has ever been so happy to see me in my whole life. It was as if he had been waiting for a very long time for me to come, and he had been unsure if I would arrive. He extended his hand to mine in a gesture of sublime warmth, love, and welcome.

I knew it was John but it looked nothing like him. He was darker, heavier, and had a completely different face. There was a magnitude about him, and a humbleness at the same time. I noticed there were other people in the room. Ancestors and relatives. They were all happy I had come. Their family was honored somehow. John greeted me as if I was a very important visiting dignitary. Or more ...

All he had lost during life had been restored. Not only the weight he had lost at the end, but everything. The life of homelessness, alcohol, and illness was gone. Not a trace of that was anywhere.

I arrived at the morgue the next day. The woman who worked there sat down with me on a couch and explained the procedure to me. “We don’t really show the bodies anymore, unless

it's absolutely necessary," She said. "We do it mostly with photographs."

I filled out some paperwork, explained the situation to her, and then waited on the couch for her to bring the photos.

As I waited, I tried to picture his face, but I couldn't. In the dream, he had had a completely different face and body. I couldn't remember anything, physically, about the real John. I didn't know if he was tall or short, light skinned or dark skinned. I didn't remember the shape of his eyes, or the size of his nose. I recalled that even when he was alive, I had had trouble recognizing him from one time to the next.

The woman joined me on the couch again, and handed me a folder. "Take your time." She said. There were universes of tact in her voice. She was accustomed to grief.

I opened the folder and viewed the two photographs inside, each taken from a different angle. They were both taken in harsh light, illuminated by a flash, and the colors were washed out. One photo was the side view of a man on a slab. The other was a view from above, head on. If I had any hope of a positive ID, it was with the head-on one. I took it in my hands and studied it. The man in the photo had very sparse, thinning hair, which I didn't remember. He was also very yellow in color, which I didn't remember either. But that could have been the flash. The features were average. There was nothing to go on. Nothing rang a bell.

I had probably spent a total of 10 minutes with John in my life. In that time, his spirit was what one noticed.

"I can't do it." I told the woman. "I don't know what to do. I can't leave him unidentified."

"We'll get the body ready." She told me. "Go have lunch, and by the time you come back it will be ready."

When I came back from lunch, the woman led me down a hall. We stopped in front of a large window with the shade drawn. "You will view the body from behind this glass," She said. "Let me know when you are ready. And take all the time you need."

I told her I was ready. She pressed a button, and the shade slowly lifted. Behind the glass, there was a body laid out on a steel table, covered with a white sheet except for the head. It was the same head I had seen in the photo. Light skin, thinning hair, average features. I needed to look at the eyes, but they were closed to this world forever. Everything I needed was behind those taut, wax-like lids. I shifted gears. Instead of focusing hard with my eyes, I softened my focus, and tried to feel something. I waited to feel something. I felt nothing. The woman stood

patiently beside me. I waited some more. Nothing came. I had no connection to this body.

“It’s him.” I said. The woman lowered the shade, and we walked back out to the reception area, where I signed the paperwork.

Mari Georgeson, who is a Chicago native, lives in New York City where she is currently working as a Public Health Educator. She strongly believes the relationship between patient and provider can be one of healing for both parties. Georgeson also writes fiction, and likes to spend her free time salsa dancing, or shushing down the highest mountain she can find.
