

Man in the Hall

Adaira Chou, MD, MEd*

*Corresponding Author. E-mail: adaira.chou@gmail.com, Twitter: @AllAroundDoc.

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Just past the revolving door and to the right of the atrium there's movement under bright lights. The space ripples with a cadence of motion, to the beat of sirens and chatter. There is no calm or peace—this is the emergency department, and in the corner pocket of a hallway a patient with aged chestnut skin sits on a bed. His sleeve hangs onto the curve of his shoulders while his hat covers coiled hair and rests low against his brow. He slides his leather shoes off his feet as the sound of his hands rubbing together bounces off the walls. I see him.

I see the wrinkles woven in around the folds of his face. I see how he has been worn down as a black man. The static in his eyes lets me know he has not lived a charmed life. Our exchange begins as we cover mundane topics: the weather or traffic, conversational destinations we are all comfortable visiting. He comes again, and even more after that, appearing to have lost against whatever dragon he's trying to slay.

The years roll on as his face grows vacant and covered with a beard now gray. He'd have nearly evaporated if it weren't for his skin and bones. Once, among the noise that paced around us, I asked him why his eyes point to the ground and his shoulders curl into a ball. I wanted to know why he hid his confidence and where we could take the conversation to find it.

"What is it that you hide from?" I asked.

Against the ambience his faded voice replied, "I hate myself sometimes. And when it's not sometimes, it's all the time. Every once in a while I get started on life, just to realize I'm a few steps behind from where I last left off." He was born with soiled dreams and gave up on his potential before he ever saw how big it could get. He hid from the world. He hid like the moon in the clouds, peeking through for moments, just so a viewer knew its radiance still existed in the silence.

I believe he wanted to be more than he was but never had outstretched hands around him to pull him there. I wanted him to tell me who he was and, if not that, who he always wanted to be. The most rewarding part of my job is being a collector of stories. I warned him of the dangers of valuing his

broken outcome more than his dynamic journey. "You might just miss something if you are afraid to look," I said. I wish he knew that there is wealth in personal stories, especially those soaked in love, loss, or luck.

Life's greatest currency is a delicate story full of simple details. Sweet slices of being, like the feeling of warm water trailing over tired hands or watching soft wind as it flirts with a flower—void of any sparkle, they offer just genuine content. These simple moments are ingredients for our intimate stories, marked by the distinct fingerprint of words we use. As listeners sit on the edge of worn chairs and scrape the back of their knees, they wait as the next word heard kisses their ear. They idolize the storyteller who uses a tongue as an instrument with no regret. Where time is punctuated with a pause and the audience reclines, hears the peaks and valleys in others' lives, and thinks *I know that feeling, I've been there before*.

When I told him I felt the weight of his life, his words came out and met mine by saying, "How does a doctor understand struggle?" He took his time on that answer, too, dragging each word out of his mouth with caution. Oh, how a soft breath in a sentence can change its meaning.

My heart cradled his not because of his hidden failures, but because he didn't realize the truth of who doctors are, or even who we used to be. And I suppose that was the root of my disconnect with him all these years. I thought it a shame that he didn't know that sometimes we doctors leave our confidence at home and bring in nervousness, uncertainty, and regret instead. We, too, have been toughened by our own stories. We are just humans revered for being humane. Our greatest skill isn't memorization or regurgitation. It's the ability to understand vulnerability.

I met his sister once—the day he died, actually. She arrived, tall, slender, with a puff of curly hair the color of smoke and fog. Right there in the center of the room she stood still, with grace and sentimentality in her posture. She snuck out his nickname, "Blue," just moments too late for him to hear. My eye caught her holding his hand, though, and it almost looked like he was holding hers back. But he had passed already, with his life story tucked away behind his closed lips.

"I didn't know he had family. I didn't know anything about him," I told her.

She showed me a folded-up picture. There he was, younger, in an old classroom decorated with rusted windows and stained walls. In it, I could see a place where he once sat with his feet crossed and settled on the chair in front of his. He was barely hanging on to his teenage years when he caught himself daydreaming with his eyes closed. He looked like he was social enough to get invited to parties, athletic enough to play varsity, and confident enough to catch the eye of a woman.

She told me his fundamental years were spent trailing Los Angeles, speaking sass as he enjoyed the flavors of life. He played through the trees and sat his tired back against their trunks. He developed a warm kinship with his mother and sisters. They were the heroes who filled his eyes. It was a colorful narrative, where the details unraveled like tossed yarn.

"And when did his life turn?" I asked.

She kept that picture of him as a memory of what he once was like. Happy and filled to the brim. A few days after that photo was taken he was in an accident that caused him to have a hard time focusing on words written or even words heard. His grades dropped because of it and he decided college wasn't likely, so he picked up a low wage job right out of school. He took up drinking to smooth the crinkles in his life. Each drink put him closer to being single and homeless. And over time, that's what he ended up being.

His sister got him into private therapy, just once. She told me it was one of the last warm memories she had of them together.

She took him to a place where tender footsteps go unheard and voices are softened to a breezy whisper. In a faintly marked building, through a door often locked, and past the carpeted hallway, a woman awaited with her lips parted to smile. Visitors, guests, patients, those in

need—whatever name you ascribe—arrived. Each carried a demon they weren't too fond of. While the dim lights serenaded their eyes as the overhead jazz held their hearts, the therapist collected each story they shared and offered a path to safety and health. She said *welcome*. Many accepted, some declined, and yet always through her fervor, she continued.

She sounded phenomenal.

"That therapist was the first person who got my brother to talk. And she was the last as well. He just never trusted people after her."

He both lived and died alone. We saw what his life looked like here, but no one knew how it appeared when he left. I was curious how his sister knew to come see him at my hospital. He had no contact information and there was no phone in his belongings.

She told me when you look for someone, the first place to go is their home. And that bed at the end of the hallway was home. Even though we never really knew him, we never treated him like a stranger. And for that, she was thankful.

There are some patients we never forget. Where ownership of the events that occur before our eyes becomes murky. Part of their journey becomes part of ours. Throughout my mistakes and even failures, I look for these gems in the weeds. The stories that remind me that the value in my job is not the tangible tasks, but the visual and audible delights I get when I enter a room. So that when I see a patient, like Blue, my lips part to smile. Because now there is more to me. And because of that, at the close of my days I sit. I write. And I look at an old family photo that reminds me of my past.

Author affiliations: From the Department of Emergency Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, MA.

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