REFLECTIONS

2005 Creative Writing Contest Honorable Mention

A BAG OF HUMILITY

Dr. Bender parked next to the weathered mailbox. As he climbed out of his car, he saw Jack standing in his garage, looking lost amidst years of accumulated boots and sleds and rusted bikes. They greeted each other with a firm handshake and Jack started in about how he needed new shelves to organize the clutter. "Sorry it's such a mess. I meant to pick up before you came, but Hannah needed some company this morning." In his normal manner, Jack continued to talk about his garden and all of his new projects and some of his old ones too, chatting away as if he hadn't seen Bender in years.

At the back of the garage, Bender and Jack passed through wooden door and into a dark hallway. "Don't worry about your shoes. You can go back and visit with Hannah and I'll get some refreshments together. How about some vegetables from the garden?" Jack disappeared into the kitchen. Still in the hallway, Bender noticed that the worn pathways in the shag carpet revealed their favorite rooms: the family den off to the left, its walls lined with trinkets and pictures, with a bunny-eared television sitting in the corner; the tiny kitchen off to the right where Jack stood, the table filled with Monday-Sunday pill boxes and old stacked mail; and finally, the bedroom, their once quiet retreat, now the center of their world. It was in this room that Hannah sat upright in a recliner next to their bed, her head slumped against her shoulder.

Bender had known Jack and Hannah for close to ten years, since he had begun practicing in the area. In that time, word had spread through their family and Bender now took care of their three sons, a handful of their grandchildren, and a number of their relatives. He knew their family well and he knew that Hannah stood at the center of their world. Her son had confided in Bender several days earlier at the office, devastated that his mother wasn't doing well, but Bender hadn't realized just how much Hannah had deteriorated.

Two months ago, he had seen Jack and Hannah in the office for one of their usual visits. Hannah sounded hoarse at the time and Bender had ordered a chest x-ray. Two days later he called them back into the office to let them know that the x-ray had revealed a large lung tumor. She had taken the news with surprising resolve, biting her lower lip, almost as if expecting those words coming from Bender's mouth. Jack had sat stunned and silent beside Hannah. Bender remembered how at the time Jack had taken Hannah's hand and ever so slightly rubbed his thumb across the back of it.

Jack's voice brought him back to the room. He had finished in the kitchen and as he hobbled into their bedroom, he set down a plate of sliced cucumbers and peppers. Jack rattled on about his latest hobby of weaving wicker baskets while he moved behind Hannah, placing his hands on her shoulders. Bender entered their haven and knelt in front of Hannah on the raggedy carpet. As he opened his crisp black bag, he felt an overwhelming sadness envelop him. The strong woman sat wilted in her chair with a painfully empty stare.

He barely heard her heartbeat over his thumping pulse or her respirations over his anxious breaths. It made no difference. The moment he had entered the room he knew Hannah would die soon. Still, Bender continued to examine her, clutching to his routine for fear of losing himself to the heavy sorrow he felt. He pressed his hands against her abdomen and felt the fluid in her swollen legs, but he could only think of Jack sitting alone at the kitchen table without anyone to listen to his ideas.

While Bender finished his exam, he noticed the way Jack's right hand rubbed Hannah's shoulder almost without moving his fingers—that same gentle movement that Bender had watched in his office several months earlier. It was the most tender movement he had ever seen Jack's coarse hand make and somehow Bender immediately knew that Jack understood Hannah didn't have much time. Bender stared, amazed by the transaction that had just taken place. Jack had placed the love of more than fifty years of marriage in a protective touch, as if to shield his wife from the hurtful truth.

Bender began to muster the strength to speak. Before he could, however, Jack motioned toward the kitchen. "Why don't we go eat in the other room. Hannah seems tired." He'd show Bender his latest recipes, too. And then Jack nodded his wrinkled brow toward the hallway, ushering Bender out of the room. By the time they reached the kitchen, Bender still had no words to address Hannah's approaching fate. He made a number of meandering attempts to talk with Jack, but as if anticipating Bender's intentions, Jack shifted the topic of conversation each time Bender began. "Our oldest just got a promotion," or, "Our granddaughter learned to walk."

Although he understood what Jack was trying to do, Bender felt obliged to talk with him before he left. In lieu of absent words, Bender took out his script pad and wrote a prescription for pain medicine. "Here, this will ease her pain during these last few days," he explained. Although Jack's shaky hand accepted the prescription, his words would not betray his intent. He continued to pull out tattered recipes from cardboard containers, handing the most worn ones to Bender. "That's Hannah's favorite—I've got string beans in the garden to make it with."

After the two men had sat and talked about everything except Hannah, Bender rose to leave. "Hold on a moment," Jack said. He had just picked some lettuce from this year's garden and Bender should take some. With his plastic bag of lettuce in one hand and his black physicians bag in the other, Bender followed his shuffling patient down the hallway. After they descended the stairs into the garage, Jack placed his thick hand on Bender's shoulder. "You'll come to the funeral?" Bender nodded his head and a silent sigh of relief escaped from within.

Bender walked back down the driveway while Jack stood in the same place Bender had initially found him. Jack waved goodbye and then disappeared into the house as Bender drove away. The little bag of crisp lettuce sat on the passenger seat, and he remarked on the humility of the gift. It was simple and human, much like he had felt today in his patients' home. At that moment, Bender knew that his black bag would soon show the wear and tear of use. Once a month, ten times a month, whatever it would take to break in the crisp leather. That was the reason, after all, why he had entered this profession.

JAMES A. FEINSTEIN
Philadelphia, PA, USA
FeinsteJ@mail.med.upenn.edu

—FROM FINAL JUDGE JACK COULEHAN—

"*A Bag of Humility*" carries us backward (or maybe forward) to a world in which doctors make house calls. In this world doctors enter into their patients' stories, but they find it just as difficult to put the truth into words as the rest of us do. "*A Bag of Humility*" shows that support and compassion, and even truth itself, lie more in the unspoken action, than they do in a thousand words.