REFLECTIONS

Todos Los Dias

"Ask her if she has regular headaches," continued Jodie, a first-year resident.

"¿Te duele la cabeza regularmente?" I asked the young Mexican girl sitting on the exam table.

"Sí, todos los días," the girl replied.

"Every day," I translated while wiping a bead of sweat from the side of my face. It's too damn stuffy in here.

"Especialmente cuando hay mucho sol," added the girl.

"She says it bothers her more when there's bright sunlight," I told Jodie. I hoped I had translated correctly. I wasn't fluent in Spanish and was having an especially hard time concentrating due to the noises coming from the "exam room" right next to us. The only thing that separated us was a thin curtain hung haphazardly from the ceiling. I looked over at Jodie. She was jotting down some notes in her little notepad and seemed to be puzzling something over in her mind. My thoughts began to wander. Mission trip. El Hongo (mushroom). SIMS. Early morning fog. Old van careening over winding roads. New faces. I could picture them all . . . too many new names. The border. Mexico. Transition to third world in less than 5 minutes. Bumpy roads. Potholes. Sore butts. Desert. Shacks. Policia check points. The mushroom-shaped rock. Turn left. Turn right. Right-left-left-right. I was lost. There's the church. Dilapidated motor home. "Let's go pass out fliers." "Clinica mañana" (clinic tomorrow). Group of men leaning against the fence. "Clinica mañana." "Gracias." Middle-aged mother sweeping her front porch. "Clinica mañana." "Gracias." Beans and rice for lunch. "Gracias?" Spaghetti for supper. "Real food!" Toss and turn all night. "It's frickin' cold in here!" Wake up early. "Why am . . .

"James?" Jodie brought me back to the exam room.

"Yeah?" I tried to focus back on the job at hand.

"Why don't you take her out and check her vision. That's the only thing I can think of to do at this point."

"Alright," I replied to Jodie then turned to the Mexican girl, "Ven conmigo."

I took her outside—right outside the curtain—and told her to cover her left eye. The eye chart was on the wall to the left of the last "exam room."

"Tell me what's the lowest line you can read." At least that's what I hoped I said. Sometimes I wasn't sure if what I meant to say was coming out right in my broken Spanish. I was getting tired.

"What's the problem with my daughter?" A heavyset woman with black hair pulled back tightly from her forehead spoke up. What's the Mom doing back here? She should be in the waiting room. Then I quickly realized she was in the "waiting room"—which just happened to be about 5 feet from the exam room.

"We're not sure exactly. I'm just checking her vision." I turned back to the girl. "Is that your mom?"

She nodded her head and I continued. "OK, cover your right eye and read as far down as you can."

I poked my head back into the exam room. "Hey, Jodie, her vision is OK, about 20/40. What should I do now?"

"Well, I don't know. As far as I could tell from examining her there was no neurologic damage in spite of her accident. I don't think we can do much more in this situation." Jodie shrugged and turned back to her next patient.

I closed the flap to the exam room and stood there for a second staring blankly at the blue fabric that served as the exam room door. I felt ready to cry and didn't really know why. What am I doing here? We aren't doing any good at all for these people. Everything's too rushed, too primitive. What was I expecting to do in one day anyway? I should've stayed back home and studied. I took a deep breath and turned around. There was the mom.

"Could you check my other daughter's vision, too?" I looked down at the small girl. She had a pudgy face and long, wavy black hair. She was maybe 7 or 8 years old. Looking down at her I saw a look of innocence and trust on her face.

"Sure, why not?" I answered the mom and then knelt down to the level of the little girl.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Victoria." Her voice was low and quiet.

"OK, Victoria, we're going to check your vision. What I need you to do is cover your left eye—no, this one here—and look over at that chart on the wall over there. Start at the top and tell me how far down you can read."

"I can't really see anything." She sounded anxious.

"That's OK," I reassured. "Can you see any letters?"

"Hija, can you see anything?" Mom interjected wanting to make sure Victoria understood me.

"Si, I can see the big E on top," said Victoria.

"Can you read anything else?" I probed.

"No, nada."

"OK, now let's cover your other eye and look." I helped her to make sure she wasn't peeking between her fingers. Her vision was about the same in both eyes—terrible.

"Hey, where's that box of glasses?" I yelled in English over to some of the other students who were taking blood pressures.

"Right over there!" one yelled back pointing under a table.

Our eye doctor tools consisted of a box of old glasses donated by people back in the U.S. My job now was to try and find a pair that would fit little Victoria's needs. I grabbed the box, brought it over, and set it down by Victoria. Looking into an endless mixture of lenses and frames I despaired. Where do I even start?

I reached for the first pair and placed them over Victoria's eyes.

"Do you see better or worse?" I asked her, switching back to Spanish.

"Ohhh, I don't see anything!" Victoria grimaced, puckering her face up like a prune. I quickly took the glasses off and set them to the side.

"How about these?" I placed a pair of grandma-looking "cat's eye" glasses on the poor little girl.

"Better," she answered.

"OK, so how far down can you read?" I inquired.

She could only read down to the second line. Not good enough. I set those glasses aside as well. So we continued through pair after pair: some better, some worse; some antiquated, some stylish; some tiny, some huge; all different sizes and shapes. Finally, we got it narrowed down to a few pairs that improved her overall vision to 20/50. Then, we narrowed it down further by checking each eye separately until we had it down to two that were about equal.

"OK, Victoria, which one do you like better?" I held up the two pairs, neither one very stylish.

"I think I like these," said Victoria as she reached for a large, pink-rimmed pair. I put them on her and couldn't help but smile; they made her already big, brown eyes look even bigger.

"I can see! I can see!" Victoria ran around looking at everything and showing everyone her new-found treasures. Whether they could understand her language or not, everyone seemed to straighten up a little more and smile a little bigger as they saw the simple joy of a child who had just discovered a new world.

I stooped down to pick up the discarded glasses lying all over the floor. Suddenly, I wasn't tired at all. I felt a cool breeze blow in through the open door and something moist running down my cheek. Chuckling to myself I reached up and wiped away the tear. Thanks, my little Victoria, thanks . . .

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