HONORABLE MENTION

Birdman and the Laying on of Hands

Grey Jones was the first patient I referred to as mine. I had been averse to claiming possession of patients and had always been uninhibited and vocal in stating these views to colleagues. "It seems to me," I would expound, "that if you refer to a person, an ill person who has found himself in need of medical assistance, as *your* patient, it feeds the inherent sense of power that we physicians must battle to avoid. Patients become like helpless children, at your mercy." These colleagues to whom I was speaking were, in fact, my peers—classmates, actually. I was a medical student and those were my preclinical years.

My change of view didn't happen right away. The first clinical rotation I had was Surgery. My days consisted of retracting in the OR and writing notes on the floors—admission notes, preops, follow-ups. The senior resident declared that my notes were too lengthy. "Too much information. Tell me this: Does he have a fever? Has he passed gas? What are his meds? How is the wound? That's all I want to know." Certainly it was not a context conducive to feeling any sense of ownership over patients. A student is lower on the steel-reinforced surgical totem pole than a patient is. No, these patients weren't mine—not in the patients' minds, not in the residents' minds, and certainly not in my mind.

Six weeks later I started Medicine. The night before the rotation began, I had devised a new system for what I would carry in which pocket of my coat—like the beginning of a school year when deciding whether to use spiral or loose-leaf, highlight or underline. I had placed pocket references in my lower right pocket, instruments in my lower left one, my note pad and pens and penlight in my breast pocket, and I had sewn in an inside pocket because I hadn't enough room to carry the quick-look dosage book and the pocket guide to physical exams. My goal was to be totally equipped and prepared and to impress anyone I encountered.

As was traditional, the first morning rounds were done with the outgoing team. We were rounding at the bedside and so far had met the GI bleeder who had been transferred from the unit that morning, the diabetic with a leg ulcer, and the Sickler admitted for a pain crisis. En masse, a sea of white coats, we trudged into the next room. I recognized that face—but, from where? Patients are made so anonymous, their individuality camouflaged within the worn and tired hospital gowns. Interestingly this is often true in reverse as well: persons known first as patients, when later greeting me on the street or in a movie theatre or at a party, often draw a blank in my mind—until they mention their condition. What a sorry statement that is, when I feel my mind say, "Ah yes, Mr. Rosa, the hypertensive with gout," or "That red nose, yes, it's Ms. Kraven, the depressed alcoholic." The more medically involved or difficult, the easier my memory is jogged.

But I digress. On this day of which I speak, I was a medical student, desperately trying to impress all around me—the residents, my fellow students, and most of all the attending physicians. I knew that if I had an edge, a patient I knew perhaps, it may well help me to achieve my aim. As the resident began the brief patient history, I remembered from where I knew this man: it was Birdman.

"Grey Jones is a 44-year-old man with no significant medical history who was in his usual state of health until 2 weeks prior to admission when he developed a cough productive of yellow sputum, pleuritic chest pain, and a fever. On admission his temp was 102.3, he had pulmonary rales, and his CXR showed an infiltrative process in his lower lobes. We have obtained sputum samples and are currently treating him with IV cefoxitin."

Anyone who frequents Riverside Park in the morning hours knows Birdman. People point you in his direction if you refer to him as that: it is the obvious name for a man who has pigeons on his lap, shoulders, head. He is unusually gregarious for one so involved with animals. The bench he chooses to sit on—the one facing the basketball court with the dog run on the left and the playground on the right—is at a busy crossroads in the park, ensuring the passage of numerous coffee-cup-toting walkers, stroller pushers, joggers, dogs on leashes, all of whom wave to, smile at, and greet Birdman. He is a park regular, but not the crazy type. He reads his *New York Times*, folded in quarters, while pigeons roost on and around him. He often has someone sitting beside him, most often a park newcomer, who learns of the pigeon pecking order and which are boyfriend and girlfriend and whose leg has been damaged from a string tied to it and why to never feed a bird stale bread (they learn to distrust you). Once, a year or so before, I had been that newcomer.

"Do the birds have names?" I asked.

"Heavens, no. These are wild animals. They don't have names," he stated, abruptly.

Around his neck hangs a small blue leather purse. In it he keeps the peanuts, broken into delectable morsels, perfect-sized pigeon pieces. On his left shoulder, the mysterious number one roost for the number one bird in the pecking order established by the pigeons, he has attached leather straps—four of them—that presumably simulate a tree branch, or perhaps are simply to prevent Birdman's own clothes from becoming shredded. I asked him the purpose once but he deflected my question and instead began an excited discussion about a new white pigeon who had recently joined the group. It occurred to me later that perhaps the straps were a homemade man-made version of feathers, an attempt to signal to the birds that he was more one of them than not.

"I'll take Grey Jones," I said, when the team of doctors had reconvened in the corridor and the senior resident began divvying up the patient load.

The minute I recalled who this patient was I had entertained fantasies about soliciting an exceptional history, the one acknowledged strength of medical students, and then of revealing the diagnosis: something out-of-the-ordinary, the zebra hoof-beat students often hear, perhaps bird handler's pneumonitis, or, what is that pneumonia caused from pigeon droppings? The first medical team had already thought of these and others, had made detailed notes of their theories, and had eloquently and

accurately ruled them out. In fact, he had pneumococcus pneumonia. And so my role distilled down to examining him in morning rounds and writing the daily chart note. I made no decisions, I did no procedures, I came up with no diagnoses. Certainly, I remember thinking, this man is not *my* patient; I successfully reassured myself that my view that patients must never be referred to in the possessive was still worth maintaining.

As is often the case with otherwise healthy patients, Grey Jones was examined by me, the medical student, more than by any other doctor. And since it was one of my first clinical rotations and I was still learning how to use my instruments, I never abbreviated the already inherently abbreviated inpatient daily exam. Instead not only did I listen to his lungs and heart and palpate his abdomen, but on him I learned which way to turn the dial on my ophthalmoscope to bring his optic vessels into focus, I distinguished the malleus from the incus in his ears, I examined the underside of his tongue, I checked all 12 cranial nerves, I probed for occipital and preauricular lymph nodes, I felt for axial, femoral, popliteal pulses, I measured out his organs by percussion, I elicited reflexes on his arms, below his knees, at his ankles, I examined his nail beds, I even checked for scoliosis. And I did all of this every day and whatever other things I thought of as I went, never betraying my sense of total control and composure and conviction that each and every thing I did was of utmost importance.

But naively, my sole motivation was to learn, not to heal in this circumstance. I had resigned myself to the fact that this was not the case that would bring me Honors in Medicine, nor was this the patient I could feel responsible for helping to heal—the drugs and natural course of the disease would do that. Nonetheless, by no means was I trying to trick him. I was simply trying to be the very best doctor I knew how to be given my limited role and even more limited experience.

As expected, Grey Jones gradually improved on the antibiotics and was discharged home on day 8. Three days later I went for a walk in the park. I found Grey sitting in his usual spot. The white pigeon was on his shoulder. As I sat down next to him the pigeons fluttered away onto nearby branches. He had on a pair of furry gloves I had never seen him wear before.

"Grey, don't worry about getting diseases from the birds. The pneumonia you had was completely unrelated."

He turned and looked me right in the eyes, giving me the same look he had held on his face every time I had examined him, a slight bemused smile escaping from the sides of his mouth. I became uncomfortable with his gaze and looked away. I felt the birds' eyes on me too.

"You must be very gentle when handling them for they are out of familiar territory and are very vulnerable to you. I wear the gloves because I find pigeons are then more willing to allow me to hold them." He reached up to his shoulder and gently rubbed the breast of the white pigeon, tucking his gloved fingers under her wing. She leaned forward, shifting her weight into the palm of his hand.

"A few months ago there was a young child who was here watching me feed the pigeons. There was one eating in my hand and the child reached out and grabbed him from the back. I was amazed because instead of flying away the pigeon went limp and fell to the ground and allowed the child to stroke his back before standing and finally flying up to the tree. He must have sensed the child meant no harm and was merely trying to learn."

We sat there in silence for a while. Grey's hands were resting on his lap, the pigeon nestled in between them. He slowly lifted her up near his face until he could see her eyes.

"I would like you to meet Doctor Tennant," he said, addressing the pigeon with a formality I am unaccustomed to hearing.

"Actually I'm not a doctor yet, Grey, still only a student."

The pigeon cocked its head and eyed me suspiciously. I had never been given the once-over by a bird before. Not sure quite how to respond, I bowed my head and gave a slight nod, feeling rather like a bird as I did. Another pigeon landed on his shoulder.

"That's my doctor," he whispered to it, while pointing at me.

I smiled and opened my mouth to protest. There was a furious fluttering of wings and squabbling as five, six, then more pigeons came flying down from the trees surrounding the bench. Grey put a finger to his lips and shushed me. He lifted my arm up until it was horizontal to the ground, a perfect perch, and the white pigeon flew up and landed on my outstretched palm.

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