HEALING ARTS

Materia Medica

Brave Silence

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Susan's eyes searched the floor, her gaze fleeing mine. Finally she lifted it towards the ceiling, to roll tears back, and let out a quick laugh.

"You must think I'm stupid."

I pushed the heaviness into my chest with a long breath. Part of me wanted to say something reassuring, to comfort her and affirm that our conversation had actually helped. Another part of me was unsure it had and wanted to hold the silence instead.

After high school, Susan had moved from her rural hometown to Houston alone, taking night classes at a community college and working as a waitress to cover the costs. Though new to town, she did well in school and got along with her classmates, quickly forming a friendship with a study group of seven or eight people. And though she sometimes missed home, she loved being in a new city. It felt large and unfamiliar, like it was waiting to be discovered.

Much of this satisfied Susan, but it did leave her with a private frustration: one that emerged on bus rides home, when she wished she could afford a car, new clothes, and a better apartment; one that surfaced after she lied about her weekend plans so her classmates wouldn't see her wearing the same outfits or know she couldn't afford to eat out; one that she fought each time she completed another financial aid form. As time went on, the life she had envisioned began fading—its possibilities still unexplored, its promise dulled. Her frustration hardened into embarrassment, and then anger. It lingered over her, like a cloud, until she couldn't tell if she was angry at her situation, or angry that she felt so embarrassed.

But that was all before Jason. Before a friend from the study group introduced her to the older, thirty-two year old man who quickly became the most gracious friend she'd ever had—one who took her out to dinner, paid for her clothes, and let her use his car. Before their friendship gradually became physical and Susan realized that that was what Jason wanted in return for his graciousness. Before she struggled to decide how she felt

about it. And before she stopped resisting his pressure and let go.

I sat with Susan for the next half hour, listening to the rest of her story. She told me about how she had given her virginity to Jason without thinking that she should've asked him to use protection. She recalled the first time she suspected that he had other 'friends,' and how afraid she was to ask, afraid of what might change if she did. She shared how she suppressed the urge for months, focusing instead on the good things Jason had given her. She recounted the day she finally addressed the issue—how she fumbled with the words, how quickly the conversation seemed to move, and how Jason became so angry that he ended their friendship immediately. She shared quiet thoughts from the weeks that followed, when she wondered if it would better go back even if he was being unfaithful, so at least she wouldn't have to be alone. She admitted how pathetic she felt for even considering it, but how even then she never imagined she would end up in the hospital a few months later with nausea and chills, across from me, being told she had HIV.

I pushed the heaviness from my throat, and we sat in thick silence. I put away the educational materials I'd planned on giving her and decided not to discuss prognosis and management, though I knew both were important. Part of me wanted so badly to say something and offer my knowledge, but I sensed in Susan's roaming gaze that the last thing she needed was more words. And sitting across from her, I realized that I didn't know. I didn't know exactly what to say. I didn't know how turbulently the thoughts seemed to swirl within her, drawing short, staccato breaths from her chest. And I didn't know what to make of the unsettling feeling rising within my own, that almost nothing I learned in classrooms had prepared me for this moment and what it was demanding of me. For the first two years of medical school, I combed textbooks and memorized information that could later bring my patients healing. But with Susan, I had wandered for the first time into an unfamiliar space: one that demanded comfort without cure or even the promise of comfort; one where my facts felt too thin and sterile to help.

The moment felt light and suffocating, like I had stumbled upon the edge of a profound secret. My patients would invariably need my growing clinical acumen and skills. But in the difficult space between medicine's achievements and limitations, they would need more than that. There, they would need me to know when to lay aside knowledge and stand quietly with them in crisis, my humanity pressed closely against theirs, protecting that space from the fear looming within words. So as the urge to speak leapt up again—concrete, promising to dispel the tension—I pinned it tightly against my throat. I still didn't know the best way forward with Susan, and the silence filled me with an intense feeling of vulnerability. But sitting with her in that moment, I felt with an almost unexplainable measure of confidence that what she needed, and what I needed, was to sit quietly.

After a long while, I finally placed my hand on her shoulder and cleared my throat.

"No, I don't," I managed finally, shaking my head slowly.

She glanced up with an almost perplexed look. "I'm sorry?"

"I don't think you're stupid," I said, lowering my gaze into hers. I swallowed hard, hoping she could

sense how much I meant it. "I think you're extremely brave."

For a few seconds, Susan's expression seemed nearer to surprise than relief, and as a pulse of heat spread down my neck, I feared that I had betrayed the moment. But Susan sat without speaking, looking into my eyes carefully as if studying the intent behind them, weighing its integrity. Her gaze felt penetrating and unapologetic. I fought the intense impulse to look away and escape the uneasiness building within my chest. Instead, I leaned into it and let her eyes scan mine, darting around quickly at first, then slowing gradually before finally resting in her lap.

And for a little while longer, we gripped the silence together—two people standing in a foreign moment, neither sure how to best proceed, but both determined to try. Eventually, her breathing settled into a soft cadence, and I thought I saw a grin form at the edge of her lips. I glanced up at the ceiling, smiling through a deliberate breath.

The space between us felt vast and sacred.

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