HEALING ARTS

Materia Medica

The Spirit and the Dust

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September, 1999

It didn't take much back then—just a splash of coconut rum in a glass of Mountain Dew. But that night I got drunk.

He was the first freshly dead person I'd ever seen, and I never wanted to see another. His back was blistered from the hoe's blunt force, he was naked in a room lined with strangers, and he was caged in a cone from a glaring overhead lamp. The scene was ghastly, a Lautrec from the Moulin Rouge.

The code hadn't gone well. His ribs had cracked, his intubation had failed, and his bullae (his back *was* a bulla) had ruptured. My resident had told me to draw femoral blood, and when I'd missed, she'd barked, "KEEP DIGGING!"

I hoped that man was "dead on arrival," unaware of his horrid departure.

July, 2001

A typical VA hallway—windowless, greasy, and poorly lit by a flickering fluorescent strip. I've been asked to pronounce this vet dead, but as I approach his room, my legs grow weak. I feel like I may pass out, and have never been so scared in my life.

I retreat to the nurses' station, grasping at walls for support, and a kindly aide tells me she'll come along. She practically has to drag me down the corridor, then brace me at the bedside.

The vet has this look of death. Not masked, like on made-up corpses in funeral homes, but horrible and raw. Milky eyes, dentures crooked in his slack mouth, his neck extended at an impossible angle—just dangling off his plastic pillow. He's a terrifying sight.

My exam is cursory, as I can just force myself to listen for a heartbeat and give a sternal rub. I flee to the chart room to write my death note.

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February, 2006

Alice, she's actively dying. That tumor has spread everywhere. She can barely tolerate a car ride, let alone an ambulance to Connecticut.

But Hirsch says he can do something, Doctor Mike. He says there's hope.

You know that's not true, Alice, and Hirsch does, as well. Do you want her to spend her last days hunched over the porcelain, or surrounded at home by people she loves?

You don't understand, Dr. Mike. But you're barely a pup. We're not ready to give in.

But, Alice, you know she's not prepared to...

MIKE!

Alright, then. Call me when you two get home.

April, 2008

Annie finally died today, and it was the strangest thing I've seen.

Her tumor had finally breached. It was in her chest and her bones and her brain. She could barely stay awake. But she would not admit defeat. I think that's how she saw it, anyway. Even yesterday she'd wake up, demand a second opinion, and fall back asleep. We weren't doing a thing for her.

We finally called palliative care, and within half an hour they had Annie agreeing to go home. Not for "hospice," mind, but to "aggressively treat her symptoms." And just minutes after they left, she looked each sister in the eye, drew a final defiant breath, and was gone. This stubborn frightened warrior.

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Annie finally died, never having to admit she was dying.

August, 2009

Dear Andy,

I was moved to tears by that story you told. How, as your patient lay dying—having made clear his desire not to be resuscitated—and his wife was begging you to save his life, you found yourself bewildered.

What do I want to tell you, Young Blood? That you “done good?” That you were brave and right-hearted in respecting your patient’s desires? That you’re a wonderful doctor who does your family and patients proud? You know all that.

No, Andy, I want to tell you that the pain you witnessed ought to make us more empathetic. Some of us avoid it, some guard themselves against it, and others, like you, absorb it and allow it to bolster their humanity.

And I’m deeply proud of you.

—Mike

July, 2010

I hadn’t felt so exposed in years. Laid out and flayed open.

I was in Jackie’s hospital room, with this herd of kids and grandkids (who knew how fecund?) spilling into the hallway, having just told him the effusion was malignant and that he’d only live another week or two. And I just burst—coughing, draining, and spluttering. tears, mucus, and spittle. Each droplet a vessel for my grief. I loved that man.

But Jackie did something extraordinary. Something remarkable even from a man who’d spent his life leading others.

“Mike,” he offered (no hint of fear—did he already know?), “you did everything you could. I’ve had a good life. I’ll be fine.”

Then he sat up in bed, wrapped me in his bruised leathery arms, and whispered, “Send me home.”

March, 2011

I’m always struck by the survivors, Elzo. The women, in particular. How they fight for their men, and wrap themselves around them like cocoons.

I took care of a man and his wife, and they didn’t particularly get along. She’d once told me he’d beat her early in their marriage, and you just don’t get past that. But when his cancer came back, she’d barely let me get him on the phone. She filtered *everything*. Like I was the Grim Reaper, and she was trying to ward me off.

Even as he was losing weight and shrinking to a husk, she’d refused to call hospice. Elzo, she once called my office demanding that I schedule him for a screening colonoscopy, and this was two months before he died.

But when he did die—and that happened quite suddenly—she was fine. Not stoic, mind you, but truly fine. All the crazy defensive desperation of the preceding months gone. As if she’d finished a task, then returned to the work of being herself.

December, 2012

If I ever had stage four, Stevie, I’d just drop off the screen. No chemotherapy, no consultations, and certainly no more work. Just an ayahuasca root, some medical marijuana, and a case of bodacious red wine. And that would be that.

But if there were even a chance, Mike? Just five or ten percent?

Not worth it, Cutie. I’ve seen enough to know. From my lips to your ears: if things get ugly, call Old Town Liquors and place that order.

July, 2013

I’d always thought that Ed would be the one to teach me how to die. How to die *properly*, that is. Probably because he’d taught me how to live.

He was so gracious in life. So damned easy and agreeable. And he’d always predicted that once he felt ill enough, he’d stop dialysis and say his goodbyes without regret. But the lymphoma changed everything.

It’s a terrible thing to see one’s hero scared, partly because fear is oppressive, and partly because his fear makes one doubt one’s own fearlessness. If this man—this centered, gentle man—grasps at his half-life (he always felt so tired and ill!) like a drowning man clambering for the water’s surface, how will I face my own death?

There’s no telling, of course. None of us can tell. But I hope I won’t die ugly or alone or desperate. We physicians

see too much of that. And that my loved ones will keep perspective. That I'll neither give up needlessly nor fight too long, and that someone may become more human for having helped see me off.

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