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ROOM 13

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ROOM 13

Cover Page Footnote

The story is based on reality however any names and locations have been changed in order to protect the privacy of subjects involved. I acknowledge the help of Juliet Patterson for helping with my story.

ROOM 13

I tend to forget names, I try to recall their names a few months after they die and I can't. I retain a lot of other things. I wonder if it isn't a trick my brain has come up with to leave them alone, to let them hide in their own special place and stay there protected from the damage that memory tends to do the dead. I do always remember where I saw them last. I know that physicians and health care providers are not as detached as they want to be, or as the world portrays them to be. I am one of them is how I know. I think the secret to the deceiving façade is that most of us don't know how to show grief let alone realize when we are grieving. We all took an oath, a modern version of the Hippocratic oath right before we graduated, we swore to do no harm, to serve and so on and so forth but nobody mentioned loss and the heartache that follows. What were we all supposed to do with it; it showed up in our lives quite a bit.

She used to smile and grunt. Her mother would interpret her squeaks and teeth grinding mixed with throaty vocalizations.

"She likes that!" Her mom would say and point to the otoscope

"It's what I use to check your ears, you like that huh!" I would say, intrigued that any child would let me examine her with a smile. She smiled most of the time when we interacted. She seemed to like human contact. She had little hazel eyes on an oval pale face that was always tilted to one side, her right.

ROOM 13

Her hair would be parted to the left, fine and blond. It fell to her shoulders. I could see the marks of a fine comb and water with some styling gel her mother used. She had a Hannah Montana back pack, attached to the wheel chair, pink and purple. The pop singer was smiling wide with her arms stretched jumping in a shimmery glitter background. My patient often had some pink or purple on, a sweater, pants or a scarf with a variant of those colors. I assumed those were her mother's favorites. The little girl had lost her words and most of her developmental skills to the grips of Cerebral Palsy that her mother referred to as CP "CP caused this! CP caused that!" Like a legendary monster, it was gone but the damage was done and it did her good to tell us who did it, as if we would forget. According to the mother "It" got her shortly after she was born and claimed most of her brain. I never figured out how or why exactly this developed, how much was done to halt it. I had come to terms like her mother that this was her state and dealt with the consequences.

"She wants to go back to school, she is missing history class" mom would say.

"They teach them history? Seriously!" I remember asking caught off guard.

"Oh yes! She is in fourth grade. Mrs. Brown is teaching them about the Great Depression you know? We did an online search about Kansas in the Great Depression! Didn't we! That was our assignment!" The mother said.

A series of throaty squeals followed. They did after most questions asked on good days.

It took all I had to put my facial expression back together from "Are you kidding me" to an agreeing smile. My patient was a profoundly delayed nine years old, in Special Ed. She was non-verbal, did not communicate back about her world in any form. I couldn't imagine the

ROOM 13

purpose of teaching her about the Great Depression but couldn't help internally wonder if it reflected how Mrs. Brown felt. I would be profoundly depressed caring for a classroom of non-verbal pupils but that was me.

The mother seemed very pleased with the curriculum and impatient to get her daughter back to school anytime she came to see me in clinic. Her optimism fit the dictionary description of heroic; it must have been what kept her going. She turned caring for her disabled daughter into a hobby, a passion and a show for whoever cared to stop and listen to the latest and greatest in the world of Cerebral Palsy. Most of the times that she came to visit us in clinic I was busy, too preoccupied to stay on schedule to visit with her about their next vacation or their last field trip.

"We got her this fantastic laptop and she watches her favorite shows on the road, she can also use it to color, etc." Mom would say.

"Very good!" or some generic overinflated answer would usually be my reply.

Her condition of spasticity that accompanied her since birth had caused her to have tightened muscles and shortened ligaments She was folded like an old metal chair that had the bad fortune to be thrown into a tornado while waiting on the front porch one day. Over the course of the two years that I cared for her as a patient she showed up a few times a year for the yearly well child check, immunizations and occasional cold here and there. She managed to stay healthy for the most part.

ROOM 13

I got reminded of her quiet pink and purple existence regularly through diaper prescriptions the nurses asked me to fill out. I did gladly, the State deemed her disabled and in permanent need of diapers but in order to get those paid for a doctor, me in her case had to write the prescriptions and refill them routinely. I was the one writing a clean white paper dispensing them for the little girl who would never be able to grow out of them and whose mother will always have to clean after. I wondered if I could do it, be the parent of a disabled child. Would her laughter come to me like it did to her and could I convince myself of what she seemed so content to believe? A world that she put in front of a broken little girl that came with no return guarantee.

The last time I saw her was a Monday. It makes me sad that I remember the day and the room but not her name. Her mother looked tired and pale, checked out like a stoner but too fidgety to be one. She kept tapping her foot nervously on the floor in a crescendo fashion that culminated with her shifting in her seat and restarting the tapping while looking aimlessly at the room. She kept fidgeting almost to a rhythm through the questions.

“She’s sick today, she doesn’t have a fever here 98.6,” I said in a half question fashion. The nurses leave a little typed note briefing us on what is going on. I had seen her many times with little colds and brief viral illnesses. My physician brain was on autopilot, she didn’t have a fever in our clinic, and this had only been going on one day. I had made up my mind that it wasn’t a serious matter after glancing at my patient from the corner of my eye.

“She had a fever at home,” the mother said.

ROOM 13

“Has she been vomiting, having diarrhea or coughing, does her urine smell different when you change diapers, is she drinking well and wetting diapers” I asked.

She shook her head and looked away from my smiling eyes refusing to hold my gaze. I felt my face deflate like a balloon, I was so used to her helping me make the visit easier, pretend the world was fair. She was refusing to play along today.

I asked the mother to move the girl to the exam table to get a good look at her. I was intimidated by all the straps and buckles that ensured my patient stayed in her seat, I was also afraid of pushing too hard on her delicate thin frame, I didn't even try to get my patient out. I trusted the mother to be more qualified to handle her special child, like she had many times during our encounters. Mother and daughter used to smile to each other during that brief moment from the stroller to the exam table as mom huffed and puffed pretending that her daughter was so big and heavy. Today mom didn't seem in the mood to repeat the familiar show that made my patient smile and me many times in the past. She was somewhere else all together. Her usual grace and fluid moves were sudden and interrupted. She lifted the kid and deposited her like a package on the table.

“There” she gestured with a half open hand that quickly recoiled back to her side as she stood to the side of the room leaning against the sink we use to wash our hands after the exam. This was a place I had never seen her occupy in the room before. She wasn't watching me; she seemed bored, waiting for the visit to be over with.

The girl's hair was pulled back in a ponytail. It felt sticky, didn't seem its usual fine blond self. She was wearing her pajamas or what seemed appropriate to lounge at home with,

ROOM 13

grey pants with a rubber waste and a navy blue loose long sleeve shirt. There was no backpack in sight.

The little girl was very quiet. I examined her, head to toe. Bent stiff folded thin arms and legs, skinny belly, tiny toes, clenched fingers and crooked toes. I looked into her little ears, pried her mouth with a tongue depressor to make sure her pink tonsils weren't infected... I did find a reason for her reported fever. She had a runny nose.

"It looks like a cold, if she gets sicker, if her fever continues beyond mid week or she starts coughing or vomiting we need to see her back," I said with the little girl still on the exam table.

"Ok" mom said.

That day for the first time even though she said it we didn't have "Ok" or the usual illusion of it that we were used to filling out the space with. Up until that day, she had been the one reassuring me that it was "ok" that she pulled the bad card of the broken fragile child. I hadn't practiced reassuring her enough or saying anything that made it better, I wasn't sure where to start.

"What is your teacher teaching you about at school? Tomorrow you should be able to go back!" I said.

Mom looked away, the little girl smiled at the tone of my voice. She reached out her bent spastic wrist and grabbed my hand; I stood there for a moment smiling to her with a couple of my fingers in her little bony hands as we looked into each other's eyes. I saw honey in hers, I wonder what she saw in mine.

ROOM 13

I picked the little girl up alone and gestured to mom to reach out and help me get the stroller closer. The patient was the size of a four year old but I still needed help. Mom looked at me but didn't help. She seemed frozen, almost mean. I struggled with my patient's weight as I took two unsteady steps towards the opposite side of the room. Her little ribs and back bones folded in my arms and I realized for the first time how thin and fragile she was. She smiled to me and tilted her head back as if the ride was a game we were playing for the first time. I almost dumped her on the black leather lined medical chair.

"We made it!" I said with an exaggerated huff to which she smiled even wider and mom picked up her purse.

I adjusted a Dora the explorer fleece blanket on her lap, moved to the side and gestured mom to finish. The buckling business was too complicated for me to do on my own. Mom faced the girl to pull the straps and snap them closed and the girl started to scream.

I stood there facing mother and child and shrieks filling the room. The mom finished and turned away facing the door, her face emotionless like the white walls of the room.

"Why did she do this? She has never done this?" I said

She started to wheel her daughter out of the room without answering my question. I stood there watching the red and white squares on her back struggle with the balance of the wheelchair as she slightly tilted it to get it out of the door. My heart was racing, the screams startled me, I was not expecting them.

"There's a drug rep with samples up front, do you have a minute?" Lindsey said. Her tone was pleading; she liked to have samples in the medication cabinet. I couldn't say no.

ROOM 13

“Sure” I said and walked away from my confusing patient encounter into the rest of my busy clinic afternoon.

The next day I was sitting in the resident room in my brown dress and purple tights. I remember wondering about the color of the tights, whether or not it was the best match for that dress. I was waiting for the residents to get done from their patient work to start our morning didactics. David said they wouldn't be long so I sat by the window and stretched my shoes into the square of sun coming inside. I always wished we could learn outside like grade schoolers did on pretty fall days like this.

My pager went off, I picked it up and sighed as I pushed the little grey and yellow button
“Denise, Pediatric Clinic”

I always feel irritated returning clinic pages, the questions are usually dull and out of context for whatever I am usually doing at that moment. I always wished I didn't have to answer questions about clinic patients when I had moved on to cover hospital patients but we all did.

“The patient from yesterday. The one you saw with the fever, the detective called and she is dead. He will call you later to explain,” Denise said. She sounded matter of factly. I even think she was eating something.

The sun made a little purple diamond of light on my leg. I held it very still there. I heard my breath leave my chest and I saw the back of her head leave room 13.

I remember looking at the phone and the distance to the door, thinking I could run fast to the clinic and open the door to room 13 and get her out, not let her die, my eyes went back to the shape of light, it had slightly moved down, it had gotten longer almost touching my

ROOM 13

ankle. I heard the sound of air go into my lungs and stay there. I was holding my breath. Denise was waiting for me to say something.

“She didn’t have a fever. She’s dead?” I said. I saw myself running again to stop her from leaving, from dying.

“I know. She didn’t look that bad!” Denise said. More chewing sounds followed. My eyes were closed, I saw Denise sitting at her desk wearing her white nursing scrubs, her hair was mostly gray she straightened it and wore a black wide headband.

I wanted to tell her to go to the room down the hall and get her out but that would be insane. I took a deep breath and moved my leg away from the sun on the floor. She was dead. Even if I ran to room 13, she wouldn’t be there, it was too late.

I went to lunch that day, came home and didn’t say anything about my loss. I don’t recall feeling any grief; I did have an urge to run to room 13 to get her out, many times that day and the few ones that followed.

Several days later I got a paging that read “detective Hoskins”. I was in the middle of my afternoon clinic with a slow resident and a cranky nurse practitioner. The best analogy to this situation is that of being in the middle of New York City traffic caught between an empty cab in front of you and a full one behind you. Not good. This was not the day to converse with a detective. I knew what he or she was calling about.

“What did you do Dr H!” giggled the slow resident

“It’s about that girl who died” cranky nurse practitioner said. I just wanted both of them to go do something instead of being there.

ROOM 13

“This might take a minute, you can both get started with the next one,” I said. They both seemed disappointed; this would have been the perfect occasion to waste time.

“I was told you would call. How did she die?” I said to the detective after a quick introduction he did.

“The police was called to the house after a 911 call was placed, the fire department got there first, she was beyond resuscitation. She drowned in the tub,” He said

“She can’t exactly get in the tub. This child has severe palsy, she cannot move, she needs lifted from one place to another”

“Mom was giving her a bath, she said the girl had a seizure and she drowned”

“Why didn’t she get her out of the tub?”

“I don’t exactly know the details. I am calling you because I need to know since you are the provider who has seen this patient the most and we need to rule out any malicious or foul play as a cause of death. That is why we need your help,” he said.

I felt frustration in my throat. I thought about foul play, I doubted from the short conversation we had shared so far that I could help him rule anything in or out. I heard the red tape and non-sense of detective jargon in his voice and words. Besides she was dead. My help was a few days too late.

“Sure, what would those questions be?” I said.

“Can she save herself if she fell head first into water when she had a seizure for example?”

He said.

ROOM 13

“Absolutely not, she didn’t have a seizure disorder that I recall. Not that I ever remember mom talking about anyway” I said

“Very good, very good, thank you for your time, we certainly will call you back if we need any more information. “ He said

“Why did she leave her in the tub?” I said

“I wouldn’t be able to answer you at this point, mom was very upset when the firefighters arrived to the scene” he said

“I am sure she was”

“What will happen now is an autopsy, and a determination of the exact cause of death, the police department will revisit the parent and the home, as I said if we have any more questions we will call you back “ he said.

“Alright”

His voice was kind, he sounded like a good cop. The kind one could talk out of a ticket. Life went on after that with a busy clinic and a busier life. He never called me back. Even though I can’t recall her name, it has been almost two years and I can’t forget her face. I always wonder what else I could have done. Why did her mother bring her to me, there could have been something she was expecting me to fix that day, before she gave up on her little girl ever learning history like a fourth grader should.