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Room 11

Jane-Frances Aruma

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Room 11

Jane-Frances Aruma

It felt like a whole new world on the other side of the exam rooms at this clinic. If I focused hard enough, I could probably smell all the knowledge and possibility emanating from behind the glass partition. It was here that physicians huddled, residents learned, patient care plans were discussed and solidified. I have not had much experience as a patient myself. But being at my small regional medical college offered me the opportunity to see even beyond the direct patient experience from as early as my first year.

It was 2019 or was it 2020 (before the pandemic) and I had often wondered what doctors do between patients. Between leaving one room and entering another, does nothing happen? Do they carry information, emotion and whatever else from the previous patient unto the next? Or is there some ritual, like taking a long, deep breath that represents reset - a cleansing, a re-beginning, just like what I set out to do today.

Undeserving

"What type of medical student doesn't know how to count? I give you five minutes, and that's all you get! Have I made myself clear?"

Those words rang loudly in my ears, boldly threatening the certainty in my stride as I approached Room 11. Just last week, I had been careless enough to overstay my allotted time with a patient, inadvertently setting us a bit behind schedule. My preceptor had made it very clear that he was not pleased at all. Which is why today, my second chance, just had to be different. Today had to be better. Having looked up my patient beforehand, I took time to learn all I could about his disease. I was armed to the teeth with knowledge about direct and indirect pathways, dopamine, and acetylcholine. I was ready as I'd ever be, to identify any item from the list of Parkinson's symptoms I memorized before I went to bed. My right hand on the door handle, I thought, this should be quick. I gave the heavy wooden door a push to open.

Hello Patient N.

Yes, his day was good. Yes, he was just here for a routine checkup. No, he had no specific concerns. Yes, he was tolerating his medication. *Well, great!* I left the room, and delivered a flawless presentation to my attending. All under 5 minutes! *Maybe medicine is for me after all.* I gladly returned with the doctor to see our patient. All was well in the world again.

Room 11 looked different the second time around. The weight that had just lifted off me lent freedom to my eyes to caress the room in a way that they didn't before. They first landed on the smiling face of Viola Davis plastered on the cover of the magazine in the display cabinet. And then, they fell on the adjacent wall where a lone yellow butterfly in flight had been wonderfully captured against a blurry green background, a drop of water on its right wing. The supply cabinet was slightly ajar above where my head had been, where my attending now sat speaking to the patient. Our patient who had Parkinson's, but who also had bright blue eyes and hair that was thinning gracefully. Our patient who had been a successful wrestler in his youth, a man of many stories and a healthy sense of humor. A man whose smile was easy to imagine even though his disease wouldn't let me see it on his face. His face, the face of a man who had lived. Where it had just been my patient and me with a table between, the room had since become dimensional.

And so had Patient N. *Have I really done well today?*

This experience will linger in my mind for weeks to come. I will think about Room 11, the space in which I had been so focused yet so absent. I will consider the positions I occupied in this space - one where I was the almost-doctor, the person with a job to do. And the other, where I was a student, free to learn, to observe, to think. And consequently, I will reflect on what it means to be a physician, a good physician - the type I know I want to be. What makes a good

Jane-Frances Aruma, Penn State College of Medicine, State College, PA

doctor? Is it professionalism or humility? Empathy or competence? I will reflect very carefully, critically. I will reflect through days spent shadowing and nights spent studying; through the multitude of errors I will make during my training; through the plethora of lessons I will learn every day. And eventually, I hope I will settle on the word "balance." My practice, a sweet mix of intelligence and kindness, of efficiency and compassion.

And then also, I will think about patient N. I will imagine the man in youthful exuberance. And will remember him fondly, as the man he is plus Parkinson's. For he has played a part in my story. And I will wait with gratitude, for certainly, there will be more Patient Ns to come.