

For the Old Man Buying a Stuffed Giraffe

By Ben Goldenberg

My career in medicine is always introducing me to new emotional experiences, but nothing will ever make me feel the way I do when I walk into a hospital gift shop. It's like stepping through an interdimensional portal; the frenetic, anxious atmosphere of the hospital gives way to the anodyne hum of small-stakes commerce so seamlessly it's almost jarring. When I enter the gift shop, I'm suddenly in a world where I never have to hear bed alarms or overhead code blue announcements – only the soft rock offerings of 93.9 Lite FM Chicago. Tubes of every Pringles flavor climb the walls like ivy and nobody's talking about vital signs. I can take in a deep, carefree breath of air that smells like greeting cards and tell myself that in this moment there are no major medical decisions to be made; I'm just a guy on a little errand.

Anyway, I'm in the gift shop when I see you. We met briefly last year when you were here with your wife, who at the time was admitted for fever after chemotherapy decimated her white blood cell count. I came to see her as the infectious diseases consultant, and while I don't remember specifics about her case, I remember how thoroughly the room was adorned – get-well cards, flowers, stuffed animals, matching coffee mugs with fading images of Looney Tunes characters, an old souvenir-framed photo of your kids on a roller coaster that doesn't exist anymore. I remember your satisfied smile as you looked at me and my team members admiring all the knickknacks and tchotchkes that you had lovingly arranged just so. We all just stood there for a while, thinking about our own knickknacks and tchotchkes and the people they remind us of. For a moment, you made everyone in that beige-walled hospital room feel like they were somewhere else. Somewhere better.

Now, months later, she's back in the hospital and you're back in the gift shop's stuffed animal section. I see you holding a bear in one hand and a giraffe in the other. You're alternately lifting each of them up and down as high as your arthritis will allow, slowly and deliberately, like a balance scale weighing gold bullion. I can imagine the gears turning in your head as you wonder which one she'll like more. Which one will better complement the others in the cotton-filled menagerie she's accumulated over the last few months? Which one is more likely to make the next chemo treatment a little more palatable?

I try not to think about the possibility that no matter which animal you choose, she might not recognize it, given the way her cognition and alertness have become more sporadic with each cycle. Will she even be awake enough today to notice a new gift, to notice *you*? Maybe not, you think, but you decide on the giraffe and shuffle over to the register because at the end of the day it's a gift and it's from you and that's what matters. This is the hospital gift shop, after all, where hope springs eternal and we can temporarily forget about all the suffering this building was constructed to hold. I catch you picking up a few other items, but I get distracted

by the radio's smooth transition from "Keep on Loving You" into "The Boys of Summer" and before I know it, you're out the door.

Just before the door closes, though, I can see that you're carrying a trio of Mylar balloons, and they're the shiniest Mylar balloons I've ever seen in my life. And maybe I'm still imagining things but as you walk further down the hallway, I swear I can already hear the hiss of air leaking out of them.

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