

The Choice

By Keenan Whitesides

She wasn't even an oncology patient, but she had been moved to the 9th floor because of an overload on general medicine. I don't recall her primary diagnosis, but I knew we had an order to get Ms. B out of bed. She was an elderly woman, at least 80, and she had an air of dignity about her as she sat in her hospital bed. Shrunken in her hospital gown with her hair disheveled from a restless night's sleep, she sat poised and curious as we entered her warm room. I had noted in her chart that she had hearing aids and found it difficult to hear out of her left ear, so I placed myself on her right side. I knelt beside her bed to ask the litany of history questions so commonly rehearsed by any medical professional in the hospital. No, she had not had any falls within the last six months, no she did not have any stairs in her home, yes she lived alone. We had merely begun to delve into the description of her hobbies and general interests when we were interrupted by a sharp rap at the door and a subsequent procession of white coats. "Hi, I'm doctor N and I have students with me and we're here to do our rounds." As the doctor began pushing aside her hospital gown to wedge the cool stethoscope on her concave chest, he fired an array of questions "Last bowel movement?" "Any dizziness?" "Did you have your chest x-rays yet?" As she was clearly overwhelmed with this invasion of privacy, I circumstantially became Ms. B's interpreter—repeating the questions so she could hear them and conveying her muted responses back to the doctor like a translator would mediate a discussion between those that spoke a different language. Ms. B hurried to pull up her slipping gown but fumbled as her frail wrist became entangled in a maze of IV wires. I readjusted her gown and she gave me a grimaced nod of appreciation. "Now the students will listen," dictated the doctor, and instantly Ms. B's small frame was swarmed by a mass of white-coated students grappling to auscultate the sounds of the sick woman's lungs. "Thank you" he barked, and the crowd fell in line behind his hurried steps out of the door. For a moment we sat in the silence of their abrupt departure. "How would you like to get out of bed?" I asked Ms. B quietly, my words echoing in the now quiet room. Ms. B smoothed a few errant strands of silver white hair behind her ear and readjusted her hospital gown. "Do you mean I have a choice?" she asked. Her voice was barely above a whisper and her eyes danced with hope as she searched my face for an answer. I nodded my head and we were suspended for a moment in time, as she savored the luxury of choice, something she had longed for so greatly in her time in the hospital but so rarely received. "Yes," she finally started, "I would like that very much."

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