

The Last Call of the Day

Category: Poems

written by Mark Knudson | May 3, 2019

Mark Knudson ~

Why is it always the last call of the day,
Bag packed by the door, and sometimes I've even put my coat on,
And then I know that I have to make the call.

If I was smart, I'd schedule a visit, have the nurse set up a time
To have the patient drop by after the test is done,
If only I was smart!

But today it is too late for that, Friday night,
And a weekend of intolerable waiting for the patient,
So I make the call at half past 6.

The first ring means too late to hang up, the second ring raises hope that no
one is home,
If I make it to the third ring, I start to rehearse a message,
But with the fourth ring, a soft voice breaks the silence.

The answer is always cancer, it's never the plague, or leprosy, or even a
kidney stone,
Once in a while it's HIV, and one time it was TB,
But cancer is the real answer.

So I share the news, and I wait for the click
Of a dry tongue trying to form a response,
And I say, "I'm sorry, and I will see you Monday,"
And pick up my bag to head home,
Because it is always the last call of the day.

About the poet:

Mark Knudson is on the faculty of the family-medicine residency program at Wake Forest School of Medicine in North Carolina. He divides his time between caring for patients (some of whom have been his patients for thirty years) and teaching residents. In the course of a long career of writing poetry (humorous poems to celebrate staff, residents and faculty, as well as serious poems that reflect his patient care), this is the first piece of poetry that he's had published.

About the poem:

"The blessing and curse of caring for patients over many years is that you develop relationships with people that are complex and important. As a result, life-and-death situations take on greater meaning, bringing you a deeper level of sadness for the problems that patients face and a greater

appreciation for the ability to be a part of their lives. This poem followed the delivery of a cancer diagnosis to a patient I had known for years—someone who had already dealt with more than enough social, medical, family and financial crises.”

Poetry editors:

Johanna Shapiro and Judy Schaefer