

The Pen Guy

Category: Pretending

written by Joel Bradley | October 2, 2018

The resident leading our team was brilliant. He rarely needed help or correction. He developed threads and insights that gave me the rare sensation of delight that comes from seeing a mind at work far above the crowd I am standing in. There was little work to do in supervision.

When he asked me for help with the *Pen Guy*—what his family called him—I paused and then nodded. Perhaps he saw me falter.

I pictured the rounded surface of the pens in the case he kept at his bedside: their grain sanded smooth, him at the edge of his bed, eyes lit, talking of his shop, his tools, the grit of the sandpaper. The seven coats of finish. Internally, I made the summary calculation that once again I had no idea what I was doing. Like his, my sole credential in refracting this man's fate consisted only of my own trouble with the narrative, which had wound its way around us like strands of iron smoke: a signal from a dying man on an atoll.

He had been on home hospice for his lung cancer, and his prognosis was, simply, "soon." So said his chart and our specialists. He had come into the ICU confused, heavy with sleep from patches and pills. His wife had cared for him for many years, weathering the unending punctuations of appointments and hospitalizations, finding their way together through the long uncertain hours populated by intractable illness, things growing in the darkness. Her face was drawn, severe: she had suffered.

But his son, daughter, and sister were at the bedside, and they were fierce. They felt he had become a prisoner, subject to capricious rules, each of them begging for visitation rights. After earning "Tomorrow at 8:15," their appointment to visit dad would be cancelled during the sinuous drive through the eroded hills. He was not allowed in his shop.

The meeting came. Surrounded by family, students, and residents, I found myself in a mist, planned but also unpiloted, edging around the impenetrable husks of personalities, long grudges, anger, loss, uncertainty, and the fear beneath. In the hospital, these are not moments of control but of wilderness, in which humanity — mine, ours, theirs — becomes bracing, harsh, painful and clear. We are all barely hanging on.

What the resident heard, saw, or thought, I will never quite know. We traded assurances. He went home that night to his wife and his infant. I went home

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And soon our patient went home with his sister, not his wife. He was glad, he thanked us, his eyes sharp and clear as when talking of wood, with no trace of dying.

I still think of his hands, covered in dust, at his lathe, turning pens—sanding them again and again.

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