

Underneath It All

Category: Coming Undone

written by Mallory Kane | May 22, 2023

I was supposed to see Jane for abdominal pain, but within minutes of meeting her, she told me that her boyfriend hits her. Once, so hard that he fractured and dislocated her jaw. She has a lot of bruises, but only in areas covered by her clothes. To the unknowing, Jane appears neatly put together, whole. But, underneath it all, she is unraveling, coming undone.

That day in the clinic, Jane decided to trust me. She let me in on her secret, showed me her scars. I hoped she would let me help her get somewhere safe, but when I offered, she declined without further explanation.

Physicians are not mandated reporters for domestic abuse. Jane was eighteen, and her suffering stemmed from the hands of her boyfriend, thus I was forced to keep everything she told me confidential. I watched her crumble, unable to do anything about it.

As a medical student on clinical rotations, I hear sad things everyday. I place my patients' burdens on my shoulders because that's my job—or, at least, it soon will be. And I wouldn't trade it for the world. But these burdens have weight, and too often, the systems I work within have holes that prevent me from solving my patients' deepest troubles. The result is that my patients must continue living the unfathomable, and I must live with their undeserving faces constantly on my mind, impossible to ignore.

At the end of the day, I leave the clinic, but I do not forget. I go home thinking about Jane, who left the clinic and went back to being abused. I think about Mr. Fay, who left my patient room and went back to his bed under a bridge in the middle of winter. I think about Mrs. Larson, who left my patient room and went home to an untouched room that once protected her now dead son. I think about my patients. Their faces and their stories are a part of my life. How can I accept their harsh realities?

As a soon-to-be physician, I am not supposed to be affected by the tragedy I see daily. I must strive to attain the utmost composure and resilience. I must stand up tall, be poised, and portray a sense of togetherness. Doctors are supposed to be strong, unbreakable. But are we really bulletproof, or do we just not speak when we come undone?

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