

Jeannie

Category: Stories

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"The person with the contractions gets to pick the channel," I reassure Jeannie, as she tries to talk me into watching *The X-Files*. It's not my favorite, but I'm just the moral support—oh, and the doctor.

When she first came to see me, eight months back, Jeannie already had a four-year-old boy and didn't think that there was much my little white nulliparous self could teach her about pregnancy. I'd offer her my book-learned advice about pregnancy or suggested sources of support, and she would listen patiently, then do what she wanted. She did show up for all her appointments, and she humored me at times: although she refused to stop smoking pot for her nausea, she cut down a little "to make you feel better."

Jeannie shared everything without embarrassment. Well-trained resident that I was, I asked her about bleeding or discomfort during sex. She said that it sometimes hurt when she was on top, "But he don't like havin' to be up there doin' all the work."

Now, two weeks before her due date, she's come into the office contracting. Sure that this is it, she's already arranged care for her son. We make the ten-minute pilgrimage to the hospital. I ask who she'll have with her during labor. Looking at me with one eyebrow raised, she replies, "You."

Oh. Okay.

So I sit with her, and we watch *Wheel of Fortune* and *The X-Files* and chat. I hadn't realized how important it is to her to have her own doctor. While completing the paperwork to be admitted, she'd informed me, "That nurse figured I was with the clinic. But I said, 'No, my *doctor* is Dr. Gordon.'" A little satisfied smile at defying the nurse's expectations.

The pigeonhole they've tried to squeeze Jeannie into pinches her, and she's not about to stand for it. As we sit there, she tells me about her previous labor. They'd said she couldn't have any pain medicine because she was too far along. "I grabbed that man by the tie and said, 'Give me some morphine.' And he did!" Wary of the world, she adds, "Who you gonna trust? If you're black, you can't trust the police. Can't nobody trust lawyers. So you gotta trust your doctor."

I try to express gratitude, but she brushes me off, changing the channel to a talk show.

After twenty hours of dwindling contractions, some sleep and then eighteen laps around the floor the next morning, we conclude that she is not in labor, having stopped dilating at three centimeters the night before. Jeannie and I leave for our respective homes, knowing that this is not farewell but au

reservoir.

Two nights later I'm awakened by a call from Katherine, one of my fellow residents.

"Your patient is here in labor, and she's wild. Get here as fast as you can!"

Barreling into the hospital room less than ten minutes later, I see Jeannie thrashing on the bed, wailing, "Pain! Pain!"

Katherine tells me that they have been unable to get an IV into her because she won't stop writhing.

"Jeannie," I implore, "you have to hold still so they can do this and give you medicine for the pain."

"I can't, I can't, I can't," she moans, tossing from side to side.

Some inner drill sergeant surfaces: I put my face over hers and bark "Jeannie!"

She freezes for a minute, then whispers, "What?"

"Have I ever lied to you?"

A pause, then: "No."

"Okay, so listen to me. You can do this."

A combination of commands and reassurance gets the IV placed, Stadol given, Jeannie calmed. I stay next to her, bullying as needed when she begins to push. The bizarre intensity of our connection doesn't occur to me until she asks for some ice. I begin to leave, but my supervising attending jumps up from the rocking chair, saying, "I'll get it. You stay here."

Jeannie has a baby girl, Keesha, and for the next four months brings her faithfully to see me. Then it's time for our last visit, because I will soon be graduating from residency.

Through the whole visit, Jeannie refuses to meet my eyes. She addresses her comments to Keesha: "You find a good doctor, and she just leaves."

I try my best behavioral-science phrases. "I know that you're upset I'm leaving..."

Jeannie will have none of it.

"Got to find a new doctor again," she tells Keesha.

I tell her which doctor will be seeing her and Keesha, but she keeps her gaze averted and finally leaves with Keesha in the carrier.

She doesn't even say goodbye.

As she walks down the hall I consider going after her to hug her, but realize that this is far too public a place, even if she might otherwise want me to do so. So I just watch her strong, straight back recede as she goes and think, "I love you too, Jeannie."

About the author:

Andrea Gordon MD is on the faculty of the Tufts Family Medicine Residency Program at Cambridge Health Alliance in Malden, Massachusetts. "Although I wrote poetry in high school, I had stopped until my advisor in residency told me, 'You should write poetry.' That was enough to start me writing again. I feel privileged to be invited into people's lives and to hear their stories."