

MIND TO MIND

*Creative writing that explores the abstract side
of our profession and our lives*

Carol Wiley Cassella, M.D., Editor

But Those Who Wait

Isaiah Kletenik, M.D.

The straw wings of his hat soared to the ceiling poised to take flight, held to the earth by an unfinished brown leather cord lassoed about the brim. A snowy mustache flowed from his upper lip towards the center of his gravity, a large brass buckle depicting a sunrise, or perhaps a sunset. “How are you today?”

He didn't answer but nodded gravely, producing a small piece of paper, darkened on the edge by tobacco snuff, which he slowly unfolded, revealing a list penciled in deliberate script; he carefully reviewed his list to recall what he already knew.

“I have pains in my shoulders, both of my shoulders,” he shrugged showing a grimace. “I can't remember what I did if I did anything wrong at all. They just started hurting. And my hands.” He looked down at them now as he alternately gripped and loosened the twisted ropes that were his calloused fingers. “I sit down to pay my bills, worked hard all my life. I try to do the simple arithmetic but what I did in fifth grade I can't do anymore. All the numbers spin around in my head and then my daughter comes and says, ‘This bill is due’ and she just goes ahead and writes a check and sends it off before I can have anything to say about it. I paid my way all my life,” he finished with conviction and a long, piercing gaze.

“What else has been going on in your life?”

The author has received permission from the patient to publish the information included in this article.
From the University of Colorado School of Medicine, Aurora, Colorado. isaiah.kletenik@ucdenver.edu
Accepted for publication February 14, 2015.

Copyright © 2015, the American Society of Anesthesiologists, Inc. Wolters Kluwer Health, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Anesthesiology 2015; 123:715-7

“Well, I’m finding I can’t sleep when I want and I sleep when I don’t want. I lie in bed and then an hour later I wake up and the next morning I’m falling asleep when I should be working. I tell you nothing works since my wife died.”

“I’m sad for your loss.” I stayed diagnostically matter of fact. “How long ago was that?”

“She died back in August and I know, I know it’s been six months and my daughter and my friends they all say, ‘Now pull yourself together and move on, you’ve got to get on with life,’ but I can’t.”

The tears begin to well and a bead rolls down his cheek catching the edge of the long white mustache and falls into the dark blue jean ocean in his lap. His head shudders and shakes and I reach for the green tissue box, the one useful salve for this ailment in the pharmacopeia of my education.

“I apologize. I shouldn’t be crying. When I was a kid my father would slap me the side of the face and say, ‘Men don’t cry. Be a man!’ and I know it’s wrong. Oh he would slap me right the side of my face.”

“Don’t feel bad about crying. It doesn’t bother me.”

“Well I’m real sorry. But every morning I wake up and I’m waiting for my wife to come back. I know she’s coming. I go to bed and I’d swear she’s there and every morning, well she ain’t come. My whole life I’ve been waiting for her to come and get me. I’ve been sober for 38 years, married for 44, it’ll be 45 this December. Oh when I was young I was terrible, wild, rough. I would get with drink and it would be in a bad way. Every Friday night I would go into town. Every Friday night I would get drunk and get into a fight, always getting into brawls and every Friday night I would end up in jail. My wife would beg me. ‘Now don’t go out and make a scene. Stay home, we’ll have a nice quiet night together.’ I never did. It reached the point my wife would keep \$200 in her drawer; she would pull it out of the bank every Thursday in town. She kept it on her person when I was around so I wouldn’t get to it. I would go out Friday night, get into a brawl and get thrown into jail. She’d wait, wait right until Sunday in the evening, come down to the sheriff’s office and bail me out in enough time to get to work the next day. That’s the only way she learned to get some peace. Every week I’d go out Friday, I’d go out and get caught and I’d wait counting down to Sunday night for my wife to come and save me, to come and pick me up like a little boy in the principal’s office. I don’t know why I couldn’t stop but I couldn’t and then I’d just sit there, waiting to be bailed out of my misery. And now I’m here just waiting for her and I know she’s gonna come like she always did to get me out of trouble. I don’t know who’s gonna save me because she’d always be the one. I’m real sorry for crying and making a scene.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“I’m sorry I really am. She made me promise, otherwise I wouldn’t keep on living, keep on takin’ these awful meds. She said, ‘Now when I’m gone you’re gonna keep

takin' your diabeetus meds cause you gotta live for our daughter and granddaughters cause I can't but you gotta keep on livin,' and I promised her. Of course I did."

"It came on real quick. She felt peculiar in her belly down there and didn't make nothing of it. Went to a doc a few years back, said it was a stomach thing. Got the colonoscopy. Nothing. Years it just felt strange and suddenly the pain got worse. Well, it was her ovaries. They said it's not so easy to pick up these things. First they took out a tumor the size of an orange and then the next time the size of a grapefruit. And she fought hard, real hard. She fought me for years so I know she's strong. 38 years not a drink. She got me through it and she's watching me now. Sometimes I feel so down I don't want to go on, but I'm a man of my word and I can't disappoint her. I wake up in the morning thinking of her and I know she'll come. We're all just waiting for something to save us. It's the only way we can live."

Acknowledgments

The author expresses his gratitude to John Miller, M.D., for his teaching and without whom this story could not be shared.