MIND TO MIND

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

The Walk

Emily C. Raffensberger, M.S.

I'm bound comfortably snug inside a cocoon of anesthesia. There's nothing to see, to taste, to touch. Nothing hurts. Everything is starch and antiseptic. Out of the nothingness come pinpricks of sound. There is the hum of ventilation. I hear a voice say the phrase "wake up." It cuts in between the blips and beeps. The voice gets swallowed up in my narcotic haze.

I smell vinyl, latex, ethanol, and isopropyl. The cardiac ICU bed feels solid, hard, and uncomfortable. I feel tubes and wires. I feel the stick when the nurse takes my blood. I also feel like sleeping. Pain medication pumps through the IV line. On cue, I take a nap.

The next time I'm awake, I fixate on the white cubicle curtain. It hangs backlit by monitors. The curtain hides the theatrics going on behind it. Otherworldly figures jerk around like possessed marionettes. They say sharp, urgent lines like "now" and "stat." The stage directions appear haphazard. There is a rushing. The woman next to the curtain can see the show front row. She stands, unmoving, watching the scene. I see her mouth say something. It may have been "daughter." It may have been a name. When I wake up, the woman is gone.

The drugs wear off; my body stabilizes, and I'm extubated. It hurts too much to talk after the plastic breathing tube jammed into my throat gets yanked out. I'd have ice cream if I could, but I can't eat or drink anything for hours. I start with mouth swabs, move to ice chips, and then slow, short sucks through a straw. Like an alcoholic, I can't get enough. No amount of liquid drowns the fire ants crawling around my esophagus.

When I'm moved to the cardiac step-down unit, every hour on the hour, the nurse assesses my pain level by asking me how intense it is on a scale of one to ten. I rate it at about a four. The nurse asks me if the pain is sharp, dull, achy, raw, stabbing, or throbbing. I tell her all of the above. She asks me where it hurts. I say everywhere.

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Emily C. Raffensberger, M.S.: Penn State University College of Medicine, Hershey, Pennsylvania. eraffensberger@pennstatehealth.psu.edu

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The nurse insists movement will make me feel better. She lends me her arm so I can walk down the hall. Except I don't walk. I plod on swollen feet cushioned inside blue hospital socks. My legs wobble against the gravity pressing on muscles I haven't moved in forty-eight hours.

The nurse wheels the IV pole into a brightly colored playroom. Too bright.

"Here we are!" She gestures around the room, showing me all the fun things there are to do.

"I'm in middle school," I try explaining to her. "I've stopped playing. Can't I just go back to my room?"

The nurse doesn't give me that option. "Have a good time!"

How can I possibly play?

All I have on is a flimsy hospital gown. The ties are barely tight.

The nurse mistakes my disgruntled expression for worry. "I'll be right down the hall in case you need anything."

I'm twelve years old. I'm a patient in a hospital. What I need is my childhood back. I won't find it here in this playroom where a grown woman sits among the toys. I recognize her not by her height or her hair, but by her eyes. What stands out is the haunted hell sitting inside her retinas. She is staring, looking at nothing.

I sit next to her. Sitting is hard because I'm weighed down with cords. When I get them untangled, I ask, "How is she? Your daughter. How is she doing?"

"How—"

"I saw you." My mouth hustles out a stream of prepositions that explain how I know her. I'm also, in part, trying to convince myself I hadn't hallucinated. "I saw you with your daughter. She was next to me, in the bed beside mine on the other side of the curtain. I was in the ICU. I had open-heart surgery."

I had to know. I had to ask.

"Is she okay?"

A muscle in the woman's bottom lip shakes. "She had a heart–lung transplant." The next sentence implies a death blow to her child. "She is still very sick."

There's always someone worse off than you. My mom tells me this all the time, and here is the proof. On a scale of one to ten, I rank this woman's pain as probably an eleven.

"I'm very sorry your daughter is not doing well. It is very sad to hear. I hope she feels better very soon."

My English teacher would be appalled. Using *very* as an adverb is a cheap cop-out. Using *very* twice in quick succession is cheating. *Very* lacks the intensity required when stressing the superlative. *Very* should be substituted with more substantial synonyms such as deeply, extremely, or truly. There are a multitude of words I can choose from, but finding the appropriate one is exceedingly complex. I need one that isn't a sparkly greeting card. I need a neutral word. One that is docile and without frills. I decide to stick with *very*. *Very* seems to work.

"It must be very sad for you as her mom. I hope very much that you feel better soon."

"Me too. Thank you."

We sit with the sadness. We say nothing because no language encapsulates all that needs to be said. There are no words to make the sadness go away. I don't know what else to do, but the silence seems to help.

Sitting beside this woman, I learn nothing about her from the silence. Not her name or what her favorite color is. Not her daughter's name or what grade she is in. In my not knowing, I learn much about silence. How it fills quickly with diegetic noise and racing thoughts. How it makes me aware of my autonomic responses. How impossible it is to remain still and silent simultaneously. How being simultaneously still and silent happens only when a person ceases living.

The woman's voice breaks the silence. "I must go back now."

I sit alone among the toys, looking for something of interest, and find a book. I read it last year, but I allow the words to distract me. They tell a story of a boy who learns to hold memories and the man who gives the memories away. I get lost in the words. They tell me some memories are easy to remember, some memories are best forgotten, but someone must hold them. The painful ones. The happy ones. The sad ones. The pleasant ones. Together, they make a life full of color and wonder.

An hour goes by. Right on schedule, the nurse comes to rank my pain. I tell her I am ready to rest. She lends me her arm to help me walk back to my room. This time, I don't take it. I manage by myself, book in hand. The words inside make walking easier.