

Reflection #1

Again, Next Saturday

A pit of nerves in my stomach before we met.
A frigid Friday in Florida; the sun's yellow warmth shone on me.
Orange polo and khakis, pacing to my red car, driving to the ALF where you and your wife lived.
I got lost, mispronounced your surname at security, and wondered what else I would botch.

My year before medical school, I began to volunteer with hospice as an aspiring oncologist.
I wished to comfort those in the most uncomfortable setting – green, naive, eager.
Prior to meeting you, for five months, I spent Friday mornings at the bedside of patients actively dying.
Gravely white, cold walls surrounded each patient as they mustered final, fleeting breaths.
I felt helpless, tried making a difference, holding pale hands in final moments when a family could not.
Blue, rudderless, useless – each shift I left wondering if I helped.
I heard about home visits: volunteers were assigned a patient and would meet them weekly.
A soft, sweet voice answered my call – I spoke with your wife and overheard you ask who was calling.
Next Saturday, we would meet.

I knocked on your front door – “come in!”
The weather channel on, brown blinds cracked, dusted black and white family portraits.
You sat: tall, frail, sunken in a recliner, yet full of life with a grand smile.
You wanted to go for a walk outside – this would become our routine.
Your wife showed me how to help you from your chair to your walker – “nose over toes.”
Slowly, out of breath, leaning on your walker, shaking arms with purple patches – “take your time.”
To the toilet, then to your walking clothes, and finally to assemble your Swiss-army walker:
Tissue box, snacks, extra sunscreen, a grabber-reacher – you triple-checked that we had it all.
“Let's boogie!”

We began our first walk – 10 steps in, we turned around – we forgot your sweater.
Embarking again, we slowly shuffled by the navy pond to the gazebo.
We chatted in the shade about your life as an engineer, how you met your wife, your six daughters.
My face hurt from smiling as you lured in a family of ducks with wheat bread.
Once 2 o'clock hit, it was time to boogie for your late snack – “nose over toes.”
You had a shortcut back you were excited to show me.
Back to your living room, exhausted, but still sporting a smile – “again, next Saturday.”

This was our routine each Saturday for two months, until one day, it was not.
Your wife called on a Thursday morning – you had fallen, EMS had to help you up.
You were being kept at the hospice center for respite care.
I worriedly rushed over but was relieved to find you smiling, tired, with no major injuries.
We sat and talked like old times – you were excited to return home for us to walk again.
I saw you again Friday morning – you seemed more exhausted with only a weak smile – “I'm A-okay.”
Friday night, something didn't sit right – I drove back to see you and found you tired, but comfortable.
We chatted until you fell asleep – I said goodbye, uneasy, though unsure why.

The next morning, Saturday, I walked to your room – your wife and six daughters solemnly greeted me.
“He just passed.”
Knees buckle, clear tears puddle on the floor, I try to hold it in – beige tree moss sway by the window.
Motionless, peaceful – encased by the warmth of family and loved ones – blocking the bleak white walls.
I hugged your family – “we never saw him as happy as he was the last two months.”

We all embraced again – I offered my condolences, went home thinking that was the end of our chapter.

A few weeks went by – I received an email from your wife about your funeral.

I felt uncomfortable – not family, only present for two months of your 89 years.

Another cool Florida morning – I drove to the cemetery, a winding gray gravel path, forgetting my blazer.

Deep in the forest green – walking to your grave, sun rays seeping through, your warmth shining on me.

During your eulogy, your wife thanked me for being the son you never had.

I only visited, walked, talked – I never thought things so simple could make such a difference.

I thanked you for your lessons, and I vowed to come back to visit – again, next Saturday

Reflection #2

It was the last day of my surgery rotation, and the last day on the Trauma service. I was feeling quite tired that day and nervous about my oral exam scheduled at 3pm, and I remember thinking, "I just need to survive today." Then right around 12pm, the pager went off. It was a Level 1 Trauma Alert. The message read: 25yr M motorcycle crash, unresponsive, CPR on scene. At the trauma bay, the senior resident briefly walked me through the Trauma Algorithm, explaining how it was unlikely the patient would recover after CPR >10mins in the setting of blunt torso trauma. Things happened so fast. The patient arrived, cardiac activity was observed and it was all hands-on deck trying to save his life. I jumped in cutting away his jacket, jeans, and gloves, discovering injury after injury, scrapes, and broken bones. I saw the trauma attending intensely focused trying to place a femoral line. I saw the trauma residents quickly placing chest tubes. I saw nurse after nurse performing CPR. And suddenly, everyone stopped. The resident called the time of death and asked us to hold a minute of silence. I stood there, and I felt heavy. I tried to put a name to the emotions I saw across the room, and I realized I could not name my own. This was the first patient I witnessed die, and I just felt heavy. It wasn't until I made it back to the call room that the tears finally kicked in.

This experience affected me as I think it affects all medical students. That was the first time a patient had died in front of me, and even though I was technically part of the team trying to save his life, I felt useless. I remembered how much I hated that feeling. One of the reasons I decided to apply to medical school was to avoid feeling useless again...like I did when I was little, when my sister died of a ruptured cerebral aneurysm. Then I felt guilty. Guilty for thinking that finishing my surgery rotation was equivalent to fighting for survival. Guilty for thinking only of how *I* was feeling in that moment. He was someone's son, maybe someone's brother, and he had died at 25 years old all alone. I began to imagine what his family would feel when they got that phone call, and my heart sank. I am grateful to have had a supportive classmate find me in the call room. He allowed me to cry it out, to sit with all those feelings, and to find a way to move forward to face my other responsibilities.

I was no longer worried about the oral exam. It felt so trivial now; however, it made me consider another hardship of this profession. We are expected to bounce back so quickly. To process all those feelings in an efficient way so that we can step into the next patient's room and give it our 100%, all over again. Sitting here today, I have my doubts if I will one day be able to "efficiently" process the loss of a patient. I hope I continue to remember that heavy feeling. I believe it will keep me motivated to learn as much as I can throughout my career, to make sure I give each of my patients the absolute best care possible. This reflection exercise made me realize that I must also continue to hold space for myself and for my colleagues. It is okay to feel all those emotions. Taking the time to reflect on those moments will help us remember what is important to us as future physicians.