

MIND TO MIND

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

Stephen T. Harvey, M.D., Editor

The One Who Held Her Hand

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Imagine Monument Valley with its stunning red buttes in the candle-like flicker of the sun's last breaths. Imagine the Grand Canyon and its captivating red-white walls teasing your eyes with seemingly infinite depths. Imagine a trip your family took to those places and the beauty that was so pervasive you felt it in your core. Now, picture a hogan, a traditional Navajo dwelling, just out of view in each of those places. It sits just beyond the mesa where the paved roads carrying tourists end. Visualize its mud-covered roof, patched each spring to fill the holes cracked and frozen during winter's cold in an attempt to seal out summer's coming monsoon rains. Imagine a silver sliver of smoke, whispering from the ash black smokestack carrying the scent of cedar, pine, or cottonwood chopped and stacked the previous fall. Picture a grandmother sitting in the front entrance of the hogan allowing her face to bathe in the gentle, white warmth of dawn. She doesn't feel well, she hasn't for a few days. She aches, occasionally fevers, and has a dry cough. She has endured many illnesses, but this feels somehow different. She sits still allowing dawn to muster her courage to ask her daughter to drive her the 2 hours to the local hospital to get checked out.

She knows the trip by heart. First, put on her best skirt, drape her mother's turquoise necklace around her neck and slide the silver bracelet she's had since she was a teenager onto her wrist. Next, climb into the passenger seat of the sun-bleached, maroon 1996 Ford F-150 and listen to the cold engine put up a firm resistance to turning over. Crank once, crank twice, crank three times... "Third time's the charm," her daughter always says as the stubborn V6 sputters indignantly to life coughing smoke from the

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rusted tailpipe. Then, 2 miles down the sandy two-track road and turn right at the wash where clay curls crisp from yesterday's 90-degree heat. Continue past the cottonwoods whose leaves glow green and flutter in the morning breeze. A few more lefts and a couple rights and the truck rumbles onto the dirt Indian Route whose washboards rattle the jaw when the road grader hasn't passed by in a few months. Finally, an hour and a half into the journey the tires touch pavement for the final 30-minute ride into town. Turn right at the stoplight and head up the hill to the hospital whose faded tan walls have weathered nearly four decades of unrelenting Arizona sun. Rumble across the cattle guard and park in the visitor lot between full-size pickups with paint peeling from their tailgates.

Once parked, her daughter helps her down from the truck and she shakes stiffness from her legs. A greeter at the entrance asks her questions about fevers, cough, and recent illness. She answers yes to all three. She's given a mask and directed into a clinic room where a nurse taking her vital signs recognizes the bouncing baritone of an oxygen saturation hovering around 79% as a sign of trouble and quickly notifies a physician. After gagging on a swab snaked into her nostril she is directed to the emergency room where plastic prongs are placed into her nose. Her daughter talks with the doctors and says she needs to stay in the hospital for a few days because she needs oxygen for viral pneumonia. Off to a hospital room she goes. Nurses check on her breathing every few hours wearing plastic face shields, purple gloves, and blue plastic gowns. The yellow light of day becomes the black of night which fades back into day. Second by second, minute by minute, hour by hour, the knob on her oxygen supply slowly drifts toward higher and higher flow. Eventually, she meets a respiratory therapist who places bigger prongs in her nose and a new machine flickers in her half-dark room with green, red, and white numbers depicting her high flow oxygen needs, each value silently ticking northward. Her daughter, long since ushered out of the hospital, calls her twice a day and talks with the doctor. One day, her daughter says the doctors worry that they cannot turn the oxygen flowing through her nose any higher and they think they need to place a breathing tube. Quietly, she whispers her assent saying she trusts whatever her daughter thinks.

I walk in, the anesthesiologist, wearing a white helmet blown full of air from a whirring motor. I cue up the morbid symphony of the pulse oximeter hoping the soloist on this day will be a soprano rather than an alto. I place a cold, plastic mask on her face and the nurse whispers in her ear, "Yéego shimá," urging her to breathe deeply. Five minutes, they tell us, provides a patient with adequate oxygen to tolerate the brief

period between when we give the drugs that conjure forgetfulness and when it is safe to place a breathing tube. Five minutes, we have to consider the journey we took to this moment in time, to ponder how a virus navigated oceans, mountains, rivers, and valleys it took humans centuries to overcome, in just a matter of a few months. Five minutes, to consider how this elderly grandmother, who lives an hour and a half off a paved road without electricity and clean running water in her home, became infected with that virus. Five minutes, to immerse ourselves in her bravery, to sense her fear in the cadence of her breathing and to stand beside her, feeling her presence and her ours. Five minutes, to hold her hand, gently squeeze her shoulder and do all we can to will into existence the possibility that she will be the exception and not the rule, that with time her lungs will get better, that she will be the one who survives. Then, the five minutes are up. I resignedly nod at the nurse who methodically coaxes medications into her veins to ablate her memory and paralyze her muscles. I sweep her tongue aside and glide a stiff, plastic tube between her vocal cords and a ventilator is connected forcing air into her lungs. A flight crew marches in and whisks her off into the jet black, starless night to a city far away to provide intensive care. This is her first trip on an airplane. She won't remember it.

Her bed lies vacant with sheets curled and ruffled, a monument to where her body once lay. I contemplate her life, her resilience, her courage. I imagine how I will remember her. I think about the brief moment in time, the little more than five minutes when our lives crossed. I think about the years I spent learning how to pour the most powerful medications on earth into other human beings in order to deftly reach into the darkness and draw them back into the light. I think about the seconds her hand rested in mine. I wonder, would our time together matter most if I was the one who drew her back or the one who held her hand?