

## A Shot of Perspective

By Jordana Kritzer

It was close to 8am, and we gathered in a circle to receive our first vials. I felt like I was in a movie. So many moments seemed surreal during the past year, like when people started wearing masks to the grocery store, I remember looking at strangers and thinking, “Are we really doing this?” The white medical tents set up outside my hospital during the peak of the pandemic looked like something out of E.T. The lockdowns and curfews and endless sirens-- it all felt like the script of a Hollywood Drama. And now, holding the vial of COVID-19 vaccine in my hand, I felt the camera move in for a close up.

I had arrived at the Department of Mental Health in lower Manhattan at 6:30am. Twenty-five nurses had crowded into a conference room, waiting for their foreheads to be scanned for fever. Once we'd been cleared, the nurse with the clipboard asked for volunteers to give the vaccinations, I raised my hand.

“What are you? It doesn't say on the sheet. RN? LPN?” she asked.

“MD,” I muttered, trying not to sound pretentious.

All heads turned to look at me.

“MD?” she whooped. “I don't think I've ever seen an MD here before. Well, I am coming to you if there are any emergencies.”

We were told to gather all of our vaccination supplies from a storage room filled with unmarked boxes of needles, syringes, alcohol swabs, Band-aids, gloves, Lysol spray, gauze, and blank vaccination cards. I had expected to find a box at each vaccination station filled with all the materials I would need for the day. Or at least a list. But then I realized, it's the nurses who put boxes like that together-- and that's me today.

I am not new to figuring it out on the fly. I am an Emergency Medicine doctor—it's practically listed in my job description to be resourceful. I regularly perform surgical procedures on top of sterily-draped garbage cans. I have delivered a baby in a stuck elevator and in the backseat of an SUV. But today I was a set of hands, well-worn with years of giving injections to patients in distress. I had answered the call to be part of the army of capable hands, a cog in the giant machine designed to pull us out of this pandemic. So I carried what I could find down to the auditorium.

The Program Manager opened an ordinary, nondescript Coleman cooler and removed the vials. “These are your responsibility,” he said. “Every dose is precious and must be accounted for.” I looked down at the glass vial pressed against the creases of my palm. The word MODERNA written in red matched its bright red cap. Was this the end of the movie? I thought. Is this the final image that means everything is going to be ok?

“Oh please let this be the end,” I mumbled, almost aloud.

We were told to get to our posts and be ready. My station was on the stage in the auditorium. I double checked all my supplies and waited.

“Should I begin my eight bars?” a woman in her late 70s crowed as she skipped up the stairs to the stage, her arms extended as if she were to break into song. Her legs found a spryness in this moment that allowed her to float towards me. Her eyes sparkled playfully. “I feel like I’m at an audition.”

“Step right up for your golden ticket,” I played back. “Have a seat and we’ll get this show on the road!”

She sat in the chair, her eyes never leaving mine, tears glistening. “You don’t know what this means. I haven’t seen anyone in a year. I have been so lonely. My heart has broken so many times. What it will be like to hug my children, my grandchildren. To be in the same room with them, not feel so utterly alone.”

I plunged the needle into the vial and drew back her dose. “I can’t believe that this is the magic potion,” I said. I couldn’t help myself. I wanted to soak in this moment as much as she did. I could feel my throat get tight, my own emotion overwhelming my usual defenses.

I thought of the sobs of my patients’ families when I called to tell them their loved one was dying from COVID-19. In those moments I had tucked my own feelings away, locked them in the place where I was trained to compartmentalize them, so I could keep doing my job. I specialize in emergency resuscitation, and part of that job has always been end-of-life care, spending someone’s final moments with them and their families. But the volume during the peak of the pandemic made for a very full compartment. The desperate requests of my patients’ families echoed in my mind.

“Please hold her hand. Tell her I love her. Tell her she is everything to me.”

“Tell her I’m sorry. It’s my fault. I should have brought her earlier.”

“Does he have his glasses? He will be so scared without his glasses.”

“But I just dropped him off! I’m right outside! They won’t let me in. Ask him to hold on until I can say goodbye.”

“But she is my best friend. I can’t live without her.”

I blinked back to the present. I really looked at the woman in front of me. And to my surprise, I felt the clasp on that feelings compartment start to open. Her joy was palpable and instead of noting it as part of my clinical assessment, I felt it. Deeply. I couldn’t believe how dangerous and wonderful it felt to allow myself to share in her elation. All of a sudden, I wanted to jump into a pool filled with feelings.

I thought about when I was infected with COVID-19. At the time, we didn’t know much about the disease, we had some data from China and Italy, but nothing conclusive. I sent a

group message to my ER doctor friends: “Save me a ventilator and watch my teeth when you intubate me-- they’re real,” with a wink emoji, a gallows humor joke to my friends who, like me, take patients’ dentures out before putting a tube down their airway. The text was a joke, and it wasn’t. We were all worried that we would be one of the unlucky few that developed severe COVID-19. There were few if any ventilators left at our hospital. I knew we were all concerned about what we would do if we ran out and a patient needed a “vent,” but also what if they were all gone when we needed one?

I thought about how guilty I’ve felt during this past year. Guilty for the relief I’d feel every time I’d walk through the front door of my warm, beautiful apartment after a difficult shift. I’d see my three young children waiting to hug me as I’d strip off my dirty scrubs in the hallway, and I’d think of how many of my patients’ families would forever be wishing for them to come through the door.

The woman’s masked face became blurry as my own eyes filled with tears. People always ask me—especially this year—if I get emotional witnessing human loss and suffering in my work. I usually say that I leave the emotions to my patients and their families. That it’s inappropriate to ask them to shoulder my emotional response on top of having their own. The doctor should take care of the patient, not the other way around. But deep down, I stay behind the wall as a self-protective measure, a shield from the barrage of other people’s heartbreak. And until this moment, I hadn’t realized that by protecting and hiding my authentic self how much I’ve missed out on truly sharing joy with people.

“I don’t do Happy Medicine,” I thought. The work I do is important, it’s fulfilling, it’s exciting, but it’s not happy. In my busy Emergency Department, everyone always needs something from me. I always have to decide, even when I’m uncertain. There are too many problems I can’t fix. But like so many things, you can only know light if you have been in the dark. And for me, giving a highly effective vaccine during a deadly pandemic comes about as close to pure happy medicine as you can get.

I stuck the needle deep in her deltoid muscle, and my thumb easily guided the plunger of the syringe forward. The effort of thousands of scientists, hundreds of thousands of volunteers, and millions of dollars disappeared into her arm in a second. I removed the needle and applied pressure with a bit of gauze.

“It’s done!” I cheered.

“That’s it?” she asked incredulously.

“Just like that. You’re vaccinated!” I placed a Band-aid over the small hole and handed her the white vaccination card.

“You have received the second shot and completed your vaccination series, congratulations!”

“What do I do now?” she asked.

“Go live your life!”

And all at once, the camera pulls back to view the whole auditorium as the tinkling of instrumental music starts to build. We follow her as she zips up her jacket and walks out into the lobby. She pauses a moment at the door and takes a deep breath. The music swells as she steps out into the bright snowy morning.

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**Jordana Kritzer, MD is a graduate of Washington University in St. Louis where she received her BA in Anthropology and Theater. During medical school at SUNY Downstate, Dr. Kritzer created many storytelling opportunities including Stories Forum Initiative, “The Vagina Monologues” and the annual “Stories from the Wards.” She completed her Emergency Medicine residency training at Jacobi Medical Center/Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx. She is a board certified Assistant Professor at Albert Einstein College of Medicine where she teaches classes on clinical empathy and communication within the doctor-patient relationship. Dr. Kritzer works at Montefiore’s Wakefield campus as an attending physician, caring for patients and teaching residents. She was named Emergency Medicine Physician of the Year in 2015.**