

## Medical Metamorphosis

By Jessica Little

Resistencia, Argentina

Hospitals tend to have an extraterrestrial air. Shiny structures filled with yawning expanses of slick, sterile floors, strange beeping machines, and masked creatures with gloves cutting open sleeping bodies. We earthlings enter timidly, uncertain of where to go and how it all works. Even on the rare occasion that the guide to the hospital is a warm voice rather than a robotic speaker, an arrow, or a sign, we still hover outside doors – ill at ease and alien. I have yet to meet the person who gets a glowy look and gushes about a hospital feeling like home.

As I observe, I see that Residency is a bit of a metamorphosis—a violent stretching, yanking mutation of humans into aliens. It is not a pretty process. But in many ways it speaks to the resiliency of these beings. Placed in extreme conditions—they adapt and evolve. Under the duress of bright fluorescent lights, cramping muscles unable to move one millimeter, routine reproaches and rebukes, and definitive, enduring sleep deprivation—they develop a new glazed-eye state of consciousness. They are awake by necessity but not alive in the same way—oblivious to all on the outside. The hospital is home. Immersed in this extraterrestrial environment, the earthlings are aliens now.

I watch the resident-aliens go about their work, striving to survive, acclimating to a new consciousness, until there is a collision. A collision of consciousness. A hovering earthling that breaks down the barrier, poking open the door of the lounge and collapsing onto a chair, spewing sobs and blubbering incomprehensible words. The glazed eyes in the room glance at each other in dazed discomfort. Finally one pair, just a tad more awake and alive, just a tad older, edges closer and calms the inconsolable woman. My stomach wrenches and releases, wringing itself out, fearful of knowing the source of despair. I soon understand that the head nurse has kicked her out of her daughter's room. For the thin mother with dark circles beneath her eyes, who is already drowning in a sea of uncertainty, this separation is the last straw that brings with it a flood of devastation and despair. For an alien, it is a change in the air—the entrance of a disruptive force far removed from skin and stitches. The gust of emotion is too far outside the scope of the glazed eyes. One of last year's residents speaks to her with calm professionalism: "Sit down here and pull yourself together. He assures her that an exception to the rule can be made, so she may stay with her adolescent daughter, who is suffering from liver trauma. Her petite body ceases heaving and her swollen eyes slowly dry. When she leaves with a whoosh, something leaves with her and the air settles. The aliens are again at ease.

In the OR, another collision occurs. I shadow Renato down to operating room number two, as he informs me we will be placing a chest tube in a patient with a pneumothorax. Once we are dressed, we glide in wearing surgical masks, and I feel a jolt as I look up to see a battered

boy in his mid-twenties peering back at us, fully alert. The anesthesiologists are absent. One of his eyes juts out in a perfect sphere, swollen shut and black, reminding me of the bulging bruises of cartoon characters. His teeth are small and set far apart. When he sort of smiles at us, their canine points and the foamy blood that froths up give him a menacing grimace. Renato sets up and applies anesthetic with a syringe. I feel a shift in the air again, as this boy stares directly at the scalpel that slices through the skin in the space between his ribs.

For aliens, it is easy to forget the invasiveness of the procedures they perform. The OR is the inner sanctum. Earthlings do not often invade. Not in any state of awareness at least. It is quite a collision to rediscover the feeling of infiltration that comes from first slicing through skin—to see it in the eyes that wear the skin is even more unnerving. Renato digs his finger into the chest of the patient, calmly conversing until the boy's words turn to harsh grunts, and the pain writes itself across his face. Renato's finger has just found the collapsed lung and is preparing to insert the tube, when the boy decides he can't handle the pain. "Take your finger out," he orders Renato in a harsh rasping voice, eyes scrunched shut. Everyone in the room stiffens. The nurses, lounging against the wall, straighten and carefully tell him we are almost done, but their voices are edged with apprehension. The boy does not listen. He snarls and grasps the arm of Renato that is lodged in his lung. The tension escalates tangibly. The nurses, Renato, and I emit a stream of warnings and pleas as we attempt to translate the impending danger: his lung could deflate. It is a teetering moment, and somehow we do not tumble over the edge. The boy heaves a breath, releases the arm, and grunts his way through the last part of the painful procedure. But, I for one am left edgy.

I ponder the effects of these earthling invasions on the residents. Do they feel the weight of the other consciousness as I do? Do they feel the foreignness of their own? Once, as I watched the residents, I questioned the privilege of a persistent awareness of humanity, because in the end it is extreme exhaustion, not a growing indifference that transforms them. But now, I am starting to see something else. At the end of this brutal initiation, if the glaze in their eyes hasn't fully set like stone or steel, the collisions will take them in a circle. These "choques" with humanity will accumulate over time until alien and earthling merge again and the doctor surfaces from the shell of the resident. For the doctor, it is not easy either, but I believe it is more doable. They are not so stretched. They may shake off the glaze over their eyes and hone their awareness of the anguish of earthlings.

*"He allowed himself to be swayed by his conviction that human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them, but that life obliges them over and over again to give birth to themselves." —Gabriel García Márquez*

I am one of the pristinely privileged here—an odd hybrid of human and alien, finding home and humanity in this hospital. I amble among the aliens, invading the inner sanctum, forgetting my first flinch at the slice of skin and the strange surrealism of the naked bodies stretched out on the operating table. The lounge that could seem cold and icy now takes on a cozy light. Late in the afternoon, I run through the dry heat, past the park. A silver car honks three times, and I wave vigorously, shouting, "Hola!" to the familiar face I think I see and then turn a bright shade of fuchsia as I realize I don't know this old man who I have greeted so enthusiastically. I duck my head down, laugh out loud, and keep running past flower shops and kiosks that mark my usual morning bus ride until I skid to a stop, sweaty in front of the hospital. I stride with authority through the empty afterhours halls and up to the

resident's lounge to drop off something for Renato. I sit to catch my breath, when a girl from the Clinic drops in on us, and we spend an hour chatting about patients and our own pasts. This is no foreign planet or other dimension for me. I hardly ever hover.

But I recognize that I live in luxury. I sleep. I eat. I run. I read. I think. In the afternoon, I lay outside, watching the clouds unravel and eagles circle high, and consider all the types of toes I have seen. In my opinion, there is shocking toe variation amongst earthlings. And I can tell you for certain that no alien ever has time to think about toes. I feel no duress, and I am able to dwell on the humanity I see in the hospital. I do not have to make ten calls or find a misplaced surgical needle in the fleeting minutes before the surgery starts. Instead I stand and speak to the patient with eyes alive and unglazed. But I am not the example. In truth, I am the exception. I clearly understand that my vantage point is powerful and privileged.

It is the end of my seventh week here. I have heartily embraced my hybridization— alien-earthling. The hospital is in a mini-crisis—a serious strike. For a week and a half the workers have abandoned this extraterrestrial land. There are no technicians, no cleaners, and the operating rooms are echoing and empty except in emergencies. The aliens are getting antsy to slice skin, but I have busied myself with lists and all the things I have left to learn. Each day, I take one of the slips that the residents use to request blood samples and lab results, and note the conditions and evolution of each of our patients. I am constructing continuity and coherence. And though the residents may momentarily shy away from sobbing mothers, I am in awe of their interminable awareness of every change in the state of these forty-plus patients. And with my lists and my learning, I mimic and memorize and acquire a sliver of the analytic awareness of the aliens. When we do operate an emergency case of Cholangitis, I act as instrumentadora—my heart pounding as impatient surgeons expect me to have a telepathic rapidity. But I am not afraid, I am a hybrid, and it is an alien's adrenaline I feel. When Dr. Cantero asks the residents what we have left, I pipe in about the endoscopic procedure. He accepts my answer with bemused surprise. The anesthesiologists affectionately call me “R1” for Resident Year 1 and ask when I will be doing my rotation in anesthesia. I may not have glazed eyes yet, but this hospital is home to me too.

So it was just about time for me to have my own collision. On Thursday, early in the morning, I walk down the hall, waving, chipper, at the nurses. Two thirds of the way towards the lounge, Veronica pulls me aside. We do our *besos* on both sides, and then she leans in and tells me in a hushed voice, “Renato is not coming in today. Last night, the brother of his girlfriend died.” I suck in a shocked breath. Over the course of the morning, I glean from the low conversations of the surgeons that the 17-year-old brother was killed in a horrific car accident, losing control after reaching almost 200 km per hour. It is so characteristic of this country, that in spite of the passing nature of a girlfriend, the word “cuñado” or “brother-in-law” ubiquitously describes cross-sibling ties. Families are not isolated units here: they are complex webs of blurry boundaries, ever expanding. In the lounge, a medley of shock and scorn and sorrow is evident in the expressions of the surgeons. Murmurs of “too fast” hang in the empty spaces between them. But I am overwhelmed with a strange, seemingly misplaced sadness.

Why do I feel the urgent impulse to cry for a boy I will never meet, a brother of a girl I've never met, a girlfriend of a boy I have only just begun to know? What closeness leaves me more surely shaken by this death than the deaths of those I have encountered in these same halls? I cannot clearly tell. I have an inkling, though, that in the hospital, we fancy

ourselves invincible – aliens, not earthlings. But this time, without skin and stitches and stench, it is distance that delivers closeness. I feel this loss like my own. I imagine my own earthliness, the impotence of all the aliens in this incident, and the fragility of family—our foundation, without which, we would become undone. I feel for a second that we are always in that teetering moment of the chest tube, tilting treacherously towards tragedy. I understand that ultimately we are all earthlings at the end and all the time.

*“Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat.”*  
—*Ralph Ellison*

---

**Jessica Little is a student who will begin her second year at the University of Virginia School of Medicine in the fall. Little took one year off before medical school and spent three months working in a hospital in Argentina, an experience that was the inspiration for her piece**

---