

Robes the Color of Saffron

By Hannah Wellman

He was dressed in robes the color of saffron. His face was wrinkled but his brow unfurrowed, exuding the kind of inner peace that follows a lifetime of mindfulness. He was in the exam room at the geriatrics clinic, sitting in the tangerine-colored wheelchair that the monks at his Buddhist monastery had custom-ordered for him. He smiled widely as I entered with the geriatrician, and then he gestured to his small backpack. His student, draped in white robes, reached into the bag and pulled out two delicately woven bracelets the color of spring's first violets. He handed one to me and one to my preceptor. I slipped it on; the bracelet fit perfectly, as somehow I knew it would.

I first met Achan after a bowel resection to remove the cancer that had brought him to the emergency department. It had started as some blood in the stool, then weight loss, then weakness. Achan was not his legal name, the one in the chart; it was a term of profound respect for a teacher or mentor. By unspoken agreement, this was how his friends and students addressed him. He was serene even then, small and pale in the hospital bed as we explained his diagnosis. His student translated and he nodded, telling us that he understood.

About a week after he was discharged, he came to the geriatric clinic for follow-up. His blue eyes were bright as ever, a glimpse of the soul inside the withered body that had betrayed him in its marvelous and terrible intricacies. We spent much of our time discussing his prognosis and his goals of care. My heart sank as I read through his biopsy report, knowing his time was limited to weeks or months at best. He must have seen the sadness in my eyes as I began to explain the results. He listened intently, like always, and gave me a small smile. "It's okay," he told me. "Life has been good for me." I started to protest – like any doctor, I wanted to find a solution, to try every option, to fix him. He took my hand to reassure me, and at that point, our roles reversed. "It's okay," he said to me, as I had told so many patients before. "Let the days pass as they will."

I watched him leave the clinic, watched him roll down the long hall in his tangerine wheelchair, the violet bracelet still snug on my wrist. I learned later that he planned to travel back to Thailand, to his home, at the end of the month. We all knew he would not return.

I never said goodbye to him, and perhaps that is the way it should be. We are just minor parts of the innumerable chapters in the book of a patient's life. We aren't the main characters, though we hope to play protagonists in our own small ways. The implicit teaching of medical school is that a doctor's identity is rooted in his or her career and centers around patients. But a patient's life does not center on doctors. Achan, so profoundly and uncommonly devoid of egotism, reminded me that we all pass through each other's lives but do not stay. In fact, he might say, nothing stays; let the days pass, as they will.

It is what we do with that time, however short, that will be remembered as our mark upon the books of life in which we appear. When I look back on this chapter of my own story, at the long and often difficult third year of medical school, Achan stands out to me as brilliant flashes of color—the saffron robes, the violet-colored bracelet, the blue eyes, all bright and indelible as the man's soul itself.

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