

Mr. Brown

By Lauren Klingman

Mr. Brown wasn't someone I knew well. In fact, I barely knew him at all. Mr Brown isn't even his name. I began calling him that because our acquaintance was so brief I cannot even remember his real name.

He was one of those people who enters your life fleetingly, affects it profoundly and then fades quietly into a tapestry of memories. From the weave, I can still find the Mr. Brown-colored yarn among the rest.

I can picture him. His stooped shoulders. The gleam of his smooth head. His dark eyes, stormy and then softening. I can hear the rumble of his voice. I can feel his calloused hand on my own, squeezing mine gently.

I remember him perfectly despite our connection of only fifteen minutes. His name is lost to the void of time, but his presence in my life remains.

I was a first-year medical student, hopeful and relatively bright-eyed, my enthusiasm for medicine not yet diminished by the training system or compassion fatigue.

I was tired today. I got home around 7:30 in the morning from a shadow overnight shift, tossed sleepless in my bed until noon, and finally walked to our teaching hospital, feeling the cruel hangover only lack of sleep can cause. The chilly February afternoon wind racketed the windows as our Patient Physician Communication class crept through its final day.

The patients were tired of us, the nurses and residents said as we entered each ward in a drove of short white coats. They won't do another interview. Could I blame them? Feeling poorly and being gawked at like a caged animal by twelve eager first years could hardly improve their day.

I was last to interview a patient. As I peeped into room after room, I tiptoed back out to fatigued "no's."

"I have someone for you."

A tall, lanky resident appeared suddenly, grinning down at me as if we shared a victory. "He's a nice guy. Recently found out he has liver cancer."

Great! I thought, honing in on "nice guy." Liver cancer? Well I had experience handling that. Maybe he was here for chemo.

“What’s his name?” I asked.

“Mr. Brown,” the resident said, pointing to the makeshift door made of a curtain.

“Mr. Brown,” I said under my breath, edging inside.

“Mr. Brown?” I called out, louder. It was dark. A man in his late 50’s was tucked into his hospital bed. The standard lightly patterned blanket, providing next to no warmth, was draped over him. He looked tired.

“Yes, miss?” he said in a deep, rolling voice.

Quickly I explained who I was, that I would bring back a small army of students if he deemed it acceptable, and we would just talk. He looked at me for what felt like an entire minute and said slowly, “That would be alright.”

I gathered my group and charged back in, thrilled to be nearly done with my day.

“So Mr. Brown, what brings you in here today?” I asked, smiling, mentally checking off bullet number one on my patient-communication checklist.

“I just...I just found out...I have stage four liver cancer...?” He crumpled.

Time slowed. I closed my eyes briefly. I couldn’t decide if I was more frustrated at the resident, whose definition of “recently found out” actually meant “today,” or at the universe for placing me in this situation.

Mr. Brown looked at me with large, pained, tear-streaked eyes and I made a decision. Today’s interaction was my graded final, and I didn’t care. I knew I wouldn’t finish the checklist in this interaction. But this man in front of me was a person in pain. I began talking.

Mr. Brown had learned only two hours prior that he had metastatic liver cancer after presenting to the emergency department with abdominal pain. He had been whisked upstairs for “more tests,” where they disclosed the cancer. Fifteen minutes later, he was told what that meant – he was dying. There was a deluge of hurried explanations, more blood draws, doctors and nurses came and went like a revolving door, and then he was left alone. Time seemed to move slower, his hospital bed in the eye of this devastating hurricane. For over an hour no one had entered. He had sat there, thinking about how he was dying and what that meant. Until I had come in.

He was a nice man. He’d worked hard to help the poor, devoting his life to ease the suffering of others.

“Why would this happen to me?” he asked me. “I’ve done nothing but good. I’m a good person. I do what’s right.”

I don't know, I thought miserably. *I have no idea. It isn't fair. It isn't fair at all.*

We talked more. He had never married. He loved his Alma Mater's football games. He had nieces he spoiled. He had always wanted to see the pyramids in Egypt.

Towards the end I made a mistake. Bringing our conversation to a close I said, "We are all wishing you luck on the journey that's ahead of you."

"Journey?" he balked. The warmth and comradery we had developed vanished. "I know what *journey* means."

I felt awkward. I could feel my face glowing red. *Good luck with death*, he thought I had said. But then I met his eyes, and something like uncertainty flitted below the stormy gaze.

"All of us have a journey," I said quietly. "None of us know where that journey will go or how we will manage it. But we're all put on this earth to enjoy the time we have and do the most with it that we can."

He looked at me for a long moment, nodded briefly, and then gazed out the window.

I walked back home slowly that day. My mind was turbulent. It was cold. Ice had caused me to nearly slip earlier on my walk to school. I didn't have a jacket besides my flimsy white coat—a sad protection against the elements and an even sadder barrier against human feeling in the hospital.

I thought of my grandma. She wasn't doing well. Her mind was going because of Alzheimer's or depression, or both. A pulmonary embolism left her on an oxygen machine she despised. Was it the metastasized melanoma that was making her so weak? She was still reeling from the recent loss of my grandpa. The last I had seen her, she looked so tiny. Tired. Finished.

I thought of my grandpa. I thought of the day I found out he was dying. I drove over to their house and as usual he was in his garden, kneeling on the ground in dark pants and a button up shirt, dirt caking his knees. Surrounding him were a trove of tools and he was wrenching apart his sprinkler system. How could this seemingly healthy man be dying? Two short years later after countless bouts of chemo and radiation, it was undeniable. His liver gave out and his organs began to shut down at alarming speed. We raced to the end with him, but he crossed the finish line alone.

I felt panicky. My thoughts tumbled haphazardly around, messily bumping against each other in a repetitive nightmare.

Would this happen to Mr. Brown? This kind man? Would death look the same? Would the scene repeat?

Would it be spring? Would a soft breeze float in and mix with the increasingly evident smell of death?

Would he be able to open his eyes or would they flutter and remain unfocused?

Would he stop being able to speak? Would his rolling voice turn to a whisper and then cease all together? Would he then moan, making the only sound he could produce? Would it turn into a rattle with every inhalation?

Would his nieces sit beside him, looking at old family photos, sifting through years of memories just for something to do?

Would his breath become more labored and less frequent?

Would they wait? Would they hold his hand and tell him he was loved?

I had to hope they would.

Even now, that single interaction is sharp in my mind. Alive. Fifteen minutes I can't forget. Out of the many thousand patients I have cared for, there are those I remember. Someone's laugh, a wail, a quip of advice, a hilarious moment or a lesson in humanity. The patients who are human before they are diseases. Like Mr. Brown.

Mr. Brown, I think of you, even though I wouldn't be able to find you if you are still alive today. I think of the person you told me you were, the things you did, the life you loved. Sometimes at night when I can't sleep, I lay in my bed, staring at the ceiling painted with the orange filter from street lights, wondering where you are. I wish you peace on your journey, Mr. Brown.

Lauren Klingman is a theatre artist turned emergency medicine resident at Stanford. She has acted and directed in theatres across the country, has had her writing published in multiple online journals, is a proud member of the Gold Humanism Honor Society, and is always seeking ways to bring her love of art and the medical humanities into medical practice and medical education.

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