

## Pocketbook

By Jill Muhrer

“My pocketbook, it’s been closed for a long time. They should sew it up, and seal it forever. The only reason I’m here is because of that damn virus. HIV puts me at risk for cancer. I know I don’t have any infections. I haven’t been with anyone for years. I can’t remember when I had my last exam down there. You just do what you gotta do, and then I’m out of here.”

As I’m setting up the Pap smear, I hear a series of beeps, bells and alarms that sound like an arcade. I sneak a look at D and see that she is playing a video game on her phone.

“What are you playing?” I ask.

She motions me to the head of the exam table and teaches me about the game, which I totally don’t understand. I am impressed with how adept she is at moving up levels. I sit close to her, and we laugh about the graphics of the game. I begin to take her gynecological history. She is reticent at first, but eventually shares her story or at least part of it.

*Ding, ding, beep!* “Well I don’t remember when my last pap was, but I think it was okay. No one said anything so it must have been. I never went back anyway. Look I made it to the next level.”

“Cool” I say, giving her a high five, which has a calming, effect on both of us.

“I had two kids with my boyfriend and a few abortions, but I can’t remember how many. I had no way to raise my kids. My husband, he could be real sweet, but then he’d drink and get totally ugly. He’d beat me, and then cry when he woke up and realized what he had done. I had to forgive him. They needed a father. Then one day he hit my son when he tried to protect me. That was it. We waited till he was out of the house, and then we ran. We stayed in a shelter for a while until I found a cheap place to live. I’m not proud of this, but it worked. I used “my pocketbook” to make money. I couldn’t get a job because I dropped out of high school. Without any education or training this seemed easy at least until it wasn’t. I definitely was a survivor. The kids would sleep at night while I went out and made my living. Damn, I just won again!” Her phone blinks and rings.

I tell her that I’m impressed with how well she handled these challenges and what a good job she did caring for her children. I admire her courage and strength.

“I got tired though when the streets got rougher. Customers could be real mean. I really don’t want to talk about it. I closed my pocketbook for life. Can we move on and just get this over with? Oh and I’ve had my share of infections, but none in the recent past. As I said, I am not

involved with anyone. No, I don't have any family history of breast, ovarian, cervical or colon cancer, and NO I DON'T HAVE ANY SYMPTOMS OR CONCERNS!"

I quickly focus on an area that is less threatening for her. We review how to do a breast exam. A close friend of hers died of breast cancer, and she doesn't want any part of that. She is relieved to know how to monitor herself for breast changes.

I get ready to complete the pelvic exam when I am startled by the sound of a bag ripping open followed by a loud crunch. I look up and notice that she is eating potato chips. No one is allowed to eat in the exam rooms, but I acquiesce.

"Do you want one?" she asks. "They're my favorite, double cheese."

"Oh no thanks," I reply. "I appreciate the offer, but I ate a big breakfast."

I explain the exam, but this upsets her more. "Oh for goodness sakes, just do it. I'd rather not hear. I just hope you don't find any unexpected pockets in there."

"I'm not worried," I say to reassure her. I carefully proceed with the exam. "I'm fine," she says. Her muscles tighten.

"So how's the game going?"

"Fine," she says.

"Ok, just let me know if anything bothers you or if you have any questions."

"Sure," she says while crunching on another chip.

I finish the exam, which is normal except for mild atrophic changes. She is relieved to hear this. I step out while she is dressing.

When I return, she says, "well that wasn't so bad." I compliment her on completing the exam, and focus on her resilience. We discuss plans for her next visit and that I'll call her when the results come back. She can always call me if she has questions.

"Ok," she says. "Hey, do you want to give the game a try?"

"Oh sure, I'd love to."

I try my best, and together we laugh about my failed efforts.

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**Jill Muhrer is a family nurse practitioner who retired after providing primary care to patients in Camden, New Jersey through a federally-qualified healthcare center. After completing a writing workshop at Westport Writers and a medical narrative program at Columbia University, she is focusing on story writing. Muhrer received her BSN from the University of Pennsylvania and her MSN and DNP through Yale University. She has published stories in Pulse-Voices from the Heart of Medicine, and the American Journal for Nurse Practitioners, as well as clinically focused articles in the Journal for Nurse Practitioners and the Nurse Practitioner and haiku in Modern HAIKU.**

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