HEALING ARTS

Materia Medica

Final Moments

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They arrived in a slow trickle initially. His daughter came first. Clutching her boyfriend's hand, she sat at his bedside with the spackled cheer of someone thrown into a situation too difficult to fathom. An hour that seemed like many passed before she was joined by a brother, then a growing handful of cousins, aunts and uncles. Soon they were having to trade spots, swapping out seats in the waiting room for the coveted posts by his bed. As the crowd of visitors grew, it became clear that his daughter hadn't doubted us when we warned her that tonight might be the end.

He was a liver patient, the sorts of which we saw so frequently they'd been granted this eponym as if their diseased organs alone defined them. He'd shown up six months earlier with an empty past medical history vomiting up pints of blood. Years of alcohol had left his liver stiff and scarred, backing up blood flow into a network of engorged esophageal blood vessels that were prone to rupture. Over the past six months he had cycled in and out of the hospital. His easy-going nature managed to cut through the cynicism of my overworked colleagues, and he was on a first name basis with several.

I'd only met him days earlier when he was admitted to the intensive care unit for urgent dialysis, as his kidneys shut down in the predictable domino effect we call hepatorenal syndrome. The past few days had been filled with the frenetic work of completing his transplant evaluation. With six months of sobriety he was finally eligible, and we were all expecting him to be listed for a new liver. So it had come as a surprise this morning when the liver team delivered their final verdict—he would not be eligible for transplant because of his lack of social support. Decades of drinking had scarred more than just his liver, and his relationship with his children had been tumultuous at best. Faced with the impossible task of rationing the scarce resource that is a new liver, the transplant team felt his lack of steady support would

make post-transplant success less likely. Tonight, watching his room fill with visitors the irony of this decision was hard to ignore.

I sat at the computer outside of his room for most of the night, going in only to adjust his morphine drip or check in with his family. His daughter said she wanted to wait until everyone had come before disconnecting the dialysis or stopping the medications supporting his blood pressure. When his youngest son cautiously shuffled in I understood whom she meant by "everyone." They hadn't seen each other in years and for a few minutes they acted like strangers, looking more at the other visitors in the room than each other. But through whatever alchemy occurs in the face of great loss something shifted, and the next time I walked in they were embracing in his hospital bed. They both wept openly, their faces pressed close with tears and words mingling together. I wondered when the last time they'd hugged had been. I hoped that this moment would provide some sort of salve to the wounds of guilt and disappointment and hurt they'd accumulated over the years.

He died quietly later that night, with his children holding his hands and a soft blanket tucked under his chin. Their tears had mostly been cried for now, and their faces were dry at the very end. Walking home after my sleepless night, I was embarrassed to realize that more than anything else I felt jealous. Three years earlier my dad had passed away after his kidneys similarly failed in the setting of end stage liver disease. Unlike my patient, he'd never even been considered for transplant and my brothers and I were never called to come say our goodbyes. Not having the opportunity to be there, to be a part of his death, I came to understand why we have made such rituals around death and funerals—in going through the pain of the moment and facing the finality of the passing there is some chance to heal. In nearly every liver patient I've seen since, I've been flooded with memories of my father. But for the first time on this night, I witnessed the final moments I'd never had.

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