HEALING ARTS

Materia Medica

A human touch

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The paper sheet over my face makes my nose itch. I keep quiet, close my eyes, and think of beetles I flipped over as a child, how furiously they pumped their legs trying to rock back over. After ten seconds or so, their tiny black limbs relaxed. Vulnerable, feet up, belly exposed, they received the prodding, poking and ultimate mercy of a greater power. I try to relax and keep calm.

Dr. K's voice greets everyone. He pulls up a chair, sits next to me and lifts the sheet off my face. His face feels a tad too close. He has a huge smile. I try but cannot return it.

"How's everything? Ready?"

I nod in resignation. Around me is a whole gaggle of medical students. Dr. K slides the sheet back before I see any more of the room. I close my eyes again.

"He's a lecturer," Dr. K pronounces. Everyone laughs. Indeed, I am a lecturer. When Dr. K discovered this during an initial consultation, he asked whether he could invite students to look at me. I readily agreed. They filed in, both smiling and serious. I tried to make eye contact. They could have been my law students. Their eyes were pulled quickly, like magnets, to other areas of my head and face. They gently touched moles, one over my left eye, one a bit below and to the left, a third to the right. Combined with the mole on my chin, I liked to think they formed a cross or star, and I sought meaning in their pattern.

"Do they hurt?" one asked. "No," I said, happy that *I*, rather than my biology, was getting attention.

Researchers do not know why moles—*melanocytic naevi*—form. Melanocytes are pigmentation cells: distributed evenly they give skin its color; when clumped in layers, they form moles. The average person has between ten and forty, I learned. A very small percentage are associated with melanoma. The one on the side of my head had definitely grown. I looked closer in the mirror. *Has this one also grown? Does this one have various shades of color in it?* A couple years ago I read *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*, by Siddhartha Mukherjee. I was struck by Mukherjee's explanation of cancer as our own biology mutated. I pushed on the big mole. It felt springy. *Are you mutating on me?*

The room where I lay on a cold table with a doctor about to cut me is part of a vast conglomeration of hallways, departments and doors. When I arrived, everyone seemed to know where they were going except me. The long halls, some bustling and others barren, were disorienting. *Had I entered*

a prohibited area? Was I getting closer to the plastic surgery unit, or farther?

I asked for directions.

"Hi. I am trying to find ..."

"Take a number."

"I am just trying to ..."

"Take a number sir."

I took a number. B2889. I looked up. C104. A22. B2866.

The light comes closer to my face. Its heat makes me sweat. One of the students finishes carefully shaving the hair around the big mole.

Dr. K is delighted to be giving a lesson. "This brshmetecinaly can be seen to have metarstepageed through the facimiter proximateeveean ..." He goes on. I have no idea what he is saying, though I listen with all my might. After all, he is talking about me and my cells. I have nothing—no cell phone, online news, or Mukherjee—to distract me.

The room falls quiet with a slight background hum. I feel the numb touch of the blade. I smell what seems like the scent of burning flesh. *Had he told me he was cutting or burning?* I suddenly feel claustrophobic. My knees tingle. I can hear my breath, slowly and laboriously, in and out, in and out. The cold from the table seeps into my ankles.

I am alone, in Malaysia, on an operating table, thousands of miles from my nearest relative.

All the hospitals I have been in are populated with stark contrasts. The antiseptic and the raw. The impersonal and the intimate. The cool administrative gaze and the warm caring touch. Janitors clean surfaces while viruses—a foot away—spray and seep from sneezes and wounds. I watch complete strangers in the waiting area survey one other in their most unprotected moments of pain, anxiety and fear. I reach the front of the line. The receptionist examines the forms in my file more than looks at my eyes. Yet later, a nurse places a pillow gently beneath my head and wipes my trembling lips. In these immense bureaucratic institutions, in our disconnected connected world of smartphones, in megacities where a glance at the passengers in the next car feels like an awkward violation of privacy, this ever-diminishing slice of humanity slips away. I crave it and cannot imagine I am alone. In times of vulnerability, when we are the beetle on its back, our need for human comfort is never greater.

A ruffling to my left interrupts my thoughts. A nurse reaches over me, handing something to Dr. K. The light momentarily dims from her lean. Then I feel it. Her soft abdomen pushes against my arm. Its warmth flushes into my

bones. She keeps it there. It eases slightly, then pushes again. *Is she comforting me?* There are layers between our flesh, of clothing and sheets. But a touch need not be direct. The scalpel, the bright light, even the white paper, disappear. *Will this be what it's like when I die? Thank you. Let the last thing I feel be a human touch.*

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