

Letter to the patient who was tired of waiting

“I don’t know what I did to make you all hate me so much,” I heard you say to your nurse. I was standing a few feet away in the hall, frowning as I bent over a young man’s back, probing an infected surgical incision. I looked over and watched you work to sit up and steady yourself on the side of the bed, your weathered hand clutching a cane. Beneath the brim of your hat, your deeply lined face was tight, your cheeks flushed. “No one ever came back to talk to me.”

I opened my mouth to respond to you as your nurse gently loosened the tape from your wrist and slipped out the plastic IV catheter. But she beat me to it. “The doctors were waiting until all your test results were back. They didn’t want to come back to you before they had some answers.”

“They don’t have any answers,” you said.

I sighed, wiggling my nose and cheeks to shimmy the mask out of my eyes as I straightened up and surveyed the emergency department. It was true; you had waited for several hours while we rushed past you without stopping. From your bed in the hallway, you had a view of everything, but it seems you saw nothing.

Many of the rooms’ glass doors were closed, marked with signs that warned, *Special Precautions!* Rolling carts stood outside, their supply of masks, gowns, and face shields dwindling. Behind the glass lay people, old and not so old, hungry for air and an ungloved touch.

You waited while I tried in vain to get enough oxygen into Andy’s lungs. We talked about the ventilator and how without it he would likely tire out and stop breathing. What would he want us to do when that happened? “I just don’t understand why I need one of those. I thought I was going to go back home tonight.” His voice was muffled by the mask with the flow of oxygen turned up to the highest setting.

“Let’s call your wife,” I said. “Is her number in your phone?” I leaned in to help him scroll through his contacts, but in the fog of his illness, he couldn’t recall her name. What he did know was that he did not want the ventilator. He was clear about that.

Andy made it until noon the next day. His widow, whose name is Martha, and two daughters have covid, now, too.

You waited while I listened to John tell an old story about hunting pheasants. After I told him he had tested positive for the virus, he sat alone, cataloging his lasts. At 86, he knew the statistics. He wanted to talk about this last glorious trip with his friend, Skip, who has dementia now. He never got to say goodbye. He was thinking a lot about goodbyes.

To your left, just a short time ago, a stretcher burst through the doors. Did you see? A paramedic rode on top, compressing the chest beneath him up and down, his shirt drenched and sweat streaming from his forehead to mingle with the dying man’s blood. A team shrouded in blue engulfed the stretcher but soon dispersed. Sometimes nothing can undo what a bullet has done. The nurses covered the body with a clean, white sheet as the team quickly changed into fresh blue

gowns and gathered on the other side of the trauma bay. A tech snapped a curtain forward to separate the halves of the room.

The trauma surgeon lingered on the quiet side of the curtain as the second stretcher arrived. This time, the bullet had pierced the chest a few critical inches to the left. As the rest of the team bustled around this man, whom we could help, the surgeon stole a quiet moment with the one whom we could not. Unaware he was being watched, he reached beneath the sheet and grasped the cold hand. He gazed at the young face that, in a different kind of bed, could have been sleeping—but for the plastic tube projecting up from his lips, attached to nothing. The surgeon bowed his head briefly, shoulders sagging, then turned to join the fray on the other side of the curtain.

Through all that, you waited.

You waited as that stretcher rushed right past you, carrying a young woman trapped in a child-sized body, curled on her left side. Her atrophied legs were flexed at the hip and frozen there, having never borne weight. Didn't you see? Her skin was stretched taut over her thin bones—stretched so thin in some places that it had torn. She vomited over and over, and her eyes, deep in their bony sockets, rolled back as she choked and gasped for air. You couldn't see past the curtain as we struggled to get a tube into her airway, but surely you heard the cries of her mother, who could not be stopped by the covid barriers at the front door. *"Please! Do everything. Do everything you can to save my baby."*

There was the man in the chicken suit, his face framed by a hood of faux feathers and a red comb and wattle. When the shaking chills came, he shuffled to his closet to grab his winter coat, but the chicken suit was warmer.

And the woman who thought she was having a stroke because she tried to open a kitchen cabinet and her hand kept missing the door handle. Her scans showed that her cancer has silently returned, and her brain is full of it.

A truck hit a motorcycle. A young mother overdosed on heroin laced with fentanyl. Two fishing boats collided in the dark. A man with diabetes, barely old enough to buy beer, developed gangrene and had to have both hands amputated. You waited because your test results were normal. You waited because you could.

And when the terrible day comes when you can't wait, we will be here for you, too.