

Just a floor above

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Just a floor above, a patient lies angled across the clean and freshly turned sheets. Her hollowed cheeks are glazed in sweat. Her pursed pants and moans puncture a silence as laden as slushed snow. Yet in the darting of her eyes you can hear what her exhausted lungs might otherwise conceal. That she is dying. The priest has arrived and sings his cheerful songs. He has strung the family around her death bed like a Rosary, roping in her reluctant children who gaze in angered disbelief as their mother sinks fast beneath that grim horizon.

Almost directly below, in a more hopeful room, another patient has begun the full wind-up of labor. She is double in size and chubby-pink with possibility. Her husband is here, too; the children are on the way. As I nick her waters, the unexpected gush soaks my pants. We joke about her new son, Wilder, and our hope that he will not at least in labor- live up to his name. There is a palpable spark of anticipation in the air, as electric as the calm before a Nor'Easter or the opening pitch of a championship game.

On my hospital rounds I troll back and forth between the Hospice Wing and OB, between these two beautiful women who I have come to know. One is a member of our church choir; the other a nurse in my office. And so I weave them into the morning routine of kidney infections and chest pains, the ER and ICU, with a quick hello or a nodding presence, and the relief of having a reason to be there.

I carry their clinical outcome on my shoulders. It is the kind of burden you must balance and share. But don't misunderstand: it is a tolerable load for the properly trained. Mr. Marquard, who taught me all the college calculus I could ever forget, spotted my talent early on. He knew that some of us would grasp the Eleusinian mysteries of abstract math, reach the top drawer, as he liked to say, make it to the floor above. And so it was that I learned capably in school and readied myself for the clinical challenge, every knotted complication that general practice could shuffle my way. But nothing prepared me for the aggregate loss, when each problem list and interesting case

turns out to be your neighbor and friend, and every final parting rents you where the heart resides.

I slip away from the hospital and go about my day, pushing off on those firm, familiar poles of birth and death. Wading through the afternoon hours, I barely remember my hospital charge until a mid afternoon telephone call notifies me of Dorothy's death. And at 4:30 pm, another call: Could I make a home visit on Mr. Briggs, whose family is convinced he is filling up with fluid? OB is quiet, so I point my car away from the hospital toward an old cape perched high on a bluff overlooking the ocean. Here lives the retired headmaster along with his ailing wife. And at their portal, on this snowy night, I enter into the wife's hospitality as she collects my wraps and settles me into a musty couch. As I talk, he sleeps, taking it all in, everything that I say about the specialist's report and how the stomach cancer has returned to prune his days. Then my beeper goes off: OB NOW. But I am twenty minutes out! Thank God my partner has received the same call, and when I arrive she is stitching the perineal laceration, which is the only work remaining after this precipitous and unattended birth.

And in the corner I sulk. I cannot enter into the family's exquisite joy. I needed it too badly for my own, in order to fill the cavity of this depleting day. So my wound becomes their worry: "I tried so hard not to push, but it just shot out of me," she apologizes again. And I am embarrassed twice, because she has recognized me in my despair, and believes that I blame her for spoiling the doctor's plans.

Three days later we gather at St. Francis of Assisi Church. And to compensate for the choir's thinning ranks, I sing a little louder for Dorothy. (Yes, I know it would have annoyed her, but I consider it fair restitution for the recorder she sometimes played off-key). There is no casket at this Requiem Mass, only the family in its stead. Her husband is bent in prayer in the first pew left of center. Beside him sit the same sad faces I watched, as they watched, their mother slip away. If only I could assure them that it is they, and their extended family, and the community all around us, who channel the graces that keep us going.

I believe in an expanding universe, unbounded by time, where I can mingle with Francis, our patron saint, and my parents long departed, and my children whose lives will flower long after my own life has come to an end. And I imagine, too, that Dorothy waits in the place we are all heading. Just a floor above.