

The MSPress Journal

Vol 8 | No. 1 | 2021

A New City

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I am sixteen, sitting on a bench in the dark. It is 9 pm. I am lucky that so far, I have never had a loved one die. But today I am holding the phone to my ear, feeling as though I am underwater, as my mother's voice tells me that my father is in the hospital.

There is something wrong with the electricity in his heart – but for now, he is alright. The next day we bring him food and a change of clothes, so we can see his alright-ness for ourselves. Eventually, he agrees to surgery. He later tells me what the doctors called it, an arrhythmia – something I will formally learn about several years later, although I do not know this yet.

I am eighteen, dragging my feet between rows and rows of cubicles. It is 2 pm. In each cubicle I catch fleeting glimpses of other lives, adult lives: of family photos, scrawled sticky-notes, and proudly crayon-ed works of art. I make it back to my own cell, sterile and undecorated. It is the summer after my first year of college, and my only solace is that this internship in project management will be over soon. What I have learned so far is that meetings are for gathering a large number of people into a single room, so we can all get nothing done, together. Nonetheless, I dutifully take notes. As I sit back down, I decide that in my adult life I will not work in this kind of office, where the days consist only of shuttling back and forth between meetings and Microsoft Excel.

I am nineteen, squeezing my way through rows of filled chairs in the waiting room. It is 1 pm in the hematology and oncology department, and I will be here for another hour to do what I do best – smile, make small talk, and offer free snacks. There is a constant dull murmur in the background: the front desk bustles, adults grumble, kids scuffle, babies bawl. I see a vast sea of furrowed brows, crossed arms, curled lips. Among everything going on within the transfusion suites and in these patients' lives, my task is not terribly important. But when I see their eyes light up at the sight of me, a girl in a navy-blue volunteer jacket, pushing her cart of animal crackers and Oreos and granola bars and juice boxes, I also understand that this is a very important task. With each package of cookies I offer, I learn a bit more about a person and about the importance of these things, the little things.

I am twenty, standing quietly in the corner of the exam room with my hands clasped politely in front of me. It is 11 am, and I have become quite good at standing quietly and politely. I do this each time the physician I am shadowing introduces me, then speaks to each of her patients and

their families. Today, a man expresses his gratitude toward her for taking a cost-effective diagnostic route, saving him the tribulation of more expensive and invasive testing. After the man leaves, I ask what her favorite part of the job is. The people, she says. I ask about her least favorite. The paperwork, she says.

I walk through the underground tunnels beneath the hospital's campus on my way between buildings. Outside pours freezing rain, while my umbrella lies peacefully forgotten at home by my doorstep. It is unfamiliar territory down here. I pause and spend several moments puzzling over which of two tunnels, neither travelled, to take. Finally, I choose one and don't look back.

I am twenty-one, sitting in a proctored exam room where they allow us nothing – not even snacks, not even water. It is four hours into the MCAT, and blearily I give myself another pep talk. Typical of me, to have lain wide awake the night before the biggest test of my life (though in actuality, only the first of many biggest-tests-of-my-life). I rest my head on the table for just a moment, and almost fall asleep in the middle of the Chemical and Physical Foundations section.

I am twenty-three, standing up with a row of my future classmates. We make our way down the aisle, squinting in front of clicking cameras and bright lights and the shining eyes of proud parents. I smile nervously, balancing precariously in heels. The physician who interviewed me is the one who pulls the white coat onto my shoulders. When I turn around to shake her hand, I think: I will not forget this moment, nor the warmth of her smile.

I am twenty-four, trailing behind my preceptor with three other classmates as we walk down the hallways of the hospital. Our preceptor ducks his head into each patient room, providing straightforward explanations and murmured reassurances. He has mastered the art of compassionate eye contact and expert physical exam maneuvers, easy confidence and empathy with efficiency. I have just dropped my tuning forks. Over our debrief, he gives us pointers – don't be afraid to press more firmly during the abdominal exam, listen with this part of the stethoscope – then reassures us that one day, we'll be just as practiced as he is. I listen, filled with equal doses of doubt and hope.

Months later, I am sitting on the edge of the bed of a patient who has just shared with me fragments of her life story. I am still only beginning to grasp what a true privilege it is to be here.

We are all filled with doubt and with hope, unsure of our clumsy movements and fumbled words, but earnest and willing. Only eight months into the beginning of our professional lives, we are still so green. But we have each travelled across vast lands to get here, following unscripted maps of our own design.

We have just entered a new city. I can't wait to explore.
