

ENCOUNTERS

Among ghosts

I am not a soldier. You see the soldier doctors on TV, or maybe for some, in real life. They shout orders, shock hearts or give frantic compressions to chests. Sometimes they slice into these chests for hand-to-hand combat. Others fight more quietly. They're the ones who collect vials of blood, gathering intelligence on the enemy. Through careful scans and x-rays, they seek out the enemy's coordinates and reveal its invasion tactics. They respond with carefully penned prescriptions designed to subvert their enemy and thwart the ultimate conqueror — death. With cocktails of poisons and potions they fight the good fight.

Me? I do not fight. My battles have been decided. I am a mediator. The destination for my patients has been decided, but the journey is left to me. So, I buy time, slow processes down and ease suffering. I negotiate. My end point is a patient, not a disease. This small piece of the life cycle is where I have eked out my practice in palliation. For the patient, I am a tour guide, explaining things as we go and highlighting the important things to come. But for death, I am a mediator — not a soldier. This is how I treat, how I fight.

Stench flooded the doorway long before the imposing figure of Mr. Ports did. Stench filled my nostrils and tumbled down into my lungs long before his big knuckled hand ever shook mine. The Ports were not doing well. Mrs. Ports had been the glue, the cement of the household, and now she was melting gently into death; and Mr. Ports was melting with her.

"Y' all right then?" he asked, or greeted — I was never very sure. It was an odd saying.

"How are you today?" I countered with a greeting equally as unsettling.

"Hmmp," he mumbled, ushering



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me into their tiny bungalow that was now steeped in death. The patient in question lay still in a bed that had been pulled from its rightful place and shoved haphazardly into the living room. Mrs. Ports was still, apart from the rising and falling of her frail ribs. Breathing through my mouth, I walked towards her, past the barren walls where pictures of children should have hung. She was sleeping. A gentle hand on her shoulder woke her.

"Hunnh? Ohh," she mumbled, faint recognition on her face. The doctor had arrived.

"How is the pain my dear?" I am careful to keep my voice soft. Her body had taken on a profoundly fragile nature.

"Oh. ... Better. I'm all right." A small, tired smile tugged on her face. The same tired smile answered my real question. Despite the mess, the dust and the smell, Mrs. Ports had peace. She was in the home she loved, being

cared for by the incapable man who she also loved.

“You look good — well, comfortable. Are you?”

“Oh yes, my dear,” she said kindly. I turned to Mr. Ports who hovered behind her bed. He stared at his wife with quiet terror. Her body had started to betray her; she was incontinent and was even starting to decline food.

“So, what of it then?” Mr. Ports mumbled tentatively. His face looked suspended, his jaw hanging lax in his mouth. His eyes were somewhere else. Maybe they were back in England, in East Anglia where they had met. Or maybe he has gone back to a time when he could make sense of his world. At present he could not. The backyard mechanic shop that had kept them afloat for so many years lay neglected. His life had shifted from the yard to the house.

He was a methodical man, Mr. Ports. When Mrs. Ports fell ill he spent long appointments with various oncologists. He struggled to understand the killer that had taken root in the woman he loved. Most distressing of all, her problem — her disease, could not be observed directly by him. It was a silent mass in her ovaries, the ones that had never given her the children that she had so desperately wanted.

As they were immigrants without local family, the Ports had relied on friends and the church since their arrival. Good parishioners, they never missed a mass. Friendly and warm though they were, they also never had people over. It was almost as though they were afraid that others might feel the longing that hung from their walls. Their furniture, old when it was purchased, had so much wear you might imagine a myriad of parties and friends were responsible for their condition. But it was not so. They had a lovely, but humble garden out the back, and Mrs. Ports was known for her excellent baking. Yet the home remained their private sanctuary. It was where they bore their cross and this made their home too personal to share.

When Mrs. Ports fell ill, word spread. Mr. Ports was immediately taken by the fear that they might now be invaded. He feared that the people, indeed the entire

congregation that had loved them would come to know their reality, their dark secret. It was more than either could bear. This prompted one of the most elaborate live plays I have ever seen. They tirelessly presented themselves as “doing well.” When Mrs. Ports went off

Slowly masks came off, costumes were abandoned and their vulnerable selves crept out.

for surgery there was a revolving door of guests who all remarked on how well she was doing. Mr. Ports was her able supporting actor. Together they smiled, exchanged pleasantries and declined my help, or any help at home. Their audience was thoroughly convinced, and few came to call on them. But I kept their name on a list, and now the show had run its course. The Ports were left to face the reality of their collapsing façade.

I could sense it when we met again in my office. It was after surgery rounds of chemo. I proposed a home visit and they balked. I insisted, they deflected, and I persisted. We set a date and time and I ushered a pensive couple out of my office before they could invent some reason why I should not come. That was almost a month ago, and things have changed a lot since then. Mrs. Ports has slipped closer to her death and Mr. Ports is left facing the voids of their life.

It wasn't until I sat in their couches that were worn by other people, and looked at their empty walls, that I glimpsed their grief. Their home was a window into the life they had shared, and was more forthcoming than the Ports tended to be. I started with some tentative questions, small talk about the past, then their lives as young adults in a new country. Slowly masks came off, costumes were abandoned and their vulnerable selves crept out. Their grief and hurt that so desperately needed to be acknowledged, finally was. It was this final loss that allowed healing.

There were no test results to share, no lab values to review. So instead of numbers, we made a pot of tea and dis-

cussed people. Hopes, dreams, goals and fears floated out into the open. Mr. Ports was given the concrete tasks and lifelines he craved. Plans were discussed and we shone a gentle light into the future that had haunted them. Mrs. Ports held her husband's hand as she

drifted in and out of our conversation. To Mrs. Ports I offered morphine. To Mr. Port I offered humanity. The practical stuff we left to the end. Dressings were reviewed, as were doses of drugs. Slowly Mr. Port gained some measure of control over his life. Questions were answered and emergency numbers were given. Reading material was left on a table with four barely used chairs. Our conversation lulled, and Mr. Ports rose to show me to the door.

Standing on the doorstep, I reached out for a handshake but found a hug. No battles were won that day. No heroic cure was delivered. But enormous suffering was eased. An unknowable future became more familiar, and a grief that was decades old found a voice. The Ports knew where they were headed and today negotiated a bit of their journey to that destination. When Mr. Ports let go of his hug, he turned and went back into his home, loaded with ammunition for the suffering that lay inside. I turned and walked to my car. I had another negotiation to attend, another bargain to make with death. I am not a soldier. I am a mediator.

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The author confirms that all the characters in this work are fictitious

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