



Last week in the hospital I was surrounded by grieving nurses and doctors; some gently wept, some sobbed outright, others had impassive faces that eventually cracked. Periodically someone broke down and left the grief-counselling session, only to come back minutes later looking dishevelled and exhausted. In a conference room I sat in a large circle of colleagues and coworkers who were in pain — and I felt nothing. A local doctor had died unexpectedly.

Dr. Mencion was a middle-aged man with an established practice in town. As a recent arrival, I knew him only from gossip and anecdotes: his imminent appointment as chief of family practice, his vintage 1957 Chevy Bel-Air, the self-built propeller airplane. Beyond these second-hand stories, all I really knew was his name and face, enough to say hello on meeting him in the halls. Amid all these crying people with funny and sad and surprising stories about how Dr. Mencion had touched their lives — people who felt his absence keenly and frankly — it felt somehow wrong to say *I didn't know him*. It seemed disrespectful.

But I *didn't* know him. I couldn't escape that thought as, one by one, each assembled nurse and doctor made a testimonial, stating how Mencion was more than a hallway hello to them, how they felt they had lost something very important — and amid this outpouring of emotion I began to wonder if I belonged at this hospital-arranged bereavement session.

Then came fear. It would be my turn soon, and I didn't know what to say. I dared not say *I didn't know him* — it seemed so out of place.

I composed false anecdotes in my mind until I realized that the inhuman thing was not in having no real feelings for Mencion, but in trying to simulate feeling, to lie. Here were people I saw and worked with every day, many of whom I knew well, liked and respected, and the grandiose bastard Ursus was going to conjure a fiction just to satisfy himself that he fit in. They deserved better; Mencion deserved better.

Instead, I simply said (at such times, will anything other than cliché suffice?) that I wished I had known Dr. Mencion better, for it was obvious by his friends that he was a genuine and compassionate human being. Then I gave the floor to the nurse next to me and listened to another story of how Mencion had made a difference in a life.

In the end, though, he made a difference in mine. Before this grieving session, I'd had no inkling of the impact a doctor's work has on others. Judging from the stories I heard, his life was something like mine: he struggled to be good to and for patients; he was a father and a husband; in his wake he left children, a wife, patients and his colleagues. He did the best he could, day after day, and he left in his great wake an impressive number of people.

And so by the time the session ended I began to feel something. I began to believe that the work that we do does not go unnoticed, that care and compassion are valued, and that general human decency is appreciated. Mencion's death made me want to be a better doctor, a better person, by emulating his example.

— *Dr. Ursus*

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