Elijah’s Wish

Joseph M. Geskey

Briarwood Children’s Hospital is a labyrinth of glass, brick, cement and steel carved in the acres of fertile soil, wood-framed houses and rolling wheat fields of central Pennsylvania.

As a medical student doing my first clinical rotation, I wanted to be prepared so I stuffed my white, wrinkle-free lab coat with pocket-sized manuals of Internal Medicine, Pediatrics, and the interpretation of lab results. My right pants pocket always housed crumpled sheets of notebook paper so I could hastily jot down clinical “pearls” of wisdom. I wanted to know everything—how to do procedures, how to diagnose the maladies that filled each hospital bed, and how to treat each one. I was finally getting to practice medicine.

During my intern year I walked the hospital halls with another ambitious intern, both of us hoping we made enough of an impression on the house staff to be selected as residents. One scene remains sculpted inside me, a defining moment lucky enough to be recollected, retained and remembered.

“Hey, I heard Johnson (our attending) is going to let us put a Swan-Ganz into one of the patients today.”

“Yeh, I’ve always wanted to do one of those. Who is it going to be done on?” I replied.

“I don’t know the kid’s name but I think he’s in room 18.”

Seconds later, the night nurse asked my colleague if he could draw blood from a hysterical, screaming, crying child in one of the rooms.

“Christ, more scut. You’d think after spending so much time here they’d let one of the med students do it. Hey, don’t do that Swan-Ganz without me.”

About ten minutes later the intern came out with his face fire red and his shirt drenched in perspiration.

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“Do you mind helping me out? The little bastard won’t cooperate.”
“What’s his name?”
He flipped through the chart disgustedly and muttered, “Elijah Wood.”

I remembered my first day at Briarwood when Johnson asked me to draw blood from a ten year-old leukemic patient. I rushed to recall the proper technique that I learned in medical school—the proper handling of the needle, the perfect angle to place the needle in the skin and when to remove the needle. I blocked everything out and focused on the lumpy, bluish vein and imagined that I was inside the skin and right on the outskirts of the vein so I could make the perfect entry. Johnson stood in the corner of the room, a god-like presence in the cramped room. I had to do this right. The nurse and mother restrained the crying child, probably already weak from fighting the leukemia. It took me awhile but I did it.

I remember Johnson remarking, “Like a textbook. In fact, exactly like one of those books you lug around with you. But you did one thing wrong and tomorrow I want you to tell me what it was.”

Later on, puzzled, I grabbed a textbook and scanned over the proper procedure for drawing blood. Everything I did was right there in black and white. Confused, I asked the nurse if she could tell me if there was anything I did wrong.

“Did you notice the patient?”
I just shook my head and angrily berated myself for being so callous. I didn’t even have the courage to go back and make amends to the child.

As I walked to Elijah’s room I removed the chalk-white, wrinkle-free jacket and discarded the noose-like black-striped tie and cleared everyone from the room.

In pajamas Elijah continued to sob. Salty tears streamed down his pale face leaving streaks of red. His disheveled brown hair flopped down over his sweat-soaked forehead as I knelt down alongside his bed.

“Elijah, how are you today,” I asked as I gently brushed his hair off his forehead and blotted the sweat from his face.

“I don’t want any needles.”

“Elijah, I don’t want to stick you with any needles. I want to talk to you. Hey, I notice you’re wearing “The Simpsons” pajamas. I bet you like Bart.”

“Yeh, he’s cool.”

From behind my back I pulled out a Bart Simpson doll I knew, from experience, he was every little child’s favorite cartoon character. A faint smile revealed Elijah’s two little dimples before he reverted back to his somber posture.

“Hey Elijah, do you like stories.”