

Humanities in Medicine is a program which supports humanism and the arts in the Dalhousie University Faculty of Medicine. Through many innovative programs including Music in Medicine and Humanities Days, this society helps to preserve an important balance in the Faculty of Medicine. This is the balance between analytical science and humanism, the treating of a disease and the treating of a person. It is difficult to measure the true contribution to students from such an organization. However, one small aspect of this contribution, in this case, includes monetary support. Humanities in Medicine provides a large amount of monies to the students of the Faculty of Medicine in the form of scholarships, prizes, bursaries, and research grants. These include many initiatives to encourage students to participate in the arts and reward excellence in their endeavours. The Cynthia Davis Prize for Writing is a literary award to recognize writing in the areas of spiritual, mental, and physical health. This award is maintained by Cynthia Davis, a long-time patron of Humanities in Medicine. The 2007 Cynthia Davis Prize was awarded to Dylan Blacquiere for his work, *Tags*. Honourable mentions were awarded to Karim Mukhida and Ernie Yap Sze-Wei, for their works *Essentials of Neurosurgery* and *Gertrude*. The Dalhousie Medical Journal, in cooperation with Humanities in Medicine, is pleased to present these stories in our Fall 2007 issue. Each author has shown great insight into the human condition and the challenges and benefits of achieving the aforementioned balance. These works represent the commitment to students shown by Humanities in Medicine and the resultant benefits to students and medicine alike.

Tags

Winner of the Cynthia Davis Prize for Writing, 2007

The mural was pretty good. Scratch that – it was amazing. I'd read about it in the papers: a commission from the city to commemorate Halifax's naval tradition, painted by noted local artist and teacher Liam Barish. As it turned out, it had been one of his last public works. He'd been asked to paint a tall ship on the side of one of the buildings on Barrington Street. He'd done it, though it had taken him twice as long to do as he said he would, thanks to the progression of his illness. The Chronicle-Herald even did a story on that inspirational facet of the whole thing, though Barish had come across as impatient and hostile in the interview.

He'd painted a tall ship sailing into the city, but with strange lines and eerie lighting that made it appear like a fiery ghost ship, something rising from local lore. And he'd done something with the perspective that made it seem that the ship was sailing through time itself, and not the shit-infested waters of Halifax Harbour.

I loved it. I walked past it every day on my way to work at the sandwich shop, and every day it made me pine for my own days in art school, when I had painted such things. That mural reminded me that you could do anything with a few cans of paint. You could elevate the most insipid commission into something that described the whole city in a few spare blue and white lines. Every so often, tourists would come into the shop and talk about the mural as they ordered their sandwiches and wraps. They seemed infected with wonder, talking about lines of paint on a downtown brick wall as if it were a brand new idea.

That was why I tagged the painting, one night in August. Five-foot high letters in blue spray paint, right over the sail

of the ship. Not my name, but the loops and swirls of my handle: SSRI, one S flowing into the other, R and I doubling back to frame the whole thing. I'd had to hang from the fire escape to complete it, and when I'd finished, I let go and fell back to the earth, stumbling on my feet, marveling at my tag smack in the centre of the sail. It looked beautiful. I felt like I'd staked some personal claim on the mural, made it my own. It didn't matter that I hadn't painted it. Now my tag was a part of the painting, a part of what people would talk about.

The cops, however, didn't see it that way. One of them banged my head against the roof of the cruiser as she shoved me into the back of the car. My head sang with pain. "Oops," the cop muttered.

As we drove up Barrington Street, past the few curious onlookers who'd watched the cops take me down in the act, I craned my head just enough to see my work through the smudged back window. It shone from the light of the streetlamps. SSRI. My tag, in the same blue that covered my hands and my handcuffed wrists.

As usual, it felt good.

* * *

John McNaughton presided. I remembered his name from a story in the paper that week, noting he'd won an award from some community organization for sponsoring graffiti clean-up. Samantha, my legal aid lawyer who insisted I call her by her first name, thought that might prejudice the case, and she planned to appeal.

“Who cares if he’s prejudiced?” I had snorted in her office, when she’d explained the dilemma. “I’m pleading guilty anyway.”

“That’s not the point,” she’d said, but she never explained what the point was.

So, up we’d gone before the judge in Provincial Court. Samantha had taken out her nose ring beforehand, so she looked nice and professional as she stood up and told him that I would be admitting to the charges of vandalism, defacement of public property, and public mischief. His Lordship looked down at me from the bench. “Tyler Stevens,” he mused. “Weren’t you here last year on exactly the same charges?”

Samantha looked at me; her hand was a flat palm, pushing up at the air, urging me to stand. I got to my feet and said “Yes, your Honour, I was.” I’d tagged the side of Government House. It had been one of my best, with a few subtle shifts to my usual technique that I’d never been able to duplicate since, but like they say, everyone’s a critic.

The judge’s mouth twisted back and forth. “So we’ll have to do something about this, then,” he said, after a moment’s thought.

Samantha clenched her fists. “Damnit,” she muttered, almost but not quite under her breath.

* * *

“I managed to waive the fine,” Samantha told me, five days later. We were in her office, a barren room in a ragged building on Maynard Street. I could see graffiti on the next-door building through her window. One of the tags said ‘Picazo’, with a swift, circular flourish on the ‘Z’, left in grey dulling paint that had once been brilliant white. I knew it well; it was one of my tags, from my days before art school.

“That’s handy, seeing as the sandwich shop fired me,” I replied. They’d said it was due to my ‘chronic absenteeism’, but I’d decided it was probably just not wanting to be associated with me. My name had been published in the Police Beat column of the Daily News . Classic resumé killer.

Samantha winced, but carried right on. “There’s some community service involved, but I think you’d be interested in it.”

This time, I said nothing. Samantha looked puzzled and vaguely hurt. “You, um, well you’ll be helping Mr. Barish with a new mural at a high school,” she said. “Recently commissioned, and he needs an assistant to arrange it and actually paint it.” She paused. “Maybe you didn’t know, but he has Lou Gherig’s disease.”

Paint a mural with Barish? I had not expected that. Always before it had been helping other busted taggers clean up graffiti, but this was alien. I didn’t know how I felt about it. Flashes of voices from his class, years before, rang through my head.

I crossed my legs and tilted back in the chair, stared up at the ceiling tiles and the fluorescent lights, waiting for the echoes to stop. When I looked back, Samantha looked like she wanted to explain the sentence to me, but I waved my hand, trying to look disinterested. “Painting murals. Okay, whatever. How long?”

“Fifty hours.” Her voice was an apology. “It was all I could talk the Crown into. They’ve been on an anti-graffiti kick ever since the papers did that report.”

We sat there, she and me, for a long time. There were ten minutes to go in my appointed half hour. “How about that?” she asked, finally, once the silence had grown too heavy.

I looked out the window at my old tag again. “Beats jail,” I said, fighting to keep the hesitation out of my voice.

“It certainly does,” she said. She looked immensely relieved.

* * *

I biked to his house the next day, a small two-storey home on Chebucto Road. While I pedaled, I tried to figure out how I would react when I saw him there. Would it be too much and make me pedal away, or would it just be another court-appointed relationship, there for fifty hours and gone again, with only a high-school mascot on a gym wall to mark its passing?

I hadn’t decided which it would be by the time I rang the doorbell.

It took several minutes for Barish to get to the door, though I could hear the rubbery scrape of wheels on his floor as he approached. He opened the door slowly, and looked me up, down, up again. His face looked much as it had six years ago. Black hair, unruly, with bangs falling over his wrinkled forehead. Sharp green eyes and thin pursed mouth. But time and his disease had not been kind to him: his eyes were sunken, his hair was stringy, his mouth was flat, and he was compressed into a body that looked much smaller than it should have been. His face looked heavy, like he had been profoundly disappointed by something and that this was nothing new to him. He didn’t appear to recognize me, and he didn’t appear to care.

We stood there, looking at each other, saying nothing. I

could feel myself shrinking from his gaze and forced myself to hold the line.

“So you’re the asshole,” he said, finally. Flat, dead tone. Statement of fact, not opinion.

I didn’t feel like starting a fight with him, but I made sure that my own stare didn’t waver. Wheelchair or no, I wasn’t going to be his bitch. “Guess I am,” I said, scraping the toe of my sneaker on the edge of his step. “Your asshole for fifty hours and that’s it.” I paused, and then slowly crossed my arms. “That’s two minutes of the first one gone, by the way.”

We stared at each other, him looking up from the chair and me towering overhead. Suddenly, he pushed the chair back, spun around, and then started wheeling back into the kitchen. “Come on then, asshole,” he called back, not looking over his shoulder. “I need you to look over these designs.”

His house reeked of dust, and I could feel my sinuses twitch as I followed Barish into the hall. Bookcases lined the walls of his living room and his study, each accessible through corridors that barely fit his wheelchair. There were small black scrapes on the doorjambs at the level of his spokes. But Barish set a good pace, and soon we were in his kitchen. Sunlight dappled the countertops, casting thin shadows on the empty take-out boxes piled near the sink. His kitchen table had no placemats, no candles, no bowls of fruit; there were only sheets of white paper spread out from one end to the other, each with pencil drawings, sketched with wavering, shaky lines.

I picked up one of the drawings: it looked like a bagpiper in silhouette, cheeks puffed out with exertion. “That’s the sketch for the commission,” said Barish as he pulled the brake on his wheelchair next to the kitchen table. “It’s for a private school in Dartmouth. They want a mural in their gym for the basketball team. The Pipers. Go figure.”

“This sounds fulfilling,” I muttered. I’d rather have been cleaning up graffiti on the Commons.

“It’s paying for a month of home care,” snapped Barish. He slowly reached out to pick up a pencil. “Not that you’d know much about artistic dignity, but try to imagine how much you’d keep if you needed someone come in to bathe you. Sharpen this pencil for me.”

That crack stung, but I grit my teeth, took the pencil, and wound it in a small sharpener on the table. “What judge sentenced you to drawing for me, by the way?” he asked, shuffling through the papers. “That sounds perfectly asinine.”

“It’s community service,” I replied. “Since you’re helping out a school, it counts. Plus it’s ironic. I guess the judge thought that was appropriate.”

He grunted, and said nothing else. I handed him the pencil, and he passed me a few scraps of paper. His hands shook from the effort of keeping them aloft. I grimaced as I saw that, but if he noticed, he didn’t say. “Draw these again,” he commanded. “Let’s see if you’re good for more than just tagging someone else’s artwork.”

This time I almost said something, but again I forced my silence. I took the sketches, sat down, and began to draw.

* * *

He hadn’t thought much of the drawings, and he’d said so, but that wasn’t unexpected. He made no more cracks about tagging and graffiti, and actually once told me that I was more than just an idiot with a spray can. Never once did he acknowledge that I had taken a class from him several years ago, and I found that more aggravating than the graffiti remarks. But I held my tongue, kept copying the design until he pronounced himself satisfied, and then went home. Two hours down on my sentence, and forty-eight to go.

That evening, I sat in my apartment that night and kept drawing the bagpiper. I sketched him with his cheeks puffed out, the kilt flapping around, a few subtle changes in poise and stance. There wasn’t much else to do, except for listen to the couple downstairs scream and hit each other again, and that got tired fast. It even made me forget about not being able to afford the place for much longer, now that I was unemployed.

The next day passed much the same. Barish greeted me at the door, looking more tired than the day before. “We’re getting the colours set today,” he said, and soon we sat at his table, playing with paints, trying to get the colours just right. Barish sat in his wheelchair and shouted commands, and I coloured. I said little, every so often checking my watch to see how much time had passed.

Ninety minutes in, we had gotten the shades of green and gold to an acceptable balance, and Barish bade me make tea. I wanted to say something pithy, tell him how happy I was to be his court-appointed butler, but by then he was sagging in his chair, looking ready to collapse. I shut up and made the damn tea.

“I did recognize your name, by the way,” said Barish, once I had set his cup in front of him to steep. “You got busted for vandalizing the Purdy’s Wharf buildings last year. But even before that. You took one of my art theory classes, didn’t you.”

I stopped stirring my own tea, and I looked down at him. I had grown resigned to the idea that he had forgotten, but in a bizarre way that I was not impressed with, I felt pleased that he had not. "Six years ago," I said. "Theory of Public Exhibition."

Barish was silent for a moment, but once I started stirring the tea again he cleared his throat. "The fundamental truth of public art," he said, "is that it is defined by time as well as space. Once art is removed from the eye of museum curators and preservationists, its lifespan shortens and it becomes a very finite representation of what its containing space is at that particular moment in time."

I kept right on stirring. "We thought you were a pompous ass for quoting your own books all the time in class," I said. I couldn't quite keep my voice from wavering. It had sounded like a shaky parody of his booming voice that day in class.

"I'm right, though," replied Barish, as if there had been no difference. He made no effort to hide his satisfaction. "Being right means you get to be pompous if you want."

I took the spoon from my tea and set it on the saucer. "So why did you quit lecturing?"

He took a long, drawn out sip, and the teacup clacked against the table as he set it down. "I wanted to devote my time to my own work, not lecturing on other people's," he said. "Clearly that's worked out brilliantly. What about you? People get into my class if they have a modicum of talent. What happened to you that has you out doing graffiti instead of actual art?"

It is art and I told you that once before, I wanted to say, but I shrugged, and looked down at my tea. "Circumstances," I said.

"Failure," said Barish. "Familiar story."

I felt my brow furrow in anger. "I'm here to be your slave. Let's nevermind the commentary and just get back to work."

Barish snorted. "Fair enough. Get back to the colours, then."

I added greens, yellows, reds, listened to him criticize and suggest and berate. Finally, he wheeled away in disgust. "You can't do a goddamned thing right," he spat, slipping down in his chair and glaring off to the side. "No wonder you're just tagging things."

I slammed the paintbrush down. "If you don't like what I'm doing, take it up with the judge."

Neither of us said another word. I stood up, shoved the paints into his box, and tossed them across the table. When I looked back, he was staring out the window. I followed his gaze; a cat was stalking a bluejay through his overgrown garden. As we watched, the cat pounced, and the jay took off into the air, flapping its wings in rebuke. "Same time tomorrow," he said. His voice was flat.

I wanted so badly to say something cruel and hateful, but I didn't. "Yeah," I said. "Same time tomorrow."

I gathered up my things, and started toward the door. "Hey," he called after me, just as I'd grabbed the doorknob. I paused without looking back.

"The colours aren't complete crap," he said.

I could feel my teeth pressing into my lip, but I couldn't stop the smile from surfacing as I pulled the door open.

* * *

I wanted to tag something that night, but instead I drew the bagpiper again, playing with different combinations of the colours we'd decided on. It had been a long time since I'd used my own paints; I had to go downtown and buy a new tube of green to replace my caked-up old tube. Despite the acid that Barish had hurled at me, I couldn't help but feel a little proud of my work that night, and when I went to sleep on my futon, nothing seemed to matter but the mix of the colours. It had been a long time since pigment had consumed me that much.

Of course I went back to Barish. Over the next few days, and despite what felt like countless revisions, we got the colours finalized, and then started adding them to the sketches. Each step had to be redone at least four times, with Barish criticizing it every step of the way, declaring more than once that the whole project was garbage and beneath him. Usually I said nothing, but as the hours and days marched on I grew fonder of the bagpiper, of his kilt and his cheeks and his tartaned tam off the centre of his head. Finally, ten hours into my sentence, and just as we were ready to plan the first attempts at painting the wall of the school, Barish threw up his hands and said that he wasn't going to do this anymore.

"If you don't," I said, not looking up from the paper, "I will."

Barish snorted. "That's rich. This whole thing is just community service for you vandalizing my painting. You, finish it? You'll probably just tag the whole thing with blue spray paint."

I slammed my brush down and glared at him. He looked



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Church & Dwight Canada Corp., the distributors of Trojan brand condoms in Canada, is committed to increasing the rate of consistent condom use by being the leaders in product innovation, consumer education and sampling to encourage responsible sex.

Recent statistics show that while the number of teen pregnancies is decreasing, the number of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) among 15-24 year-olds is increasing substantially. In fact, the majority (65%) of STIs today occur in people under the age of 25.²

Over the past 15 years, a significant amount of education regarding safe sex has been directed at 15-34 year-olds; yet despite the fact that they are aware of the risks associated with unprotected sex, the rate of consistent condom use remains low.⁶

The truth about STIs

- 1 in 6 people will have an STI by age 25¹
- Approximately 1.5 million people have an incurable STI¹
- The highest rates of STIs in Canada occur amongst young adults between the ages of 15 and 24²

Condom Use

- 29% of males 15-19³
44% of males 20-24
do not use condoms
- 51% of females 15-19³
53% of females 20-24
do not use condoms
- Sexually active adults who reported having sex without a condom:
 - 44% of those aged 20-24¹
 - 33% of those aged 18-19¹
 - 22% of those aged 15-17¹

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)

In Canada, 30% of people with living with HIV don't tell their partners because they don't know they have HIV⁴

Chlamydia

Close to 63,000 cases of Chlamydia were reported in 2004, the highest number of cases since the disease became reportable in 1990⁵

Gonorrhea

Reported rates have close to doubled from 14.9 per 100,000 in 1997 to 28.9 per 100,000 in 2004⁵

Syphilis

Syphilis is escalating in both males and females, but more so in males. 2004 rates for men were 15 times higher than in 1997 (6.3 vs. 0.4 per 10,000)⁵

1 Statistics Canada, data from the 1996/97, 1998/99, 2000/01 and 2003 National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY).
 2 Public Health Agency of Canada. Canadian Communicable Disease Report, June 2005, 2002 Canadian Sexually Transmitted Infections Surveillance Report
 3 Condom use, by age group and sex, household population aged 15 to 59, selected provinces, territories and health regions (January 2002 boundaries). http://cansim2.statcan.ca/cgi-win/cnsmcgl.exe?Lang=E&RootDir=CII&ResultTemplate=CII/CII_&Array_Pick=1&ArrayId=1050048
 4 Health Canada, Sexual Health and Sexually Transmitted Infections, http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/hiv-vih_e.html
 5 Public Health Agency of Canada. Canadian Communicable Disease Report. 2004 Canadian Sexually Transmitted Infections Surveillance Report: Pre-Release, May 2006
 6 http://www.sieccan.org/pdf/sexual_health_qs.pdf & <http://www.sexualityandu.ca/teachers/data%2D5.aspx>

Social responsibility

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defiant, daring me to lose my temper and start yelling. I thought he might be goading me to lunge at him, tip his wheelchair over and send him sprawling to the floor.

Damned if I was going to give him that satisfaction. I pulled my eyes away, picked up the cup of tea that he'd given me earlier, and swirled the spoon in the cup. "We'll see," I said.

Barish howled. "You're just a vandal," he spat. "I should never have agreed to this. Restorative justice. What a pile of bullshit."

"Do you want to know why I did it?" I asked. I took a sip of the tea. It tasted like dishwater. "Why I tagged your mural?"

Barish's eyes narrowed, and he peered at me intently. I didn't say a word; I just stood my ground as his eyes trailed over every inch of me, looking for something that he just wasn't seeing. "Not especially," he said, finally. "It can't be that complicated."

That stung again, and this time I did see myself leaping at him, dragging him from the chair and throwing him to the ground. I made myself count to ten until the urge had passed, and waited to see what would happen next.

But the fight had petered out; neither of us said another word, and eventually, we went back to work. I finished a coloured sketch that I was proud of, and held it up to the light. The bagpiper looked ready for the wall of the gymnasium. I wanted to hate it; it was banal, and it didn't say anything but 'go team', but at that moment I wanted him on the gym wall more than anything.

Barish had been looking out the window again, silent and sullen, but when I showed him the drawing, his brow furrowed in concentration. "That isn't as bad as I thought it'd be," he said. His voice was even and soft, though there was a sense of grudging to the compliment.

I was surprised at how hot and cold the whole thing seemed. "Thanks," I said.

"I'll talk to the principal tonight," Barish said. His voice sounded the slightest bit hesitant. "We'll see about going to the school and starting to paint it next week."

I didn't want to think of this as high praise, but despite myself, it felt that way.

* * *

Samantha checked in with me that week. I had to report on my progress; she told me that Barish had to sign a form to let my court-appointed officer know that everything was going

according to plan.

"It is," I said. I paused. "He can't sign papers, you know."

I could hear Samantha suck in her breath on the other end of the phone. "Oh," she said. "Well, I'll work something out."

The next day, the corrections worker came to the school as we arrived to check out the site for the mural. Barish, the principal of the school, and I were already in the gym by the time she arrived: a tall, severe looking woman with squared glasses and a frown carved into her face. She joined us while we surveyed the wall, a few yards away from where the high-school girls played basketball. The shrieks and whistles of their shoes on the floorboards rang in my ears, and I wished for Tylenol.

"It'll go up there," said Barish, ignoring the woman as she came alongside his chair. He pointed his finger upward, toward the space between the two basketball nets at the side of the gym. I could see his tremor, more noticeable than the week before, and his voice sounded softer. "Banksie here will have to get started on the upper parts later this week."

The principal stared at me, confused. "Banksie? I thought your name was Tyler."

"It's an art reference," said the corrections officer, and there was nothing for it; we had to look at her then.

She stared at me with a markedly unimpressed smile. "Banksie is a fellow from Great Britain who defaces other people's artwork as part of his oeuvre," she said with a silky, knowing voice. "Good morning, Tyler. Your community service is going well, I trust."

I nodded, feeling a quick flush of anger rise in my face. The principal looked quickly away as soon as the words 'community service' came into the room.

Squeak, squeak, squeak, went the girls' sneakers on the floorboards.

She smiled again, and leaned down in front of Barish's wheelchair until they faced each other. "Hello," she said. "I'm Tamara Murphy, from the Department of Corrections. I'm just checking with you to see how Tyler is doing."

"The help is doing just fine," said Barish, dismissively. He kept looking at the principal, who was awkwardly shuffling his feet. "The top of the mural is going to have to come pretty close to the edge of the roof."

Murphy was not deterred, and took a sheet of paper from her folder. "We'll have to delay talking about the mural for a moment," she said sweetly. "I need to go over this form with

you, Mr. Barish. One of the requirements of the restorative justice program is meeting with his community supervisor to make sure that his objectives are being met.”

“My objective,” snarled Barish, and his voice was suddenly booming and exasperated, “is for you to get the hell out of my way so I can see the wall and figure out how this mural is supposed to work.”

There was an agonizing silence, and Murphy and Barish stared each other down through the whole of it. Her face was a perfect mask of bureaucratic indifference; Barish’s was twisted with frustrated annoyance. I had no idea what to say; suddenly I wanted to go behind the bleachers and just wait for the world to end.

“This is important,” said Murphy, finally, and the room just deflated. Barish looked downward and his shoulders slumped, and Murphy uncapped her pen.

I felt sick, and I couldn’t take it. “Excuse me,” I muttered, and before any of them could say a thing, I raced past the squeaking basketball players, through the halls of the school, out into the open air of the playground. When I was sure there was no-one following me, I patted my jeans pocket, hoping that I had left a package of cigarettes there, but no such luck. I clenched my hands into fists and pressed them, as hard as I could, into the side of my legs. I wanted to scream.

There were three boys at the distant end of the playground, and no one else that I could see. They were spray-painting tags on one of the parked school buses at the edge of the lot, near indecipherable scrawls in black paint. One of them was taking particular care; the others were writing swear words, but this one, a smaller boy with a hat too large for him and a baggy sweater, was making his tag with languid, winding swoops of his arm. DOSE, said the tag. I had seen it on mailboxes and buildings downtown. It reminded me of my own first tag, of the care I had taken in getting the loops and swirls of the letters just right in my own basement before putting my name out there on the Halifax streets, just after I’d lost my scholarship for art school.

I suddenly wanted my can of spray paint even more than I wanted the cigarettes.

The kids finished their tags, spun around, and stared at me. The two who had been tagging swear words looked shocked, but recovered, and thrust their middle fingers into the air between us and ran off. The other – Dose – looked warily at me, as though he were waiting for me to make the first move.

I gave him a thumbs-up. He stared a moment more, and then ran off after the others, still holding his spray can tight. Just

like that, they were gone.

I leaned back against the wall of the school, and looked up at the open sky. I wanted to write my name on that sky, more than anything I had ever wanted before.

* * *

“That stupid cow ruined everything,” spat Barish.

We were back in his kitchen. I had been off the clock for twenty minutes, but it didn’t matter. I smoked a cigarette, and he sipped beer through a straw, out of a small cup. He had been cursing and swearing about Tamara Murphy since we had driven home from the school.

I felt obligated to make a token attempt at defending her, though I didn’t feel like it. “She’s just checking up on me,” I said. I sighed a soft cloud of grey from my mouth, and tapped the last of the cigarette into a small ashtray on the table. “It is her job. This is community service.”

Barish sipped noisily from the glass. “Your alleged redemption has nothing to do with the justice department,” he snorted. “You sinned against my mural, not theirs. Screw their objectives. I get to decide if you’re being rehabilitated or not.”

I couldn’t resist a smile. “Am I?”

“We’ll know when the mural’s done,” he said. His brow furrowed. “That crappy paint-by-numbers mural that will pay for someone to come in and wipe my ass for a few months.”

I wished, oh I wished he hadn’t said that. I wished I hadn’t tried to salvage things, either.

“The mural’s not that bad,” I said. “I think it’s coming along nicely.”

Instantly, I wished I’d been silent. Barish turned on me, his eyes blazing fire and his voice a blistering frost. “Really,” he said. “So, tell me. What does this bagpiper say about the time and the space it’s displayed in? Be avant garde for me, Banksie. Bring all those art theory classes home. I’d love to hear what the tagging set has to say about it.”

It was a mean-spirited lashing out, and I knew it, but even though I knew what the outcome would be, I couldn’t stop myself from trying. “It says that you’re still able to put something out for display,” I said. “It says that you can still make something for people to see, even if it is formulaic and even if people don’t really notice it beyond the basketball games and the gym classes. It’s about you, not the bagpiper. It’s your tag on the wall saying you were there.”

Barish peered at me so intently that I thought I might burst into flame under his gaze, but then his grip on the cup slipped and it fell to the floor, leaving beer in puddles all over his pants and the floor. The cup bounced on the linoleum with a plastic, hollow thud. “Damnit!” Barish hissed, and he picked at the crease of his pants, fumbling at the stain, until he finally folded his hands uselessly on his lap. “Clean that up,” he demanded, even though I had already taken the paper towel and was blotting up beer from the floor.

He stared sullenly at the wall the whole time. Only when I had thrown away the waterlogged paper towel and set the cup in the sink did I hear him mutter: “I hate this.”

I bit my lip, but the words came spilling out anyway. “I know,” I said. “I’m sorry it had to happen to you.”

“I hate every humiliating minute of this,” he snarled. “I hate having the home care nurse help me to bathe. I hate having to get this damn wheelchair through the doorframes. I hate not being able to pick up a damn paintbrush and hold it steady so I don’t look like some crippled Jackson Pollock.”

I couldn’t say anything anymore.

“The worst part of this is that everything falls apart,” he said, picking again at his damp pants. “All of it. My body will stop working. I’ll have to go to a hospital or a home and wait until I die or until someone has the decency to kill me.”

“Your paintings,” I said. My throat was dry. “The ones from before. They’ll still mean something.”

He looked at me, a long, hard stare that made me shift uncomfortably on my weight. “What if someone paints over them?” he asked. Now his voice was soft, wavering. “Or if the building gets torn down? Or if someone puts his elbow through the canvas at an auction?”

“Then they don’t last,” I said. I felt like I was pleading, and ordinarily I would have hated it, but just then I didn’t care. “That doesn’t make it so that they didn’t mean anything while they were there.”

“My tag,” Barish snorted, and then slowly turned the wheelchair around. “I have to go to the bathroom,” he said. “If I have to put up with your crap, then I might as well make my own to go with it.”

I wanted to offer my help, but somehow, that felt like the worst possible thing I could do. Instead, I watched him wheel through the hallway, swear as the chair caught for a moment in the doorframe, and close the bathroom door behind him. I sat for a moment, but then, despite myself, I tiptoed to the door.

Through the thin wood, I heard his strains of effort, his muffled utterings of “shit” and “damn” as he tried to lift himself to the toilet. I held my tongue until I couldn’t stand it any longer, and finally broke my vow. “Do you need help?” I called.

There was a long pause, and then a sharp, stern “no.”

“Are you sure...”

“Get out of here,” he snarled. His voice was quick, and every word was underlined with fury and shame. “Go home. We’re done for the day.”

What was I feeling as he said that? Fear? For the first time, his weakness and his frailty were not something to hold him in contempt for, or worse, to pity. I was terrified, and I couldn’t quite figure out why.

It finally sank in that this man was sick, and that I did not want him to be. I wanted him to be the caustic son of a bitch who’d chewed me out in his art theory lectures, who’d chided the Haligonians who’d scorned his artwork, who’d stood in front of me in the classroom and showed me what fire and passion truly were like. I did not want him to be the delicate man groaning with the strain of lifting himself to the toilet.

I grit my teeth, and then went back to the kitchen, not wanting to be able to hear the growling and cursing anymore, but I heard it just the same. I sat there, staring at the sketches, at the clock on the wall, at the empty teacup sitting on the table.

But suddenly I heard a cry, and then a loud crash. I leapt to my feet, ran to the bathroom, and barged through the door. Barish lay on the floor in a twisted heap, his wheelchair pushed off to the side, his pants around his ankles and a string of toilet paper unwound from the roll on the side. There was a crack in the toilet seat that had not been there an hour before, and an ugly brown stain on the edge of the bowl. The room smelled foul.

Barish looked at me in horror; he glanced back at the chaos, and then his eyes began shining with unshed tears. “I just fell,” he insisted. He struggled to prop himself up on his elbows, and his voice was wavering and reedy. “I just lost my balance. Nothing more.”

“Do you need help?” I asked. I held out my hand; he looked at it as though it were a loaded and cocked handgun.

“No,” he said fiercely. “I don’t need help. I told you to go home. Get out of here. Now.”

I didn’t move. I pushed my hand even farther toward him,

and he suddenly reached out, grabbed the roll of toilet paper, and threw it toward me. It bounced against my knee and went rolling uselessly toward the wall.

“Get out!” Barish shrieked. “Get out, get out, don’t come back, just get out!”

I stumbled back and fell against the porcelain; there was suddenly a sharp gnaw of pain in wrist from the twisting as I went back, but I made myself ignore it. I scrambled to my feet, listening to him curse and scream, and before I knew it, my feet were propelling me beyond my conscious control.

Out the door. Onto my bicycle. Pushing the pedals back and forth, back to my apartment, up the steps and through my door to my couch. I collapsed there, bonelessly, and stared up at the ceiling.

His shrieks echoed in my mind; I listened to them for half an hour, and then finally picked up the phone and called 911. I could hear myself asking them to send someone to check on him from a vast distance, and when I hung up the phone, I stared at the receiver, feeling like the world’s most despicable traitor.

* * *

I don’t know why the Chronicle-Herald thought it newsworthy, but there it was: LOCAL ARTIST IN HOSPITAL. A small paragraph in the Metro section, with a tactful paucity of detail. Liam Barish, noted local artist and former lecturer at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, had been admitted to hospital after paramedics had been dispatched to his house. They didn’t say anything about bathrooms or teacups, and that was that, sandwiched between an armed robbery in Dartmouth and a public hearing on parking regulations.

The afternoon it was published, I got a frantic call from Samantha. “What are you going to do?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said. I was sitting in my apartment, nursing a chipped cup of tea between my hands. I liked the heat on my palms; it distracted me from the hollow of my stomach. For one brief moment I thought about just paying the fine and having it done with, but I knew that was the wrong answer. “I guess I’ll finish the mural. I’ve got thirty-four hours to go. It’d take about that long, I guess.”

“We need to get you a supervisor,” said Samantha.

“You could transfer me over to the school principal,” I suggested. I closed my eyes; I really didn’t want to think about this. The story’s headline shouted at me from the paper on the coffee table. “Just get him to sign a form.”

Samantha sounded relieved. “That sounds like a really good idea,” she said, suddenly chipper and earnest again, and then she hung up. I took the phone from my ear, sighed, and then set it back in the cradle.

Once, back in his lectures at the art college, back when he had not been in the wheelchair, Barish had pointed to me from his perch at the front of the class with an imperious crook of his finger. “Why is graffiti different from art?” he’d asked. He’d looked smug. I’d assumed that he had seen me practicing my tags, or come across the one I’d left in the bathroom stall.

He liked to do this: test us, push our buttons, but for some reason I’d been ready for it that day. “It isn’t,” I’d said. “Both are a mark that the artist has left. Graffiti is just public art that hasn’t been commissioned, if it’s done right. People reacting to the environment they live in by announcing their presence.”

He’d stared at me, looking mildly surprised that he had not caught me off guard, but it didn’t last long. He went up to the front of the class, and demanded that the six of us in the class each write thousand-word essays on graffiti as a comment on society. “If a single one of you can come up with an argument that convinces me what Tyler says is true,” he’d said, and I think that only I had thought he might be open to that possibility, “then I will give you an A.”

I wrote seven hundred words basically fleshing out what I had said in class, padding it with all the pseudo-critical garbage I could muster, and then got a friend to take a Polaroid of me tagging Province House. “This tag will be gone by the time I hand this in,” I’d written on the back of the picture. “That doesn’t mean my comment wasn’t here. Call it representative democracy; I just signed the legislature.” I’d attached the Polaroid to my essay with a paper clip, and handed it in. He returned it three weeks later. The only mark on my paper had been a circled B-plus at the top of the page, and the topic of graffiti was never broached in class again.

He’d never asked why I’d tagged the legislature. He’d never asked why I’d tagged his own mural.

I thought that I had known, but suddenly I wasn’t so sure.

I stood up, pulled on my coat, stepped in my shoes and pushed my way to the toes without untying the laces. The phone started ringing just as I’d taken my keys from the hook. I let it ring, and left the house without a second glance.

* * *

The woman at the information desk gave me his room number without even asking my name. I thanked her, and

took the elevator up onto the seventh floor. The nurses didn't even look at me as I passed, and at the far end of the hall I could see doctors wheeling a cart of red binders from room to room. There were a few people in the hallways, some looking like regular folks, others in johnny-shirts, walking around with IV poles, goaded on by physiotherapists. The walls of the ward were bland and spare, with only a few occupational health and safety posters to break the monotony. Things would be different if I were a patient here, I thought. My tag would be all over the place, just to prove that I had been here and mattered.

Barish's room was in the middle of the ward, and he shared it with one other person, an elderly woman whose hand was tied to the bed. I could see it jerking around in its strap, seemingly of its own accord; the ancient woman looked at me and said "Danke schoen". I smiled weakly back at her, and looked toward the next bed.

Barish sat in his wheelchair, looking out the window. His bed was perfectly made, as though it had not been slept in. There were several envelopes on his bedside table, none of which had been opened. I stood waiting for him to acknowledge me, and I cleared my throat only after he'd failed to do so.

"I know you're there," said Barish. He sounded exhausted. "If you want to sit down, sit down. I can't exactly stop you."

I slowly lowered myself into the chair at his bedside, and folded my hands on my lap. Barish inclined his wheelchair slightly toward me, but not enough so that he faced me. "Did you call the ambulance?" he asked.

I thought about denying it, but in the end: "I did."

He thought for a moment. "Good enough, then."

"I wanted to apologize for that."

"Don't, there's no point." He sighed heavily. "If I could have what I wanted I wouldn't have this... this condition in the first place. And let's be honest, I'd never forgive you anyway."

I couldn't help but smile at that. "Are they going to let you go home, soon?"

Barish shook his head. "The neurologist says that my condition is advancing rapidly and I should speak to the social worker about an 'alternative living strategy'." He snorted. "It's such a game to them. He actually said something about clinical trials, seeing if there was something to slow the progression down, but I can hear what they're really saying clear enough." He sighed. "I'm not going home again. I don't even care anymore. My world is shrinking and being taken

away from me, and I don't even care."

There wasn't much more to say about it, then. We had never really talked about his condition, save for him cursing when he dropped something, or growling as his fatigue overwhelmed him, but there it was, out in the open. He would continue to deteriorate, and then one day it would kill him.

Only his art would be left of him, and I had tagged it.

"I'm sorry," I said. It felt raw to have that out in the open like that.

"For what?"

"For tagging your painting," I said. "I was being selfish. I wanted to show the world that I had been there, but you'd already done that. That spot was taken."

Barish looked at me closely with a fierce, pinpoint gaze, and suddenly his mouth curled upwards in a smile. "You aren't really sorry at all."

I stared back at him, and I couldn't help but allow a small grin. "A little bit, but not completely."

"We all have to make our mark, I guess," said Barish. He settled back in his wheelchair and looked out the window I guess. "I still think it's a stupid and cheap way to do it. I always did."

"Maybe," I said, "but it's mine."

"Keep it, then," he said. "We all need one."

We paused for another few moments. The old lady in the bed next door said "Danke schoen", again and again into the silence, and nobody came. "That's going to drive me nuts," said Barish. He looked toward me. "What's going to happen to the mural? The one at the school?"

"I don't know," I said. "I might see if I can finish it. Use it for the last of my community service, and just get the school principal to act as the guardian for it."

"I still get the money for it if you finish it," said Barish. "Fair's fair."

I nodded. "Fair is fair," I replied, and then I stood up. I paused just as I began to turn. "I can come and visit you again, if you want."

Barish bit his lip. "Please don't," he said. "I hate people seeing me like this. It's only going to get worse. Go finish the mural. Take a picture and send it to me with the cheque. That's enough."

I nodded, and then started toward the door.

“One last thing,” Barish called after me. “For when the mural’s done, after you take the picture.”

I stopped at the doorway, and looked around.

“Tag it,” said Barish. “Tag that son of a bitch.”

I nodded, and mimicked pressing the nozzle of a can in my hands. Barish turned back to the window, then, and that was

that. I waited a moment until I was sure he was looking out the window, and then I stepped into the hallway, out of the ward, off to make my mark.

Dylan Blacquiere

Class of 2007, Faculty of Medicine, Dalhousie University

Essentials of Neurosurgery

Honourable mention for the Cynthia Davis Prize for Writing, 2007

Tuesday, March 12, 2002, 0716hrs

Ramesh bent down to cover the license plate of his motorcycle with the black plastic bag so that the numbers could not be seen.

I can't believe there is another bandh today, he thought to himself.

This would be the sixth one in just over two weeks and the second in three days. The stories in The Himalayan Times were becoming increasingly repetitive - farmers dumping their milk into rivers and vegetables onto the highways because blockades prevented any trucks from bringing goods from the countryside to the cities; aid workers leaving the hospitals and schools in rural Nepal because of threats from the Maoists; daily protests of thousands of people in the streets of Kathmandu; and day after day of bandhs with shops and universities forced to close – only the brave, or foolish, would risk not complying with the strikes meant to pressure the King and the government.

The inconvenience of them was becoming annoying to him. On the previous bandh days, he had taken the bus that went around Kathmandu in the mornings to collect the physicians and nurses to bring them to the hospital. It was clearly marked with the hospital logo and a red cross so that it wouldn't be mistaken as a defiant vehicle. But the bus left the hospital to bring people back home at 4 o'clock, and Ramesh never finished in the operating room or clinics or ward by that time, which meant that he had to walk home. Some of his residents were riding their motorcycles on bandh days anyway – they drove quickly, both because there was no traffic in and out of which to weave and to ensure they made it to the hospital safely. Pankaj, one of the General Surgery residents, told Ramesh that he just barely made it past a group of protesters who saw him riding his motorcycle and began to

throw stones at him. Covering his license plate was Pankaj's new trick to try to avoid any way for people to identify him on his way to or from the hospital and Ramesh thought that it was worth a try.

Ramesh put his helmet on and pulled away from his home as the Honda sputtered out of first gear. The morning was quieter than usual. Across the street, Ram Mahat was taking the cell phones out of his window display. Moona Lama's sweet shop was still closed and the tasty burfis, jalebis, and ladoos hadn't been put out for display behind the glass counter yet. Some of the other stores still had the metal screens over their windows and doors as if they weren't planning on opening today. There were few taxis on the streets, although there were still some people riding their motorcycles. The three ladies who usually swept the dust from the sidewalks were not around.

Ramesh wondered why he had bothered to come back to Nepal. After doing his surgical residency at the government hospital, he was able to persuade Dr. Gongal, the Department Head, to let him do some extra training in Neurosurgery in America. That was difficult, because his residency colleague Shamsheer had been allowed to go to Australia to do fellowship training some years back, but then he found a girlfriend there and enjoyed the money and lifestyle in Sydney so much that he never came back. Ramesh had promised Dr. Gongal that he would return – his mother was getting older and he could not leave her alone for too long, and he would be the only neurosurgeon at the hospital when he returned.

Ramesh would smile to himself whenever he pictured what Justin, his senior resident at the Massachusetts General Hospital, would say if he found out that Ramesh was back living in his parents' home. Justin had been a big help to him while he was in Boston. Justin had just assumed the role of senior

resident when Ramesh arrived, but he exuded such confidence in everything that he did that he made the residents on his service feel like their time on Neurosurgery would not be so daunting. Justin introduced Ramesh to all of the friendly nurses who would help him make his nights on call a little less busy by not paging him every seven minutes, showed him which wards stocked the best crackers, packages of peanut butter, and cartons of orange juice, allowed him to use his locker to store CTs and MRIs so that he would not be scrambling five minutes before Grand Rounds at the film library to gather that morning's cases, and took him to the Starbucks across the street for vanilla bean lattes.

Despite sending money back home every month while he was away, his sister Priya has not been subtle in reminding him daily by email of how she was looking after Mama while her older bhai was away in America. Now, ten years later, Ramesh was back home, working at the government hospital.

Work was difficult getting used to at first. While as a resident in the public hospital he had become accustomed to using every millimetre of suture and the dullest of drill bits to do surgery, after two years in Boston, he found it unacceptable to operate without a CT scan. How could he do surgery for a suspected aneurysm without a decent angiogram? After spending hours in the operating room, he would be disappointed to find that there were no more ventilators left in the hospital and now it was up to a wife or husband or daughter to ventilate their relative by hand. The operating room scrub nurses were quick to cut Ramesh off whenever he started a sentence with, "In Boston..." and teased him regularly saying that he now had a funny accent when he spoke English. He had resigned himself to the fact that he would just have to have bhagya - faith that things would follow their path and unfold as they were meant.

Ramesh sped along the Kanti Path road and then past Rani Pokhari, the small lake almost in front of Bir Hospital. The city had recently paved all of the roads near the Royal Palace, making four lanes for traffic and an overhead pedestrian walkway that bore advertisements for Coca Cola and Benetton.

He parked his motorcycle in front of the hospital, under the mural of Lord Hanuman bringing medicines from the mountains.

He was taking off his helmet and looking through his saddle bag for his cell phone when a boy approached with bunches of flowers. There were always children selling things in front of the hospital.

"You'd like to buy, sir? You'll buy from me? I promise you a good price."

* * *

Thursday, September 17, 1963, 0716hrs

Ramesh had to squint his eyes a little as he approached Pashupatinath. The sun had already lifted itself above the peaks that nestled the Kathmandu Valley as he bicycled to the pilgrimage site on the outskirts of the city. It was another reminder that he was late – by 7 o'clock, he should have been well on his way home with the flowers to have something to eat before getting ready for school. He peddled a little faster now as he coursed alongside the Bagmati River and saw the sun reflecting crisply off of the metallic gold-coloured roofs of the temples. Smoke rose softly from one of the funeral pyres that jutted into the river. Women in white saris and men in white kurta pyjamas wiped tears and fed the fire with rice and flowers. Beside them, on another pyre, two boys used brooms to push whatever ashes and charred pieces of wood remained from an earlier cremation into the holy Bagmati.

Ramesh walked his bicycle across the bridge to see the sadu, a Hindu holy man. He was sitting where he always sat, his legs dangling, near the statue of Lord Ganesh.

"Namaste, beta," he said smiling as brought his two hands together in front of his heart, "I know that your father must have already scolded you for getting out of bed late this morning, so I will say nothing about that."

"Hanji, namaste saduji."

The sadu had already put together a large bunch of white and red flowers for Ramesh and tied them around the stems so that they would be easier for him to carry. Ramesh came to Pashupatinath every morning to buy flowers to bring back to his family's shop to sell. Some thought that the flowers from here had Lord Shiva's blessings, but to Ramesh they looked just like the ones that he could have picked from around the corner of his house.

He dropped twenty rupees in the small grey can beside the sadu. It was remarkable that he was able to keep his orange robes so clean even though the temple grounds were so dusty. His matching orange turban was loosely tied so that Ramesh could see that the colour of his hair matched his ashen grey beard. The white paint on his forehead was only interrupted by one streak of red that ran from his hairline to the bridge of his nose. He wore a garland of pink and yellow flowers around his neck. The tourists that came to see the temple liked to take pictures of saduji.

"Why do you sit in the same place everyday? It's that same

scene down there.” Ramesh leaned on the cement wall, looking down at the river below and the temple and funeral pyres across.

The sadu smiled but kept looking past Ramesh across the river.

“To watch the paths taken.”

Pilgrims with brightly-coloured saris or shirts flowed inside the temple. Others, dressed more demurely, took the stairs to the white building on the right, where people brought their sick mothers or fathers when the doctors said that there was nothing more that they could do, when there wasn't enough money for more operations or chemotherapy, when the time that the path to the Holy Bagmati had to be taken had almost come. And below, the white saris and robes of people by the River were only offset by the orange and pink flowers they carried.

“So what's my path? Will I be like Erapalli Prasanna?” Like the other eight-year olds in his class, Ramesh admired the Indian cricketer, who also happened to be short in stature and right-handed, like Ramesh. “Where am I going?”

“To school. Until tomorrow, beta” he said to encourage Ramesh to hurry home.

* * *

Tuesday, March 12, 2002, 0724hrs

“What are you talking about? What am I going to do with flowers? Doctors don't bring flowers to work.”

“Namaste, Ramesh,” said two nurses as they walked past Ramesh into the hospital lobby and then giggled to themselves.

“Maybe for one of the sisters!” the boy smiled.

“But doctors do have to eat, don't they,” a little girl said more than asked. She had overheard them as sat squatting near the front steps frying parathas and boiling chai on a gas stove. She was generously spreading ghee on them and throwing cardamoms into the tea as if she had an unlimited supply.

“Are they just plain, or do they have aloo or gobi?”

“Amit,” the girl called to the boy holding the flowers, “jaldi karo, go get some aloos for doctor sahib”.

“Just give me what you have there.”

Ramesh walked into the lobby with his helmet under one

arm and took a bite – the paratha was warm.

* * *

Tuesday, June 9, 1970, 0515hrs

The rooster was crowing.

Ramesh wished that they could just eat him and then he would be able to sleep a little longer. Why should he wake up this early? They didn't sell flowers in the shop anymore. His classmate Sushil wakes up at 7:30 every morning and still makes it to school on time.

Ramesh stepped over his sister's legs – she was still asleep on the mat on the floor beside him – and went to the kitchen. He poured some water out of the bucket into the kettle and lit a match for the stove. The bells were ringing as people prepared their poojas – lighting the incense, offering rice and flowers to the gods, and then ringing the bell so that the gods knew that they were there.

Ramesh rummaged through the cabinet – there was no cinnamon or cloves. He was supposed to buy some last night. Now Mama is going to say it doesn't count as real chai.

As the water boiled, Ramesh went to see his mother. She was trying to get the oil lamp ready for prayers. She hadn't been able to go to mandir anymore because of her legs, so Priya had helped her set up an altar for Lord Hanuman beside her bed.

He knocked on the door frame before walking through the bead curtain.

“Come in, beta.”

“Do you want aloo paratha, or plain paratha” the words sounded like he was giving her the choice but his tone suggested there really wasn't one.

“It doesn't matter, beta. You choose. As long as you're generous with the ghee.”

He kneeled in front of her and took her right hand in his. It was covered with a white bandage that seemed like an extension of the white robe that she was wearing.

Ramesh took the oil lamp out of her left hand and put it on the floor beside him. “I can help you with that.”

He began unwrapping the bandage but she didn't flinch. Her arm was thin and he could feel the nodules beneath the sleeve of the robe. He tried to ignore the dark scaly patches on her hands, her arm and was happy he couldn't see the rest of them. She told him that she didn't feel the fire licking her

right hand as she cooked the dhal a few days ago when the skin on her hand had turned red and the skin bubbled.

“You know you don’t have to do this. Priya will be up soon.”

She rubbed the side of his head with her left hand and her fingers softly ran over the scar that Ramesh had made accidentally when he had shaved his head a week ago for the cremation.

“Your hands are soft, Rameshji. They are beautiful, like your father’s were. He always wanted to be a surgeon. I think you have his hands.”

* * *

Tuesday, March 12, 2002, 0736hrs

Ramesh paid attention off and on to the morning rounds presentations. He sat along the side of the conference room with the other consultants. The residents and interns on call the night before stood in front of the rest of the surgical residents and interns and presented the histories, pertinent physical findings and dispositions of the patients they had admitted. They certainly looked like they had been on call, with their hair matted or sticking out in different parts, a light layer of stubble on their faces. Ramesh disliked the sense of stickiness that he would feel on his skin if he hadn’t had a shower in the morning after working all night. He remembered, as one of the Neurosurgery residents in Boston would tell the male interns, “if I can find time to put on my lip gloss and comb my hair before rounds, you have time to shave.” Ramesh hadn’t received any phone calls last night from the house staff so knew that they hadn’t admitted any patients needing neurosurgery.

Professor Pokhrel was grilling the residents as usual – he was the consultant whose questions the residents feared most. Every morning, one of the ward aides would boil some milk and bring it to the back of the conference room along with spoons and sugar. And every morning, Professor Pokhrel would prepare his chai as the residents began their presentations. No matter how involved the professor seemed to be in his chai preparation, he would never fail to pick up on the details of the residents’ presentations.

“So why would you have made an incision like that?”

“What did you do for that creatinine?”

“And that patient was sent to a ward bed?”

“Name the diagnostic criteria for pancreatitis.”

At night, on-call was the time when the residents got to operate. During the day’s elective cases, the consultant typically did the operation with the resident and maybe one other intern assisting. But at night, no resident dared to phone their consultant to come in to do an appendectomy, and they were happy enough to be able to get to do some operating on their own. The low point was rounds the next morning. The resident who presented the cases was eager to get through them without feeling completely exposed by Professor Pokhrel; the interns who had also been on call and stood at the front were happy that all they had to do was stand there and try not to draw too much attention to themselves, and the other residents and interns who sat in front of them were just relieved that they were not at the front.

Rounds finished and the consultants and house staff streamed out of the room and went to their units. Ramesh looked for the resident and two interns who had been assigned to Neurosurgery for the month and saw that Asha had already collected all of the charts and was briefing the two interns about the plan for the day. She had a great sense of organization and made life easier for the other members of the team. She was one of the few residents who actually volunteered to do a rotation on Neurosurgery, and Ramesh hoped that if he treated her well, she would consider going to Canada or America for more training.

They saw the four patients on the ward and provided instructions to the family members who sat on the floor beside the beds. While the nurses gave the medications, it was the family members who fed and washed their loved ones, transported them to radiology, bought whatever dressings and surgical supplies were required, and went to the pharmacy on the first floor of the hospital to purchase whatever medications the physicians ordered in the chart. Before Ramesh and the house staff entered the surgical intensive care unit, they took their shoes off and put on the chuppels beside the nursing station and gowns over top of their clothes.

With all of the patients seen and a plan devised for their care for the day, Ramesh and Asha went to the first floor Outpatient Clinics. The interns stayed behind to change the dressings and follow-up on the blood tests and x-rays that had been ordered.

The hallway outside of the clinics was packed with people – it seemed that even a bandh couldn’t dissuade people from walking to the hospital if they couldn’t take the buses or three-wheel taxis. A security guard walked in the lobby shouting at the people who were waiting for the clinics to open to take their turns in line.

* * *

Tuesday, March 12, 2002, 1146hrs

Ramesh and Asha sat facing each other at the small table that was against the wall. Above the table, on the wall, hung an x-ray light box. A stool at the remaining free edge of the table was for the clinic patients, and the bench along the wall was for any family members. Behind them was an examining table – the vinyl covering was dark green and ugly and it wasn't particularly soft either. An orange curtain could be positioned to block the examination table from view.

To see Ramesh at this Neurosurgery clinic, patients had to pay four rupees for a clinic ticket. They didn't need a referral – they told the clerk at the kiosk their problem or who they wanted to see, paid the fee and got the ticket. The hallway outside of the surgical clinics was already full of people. The lucky ones were able to lean against the wall for support while the others had to stand wherever they could find a spot.

The door to the Neurosurgery clinic was always locked so that patients wouldn't start to spill into the clinic area. As it was, while one patient sat talking to Ramesh and Asha at their desk, other patients would come into the room whenever the door was opened, even briefly, and try to find room to sit on the bench to be seen next. It wasn't just Ramesh and Asha, then, who were let into the private details of a patient's headache, double vision, numb fingers, or spastic gait, but the other patients waiting to be seen too. They were also interested to see what the CT scan showed when held up to the light box. Ramesh had become used to this again.

Ramesh and Asha had seen a young lady who already had been operated upon twice for a brain tumour that continued to recur (“really, there is not much more we can do; if you can, your family will need to take you to Delhi for radio-surgery”), a four year old boy from Bhaktapur who had a shunt inserted for hydrocephalus three months earlier (“say namaste to the doctor sahib, Pribesh” his mother instructed him), an elderly gentleman who came with his two grandsons with pain in his right knee (“Ortho to see, Asha”, Ramesh suggested to her), and a man who was able to afford an angiogram at the private Radiology clinic (“you need to be admitted”).

They heard vigorous knocking at the door, such that the frosted glass shook a little.

“Dr. Ramesh, sir? I am sorry, Dr. Ramesh?”

Asha got up and opened the door.

“Sir, I really apologize,” Birendra began as he first poked his head nervously through the ajar door to and then squeezed his way past the patient waiting to be seen who sat at the end

of the bench closest to the door. He greeted Ramesh with his hands together in front of his heart. His blue Oxford shirt was so nicely pressed. He would have looked quite professional if it wasn't for his lab coat, the pockets on both sides of which were stuffed with a drug manual, cue-cards with patient notes, on-call guidebooks, and a pakora that was leaving a translucent smear on the fabric.

“I am on call-duty today with you sir, and I would very much appreciate if you could come to the Casualty Department. I am having great difficulty getting a CT for someone and he really needs it.” He looked at Asha, who still stood holding the door and whispered to her, “mass casualties”, to explain.

The Casualty Department was a hive of activity when Ramesh walked into it with Birendra and Asha. At the Nurse's station, all three of the phones were occupied with residents calling their consultants. Residents and nurses were scrambling to fill out the slips for blood work and x-rays to give to the patients' family members so that they could be performed. All of the gurneys were occupied with patients, more lay on the floor wherever space could be made. Other residents moved quickly from patient to patient, keeping pressure on bandages that were soaked with blood, examining and casting injured limbs, hurriedly pushing stretchers with patients out of the Department to the Operating theatres or to the X-ray department.

The man who lay on his side in Bed 4 did not look well. The left hand side of his face was swollen. Both of his eyes were closed and the upper lid was a mottled black and dark purple. Dried blood was caked on his forehead and fresher blood streaked his black-grey hair on the left side.

“These are all casualties from the Maoist protests near Ratna Park today, sir”, Birendra began as he looked around the room and speaking louder than usual so that his voice could be heard.

“No ambulances today, so none of the victims could make it to the Patan or Tribhuvan hospitals.”

He stopped beside Bed 4 and Ramesh began to examine him.

“He was moaning and he will open his eyes and withdraw his left arm to pain – he doesn't do much with his right side. I talked to CT and they said that they already have six urgent cases to scan to the earliest they will be able to do it is in another two hours or so.”

Ramesh wanted to tell the intern that he really should give a consultant a proper introduction to the patient – how old was he? Did he have a known past medical history? What were

the circumstances of the injury? – but as he held the man’s eyelids open and shone his pen light into his eyes he realized that now wasn’t the time to review with the intern patient history presentation etiquette.

“Did his left pupil react before?” Ramesh asked.

“Yes, sir. Sluggishly, but definite reaction.”

This man could not wait two more hours for a scan to confirm Ramesh’s suspicion. Besides, with no family members here, who was going to pay for it? The hospital would cover the costs of four CT scans per month for Neurosurgery, but Ramesh had already used them for four patients who came from outside the city. There was no time to try to convince the Department to let him have another.

“Tell the sisters in the OT that we need to set up for a craniotomy. Asha, find some mannitol and I will start wheeling him upstairs.” An intern saw that Ramesh was starting to push the head of the stretcher and grabbed the other end.

Although Ramesh had done hundreds of craniotomies as a resident and now as a consultant, he still felt a certain sense of nervousness just before he started a case. He could feel his heart beating a little faster, a sense of warmth starting from where his heart was that expanded across his chest. These feelings were no longer distracting, as they had felt as a resident when he was learning how to put a clip around the neck of an aneurysm for the first time, or suture a nick in the superior sagittal sinus. In fact, these feelings now served to refocus his attention on the task at hand.

“Namaste, Rameshji,” Anjali greeted as Ramesh entered the operating theatre in his scrubs. He could tell that she was smiling under the mask by the way her eyes moved at the corners. She seemed to be relaxed as she got the trays of operating instruments ready, but he could tell that she was doing her best to hurry. The nurses in the operating theatre knew exactly how he liked the operating table to be set up, where he wanted his instruments, and which ones were his favourites, that is, the least dull.

With the several hour case ahead of them, Ramesh regretted that he hadn’t asked the girl for the paratha filled with aloo, but was thankful that he hadn’t had the extra cup of chai.

Asha used the scalpel to make a question mark-shaped incision on the left hand side of the patient’s head and Ramesh kept pressure with his fingers on one side of the incision to minimize the bleeding. She enjoyed working with Ramesh – since coming back from America, he had developed the reputation as being one of the few consultants who would let his residents, even second-year house staff like her, do as much as they were comfortable doing in the operating

theatre. With clips applied to the galea aponeurotica, they flipped the skin flap back, drilled holes in the frontal bone and another in the thin temporal bone, connected the holes with another drill and lifted the piece of bone. A thick clot lay heavy on top of the dura.

* * *

Tuesday, March 12, 2002, 1654hrs

Ramesh and Asha had already brought the patient to the Intensive Care Unit, which was conveniently connected to the operating theatres. Ramesh was writing the operative note for the chart on the table near the Recovery Room when he heard the door that opened to corridor that surrounded all of the operating theatres slam shut. A young girl was lost as she looked around and then stopped short of the red line painted on the floor and sign that instructed that all footwear needed to be removed before proceeding. Two pairs of sneakers and a pair of chuppels lay in front of the line.

The sign on the door to the Intensive Care Unit read “ICU ensures uneventful recovery” and “No noise, no shoes, no smoking, and no spitting.” Ramesh led her through the doors and into the unit. Machines flashed different colour lights, drew curved line patterns on monitors, and spoke in a variety of beeping noises.

Ramesh thought that she must have recognized the red string bracelet around that patient’s left wrist right away because she started to cry. His eyes were closed, a white bandage was wrapped around his head, like a turban. His arms lay by his side. A tube was in his mouth and secured by tape to his cheeks. The nurses had done a good job of cleaning the blood.

Ramesh began speaking to her. He had recited speeches like this to patient’s families so many times that he thought it probably sounded rehearsed. He felt like he could see himself talking to her; it looked and sounded like the words that he spoke were dissociated from the movement of his lips, like the way the Hollywood actors looked when their movies were dubbed in Nepali.

He knew that he had lost her at the beginning, when he started “Let me tell you about your father...” They had taught him in America that you could break bad news in 6 steps – just follow the recipe.

“You can talk to him and touch him. Beta? You can hold his hand.”

Ramesh came back later that evening. She was still there, sitting on a chair beside the bed, her head resting on her father’s chest. Her head rose and fell with her father’s chest,

the breathing of the ventilator.

Ramesh stood by the bed and held the clipboard that summarized the patient's life in numbers and lines but wasn't looking at the paper. He saw that the girl had marked her father's forehead with red dye, and some of the dye marked the bottom of the bandage. Her eyes were closed.

He wanted to tell her that things would be alright, that her father would wake up in the morning and call her name, that they would go home but would need to come back if the wound started looking a little red, that she could follow the

path of the people with nice clothes who were going to the temple at Pashupatinath, not the hospice or River, that the fighting in Nepal was over.

"I'll ask one of the sisters to bring you a blanket. I think we still have some Fanta in the fridge."

She nodded.

Karim Mukhida

Department of Anatomy & Neurobiology, Dalhousie University

Gertrude

Honourable mention for the Cynthia Davis Prize for Writing, 2007

5th February 1981

"Cynthia! Cynthia! How could dirty dishes be left undone like this?" I moaned, not masking my displeasure at all.

"Well, Gertrude..."

She then mumbled something pathetic while smiling that sheepish smile. Oh, I don't know what Johnny sees in her. It must be that smile...seductive maybe, but utterly insincere. She must think I'm quite senile if I cannot see through that.

My Johnny is as good a boy as a mother could have. Never once has he raised his voice to his mother. And he has always made me proud. An obedient, studious boy who has never (thank heavens) taken to the tattoos and horrendous rock music like the riffraff down the street. He has always done well in school and enrolled into the prestigious Preston instead of that common liberal nest of a Dalmary and subsequently graduated with an accountancy degree with honours; just like his father before him. I guess I will never forgive David for allowing Shears to buy him out of Watson & Shears for if not, Johnny would undoubtedly be the 2nd Chairman from the lineage.

I already have in my savings money for Johnny to set up his own firm, like his father; I am just waiting for him to ask for it. But he never did and was content playing second fiddle to that dubious Goldman. It must have been that woman's influence. But oh well, my son would do well in any place at any time.

This Cynthia woman! Don't get me wrong. I am perfectly aware of timid, insecure women who held on to their sons like turtles and I am confident I am not of that breed. But

this Cynthia woman is simply incorrigible. I knew it from the night Johnny brought her home to dinner. I've always preferred that Jenny girl and rightly so. Good pedigree and proper upbringing with strong religious background. Well, Johnny choosing her eventually (or the other way round) was not unexpected. You see I'm not always right about human character, but I'm rarely wrong.

What kind of a wife are you if you cause your husband to achieve less than what he could? My darling David, who succumbed to a heart attack years ago, has always acknowledged me as the woman behind his success. Even after my beloved David died, I soldiered on, with the tenacity that befits a well-groomed lady; and made sure Johnny was brought up right. That is what all women should be to their husbands and to their home.

Oh and she couldn't even bake a decent pie! Her housekeeping skills are deplorable. That woman can't even wash sheets properly! Considers herself a career woman and fancies owning a business and running a home at the same time. Indeed! And her language! Oh dear me, it's not entirely disrespectful but certainly borders on it. But what can you expect. Her parents were divorced. Poor girl. All the same, it was Johnny who has to endure most of her shenanigans.

For Johnny's sake I tried my best to be patient with her, to be matronly and to guide her from silliness. At least in time, she bore me my grandchildren. Well, I thought things would be better and perhaps motherhood would knock some sense into this woman's skull. And that was not to be. Oh the poor girls. Poor Patricia! Poor Rachel! Eyelashes and earrings at the age of 6 and 5! When I confronted their mother, she had the gall to say it's 'not a big deal.'

Not a big deal, indeed!

* * *

22nd April 1983

For the 3rd time in a row, the postman left my mailbox opened with the letters and newspapers in, after repeated polite reminders to close the metal flap after. Civil servants ought to do their duty with a sense of pride. Most of the ones I encountered do it just for the sake of doing it; very unlike those days when I was the superintendant at the Middlebrook Public School, where things were not only expected to be done but done properly.

I refuse to believe propriety has run out of fashion. Thus, I must do something, just as with the milkman and the bakery. I proceeded to write a complaint letter to the General Postmaster, to convey my observations about such unprofessional attitude and a list of recommendations. If you want things done, you have to go right up to the top...

Very strange. I started my letter at exactly 1 o'clock in the afternoon. I noticed that by the time I reached 'Yours sincerely', it was past 6 o'clock in the evening. I, Gertrude Watson, have never taken so long to compose a letter. When I re-checked it, it was horrendous! Filled with grammatical mistakes I would expect a pre-schooler to make. It must be the lack of sleep lately, worrying about Johnny, and agonizing over that woman.

I suppose a stiff shot of whisky with my usual nightly glass of milk, prescribed by good Dr Robinson ought to do the trick. I undressed and slipped on my nightie. But just before, I managed to glance at myself in the mirror. I am 65 but can still fit into my best dress quite comfortably. God forbid that I should be vain but I am in rather good shape. Last few Sundays, Terence has been more charming to me than usual (as if I still don't notice things like this). I fear he just might pop the question. Then I'm afraid I'll have to decline his proposal quite delicately, for you do want to spare a widower more sorrow, especially if it is dear old Terence. Oh, such thoughts!

After reading 2 chapters from the Good Book, I took off my reading glasses and almost knocked over the glass of milk in horror! A shiver ran through me; for I could not recognize the faces in the photograph beside my bed! Why are there 2 strange men with me in it?

I recalled giving out a horrible animal-like groan and pray to the Lord to deliver me from this state. I closed my eyes and hoped everything would be normal tomorrow morning.

* * *

1st September 1985

I woke up this morning and realized that I had wet my bed. As I stared at the yellow wetness on my petticoat I felt a lump to my throat. Finally it has happened. I've been wrestling with this so-called Alzheimer's for about 6 months now. I remember feeling betrayed when Dr Robinson told me about it. Alzheimer's! I, who have never smoked a single cigarette or partook in excessive drinking; I, Chairwoman of the district's Good Nutritional Habits Society for over 14 years!

Alzheimer's!

As I climbed out of bed I noticed excrement slipped onto the floor. I wept.

Dr Robinson has advised against leaving the house unaccompanied. Johnny suggested a 24 hour nurse in the house. I resisted; even when one day I seemed to have lost control of my fingers and dropped a pan of boiling oil all over my feet and was hospitalized for weeks. I have always lived alone and lived well alone.

Then one day I couldn't remember the way around my own kitchen! My domain for more than 40 years! I could not remember the recipes I created and I couldn't even remember where the blasted salt & pepper were! The past few mornings it took me several minutes to realize where I was or who I am. I finally conceded to a homecare nurse. I read about Alzheimer's patients who wander in the streets naked and I vowed I would never be caught in that state.

Hordes of expletives simmered in my mind in these moments of frustration. Words I would never use or imagine I would ever use in this lifetime. And yet never before has such primal rage dominated me so. And I felt better after I vocalized them.

"Away from me, you stupid bitch!" I yelled at the nurse when she changed my diaper. How humiliating. I saw her wince at the insult and her face gradually grew stony to block her own reactive emotions. I immediately wanted to apologize but I couldn't.

Later that day Johnny and that woman came by to visit. I saw her stare at my stained clothes in the laundry. In a fit of rage, I flung the plate I was washing at her. It missed her by an inch.

Johnny stared at me, dumbfounded.

"Mother, what are you doing?"

Rage enveloped me. "Shut up, you stupid bastard!"

This was a new low. Against my steely will, I broke down and wept. Oh how I hate it all! Oh God, What kind of monstrosity have I degenerated to? What has come over me? Is this Alzheimer's or just who I am at the core?

I laughed. I laughed so hysterically I couldn't stop. The worried faces around me made me laugh even more.

Today I got so scared at my outbursts I vowed to never show such affect again.

* * *

10th September 1987

Today I spent the whole day chatting with David, until I suddenly realized he's been dead for 15 years.

I think I now live with Johnny, Cynthia and the girls in their home. They talk to me very often but I have to take a long time to decipher their question and by the time I can answer them, it is too late. All the time, I observed their watchful faces switched from eagerness to confusion to disappointment. Soon, I just closed my eyes.

Time ceased to be of interest to me. Earlier, I used to seize those precious lucid moments to remember everything and write them down. Now I no longer bother. It is taking too long for thoughts to transfer to my pen, and I could no longer write anyway.

When I'm relatively lucid, I'd just sit and try to remember Johnny's face and the striking resemblance to his handsome father. Cynthia. I noticed she is looking more tired lately. The girls' happy faces always brought a joy to my heart, though I can no longer express it. I know the day will come when I will no longer recognize any one of them. I live in a world of bottled up sorrow. And I know I must now make my peace.

Every night I gazed at that bottle of sleeping pills. Oh my God! How many times have I been tempted to down it all! Lack of courage, or the silly glimmer of hope, I don't know what stopped me every time. One time when I almost did it, Johnny tugged at my shirt and shook his head and I put the bottle down. Moments later I realized that it was 5 year old Johnny. My Johnny is 30 years old now. Or is it 18?

* * *

7th November 1989

Gertrude has been a regimental mother in-law. Sharp-tongued and demanding, I am human enough to admit that

impression. I could never please her! So prim and proper! In fact, her witty sarcasms can be quite humorous as well as stinging. Notwithstanding that, it was soon apparent to me also that it was her graceful elegance which Johnny mirrors that attracted me to him in the first place. Poor lady; built up all those defenses since the loss of her husband years ago and understandably, had trouble adjusting with sharing her son with another woman.

The first few years I was frustrated, with her and myself. But her illness has changed her; and more profoundly, changed me.

Since her diagnosis, Gertrude's deterioration has been rapid. She looked so frail and emaciated. After a few years at our home, it soon became apparent that she needed continuous monitoring and had to be institutionalized. Johnny was reluctant. So was I. Unbeknownst to myself, I've grown fond of her.

Yes, the days have been hard. The incontinence, the many interviews for nurses, the expensive billings, not to mention the sheer despair of a deteriorating family member in the house all the time, have been stressful. And yet, the burden and responsibility made me see Gertrude as the mother I never had.

Initially, Johnny avoided visiting her at the nursing home but urged me to go more instead. As irritated as I was by that, I could understand. He did not want to carry this image of his mother with him when she passes on. But he soon learned to grapple with it, as I knew he would eventually.

Explaining Alzheimer's to the girls was particularly difficult. But their confusion towards nanny's condition has to be cleared up and their fears allayed. Fifty years down the road, it could be their baptism of fire, with either Johnny or I.

Today I am in the hospital. Gertrude developed pneumonia while in nursing home and was rushed here in an ambulance.

I am holding Gertrude's hand and whispering sweet nothings to her. She is on a respirator and barely conscious.

9 years! Her Alzheimer's is now dancing its victory dance.

Suddenly I feel a tight squeeze on my hand and a single pearl of tear rolls down her face. As tears begin rolling down my own face, I pulled the plug.

Ernie Yap Sze-Wei

Class of 2008, Faculty of Medicine, Dalhousie University



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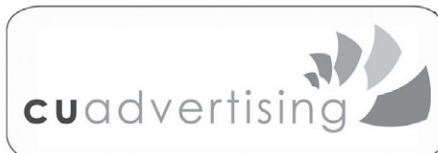
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