

FOR ALL OF US JUST STARTING OUT

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First, carry your mistakes on your sleeve.
Introduce them to every patient you meet
as though they were old friends.
Give them time to reacquaint
and only then follow your course of action.

In an emergency, trust yourself, or
earn the trust of those around you:
you will often need both.

The patient is a descendant of
all the patients before him,
respect him as such.

To the internist: your medicines are your scalpels,
fine-tune them accordingly.
To the surgeon: your scalpels are your heartstrings,
never cut what you can't see.

The patient is a poem, but don't over-analyze.
Read with the innocence of a child,
stopping at every line,
loving every rhyme.

If you find your eyes closed during the day,
don't let your mind wander to obscure facts.
Think instead of the first person you ever loved,
the sheen red-white of her lips,
like the inside of a strawberry.

For every laugh, laugh ten more.
For every tear, shed three.
And always, always, cry as though
no one is watching.

There is no art to medicine,
just singing in the rain.

No science to practice,
but a pendulum in the dark.

And last but not least: do no harm.

Dr. Ali is a third year internal medicine resident at Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare. He enjoys hiking and bicycling in his spare time.

THE ROBIN

Mary R. Finnegan

You were my favorite patient that first year
and robins were your favorite bird.
You loved them for the way they greeted
the day with song. Every morning
at sunrise, undaunted by the hour, you sat
at the window and listened to them sing.

One of your nieces told me that during the war
you'd thrown your body over a barbed wire fence
so the medics could slide a half dead soldier
over your back. I think she wanted me to know
that war was what was wrong with you,
the booted foot that trampled your life.

You asked for so little. Cigarettes, the rosary,
birdsong. At the end of my shift, I'd wheel you
outside so you could smoke one cigarette
after another while we prayed and listened
to the birds singing. I remember the sun
and the wind felt good after those cooped up hours.

It was a robin, you said, who went to Christ's ear
on Good Friday while he hung on the cross
and sang to him to ease his suffering. It's the blood
of Christ that reddens the robin's breast. Your dream
was to be a friar like your beloved Francis, to wear
the plain, brown habit, to give all of yourself for God.

But some unspeakable thing broke you
and you were turned away, left alone with only
cigarettes, the rosary, birdsong. Sometimes, as you lit
your Marlboro from the one before, a bit of ash
fluttered and landed on your shirt, it was then
I saw a flash of red glowing upon your chest.

Mary R. Finnegan is a writer and nurse living in Philadelphia. Her work has appeared in Dead Housekeeping, PILGRIM: A Journal of Catholic Experience, Catholic Digest, The American Journal of Nursing and elsewhere.