

NARRATIVE ESSAY

What I Heard

Nimish Garg

AUTHOR AFFILIATION:

University of Southern California
Keck School of Medicine, Los
Angeles, CA

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Nimish Garg, University of Southern
California Keck School of Medicine,
Los Angeles, CA,
nimishgarg.ng@gmail.com

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We met in clinic.
With your wife in hand,
a life weathered over decades,
and armed with harrowing tales
from a long-forgotten war.
I imagined your rugged exterior
shielded an equally stubborn interior.
But this is what I heard,
a soft cry for help,
seeking to avoid an inevitable fate.
As we all gazed deeply,
a speckled liver lit up the screen,
declining, decaying, dying,
from the drinks you used to forget—
those age-old war stories.

We met under the bridge.
You clung tightly, with a toothy grin,
to a tattered sweater and a perky pup
as your only possessions.
I wondered what compelled you
to come see us that day.
And this is what I heard,
a body unwinding, settling,
as it was finally attended to
instead of cast to the shadows.
As I shimmied a cuff over your arm,
you planned the tedious trek
back to a rickety retreat,
just to survive until next week,
to see if the numbers had fallen.

We met over video call.
Between pixels and pauses
your gentle smile held steady,
as you had been, despite months
under a relentless sun.
Your hands, usually still, quivered
like leaves under a stirring breeze.
So, this is what I heard—
curiosity becoming concern,
about that lump on your leg,
growing firm as a pistachio,
like those you pick every day.
Did the seeds of your own body betray
or had the perils of work
pierced beneath the skin,

halting the pursuit
of a humble life.

What I heard in
failing organs,
pressured arteries,
and swelling lesions
were stories of hope, resilience, and dignity.
So, I will continue to listen,
closely and carefully,
hoping to catch all that exists
between unspoken lines.