



“Bring Death”

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We meet because you have an infection,
though I suspect you are most troubled by a different problem in your chart.
“Recent left hemorrhagic stroke, basal ganglia and thalamus,”
not even two weeks ago.
Notable sequelae include
right sided hemiparesis
and expressive > receptive aphasia.

Before I go in, your nurse informs me that you are a doctor.
I think about how I would feel if some young medical student came in
and called me anything but doctor.

I call you doctor.
It is difficult to get a history from you.
Partially because you can scarcely speak,
(only the occasional, quiet, raspy word)
and partially because you are confused.
I tell you who you are, and you agree.
When I give you options for where we are,
you indicate that we are in a grocery store,
and I know that you are only half with me.

I see you each morning. I meet your family.
I ask about your baseline before the stroke.
“Walking, talking. She went to the gym. Her hearing has been going.”
“But otherwise, like you and me?”
“Oh yes.” Your husband confirms.
I imagine what it must be like.
Walking, talking, then suddenly unable to do the simplest things,
barely able to even speak.
I now understand why you told me you
“Need Courage.”

The next time I come in, you are feeling better.
You are doing something strange with your finger.
“Writing,” you rasp.
I offer to write the alphabet for you.
I write out all the letters so you don’t have to.
You point to each letter
to spell a word.

“B-R-I-N-G”

It is slow going.

Finding the letters is a challenge for the parts of your brain that are compensating.

“Bring?” I ask.

You nod.

You start again.

I listen to your heart while we try to communicate, multitasking.

You understand. You were a doctor.

You remember what it was like to be a student.

We get three letters into the next word
before I have to go.

“D-E-A”

I let you know that I need to go,

but that I will leave the paper

and a note for your family

so you can talk to them.

You nod and squeeze my hand tight.

I tell my team about

“BRING DEA-”

They ask me what I think it means.

When we return, my suspicions are confirmed.

“Bring Death” your husband says, tears in his eyes.

I had a feeling.

The attending asks if you have been feeling down. You nod.

He acknowledges that you were a doctor, that you know how hard it can be,
after something like what you went through.

He offers a medication to help your mood.

You accept.

Before we go, your husband gives me a hug.

“Thank you. She has been talking all day using this.”

I feel conflicted.

We fixed your infection,

but we cannot fix the broken pathways in your brain.

I say goodbye.

You squeeze my hand and whisper

“Thank you.”

As we gaze into each other’s eyes for the last time,

I feel our profound connection.

My patient and preceptor,

you have taught me more than you know.

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