



Illustration by Steve Derrick

## The little indignities

Wizened, calling out  
“Somebody help?” but not your  
Patient, so you don’t.

It’s clear she’s on the  
Commode but you talk fast and  
Pretend not to see.

He’s in the bathroom,  
But you’re running late so you  
Just chat through the door.

His wife is coming  
Back later; you promise to  
Be there, but forget.

She speaks no English,  
So you smile, give a thumbs-up.  
Did she have questions?

Lunch tray arrives, but  
He’s too weak and it’s too far;  
You don’t stay to help.

Why? Sometimes sicker  
Patients need you; sometimes you’re  
Just hungry for lunch.

The little indignities  
Accumulate, a weight you  
Can’t (shouldn’t) shrug off.

You balance your saves  
Against these slights, unsure where  
The tipping point lies.

Yes, you’re a doctor,  
But you’re also human, and  
There’s no cure for that.

—Michelle M. Kittleson, MD, PhD