

What we don't see

I held the door for an old woman
her smile was soft, practiced,
the kind you give a stranger
so the moment can pass.

And I remember thinking
how light she seemed
unburdened —

until I saw her later,
in the ICU,
head bowed beside the man
she'd loved for sixty-six years,
his body stilled by a fall.

She whispered something I couldn't hear,
and I realized
I never will.

Grief hides behind polite smiles
and clipboards.
It hums beneath fluorescent lights,
waiting rooms,
the beeping that becomes background music.

After my brother died,
I learned how easy it is
to move through the world unseen,
how comforting it can be
when people treat you
as if nothing happened,
as if you are whole.

I think of that often on rounds,
when the air feels heavy
with everything we don't say.

Once, on my neuro rotation,
I sat in on a family meeting —
a police officer,
shot in the head on duty.

The room pulsed with disbelief,
a grief so raw
it made me hold my breath.

I didn't cry
I just listened,
and carried their silence
with mine.

Sometimes I feel my brother
in the quiet between patients —
a heaviness
I can't name.

He never spoke much about his pain,
just carried it
until it carried him.

He hated seeing people wronged,
but never learned
how to ask for help himself.

Now,
when I meet that same silence
in someone's eyes,
I recognize it.
I don't look away.

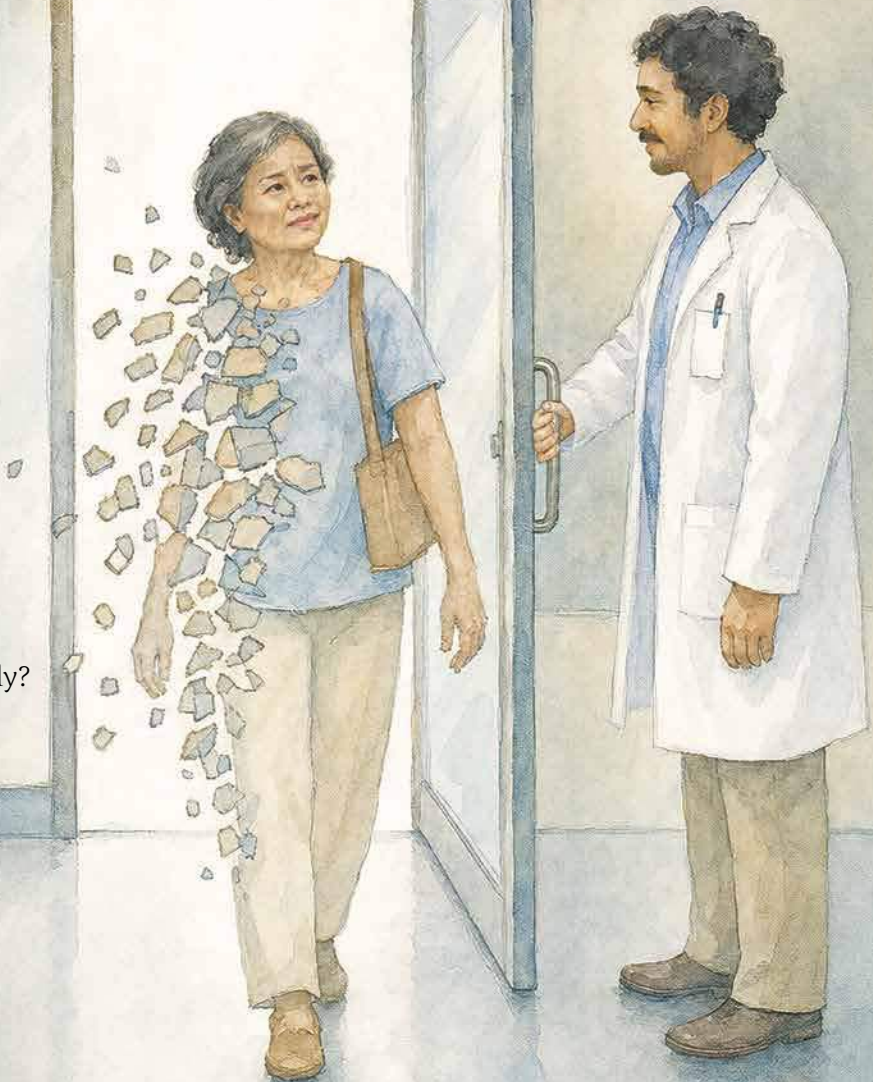
And sometimes,
when I walk the halls alone,
I wonder —
who around me is breaking quietly?
Who carries a loss
they never speak of?

I've learned
that the smallest kindness,
a name remembered,
a door held open,
can be enough
to keep someone standing.

And maybe that's what medicine really is —
not the curing,
but the noticing.

The quiet mercy
of seeing each other
when no one else does.

— Javier Montelongo, MD



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