

Essay/Personal Reflection

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It was well into the evening, and most of the patients in the hospice facility were fast asleep when the hallway lights sprang into listless action. I heard a curious sound coming from Room 10 and walked over to investigate. Through the cracked door, I saw a family, gathered around an emaciated man wrapped in warm blankets. The curious sound had been an exclamation of grief, and I quietly removed myself to the staircase a few feet away. As my volunteer shift was nearing its end, I sat on the steps and took to thinking—thinking about my day, my aspirations, and my dinner that night.

I was taken from my self-indulgent ponderings, however, as thumping footsteps signaled the arrival of what could only be a giant. I hopped from the stairs to the hallway, half-expecting to be crushed by oncoming traffic. Turning to the right, I flattened against a tall, sturdy, pillar-like figure who had just exited Room 10. He must have been standing behind the door when I had glanced in—though I could not miss him now, after crushing my nose against his sternum.

“My bad,” the giant bellowed in a thick, powerful voice. “Didn’t see you there.”

I unflattened my face and looked to the top of the pillar. “N—no problem... sorry about that. Are you a family member?” I asked this with some sense of self-amazement, as if I were David, shooting the breeze with Goliath. The giant responded in affirmation, saying that the patient in Room 10 was his brother. Goliath, as I had taken to calling him in my head, told me that his brother was a newly retired man—an industrious soul, who had gone from off-the-books odd-jobs to running his own company in a matter of years. Goliath was more than a decade younger than his big brother, although he was also, ironically, much larger. Despite these differences—or perhaps because of them—the two brothers shared an intimate bond. They had grown up in a troubled, impoverished urban neighborhood, and their relationship was, for both of them, a unique source of love and security.

“I was a kid, ya know? Growing up in the city, surrounded by this and that trouble, my brother was my rock. My parents weren’t too keen on one another by that point, and I needed a suit of armor just to get by—just to feel safe. But look at him now: I—I don’t know man, I don’t know.”

The bellow in his voice had turned to a tremor. But before I had the opportunity to ask what, exactly, Goliath did not know, he searched for what I *did*. He asked who I was; where I came from; and, as the night was fading fast, where he might find the nearest train station. But after the man had pelted me with a few quick questions, his furtive glance warned of a different inquiry, whizzing forward like a slingshot stone. He checked over his shoulder, as if he were being watched, and quietly inquired: “Are you guys going to cure his cancer?”

The rock whizzed right through my temple. If the hospice facility in which we stood were some sort of hospital, or an intensive treatment center, it was certainly not dressing the part. The hospice was run through a residential house, and the quaint wicker chairs hardly fit the “cancer center” mold. My mind wondered about Goliath: “He obviously knows that his brother is sick,” I thought, “He sees that man on the bed in Room 10. He knows that the treatments haven’t worked. Does he think this is another attempt at a cure? Does—does he know what hospice is?”

The man stood statuesque as I pondered these questions. Yet he must have assumed that I had been considering *his* question (which, of course, I should have been), and soon concluded that my answer was forthcoming. His tremulous voice softened to a whisper: “Well? I—I mean... are you?”

My throat thickened. Both the question itself, and the way it was asked, had told me everything. This man knew that his brother was dying; he knew that his rock was no longer invincible. The one whom he had come to idolize, to seek for shelter when his parents argued, lay tired and motionless in an unfamiliar bed. Industriousness had not saved his brother from cancer; and all the strength in the world could not save this man from fear.

Fear. At the risk of upsetting Goliath and his dwindling patience, I let the word ring awhile between my ears. Time seemed to dilute—back and forth, left and right, stretched out in all directions—until there was nothing left to separate one instant from the next.

But now, time was up. If Goliath had to wrestle with fear, with the realness of suffering, so did I. There was no dodging of duties, no denying the truth. I took a deep breath through my shaky lungs, and stepped out into unknown waters. “No, sir,” I said, in my best attempt at truthful compassion, “I’m sorry.” At some point, the piercing silence told me to continue, so I obliged:

“Your brother is very sick, and he’s been through a lot. His doctors and nurses have worked hard for him, and he’s endured everything with courage. But the cancer is getting worse, and they can’t cure him. We’re here to give him comfort and rest, and to give you and your family as much time with him as possible. This can’t be easy to go through, so we’re always here for you, as well.”

More silence. The word *fear* echoed through the auditorium of my mind, and I was certain that this man was seated in attendance.

“There’s nothing you can do?” he asked, almost unconsciously.

I took another deep breath.

“For the cancer, no. We don’t have the tools here, and everything’s already been done. But we *can* treat his pain and we *can* make him comfortable. We can give him peace and quiet, and give you and his wife meaningful time with him.”

The man changed yet again, although I could not describe how. Part of me thought that Goliath had suddenly become David—that beneath all the armor, this man was not so imposing after all. Yet he also seemed larger now, almost monumental, as if Michelangelo had sculpted his features out of solid marble. I was uncertain if I should go on.

My apprehension gave way, however, as the man broke down before me. Once stoic and powerful, Goliath could not hide his suffering, and the dams of his eyes burst forth. For the first time in my life, I saw tears that fell like genuine waterfalls. A wild chill ran through my body. I wanted to say something—anything—which might settle his pain. But alas, the giant had remained in the chambers of my mind, anticipating all I had to say.

“I was just with him a year ago, man! We were at a wedding, and you should’ve seen him—all fixed up in his suit, all strong and everything. Now look at him.” The waterfalls swelled, supplied by a monsoon of love and rage. I put my arm around his shoulder (though in reality, I could only reach halfway around

his back). “How can anybody say it’s going to be all right?” he continued, “It’s not going to be all right, man. It’s not.”

The monsoon was bolstered by thunderous gasps as the man leaned heavily against the siding of the staircase. Few words came to mind, and I believed that was for the best. Slowly but surely, the dams were shut, and Goliath stood up.

“You said you’re going to take care of him?” he asked, with neither bellow nor tremor. “And that he’s not going to be in pain?”


“Yes,” I said. “The nurses, the health aides, the volunteers—everyone here will make sure of that. We’re here for him.”

The man straightened upright, resembling again the giant in the hallway. A settled grief now filled his eyes, as he motioned vaguely toward the front door. We walked together in silence, save for the thumping footsteps. I opened the door, and Goliath bowed subtly to avoid thumping his head. He was quiet now, bearing burdens of which I could only see shadows.

Clouds covered the evening sky and the night felt eternal. Goliath turned around on the darkened steps, and grasped my hand as one would with a brother. He wrapped his tree-trunk arms around my body, inhaled for ages, and breathed out a sweeping gust. I reminded him of my promise.

“You do that,” he said, “You take care of my brother.” He then walked to his car, surveyed the house, and captured my eyes one last time. “Thank you” was all I heard, muttered in the dark with great strength, and great sadness.

I closed the door softly and returned to the stairs.

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