

AD LIBITUM

*It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.*

—William Carlos Williams, MD, "Asphodel,
That Greeny Flower," 1955

A Time to Talk

John doesn't know it yet, but his colleague, Jane, is considering suicide. They have practiced together in a small medical group in rural North Carolina for 15 years. In the early years, they would share patient stories or diagnostic dilemmas over lunch. It was a time to talk about their frustrations, mistakes, or concerns about beloved patients.

Now, neither one has the time.

Jane sees 24 patients a day in 15-minute slots. In the evenings, she works on charts and messages after she reads bedtime stories to her youngest child. On weekends, she does errands and more charting. She recently gave up gardening with her husband.

The staff reports she has become irritable with patients—and them. Last week, the office manager informed her that her patient satisfaction scores have dropped. He also discussed concerns about her professional behavior.

"Get rid of the electronic record, and I'll be fine," she sneered.

A few days ago, John overheard Jane complaining to Molly, her nurse.

"Another chronic pain patient squeezed in at the end of the day? Who approved this, Molly? Let me tell you, I'm done with the drug seekers."

It's not only the pain patients who pain Jane. There are the anxious ones who skip their SSRIs; the fatigued patients who refuse to exercise. Obese patients who keep overeating. Smokers who keep smoking. All of them wear her out.

"Why am I so exhausted? What am I doing with my life?" she says to herself.

Usually impeccably dressed and groomed, Jane has slipped in the last month. If you talk to Molly, you'd learn that some days Jane forgets to put on her makeup. Her skirts are wrinkled, and her blouses are frequently untucked. Her clothes hang loose on her.

"Doctor, can I bring you another white coat?" Molly asks. "You have dried blood on the back of the one you're wearing."

"I know I do—I put on my coat today, didn't I?"

Several months ago, Jane's internist prescribed a benzodiazepine for her insomnia.

It's early evening, and John has just received a text message from his medical director: "you have 9 overdue charts to complete by tomorrow." Before he responds, he takes a deep breath. It's winter in North Carolina, and through the narrow window in his office, he observes the sun draw down. He pulls up his computer and reviews the names on his delinquent list. He also notes 12 messages in his inbox. Another text appears on his phone: "can you pick up Julie from soccer on your way home?" Minutes later, John looks up from his desk and sees Jane walk by. The second time she passes, she has slowed to a meaningful walk. He waves, and then quickly looks back at his computer screen. He glances at the time in the lower right-hand corner. Jane turns back and lightly taps on his door, and calls to him from the hallway, "Uh, John, do you have a minute?"

In the moment, John recalls a poem a friend recently shared with him.

*When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaningful walk,
I don't stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven't hoed,
And shout from where I am, 'What is it?'
No, not as there is time to talk.
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,
Blade-end up and five feet tall,
And plod: I go up to the stone wall
For a friendly visit.*

John motions to Jane to sit down on the worn couch beside the door. He logs off his computer, thrusts the phone into his pocket, and plods: he wheels the heavy chair around the wide desk for a friendly visit.

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