Thursday Memo – January 11, 2018

Little, Blue Earrings – by MaryKate Driscoll

The Family Meeting Room
Is a rectangular room
Fitted with a rectangular table
Topped with a rectangular box of tissues
And a few chairs
A sparse setting

But, it fills rapidly with the sounds
Of soft tears that have brewed for years
In the bedroom of a home shared
With a husband of decades
In the wife accused of having an affair
A delusion that demands that she undress
While he examines her body
For signs and semen
Mortified
Loving him all the while that she’s hating him

It fills too with the shaky voice of a mother
Who asks for your forgiveness
When she calls
Her 34-year-old daughter
Who overdosed on pills
And left a note
For her mother to find
Next to her blue body
“A bit of a lost soul”

As I sit in this rectangular room
I find myself circling back
To my presentations on morning rounds
About their family members

This is a 34-year-old woman found unresponsive on her front porch after…
This is a 72-year-old man with a history of depression…

In this small room
Surrounded by trembling voices
And crumpled tissues that cradled words
Flowing from a cortex
Like a river breaking through a dam
Greeted by the same wide, blue eyes
That can be seen in bed ten
I am shamed by my concision
Shamed that with almost robotic form
Each morning
I search through medical records
Scribbling down
Past hospitalizations
Diagnoses
Medications
Etc.

A blank piece of white paper
Cluttered with blue ink
Incomprehensible to anyone
Who is not I
And I think now

*Maybe the patient feels the same*

I boil this entire history
Down to just a few sentences
Sanitized by jargon:

“With a past psychiatric history significant for”
“Treated with”
“___ prior hospitalizations for___”
“significant substance use history”

We are taught to use patient-centered language
We do NOT say, “He is an addict”

He is a *person* with addiction

But, what about family-centered language?

*This is a family bursting at the seams... reeling, reeling, reeling*

What about story-centered language?

*This is a girl who creates a bonfire in order to find a spark*

Often, I sit in stunned silence

Not because of what is said

Because of what I am allowed to hear

Just by virtue of being

A medical student

Not yet having proven

To this family

Any virtues of my own

It can feel strange

To know the secrets

Of a family

With which you share no blood

But, the privilege of medicine

Is that we are invited into

The rectangular room

And in so doing
Into the circle of a family

The privilege of medicine
Is that I have been
The first human being
To hear about
The baby monitor
Placed in her room
By her husband
That has made her feel
As helpless as an infant

This privilege molds our memory
We may remember the “chief complaint”
But more likely
We remember
The little, blue earrings
Worn by the wife who was
Enslaved by both love and delusion
For five years
Who still managed
To get out of bed
Dress herself
And even put on the earrings
My psychiatry clerkship
Has been a crash course
In the human capacity
For both resurrection
And deterioration

How do I honor the moments
I have witnessed?
How do I honor the privilege?
By calling out to myself
When I feel my empathy slipping away
With each stroke of a keyboard

And by remembering
Those little, blue earrings
A memorial to resilience