

The humble works of everyday people

By Howard Sann

I'm no germaphobe, but with flus and viruses in the air, going to drugstores and doctor's offices and seeing people wearing masks gets my guard up. If I'm sitting next to someone coughing, this septuagenarian moves to a distant seat.

So it was that I proceeded with requisite caution to a medical building in Norwalk, not a storefront in a strip mall or commercial building, to get a blood test for an upcoming doctor's visit.

I'd called before I left. Didn't need an appointment. Entering the office, which was empty, no electronic sign-in kiosk, the woman in charge said, "Howard?" "Yes." Wow, I thought, a personal greeting. It made me comfortable. "Come in."

As she input my personal information an older man strolled in. Who's this guy? An assistant? His hair was short and graying and he had a very neatly sculpted grayish black mustache. "You took my blood last year," I said. "I remember," she said, handing my IDs to the man to copy. "You're covered," she said. I signed the electronic pad and the man said, "Come with me."

I followed him down the hall. He went into the lab. I stopped in the doorway, waiting for her, but she wasn't coming. He was donning a blue medical smock. He was the phlebotomist. A creature of routine, I'm uncomfortable with new people. I stood frozen. The draw chair was in the corner by the window. "You can sit over there," he said. I dropped my coat on a chair, walked over, sat down. He was filling

out forms. Asked my name, DOB, address. "Right or left arm?" I asked. "Right," he said. "Unless you prefer left." I rolled up my right sleeve. He was gathering vials, equipment, putting on gloves, then pulled up his mask.

"How long you been at this?" I said nervously.

"Yesterday," he said.

"Yesterday?"

He tied a rubber strap around my upper arm and pulled it tight.

"Yesterday," he repeated.

I watched him extract the needle from its plastic wrapping.

"This is your second day?"

"You're my first patient."

I looked at him quizzically. "You're kidding, right?"

With isopropol alcohol he was cleaning the bend of my arm.

"What day is today?" he said, moving in with the IV. "Friday?"

Turning away, I said, "No, Thursday." I never look. I look, I faint.

"Tell me it's Friday," he said. He was in now, filling the first vial.

"Tell me how long you've been at it?" I said.

He laughed. We liked each other. He changed vials. Then another. Now he was pressing a ball of cotton into the crook of my arm. His hands are strong.

"Hold this," he said placing the index finger of my left hand on the cotton.

He lifted the cotton. Still bleeding. He placed a gauze pad over the vein.

"You take blood thinners?"

"They're coming out of my ears."

He got a clean gauze, placed it on my arm with pressure, and secured it by

crisscrossing two pieces of tape. He pulled down his mask. Our eyes met.

"You're a quick learner," I said.

"Didn't feel a thing."

"To do this without hurting you," he said, "I have to feel the needle going into you. See, if I feel the needle going *into* you and I don't feel it inside myself, then I know you don't feel it." He tapped his forehead over his third eye, his mind's eye. "Understand?"

"Makes sense," I said. "For your second day," I said, "You're at the top of your field."

"Have a very good day today," he said.

"You too."

At the front desk, the office busy now, I said, "Appreciate you for making it easy. You guys are great."

She laughed. "I'm serious," I said. But she was gone, pushing a man in a wheelchair into the lab. The door at the end of the hall was ajar. I saw the man sitting in the dark in a chair by the window, in respite.

Driving home, I think about what he said the last time I asked, "So how long?"

"Many many years. One day we'll sit under a tree and I'll tell you stories."

I felt gratitude. Mostly we hear bad news when it comes to health care. I was fortunate to fall into the hands of two humble, self-deprecating professionals. They didn't need to be thanked; after all, they were just doing their jobs. And, refreshingly, doing them well.

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