



Meriem

*how it is*

This is the type of story you tell over coffee. The type of story that comes with a snack, so perfectly mundane, so familiar that the telling is not so much a revelation as it is a commiseration.

This is the type of story you tell. Too many details to write, too long a story, too torturous in the monotony of everyday tragedy. We've written it anyway, every word, wrenched out of us. There has been no pleasure in the writing of this story.

When Meriem was 9 years old, she met her neighbor's family friend for the first and only time. He was shorter than her father, shorter, she thought, than any grown up man she knew. Older too. Everybody was happy to see him, deferential, she thought, like they would be for any man his age. She watched as her grandmother, uncle and mother asked him questions like, "Every time I eat anything with too much garlic, I get heartburn. What should I do about that?" or "My knee hurts whenever I go like this. Why do you think that is?" and "Why do people shrink when they get older?" He very patiently answered all of their questions. He was soft spoken; she could barely hear him from the hallway where she sat on the floor drawing in her notebook the calendula plants growing in her mother's garden.

In the middle of the question and answer session, the old man called Meriem over. He took out a piece of candy from his pocket and put it in the palm of her hand. He took her hand in his and asked, "What good have you done today?" She was confused because most adults asked her, "What's your name?" "How old are you?" "What grade are you in?" or "How is school?". He watched her struggling to understand the question and he added, "Anybody you have made smile today?"

Meriem remembered an incident earlier that day and whispered, "I danced for my little sister to stop her from crying."

"Good job," he said. "She was not feeling good and you made her better. You were of service. You gave her medicine. You can do good every day."

Meriem didn't get his name, but they called him doctor.



Meriem thought about this man throughout her life. She thought about him every time she danced to make her sister laugh. She thought about him every time she saw that candy, wrapped in shiny red paper. She thought about him when the neighbors brought food to the house when her father was sick, when she watered her mother's garden, when the flowers bloomed, and every time her sister gave her a bite of her favorite sweet bread even though she already ate her share.

Every time she saw a doctor, she thought about him. That time when her son fractured his wrist playing football and she was given a note by the doctor requesting a stool sample, urine and blood test. She thought about him, particularly when the nurse explained to her why those tests were necessary, "Your son said he has a headache. It's just to be sure," as she pointed in the direction of the cashier.

The doctor I knew asked, "What good have you done today," she thought.



Meriem didn't think about him when she first felt the lump in her breast. She was too scared then to conjure the memory of that kind old man.



After calling two friends, her sister and aunt, Meriem gets the address of a private hospital that has a doctor who deals with cases like this. The doctor also works at a public hospital, but it's too hard to get into. The wait alone can kill you, they say.

Meriem pays for a hospital card and waits 4 hours to see the doctor. The waiting room is full of people who look to be in various states of illness. Meriem sits next to her sister who tells her about the drama unfolding around the preparations for their mutual friend's wedding, to try to get her mind off of the reason for their visit.

“How long have your nipples been inverted?” the doctor asks her as she faces him bare chested. “They’ve always been inverted, more so after having my son,” she answers.

“This is very bad,” he says.

She repeats, “but it’s always been like that. My right breast is the one...”

“It’s bad. And you’re so young. How did it progress like this? Why didn’t you come sooner?”

“I just felt it a few days ago,” she mumbles weakly.

Meriem starts sweating, her stomach turns. She looks to her sister who is holding her hand and listening carefully to what the doctor is saying. She needs an ultrasound and mammogram, as well as a complete blood test. The ultrasound and blood test will be done in the hospital. The mammogram elsewhere. The doctor says she should come back in three days to speak about the results. The appointment takes 12 minutes.





Meriem's sister goes to the bank. She didn't think her sister would need so many tests. She does the math in her head. She has enough to pay the hospital and her rent. She may have to cut down on some groceries, but "we'll be ok," she says to herself.

Meriem goes to the cashier. She pays for the ultrasound and blood tests and they wait their turn. Thirty minutes later, Meriem gets her blood drawn. Three hours after that, she gets the ultrasound. "ummm.... huh..." murmured the man moving the jelly dipped instrument around Meriem's breast looking at the monitor in front of him.

"What is it?" Meriem asks.

"I'm not a doctor," he responds.



The next day, Meriem goes to the hospital that has a mammogram machine. She goes alone. Her sister and husband have to go to work and she doesn't want to bother anyone else. She hands over the referral for the mammogram to the man behind the window. He hands her an invoice, the cost, she thinks to herself, of a month's grocery shopping. She goes to the cashier, buys a hospital card, pays for the service and waits her turn. Three hours later, she gets the mammogram.



Three days of waiting.

Now, the doctor's voice stuck in Meriem's head is the one that said, "It's bad. Why didn't you come sooner..." Her sister convinces her not to go back to the same doctor. Meriem picks up the scans and blood tests results and she goes to the hospital of the second most recommended doctor.



Meriem buys a hospital card and waits her turn.

She sits thinking about her job. For the past appointments, her colleagues were covering for her. If she needs any more appointments, she'll need a doctors note. She can't take a sick day if she can't prove she's sick. "I hope he will write me a note," she thinks. "But that means that I'm sick... no note, please God don't let me need a note."

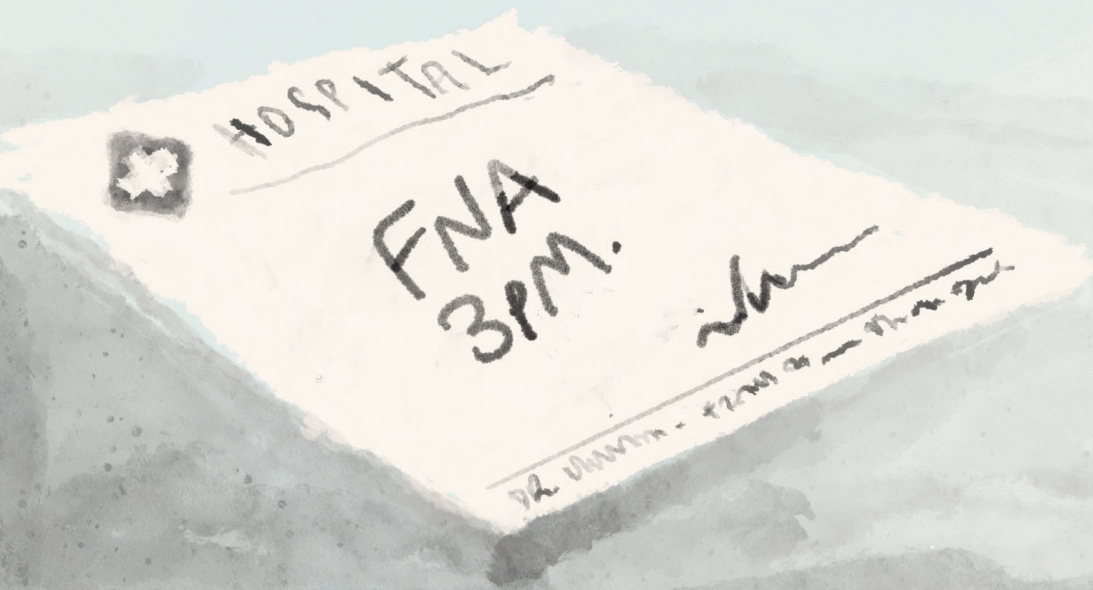
After a 4 hour wait, she sees the new doctor. She hands over her file and explains her situation. "I just want to know the results," she says noticeably fatigued. The doctor asks her to remove her top and he checks her breasts. "Hmmm, there's a lump," he says as he moves his fingers around Meriem's right breast. "Yes," Meriem responds. She covers herself as the doctor walks behind her to his desk and begins looking at the scans.

"It's inconclusive," the doctor tells her.

Per the doctor's suggestion, Meriem and her sister visit another doctor, a pathologist, who has been called "one of the best in the city."

One hospital card and two hours later, she sees the doctor. She needs to get a fine needle aspiration (FNA), a needle biopsy. A man of few words. "I do the procedures in the afternoon. Come back at 3:00pm," he tells her, handing her a note to give to the hospital receptionist.

"Another day without going to work," she thinks to herself, among other thoughts.



“He told me to come back in the afternoon,” Meriem says as she hands the referral through the plastic window to the woman at the receptionist desk.

“Take this to the cashier. Pay the balance and keep the receipt with you,” she says. “You can purchase the gloves at the pharmacy.”

“The gloves?” Meriem asks.

“For the doctor to use when he’s doing the procedure. Hand it to him when it’s your turn.”



Meriem and her sister walk to the cashier. The day before, Meriem's sister got contributions from their cousin and two close friends. It was enough for the procedure. They pay the cashier.

Meriem and her sister go to the pharmacy attached to the hospital. “I need surgical gloves,” she says to the pharmacist.

“We’ve run out,” the pharmacist replies. “There’s a pharmacy three blocks down. Try them.”

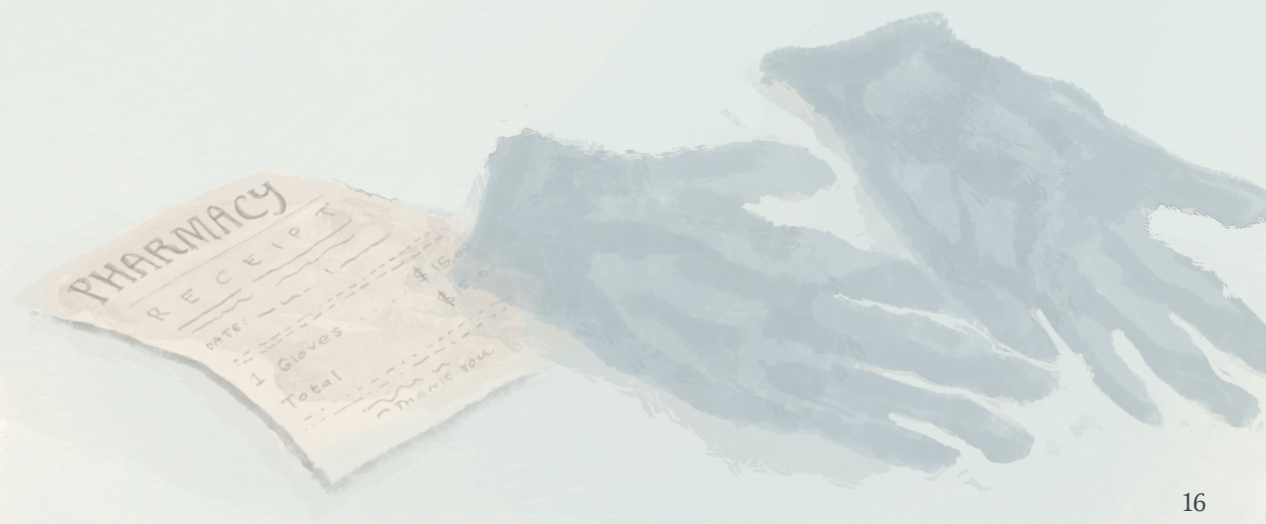
“No surgical gloves?”

“No.”





Meriem and her sister walk to the pharmacy three blocks down and purchase the surgical gloves. They are worried about the traffic home, so they have lunch at a nearby restaurant while they wait for the time to pass.



The hospital's waiting room is an outside area under a tent lined with plastic chairs. Aside from Meriem and her sister, there are five other women waiting, some with their family members. They were all told to come at 3:00pm. Everybody, Meriem learns from talking with them, will be getting an FNA. Three of them will be having a breast biopsy like Meriem, one for a lump visible in her throat, and one in her lymph nodes. From the looks of it, Meriem is the second youngest of the women.



“There is no health, even the young are sick,” one of the women whispers to Meriem as she looks at the youngest of the group, the one with the lump in her throat. She looks like she could still be in secondary school.

They share stories and at 3:54pm, they watch as the doctor walks into the room.

A nurse calls the first of them in.

Less than 5 minutes after she goes in, they hear screams. The young girl with the lump in her throat begins to cry. Silent tears stream down her face. Meriem, her sister and some of the other women begin to pray. There is no anesthesia.



As the screams die down, one of the women leans into Meriem and gives her a small bottle of holy water. She does the same for all of the women waiting for their turn.

“I’ve been here before,” she says. “There is only God. That’s the only faith we have.”

Tears continue to stream down the young girl’s face. They all tell her that it will be ok.



Between prayers and talks with the women, Meriem thinks about the possible outcomes of the procedure. She remembers her neighbor whose mother was diagnosed with kidney failure and with contributions from family and friends, could only make the first three months of dialysis payments. She wonders if the cost of chemotherapy is the same as dialysis.

She wonders how she can afford the cost of treatment.

“What can I sell?” she asks herself.



The women each wait their turn. Some scream, others moan, some finish in silence. The line fills behind them.

Meriem, without knowing it, somehow resolves not to make a sound during the procedure. After an hour and a half wait, she hands the gloves to the doctor and lays down on the same cot that the women before her laid on. He says nothing. She bites her lip, makes a fist and waits for the pain. When he finishes, he says, “you did really good. I’m sorry if it hurt. Come back in five days for the results.”

Five days later, Meriem and her sister return to the hospital. They go to the reception desk and she rummages through her purse, looking for cash to pay for the appointment. It's only then that she notices that her purse is full of receipts. She's sure the money is there somewhere, but she can only see receipts.

Seeing her anxiety grow, Meriem's sister pays for the appointment. They sit down and she takes Meriem's purse. "You don't need all of this," she says as she takes the receipts out and throws them in the trash.

They wait. And they pray.



Two hours later, Meriem enters the doctor's office. He looks at the paperwork and says, "There are no signs of disease. Maybe hormone changes are responsible for the lump, nothing dangerous. You are lucky. Be grateful." He says other things that neither Meriem nor her sister remember. The appointment lasts six minutes.





In the weeks that follow, Meriem finds herself thinking more and more about the first doctor she ever knew, the one she met when she was nine years old. The time he spent answering questions. The kindness he showed her. “She was not feeling good and you made her better. You were of service,” she remembers him telling her. She once thought that that was the work of hospitals, to make people feel better, to be of service.

Meriem thinks about the women who were with her in the waiting room, the one who offered holy water, the ones who whispered words of courage, who prayed for each other. We give each other medicine, she thinks. Her prayers now are not only for her own health, but for those women she met in that waiting room. Soon her prayer becomes that all those who are sick, are given care.

The End

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