No Hard Feelings

Colin Thomas, MD

"Do you understand what I'm telling you?" This time I squeezed Sam's hand even harder. I suppose we'll call our patient Sam for the extent of this story; this of course wasn't his real name, but his name isn't exactly the point. The pH of Sam's blood was dangerously low and the pCO₂ of his blood was critically high. It was 1:37AM and I had just told Sam that if we didn't place him on BIPAP, or even consider intubating him, then I didn't think he would live through the morning.

"I first met my wife in 1960 when I was stationed in Germany for the Army. She didn't speak English and I didn't speak German. If we had spoken the same language at the time [he chuckled], we probably wouldn't had fallen in love. We were such different people..." The shards of telemetry alarms and nervous chatter of the rapid response team rattled in my ears when he spoke this; however, the serene cadence of Sam's voice and look in his eyes (in retrospect, I think it was his eyes most of all) slowly tuned the panic in my ears into a muffled... hum: a white noise.

"Now I won't let that beard or that white-coat fool me... I know you're just a kid..." I'll mention Sam's eyes once more, because it's something I find myself thinking about from time to time; that is, what exactly it was that they conveyed—maybe it was confidence, it's difficult to say. But, it was the oddest thing... for a brief flicker of time during the endurance sprint of a night shift, I had one of the most genuine human experiences of my life with a man I had just met eight minutes prior.

"Doc... I'm not exactly sure where I'm going to go from here, but my body isn't holding onto me anymore... you know, you always wonder if you'll be ready..." Sam's breaths were short and stiff as he said this, *"...We're herded our entire life by cold and angry feelings...but, you know, in the end... you've got to understand that I have none of those..."*

"And what are those, Sam?"

"Hard feelings," Sam said with a soft smile.

Looking at Sam, I saw every piece of him—decades of growth and recycled parts, fading grayer and more wrinkled with the passing of each milestone. It was aging—the accumulation of nature's tax on our body's self-sustained existence. I imagined Sam's childhood, his parents and grandparents. I imagined his fears and regrets and I imagined what eighty-nine years of both heartbreak and joy must be like.

I later heard that Sam passed away soon after on comfort-care, looked upon by many tearful eyes of friends and family. I had left his room after our conversation together to respond to another page for another patient. On the speedy walk there, I began to eat the granola bar in my white-coat pocket as I passed through the bridge between the Gibbon and Pavilion buildings. I could see the Philadelphia night through the glass, abstract in its enormity (and alienating by its abstraction, I suppose) and lit by the automated street lights, programmed to turn on and off at specific times of the night, but also a handful of lights in apartment windows and offices; and, pausing, I thought... how beautiful the latter is.