

Virtual Mentor

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PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Commemorative Issue: Through the Student's Eyes: Sag

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Rumble, rumble of elevators
Whir, whir of conversation
Flashes of plain clothes, suits, skirts, and scrubs
Weaving between beds, wheelchairs, canes.
In this morning hospital hallway,
Thin, gray surgeon
Stops at a painting
Pulling on the wall,
Gleaming white coat
Starched, long and flowing,
Embroidered with many titles
Pockets sagging with the weight
Of tools, pens, papers, pager,
Sipping coffee from a Styrofoam cup,
Baggy eyes squint
At the painting of the patient
Wrapped in the healing snakes.
He thinks
Nice contour of reconstructed breast
Navel drops off to the left a bit
Too bad about lymphedema in the arm
Zipping around the corner,
Medical student in jeans, T-shirt,
Back sagging from the weight of
Books, books, books
In her backpack,
Sipping coffee from a travel mug,
Stops short.
Crashing into old, important surgeons
Is frowned upon.
Baggy eyes meet baggy eyes
Thin, wan smiles of understanding
Are exchanged.
She looks to the painting and thinks
Snakes and a lady.
Not on Friday's test.

Peering closer,
She wonders,
Does the new breast bounce
Like the other one?
Does that scar show
With a bikini on?
Three seconds of silence, then
The surgeon's pager screams
And the med student is reminded
To go learn the lymphatic drainage system
Of the breast.
Later, in his office,
The surgeon settles in his chair
Behind his great oak desk,
Runs his slender fingers
Over the dusty framed photos,
His children's pictures from grade school
All grown now, with families.
He wonders how their mother
Likes her new place.
He thinks about the painting
Pulling on the wall,
The patient with the team
Of helpful snakes,
His shoulders sag
And he whispers
A verse his grandma taught him
With men, things are impossible.
With God, all things are possible.
Yet I'm no longer God
To them
Later, in the library,
The med student shifts in her chair,
Now understanding the importance
Of axillary and cutaneous lymph nodes,
She stretches, cracks her knuckles,
Notices the dent still on her finger
Where the engagement ring
Used to be.
She thinks about the painting
Pulling on the wall
Her eyelids sag
And she murmurs,
Hope all those healing snakes are standard
When my white coat
Is long enough for respect

Because it sure would be nice
To not have to do everything
All by myself
The night hospital symphony plays,
Hum, hum of generators
Buzz, buzz of lights
Blended with the sighs
Of vending machines
Grateful for some rest.
And as the surgeon and the med student
Step home to this beat
To freezer meals and cold beds,
The patient in the painting
Pulling on the wall
Cries out to the jaded journeyers
We don't want everything you have
And you don't have to be everything to us
Just make sure that we're surrounded
By more hands
Than we can hold

Jennifer Bau is a research assistant in the AMA Ethics Standards Group.

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