

Fiction | *Farrah J. Mateen, MD*

Smug little men

Ever since she had known him, Mr. Robertson had been old, a presentation he didn't much care for. Jane had known him since she was 13, when she started volunteering with the "Adopt-a-Grandparent" program, back in grade 8. She had fancied herself a doctor-in-training at the outset, but with time, she soon realized her skills were in the arts and not in science. Moreover, she could not stand the sight of blood—even a nosebleed made her faint—and, as a way of confronting reality, she soon gave up the idea of medical school to sculpt and paint. Still, many years after she had written her semester-end report on the benefits of the "Adopt-a-Grandparent" program, Jane made a point of visiting the distinguished old man. Every Monday after school, she would traipse her way through the back parking lot of Pine View Villas and Convalescent Home to find Mr. Robertson staring out his stainless picture window, waiting for her stories on boys, exams, and sculpture exhibitions.

Mr. Robertson considered the encounters the highlight of the week. If there was anyone around who would have recognized him from his youth, they would have said his features had softened. His gray hair, soft and fine, covered the sides of his head much like a schoolboy's who refused to comb it and let it stand on end without consequence. Mr. Robertson spent at least an hour each Monday afternoon just propping himself onto the upholstered chair, to look like he was reading, and always put on his newest shirt, his last independent purchase for himself. Secretly, he would tuck one of the Tupperware containers from his Monday dinner tray, filled with blue Jell-O, into the top drawer of his bed stand. It was concealed from the facility's dietary staff and brought out only in case Jane was hungry. She always seemed to be.

Each week, Mr. Robertson prepared himself for the time when Jane would stop coming. And just to make sure that she knew he wasn't "one of those dependents," he told her, in his vividly sarcastic way: "Come if you want. I won't expect you." But as each week began anew, Jane came, on time, as though Greenwich Central had made the appointment, and Mr. Robertson was forced to say once more: "Come if you want. I won't expect you again."

Mr. Robertson's curse, and there was no better word to describe it, was what the "Adopt-a-Grandparent" information card called "PD." It didn't

make sense to her at the time, but it stole Mr. Robertson away from Jane little by little throughout the years. First, he couldn't hold a pen. Then, he couldn't hold the phone, and his voice would squeak and soften until he got frustrated and said "goodbye" mid-sentence. He couldn't hold a spoon. He grew suspicious. Why was she still coming to see her? Was someone paying her?

Jane could only suggest that his company made her weekly returns worthwhile, but soon, she hated to admit, that was becoming untrue. She ate her blue Jell-O with a painful diffidence to his comments. He couldn't shake her hand anymore, and his inability to turn up the corner of his lips in a real smile seemed to make it worse. She understood: He felt like no one particularly cared. The seniors, he said, are eating dog food, because they are so poor. The dogs are eating steaks, he continued. She didn't always agree with him, but what could she say to not make it worse?

One exercise they were both still fond of was going through the knick-knacks that lined his windowsill. He stacked them on old milk crates that a neighbor had once stolen from the local grocery mart. Overtop of the words "Dairy World," he glued his 75th birthday congratulatory letter from the local Member of Parliament. And sitting on the very top of the crate were statues and ornaments—smug little men—from as many cultures as one could think of. Each one had its own story. That one is Nubian—see how it looks like the Egyptians? This one was from my last fish tank—a scuba diving Santa Claus. That one is Peruvian—don't turn it upside down or it's bad luck. That one's a real statue from Cambodia, but the shopkeeper needed the money quickly and was forced to sell it for an appallingly low price. I even gave him a little more than he was asking.

Mr. Peruvian warrior, 700 AD, meet your friend from the Han Dynasty. And don't forget to impress Santa on your way. He doesn't like spears next to his oxygen tank. Lands unknown to each other had found their ambassadors on top of Mr. Robertson's makeshift time capsule.

Jane doubted they were real, but she congratulated him on his cleverness and good fortune in finding jewels among garage sale giveaways. Mr. Robertson responded promptly, in a continually softening tone: "Here, you like that one? Take it. Why wait until I'm dead?" But Jane would not. "You enjoy

them,” she said, musing about their real creators—art students like herself, no doubt. Each time she said “no,” Mr. Robertson grew a bit more upset. Jane had simply missed the point that his enjoyment was not the hoarding of goods but watching her share his enthusiasm for his silent treasures.

One week, not long after the story of the Peruvian warrior was told—and it was bound to happen, Jane knew—Mr. Robertson was not in his room. Jane felt the long-prepared-for—but never quite ready for—feeling well up in her stomach. The nurse at the desk noticed her: “Mr. Robertson was expecting you, but he can’t see you any more.”

“Is he dead?” she asked, the words forming inaudibly on her wet lips.

The nurse shook her head. “No, but it’s probably best if you don’t see him any more. He asked you not to come again.”

“What did I do?” Jane asked, bubbling tears obscuring her vision.

“Probably nothing. People get sick. But he left this.” The nurse pushed a filled milk crate out from behind the counter. The back of the birthday letter had the tiny, barely legible letters made into a scrawl that spelled “Jane.” The smug little men—from Nubia to the North Pole—peeked out at her.

After Jane graduated from high school, she accepted an art scholarship that took her across the country. She never did hear from Mr. Robertson again, and feeling that if she visited, she would be unwelcome, she chose not to return to Pine View Villas and Convalescent Home. Why had she come for so long, she demanded of herself. Why go where

you are suddenly not wanted? When does a person, for the sake of friendship, stop receiving and start just giving?

Decades later, those little men still smile smugly, wrought by an unknown artisan’s calloused hands who dedicated his—or maybe her—life to humanizing their molten shapes. Children’s playthings or the ruler’s torchbearers, Jane could almost feel the confidence of those endless empires that one day slipped into oblivion and fell into the ground without warning.

In this fragment of history, the smug little men have found their home in Jane’s study, sitting upon unread magazines and easels, with their little legs crossed imperfectly. Sometimes, she is certain, their eyes mock her. They know they’ll be here long after she disappears. Perhaps that arrogance is why their noses were smashed many years ago. But still, she is certain, their polished teeth can call her “fool.” Backs straight and heads poised. “Will this be you when you are old?” they taunt Jane.

And they had taunted Mr. Robertson, too. In his autumn days, they had watched him from the sill of his picture window, looking back at him as he shuffled around his room. They watched him drop his pills by accident and kick them under the chair into a neat pile. They watched him as he waited for the tedious afternoons to burn themselves out until Jane came again.

Neurology[®]

Fiction: Smug little men
Farrah J. Mateen
Neurology 2005;65;1142-1143
DOI 10.1212/01.wnl.0000181382.66397.be

This information is current as of October 10, 2005

Updated Information & Services

including high resolution figures, can be found at:
<http://n.neurology.org/content/65/7/1142.full>

Permissions & Licensing

Information about reproducing this article in parts (figures, tables) or in its entirety can be found online at:
http://www.neurology.org/about/about_the_journal#permissions

Reprints

Information about ordering reprints can be found online:
<http://n.neurology.org/subscribers/advertise>

Neurology® is the official journal of the American Academy of Neurology. Published continuously since 1951, it is now a weekly with 48 issues per year. Copyright . All rights reserved. Print ISSN: 0028-3878. Online ISSN: 1526-632X.

