

6-30-2021

The Souls of Our Shoes

Carly Carlin
New York Medical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://touro scholar.touro.edu/quill_and_scope



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Carlin, C. (2021). The Souls of Our Shoes. *Quill & Scope*, 13 (1). Retrieved from

This Perspective is brought to you for free and open access by the Students at Touro Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quill & Scope by an authorized editor of Touro Scholar. . For more information, please contact touro.scholar@touro.edu.

“THE SOULS OF OUR SHOES”

CARLY CARLIN

Last week we saw Mrs. James, an 80-lb woman who looked like a purple, bruised, toothpick that would blow over at the slightest breeze. She had severe COPD, was satting 84%, but Dr. Denno wasn't even worried about that since that was normal for her. She was here today because she had had a stroke (supposedly) and had total weakness and even paralysis of her left body. When she wanted to rest her arm on the armchair of the wheelchair, she had to lift it up like a sack of potatoes with the other arm and drop it where she wanted it, and even then it would gradually slide off against her control. She was in denial that something that serious had happened to her, and it seemed like had this been up to her and not her son who was accompanying her, she would not have even showed up for this appointment today. She did not feel that anything was that wrong (despite needing a wheelchair and being unable to walk). The nurses couldn't even stand her up to walk her over to the scale to weigh her, she was so weak. Karen brought in the digital scale from the next room and it took 3 people to steady her onto it. 3 people. For an 86lb woman who would topple over at any moment. Despite the mark she was already leaving on my mind just from seeing someone so crippled and incapacitated and bruised, she left a physical mark in the exam room that day. The shoes she stood up on were completely falling apart, leaving smudges of disintegrating black tarry foam material across the floor and the digital scale she stood upon. She was more fixated on the mess her shoes were making than her failing health, deflecting the conversation about advanced directives and the urgences Dr. Denno uttered to her about going to a hospital for a stroke workup. She kept apologizing for the mess her shoes were making, and made futile attempts to wipe it up with her crumbling shoe sole. The conversation circled over wanting to get her checked into a hospital, not to shut her away in a bed forever, but to give her some answers for why she couldn't move half her body, and give her a chance at some independence and quality of life down the road. She was skeptical and adamant. And fixated on the shoe mess.

a telegraph from the other side of the Atlantic. Impression: frontal lobe glioma. Brain tumor. Aha! Not a stroke after all, but perhaps worse. No chance her body could handle even a small attempt at treatment. She was in the hospital 3 days, then home hospice. How different would her life be if she hadn't been pulled into the doctor that day by her son? Would she be living any differently, any better, without this new shock of a terminal cancer?



Artist - Isidora Monteparo, “Self Forgiveness”

Unfortunately we won't really get to know the flip side. A week later, Dr. Denno was set to do a home visit for Mrs. James. She had had some stomach issues, tarry stools, was on lots of steroids for pain, and was quite literally falling apart. I asked to come, but covid rules prevented that. He would go see her after work, probably around 5:45p. At 1:15p that day, Dr. Denno got a call. Mrs. James had passed.

That was quick. I was a little stunned, not surprised, but shaken. I just saw her 5 days ago. I was anticipating hearing about her tomorrow morning after Dr. Denno's home visit, and was genuinely curious how she was doing. Luckily covid means masks can conceal most of your emotions. You can tell when someone's smiling and laughing, but not when they're biting their lip or truly thinking something over. We had to go see the next patient and put that emotion on hold for now. As Dr. Denno talked to another patient about their shoulder pain, I was just replaying over and over in my head what had just transpired. Actually, I was on reruns of the office visit from last week, zooming in on that last snapshot in my brain of her still alive. Was she this close to death at that time? Could anyone have any idea that that'd be her last time in Dr. Denno's office? Did Dr. Denno appreciate the possibility of never seeing her again too?

As I replayed the scene from the previous week, I saw myself from an aerial perspective. I saw the scene through the room's eyes, my viewpoint a 360-degree fluid security camera. So many conversations have happened in these exam rooms: celebrations, sorrows, hurdles, arguments, denials, pain, confusions, fears. Laughing and crying, in no particular order. These rooms are like a one-way sponge, absorbing every human emotion till they can't anymore. The walls suffocate these emotions, squish them in between the sheetrock and under the exam table and in the cabinets between the tongue depressors and gauze, but I know they leech out like incense or smoke, sometimes building an immense and pulsating pressure, and sometimes diffusing wispily like steam off a cup of tea. In Mrs. James' case, we didn't have some life changing diagnosis for her at the time, so it didn't seem like that billowing pressure, but more of a light and airy lingering cloud that left a little mugginess once we said goodbye and that we'd follow up with her next week.

And as I replayed that cloud in my head, that subtle steam, I felt privilege and honor to be a fly on the wall. Sure, she was 95 and in poor health, death was no surprise to anyone but her perhaps. But I still felt this sense of pride that I was let into her health experience, even if inconsequentially and immemorably. The joke or two I was able to crack when Dr. Denno left the room for one second, or the crinkles in my eyes showing my smile under my mask, or just the subtle nodding along when she expressed how frustrated she was, all felt like such a blessing to be able to offer. A blessing not to her, the recipient of my small human acknowledgments, but to me, the giver, to be able to see what was going on and adopt the emotions of the situation with such a magnified lens.

As I zoomed back into the current patient and his seemingly irrelevant and unimportant shoulder complaint, I looked around. I was standing right next to the digital scale, the same scale that had been wheeled into Mrs. James' room last week because they couldn't weigh her on the other scale. The scale that bits of her shoe kept shedding onto and quite frankly kept making a mess on. There was a little glob of black gunk stuck on the scale from the previous week. To anyone else it would just look like mud, or maybe wet tar. But I smiled subtly because it was like she had left a piece of herself for us in the office. Whether on purpose or not, it felt like she was still a patient of ours, even though she was gone.

The following week I was in that exam room again (well I was in there many times before that) and I saw some of Mrs. James' shoe on the digital scale, this time really caked in between the rubber ridges of the part you stand on. It had clearly been wiped off, but not thoroughly cleaned. Kind of gross if you're thinking practically, but kind of beautiful if you're thinking poetically. She was wiped away but still was there, at least a tiny bit.

During the rest of my family med rotation, I always looked forward to going into the room with the digital scale. Each time I'd evaluate whether it had been more heavily wiped down from the day before. How much shoe bit could I spot in the crack? It felt like it challenged me to take a chance to think about this patient I had met for 5 minutes who I could not shake from my brain. It felt like a shouting yet subtle reminder of the impact every patient can have on you, how fleeting life can be even when it's your time to go, and what a privilege it is to be just a fly on the wall in all this, or just a student scrutinizing some dirt on a scale day by day.



Artist - Carly Carlin



Artist - Carly Carlin

Fast forward to the next day, I come into the office to find her radiology report from the hospital on my desk, in that crisp typewriter-spaced font that makes it look like you went back in time and received