I Knew That Smile

Jori Fleisher, MD

The fluorescent bulb emits an agonal buzz.
The nurse heaves a sigh, her tea break overly postponed,
As a boy with a haunting smile staggers towards me.
He grins while removing his weathered backpack.
He will teach me about his rare condition, he says.
Have I heard of it?

In Botswana, brimming with diamonds, wracked by disease,
Lacking neurologists, the verdict is unquestioned.
After seven years of scrutiny, he accepts it.
Differential diagnosis has been eclipsed by HIV.
A choreographed routine masks his shaking, and he winks.
My instinct whispers against the damning verdict, and he smiles.

There is something about his smile—
The unflagging zest for life, the premature wisdom and dignity—
He radiates defiance of this death sentence.
Beleaguered nurses savor the respite of his charm.
But it has a catch—a fleeting vacuum, a tarnish on what is so freely given—
Lingering in pained tension long after he has moved on.

He humored this foreigner with blood tests.
This leading expert in ball cap and jeans,
One third of his life spent mastering a fatal disease,
Pronouncing “Hallervorden-Spatz” with tribal panache.
Until, “Great news,” says his blood, and I explain.
He sees a halo above my head; I see a halo around his eye.

His smile transforms as the optimist champions his own future.
Seven years of metered fatalism shatter.
Hope drowns out the fluorescent hum.
The nurse’s sigh silenced, she clutches redemption to her chest.
He rejoices with voices steeped in faith
I weep in gratitude for the all-too-rare save.

Together we testify.
Africa needs water, bed nets,
Brazen voices of elders, courageous minds of youth.
And yet he beams that jubilant smile I knew.
It’s not always HIV. Not only poverty and TB.
Africa needs neurology too.
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