



## Can we do this quickly?

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He rolled his eyes the minute he saw me. I smiled and pretended not to notice.

*It's because he isn't feeling well, I thought to myself, but my anxious imposter syndrome was at its peak. Did I not greet him properly, or did he think I was too young-looking to know anything?*

It seemed like any other Wednesday in the outpatient clinic—except it was the day when I was supposed to receive my Step 2 results. It was my final week of clinical rotations in the U.S., and the experience had been exhilarating. Every day was new, and I found myself learning at the speed of light.

I quickly introduced myself, and he scoffed.

Doubts started to rise – doubts that, I'm sure, medical students often wrestle with. *What do I even know about medicine and taking care of patients? Maybe I'm just a master manipulator who has successfully fooled everyone here.*

Medicine is rightly described as a lifelong learning experience, so I often questioned my existing medical

knowledge. That being said, I rarely questioned my interpersonal skills. Growing up acting as a mediator during my parents' arguments made me quite an expert at navigating rough conversational seas.

I reemphasized that he could stop me at any time, and I even offered to get him someone else.

"Let's just get on with it," he said. "Can we do all of this quickly?"

He was feeling quite well that day. (Good for him!) A detailed history revealed nothing of an acute nature, and everything seemed just fine on physical examination. Turned out, it was his annual visit. I tried asking if any of his past injuries were bothering him again. (They weren't.) Did he need a refill on any of his medications? (He didn't.)

My people-pleaser medical-student-self tried my best to make him feel better by injecting minor quips here and there but to no avail. I tried talking about the weather, and he responded with a "hmpf."

The gentleman was sitting up straight with his arms crossed and his brow furrowed - non-verbal communication and body language experts would call this "a sign of anger or dissatisfaction."

Something was definitely off, and I wanted him to feel better. The consultant physician was in another room with a patient's family, and I knew it would take a bit of time for him to come here. With nothing else left to ask, I began to input everything I had collected into the system. Normally, I would intermittently converse with patients while I typed, but I remained quiet today.

Maybe he just wasn't in a good mood. It happens to the best of us. But a disquiet crept into my heart. I was at a point where I was actively considering geriatrics as something I would like to do for the rest of my life. Our interaction made me question my choice. I am someone who is always searching for means by which to improve my skills, but was geriatrics the right area for me to start with? I had never considered it my strongest point, but now I wondered if I had even the basic skills for working with the elderly. What if I was no good at it?

"Where's that accent from?" he asked, his expression unchanged. My head shot up. *Here it comes*, I thought. "India," I said.

"North or South?"

"North India." Typically, I would talk about growing up all over India due to my dad being in the military, but I refrained this time. I was still unsure what attitude his nonverbal signs indicated, so I preferred to retreat and focus on entering his information into the system.

"That's funny. My wife and I went on a trip to the northern part of India back in 1996."

I couldn't resist: "Oh, what a coincidence, I was born in 1996!"

"Where at?" he asked.

"A city called Jalandhar— it's in Punjab."

"You've got to be kidding me," he said.

I was confused, but then he pulled out his phone. "You've got to see this."

I went closer and was surprised by a glint of tears in his eyes. He scrolled through multiple pictures: the Taj Mahal, forts and palaces, the gardens, and, in the end, photographs of the city I was born in.

As we went through the photos together, I learned that it was his wife's death anniversary today. She'd been the love of his life, and he missed her every day. Determined to keep his promise to her, he said that he willed himself to live to the fullest, even on a day as sad as this one. He had woken up feeling heavier than usual. He had searched his house for their old picture albums and had spent the rest of the morning carefully clicking pictures of old physical photographs to text them to his children and grandchildren.

My heart felt the secondhand weight of love and loss, and then I saw the next picture. I requested him to pause.

It was a picture of a framed photograph carefully placed atop a dinner table. I could see half a glass of orange juice to the side. The photograph was faded, but the colors were still strong, the way all cherished things eventually look as time passes. A young man and a woman stood before a big sign, smiling. There was another man with a bicycle in the background. A group of black and yellow auto rickshaws were visible to the left. I read what the sign said and time stood still – the sign spelled out the name of the hospital that I was born in.

He thought my surprise was purely a

result of the regional coincidence. "What were the chances of us being there that same year?" he laughed, "This is baffling!"

I told him about the hospital. His face crinkled, and he broke down. The tourist guide working with them that year had taken pictures all over the city. He didn't remember how they had gotten to the gate of that hospital.

He said that his wife would have loved to be a part of this discussion, then smiled and said that maybe she already was.

We spent the next few minutes discussing and marveling at concepts such as predetermination in hushed voices. We still couldn't believe it. He asked me what fate was known as in Hindi. "Kismet," I replied.

The consultant physician entered the room soon after, and the appointment went by like any other. My Step 2 results were released. I finished my rotations and flew back home. Life went on.

Out of all my experiences with patients, the serendipity of this incident gives me pause to this day. Indeed, what were the

chances? We had spent our lives thousands of miles apart. Both our countries have thousands of other cities. Somewhere, something decided that the tapestries of our existences should interweave and the timelines of our lives should cross, and I am glad for it.

I have occasionally joked about being the gold medallist of the Worrying Olympics. I always try to do my best, but there's invariably a background noise of *I need to be better; did I miss something?; I need to learn more; et cetera*.

I know that I will face many incidences in the future where I *will* try my best but things may not end well. Patients will have bad outcomes, patients and their families will be upset - but in some of these instances, there will be nothing one could have done better; nothing that could have changed the unsatisfying outcome.

That day taught me a lot: it made me realize that while I cannot control some of the final outcomes in healthcare, what I can do is consistently try my best every single day. Above everything it reinforced my belief that we mustn't "do all of this quickly".