**Time, misremembered**

Lili Ladner

Steven Johnson is a 90-year-old man who is visited today in his place of residence.

Due to his Alzheimer’s diagnosis, he is not a good historian but all pertinent medical history has been obtained from his daughter.

He has a medical history of type 2 diabetes mellitus, Alzheimer’s disease, heart failure, aortic valve repair, and transient ischemic attacks. Two months ago, he was hospitalized for altered mental status and subsequently diagnosed with a urinary tract infection and anemia of chronic disease. During this hospital stay, he underwent two blood transfusions to correct his Hemoglobin below 7 and received antibiotic therapy. He was incidentally found to have an intestinal fistula, but surgery was not indicated due to his high operative risk.

One month later, he presented to the emergency department with new-onset confusion and slurred speech. He was diagnosed with a transient ischemic attack and discharged with a Warfarin prescription.

One week later, he presented to the emergency department after a fall in his residence with bilateral periocular contusions and abrasions to the face. He had no evidence of intracranial hemorrhage on imaging. Several days later and following a risk-benefit conversation with his family, his Warfarin was discontinued to reduce risk of future fatal intracranial hemorrhage. His vitals and mental status have been at baseline.

At the time of my visit today, Steven Johnson is seated, watching TV, and in no acute distress. He appears his stated age and presents with bilateral pedal edema, healing periocular contusions, and a slight tilt to his head, as if caught in a daydream. I walk into his room, slowly, and observe. There are photographs in every corner, one of two toddlers in suspenders on rocking horses, one a portrait of a young, blonde woman with a pearl necklace. His bed is tidy, as if it was just made, but his counter is filled with handwritten letters, a Zabar’s menu, and crumpled tissues. His room smells like cleaning solution but he doesn’t look it. Bagel crumbs coat his lip creases which are well-defined from a lifetime of smiling, the skin on his face is crumpled like a tissue, dots and spots and scabs and scars pepper his hands like modern art. He wears a red phillies sweat shirt that almost hides his gut. He is watching the TV on megadecibel volume, neck craned upwards, eyes glazed in oblivion.

I sit down across from him and he looks towards me. As he turns, we lock eyes. His are glassy, not like he has been crying but like he is neither here nor there, like he is trapped inside that windowed soul clawing to get out. A confused smile erupts, like he remembers me from another life, as I reach for the remote. Once the TV volume no longer floods his tiny room, we begin.

I start, “Hi, it’s Lili. How are you doing?”

He replies, “Did I tell you.. about Chicago? I did my.. training there. We.. didn’t have.. a..uh..a car, we hitchhiked there.. and back. It was.. good. It was.. good.” He speaks slowly and his words are both fragmented and blended, one word impregnating the next until he can’t recall where he began.

I am all at once overwhelmed by a deep, throat-closing love and eye wetting sadness for this man. My fists clench with the self-pity of, “God I wish I would’ve listened more when I saw him last.” I feel deeply guilty. While I’ve been away at school, he’s been here, waiting and forgetting.

I think of my assignment, my purpose here: to learn from a patient about their diagnosis. How am I to learn from this man about his current diagnosis if he is perpetually frozen in the past? My mind drifts as I think of finding another patient, a more well versed patient. But then I reevaluate. Steven Johnson’s memories of his past are so vivid in his present that they may as well be his reality. So I listen.

He continues, “Chicago was a tough.. time but we had.. a good time. We.. spent a lot of.. time in the.., in the ..uh, hospital. So.. we learned a lot.” I can sense his memories of Chicago are vivid, bright stars in a foggy slush of time misremembered. Steve went to Chicago Medical School at a time when quotas in the US prevented Jewish students from attending most programs. Ironically, his parents immigrated to Newark, New Jersey from Russia, with the hopes that their children wouldn’t face religious persecution. And yet they did.

While at medical school, Steve spent an hour too many hunched over a patient, his first patient, in a dark, musty basement cadaver lab. He was an avid singer, so when he realized he could make a song to remember all the never-ending names of the aerobic bacteria, he convinced his classmates to join in. And when the exam started, they were all singing under their breaths, “Oh, E Coli, Citrobacter, Klebsiella and Proteus.”

As I sit across from him, I long to hear this song, this story told over and over and over to my rather annoyed former self. The last time I heard this song, it was foreign to me. Now, two years into medical school, I just might understand. I ask, “Do you remember the song that you made for your Microbiology class?”

Steve looks down calmly, taking a moment to file through the archives. His hands are relaxed, placed gently on the edge of his arm rests as he pauses in this moment. He almost appears stoic, frozen in time yet lost in the past. His gaze shifts up to me, “No, I don’t..remember”.

I try again, “The bacteria song that you sang while taking a test.”

“No, no I don’t.”

I smile as tears spill down my cheeks. When I was young, he would bellow this exact song so often I could predict his next lines. It was utterly annoying at the time. Now, I long for nothing more than to hear him retell this story, or any story for that matter. But it seems that he is so trapped within himself, so lost in his maze of memories, that he can hardly get a word out. I am saddened by this life of disorientation, this haze of patchwork memories, but not he.

He appears tranquil. At peace with his slipping grip on reality. Not fearful that he cannot recall the pivotal moments that make him the teddy bear of a man he is today. The joy of seeing his children for the first time, rage of losing his wife, bellowing laughter with his medical school classmates, exhaustion of slumping onto the sofa after a draining week of work. These are all patches of his quilt, fragments in his foundation, yet hardly accessible to their creator.

My grandfather is a patient with Alzheimer’s. He was born in Newark New Jersey but currently resides in his memories. As his story fades away from recall, I cherish the light that he brought to my childhood and the ripple of lives he has blessed with a heart larger than his chest wall could safely contain. The shell that he is today does not reflect the luster of his narrative.

Steven Johnson is a 90-year-old man who is visited today in his place of residence. Problem list includes:

1. Fading memory of his own narrative.
2. A life well lived.