PERSPECTIVE

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When Doctors Go to War

DOCTORS AND PATIENTS

Shifting Sands

Perri Klass, M.D.

For drama’s sake, this story should start, “It was the coldest night of the year in Boston.” Poetic license aside, it was a frigid January night, and I decided to splurge on the overpriced parking right near Symphony Hall. Now, I am not usually the symphony-goer in my family; I am the parent who stays home with the kids so their father can enjoy his single Boston Symphony Orchestra subscription. This was a special treat: we had a babysitter, and Larry and I were meeting at Symphony Hall.

But my mind was not on music. I was in the middle of what we used to call a “social service code.” Two evenings earlier, I had seen one of my regular patients, a three-month-old boy, for a checkup. I had treated his rather severe diaper rash, weighed and measured him — and worried. Because his mother seemed kind of stressed, kind of marginal, kind of over the edge. I knew some of her story: housing problems and homeless shelters, money problems, and legal problems. I had already invoked domestic violence services, family support services, patient advocate services, the emergency clothing pantry. And, of course, the Department of Social Services. There was an open DSS case on the baby, and I had spoken many times with the DSS worker.

At the end of that visit, I told the mother that I was worried. She had run out of money and supplies from the Women, Infants, and Children program and was feeding the baby out of a big can of powdered elemental formula — nothing that would harm him, but something that must have been prescribed for some other baby with a digestive problem and come her way through her mysterious network of shadowy friends. The baby, who was usually dressed immaculately in outfits with matching socks and coordinated caps, looked scruffy and bedraggled. And the mother seemed... off somehow, all over the place, overwhelmed and disoriented. It’s hard to put into words the feeling she gave me — that’s why I reach for these vague expressions of dislocation and discomfort. Or I could express it in jargon — she seemed “inappropriate,” she was showing “poor judgment.” Whatever was going on in this family’s life, I knew it wasn’t good. When I asked about it, she shook her head and hinted darkly at disasters and betrayals. “But I’ve been praying a lot,” she said.

So I told her I would call DSS in the morning, and she flinched. She felt judged and found guilty, and perhaps betrayed yet again. “So they can help you,” I said. “So they can make sure you have food...”
for yourself and the baby and help straighten out your housing."

She and the baby went home (in a taxi, with a voucher from the health center), and in the morning I called her DSS worker and, as we say, expressed my concerns. "I feel strongly that this family needs more services," I said, and listed some: parenting classes, medical and mental health evaluations for the mother, maybe an emergency stabilization team.

The next afternoon, before the concert, I was paged by DSS. Apparently, after the taxi took them home from the clinic, the mother had called a friend to come stay with the baby and had gone off, no one knew where, in search of food and money. And after some changes in babysitter, there had been some kind of crisis — someone who didn’t want to stay or didn’t know when the mother was coming back called the DSS hotline. DSS decided to take the baby into emergency custody and told the babysitter to wait there for the workers — but the babysitter panicked. Or maybe the mother got home and panicked — nobody knew exactly. But when DSS got to the apartment, there was no one there. No babysitter, no mother, no three-month-old. Just an unlocked door, an empty apartment, signs of a hasty departure.

I left word at the health center that if the mother called, DSS was to be informed at once. I called the apartment a couple of times, but no one answered. And then it was time for the concert. As I parked my car, paid my $20, and walked out into the painfully cold air, I was thinking, melodramatically, the coldest night of the year and that baby is out there somewhere. I thought about the gap between my own life and my patients’ lives — if I had just handed the mother the $20 I was blowing on parking, she could have bought formula and food and not gone chasing off on some complicated avenue of her precarious life.

Then, the concert. As the non-symphony-goer, I had very little idea what to expect; Berlioz, a bicentennial celebration of his birth, "L’Enfance du Christ," 19th-century oratorio, Larry said. Famous for its tenderness as the story of Christ’s birth, for its chorus of shepherds saying goodbye as the Holy Family sets off on the flight into Egypt. We took our seats in Symphony Hall — which was warm, bright, beautiful, and extraordinarily civilized, after our short dashes through the freezing evening — and watched the orchestra tune up, watched the chorus file onto the stage, applauded the conductor. I was obsessively rerunning in my mind the scenario of what I should have done two nights earlier, how I could have avoided this whole mess.

They kept the house lights on so we could follow along in the libretto. "L’Enfance du Christ" starts with Herod’s dream, an aria in which the king is tortured by thoughts that a baby will undo him: "Oh the wretchedness of kings! To rule yet not to live, to mete out laws to all, yet to long to follow the goatherd into the heart of the woods!" And he orders the slaughter of all the newborn children.

I could pay attention. But the combination of the music and the words, the sitting still and listening, brought up with sudden and harsh force all the worst, most melodramatic tabloid images of where that baby might be. A three-month-old out there on the cold streets, his mother ducking into doorways when the wind blasted, dragging him around corners if a siren sounded. Would she have dressed him warmly enough? Would she understand how quickly a baby could freeze? Was she unhinged by the thought of people coming to take away her child, or by this last set of betrayals — me calling to complain about her, the babysitter calling to report her? In my music-enhanced imagination, I saw her moving toward some decision point — toward a bridge, perhaps, the baby in her arms. I saw old-movie black-and-white shadows, gloomy Victorian paintings of disgraced or despondent women. I saw death and disaster and destruction.

And, of course, I saw myself as responsible. Interestingly, I was managing to blame myself along two completely different tracks, in both cases putting myself at the center of the story. In one version, I was wrong to have called DSS at all: why hadn’t I dealt with the problems of the moment, handed her $20 for formula, given her a pep talk about how hard she was trying, promised more help in the morning, and sent her home feeling supported? I had undermined her and invoked the powers of the state when all she needed was some cash and a sense that there was someone on her side. But I didn’t really believe this, though the idea of handing her $20 had taken on a certain irresistible appeal ever since I’d parked my car.

Mostly, I blamed myself in the other direction, holding this doublethink quite comfortably in my mind: why on earth had I let her take that little baby home two nights ago? Wasn’t there enough evidence that things were falling apart, that the child was at risk? I flip-flopped from the image of handing her the $20 and patting her shoulder to a
different, fiercer scenario: call the security guard, station him outside the exam room, call the DSS emergency hotline. . .

Where was the mother? Where was the baby? I had left my beeper in the car and turned off my cell phone. I could picture the beeper chirping away in the ice-cold car. Why had I ever invoked DSS, why hadn’t I just sent her home encouraged? How could I have let her take that baby home. Why hadn’t I called the hotline there and then?

And it was so cold out. The chorus of shepherds sang their farewell, and Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were journeying through the desert: “For three days, despite the hot winds, they journeyed through the shifting sands.” And the city outside seemed to me right then like a frozen desert, barren and hostile to life. And yet there I was, sitting in a glorious building, rich with light and music, voices and instruments. A building and a moment, testament, if anything could be, to the glory of cities and of group human enterprise.

In the oratorio, the weary family comes to a city. Mary sings, “In this immense town the roar and bustle of the hurrying crowds! Joseph, I’m frightened . . . I can’t go on. . . .” Joseph knocks first on one door and then on another, begging for shelter, rest, and food, only to be reviled by the chorus: “Get away, vile Hebrews! Egyptian people have nothing to do with tramps and lepers!”

Had I somehow helped to turn this little family away, to launch it into a world of closed doors, hostile winds, and, at least figuratively, shifting sands? When I closed my eyes, the images I saw were appropriately biblical and desert-themed, but they flickered every so often into a more modern, cold-climate picture: a woman, not warmly enough dressed, hurrying down a dark Boston street, clutching an infant car seat by its handle, hiding from everyone who might try to take her baby away. She tried so hard to be a conscientious mother; she had a car seat, I knew, although she had no car.

I didn’t actually start crying until the last scene, when Joseph knocked on the Ishmaelite’s door and the family was welcomed in and comforted. I’m not sure exactly why I was crying. Maybe it was at the possibility of help and kindness coming out of bleakness and despair for an individual baby, an individual family, a door opening just when the whole town seemed closed. Or maybe it was at some confused, sentimental geopolitical thought: as the householder sang, “Don’t be afraid; the children of Ishmael are brothers of the children of Israel,” it occurred to me that in this musical fantasy, one charitable home enclosed Jews, the child Jesus, and those who would later be Muslims — a 19th-century French version of a human peacable kingdom. I was, I suppose, a little overwrought.

Whomever I was crying for — myself, my patient, or the world — the music ended, and I wiped my eyes, made the cold dash back to my car, and went home and worried.

In the morning, of course, it all turned out all right; there had been misunderstandings and miscommunications — mother and baby had been safe and warm inside all night, the mother having conscientiously left messages on various official answering machines. If it hadn’t all been a triumph of good maternal judgment, neither had it been egregious neglect or avoidance of the authorities. There were still, as we say, multiple issues. The family was still, as we say, of great concern. But both mother and baby were OK. I probably wouldn’t be telling this story if they hadn’t been.

But, of course, their story doesn’t end there. It goes on, in this real city in which they live, which is not the same city I know, with complications and arrangements and contingencies that I can’t even guess, with catastrophes and threats and just getting by. I see little bits, try to help patch services together, and worry that it will again fall to me to sit in judgment. They manage, but only just. There are moments of grace and moments of safety, moments of shelter and moments of comfort, and all of that is real. But for this mother and baby, I fear, the wilderness is also real, and the wilderness is infinite.

(Identifying details about the family have been changed to protect their privacy.)