Twitter Thread by Sayed Tabatabai, MD



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There are moments now and then when, if I imagine hard enough, it's like it was before.

I don't feel the ear loops from the mask.

I don't notice the red signs on the floor, saying "6 ft apart!"

I don't feel... the heaviness that tinges every single hour.

There are moments. 1/

I'm standing in line at the post office. It's a beautiful day and sunlight streams in through the windows.

Miraculously it's relatively deserted.

A bored little boy looks through the stamps for sale with his mother.

A man stands behind me, elderly, leaning on a cane. 2/

He's tall, lean, and wears a "GO ARMY" sweatshirt paired with sweatpants, and those brown sandals that seem ubiquitous in South Texas.

I nod hello.

He nods in return, "Hi, doc."

For a moment, I feel that queasy discomfort of being unable to remember.

Do I know him? 3/

I know patients expect me to recognize them, and I often remember, but there're just too many.

Then I realize, he’s not a patient.

I forgot to unclip the hospital ID tag on my shirt pocket.

He grins, “What kind of doc are ya?”

I unclip the ID tag and smile, “Kidneys.” 4/

“My kidneys are just about the only damn part of me that works!”

He laughs. A choppy sound, dry.

I nod politely, saying nothing.

He continues with that easy familiarity that comes from being sociable, and lonely.

“I busted my knees jumpin’ outta planes for the army.” 5/

I nod again, “Thanks for your service.”

He grins, “You can thank me by telling me where I can get one of those COVID shots.”

I tell him the local resources.

He nods, “I’m on a waiting list. Can you believe there’s morons who don’t wanna get em? After all this crap?” 6/

“There’s a lot of misinformation and mistrust out there.” I try to sound level-headed.

“Bullshit, they’re idiots. People dyin’ left and right. I got every vaccine there was in the army. Damn straight I’m gettin’ this one.”

He stands a little taller.

I grin, “Good luck.” 7/

Later that day I’m home.

Still thinking about the man in the Post Office, and his clarity.

I hope he gets the vaccine.

There’s been a spike in patient deaths in the hospital recently.

Sometimes I see them in my mind’s eye.

Those who never had a chance to take the vaccine. 8/

They’re silent, because I usually see them after they’ve been intubated, so I never hear their voices.

Sometimes they sit across from me on the couch and stare wistfully at the news on TV.

A country tearing itself apart, in the shadow of a toll too vast to comprehend. 9/

Sometimes they look at me, and I see them with terrible clarity.

I see the scars on their neck where the central lines were. The tape marks from the ET tube in their throat. The marks on their wrists from arterial lines.

Some are swollen with edema, or subcutaneous air. 10/

I know what they want.

A chance to stay with their family. To stay with their beloveds.

One more day. One more moment.

One last walk in the park with their dog.

What would they have given for a chance at this vaccine?

I close my eyes and I see them clearly.

Ghosts. 11/

I listen to their labored breaths. I bear witness. I mourn their passing. I remember them.

And then I do my best to let them go.

I made oatmeal the other day. For the first time in months. Don’t know why I wanted it. I just did.

I added maple syrup.

It felt normal. 12/

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