Our true teachers

Paying tribute to those who touch us deeply.

BY KELSEY SCHUETTE

Sometimes, when no one else could hear us in the resident workroom, we called you “grandmother.” Visiting you every morning was my favorite job. You would tell me that you didn’t sleep well, sternly glaring at the machines and alarms that surrounded you, scolding them to be quiet in your most formidable librarian voice. You would tell me stories about being a librarian and complain that we had nothing good to read. When I went to the patient library and brought you Jane Austin, you recited the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice* to me by heart. You told me, over and over again, to send you home because you had too many things to do. You asked me every morning, in that same formidable voice, if we had finally figured out what was wrong with you. It was my job, every morning, to tell you “no.”

I took my rotation exam the morning you transitioned to comfort care. I stupidly ran from my test to your room. When I got there, I was out of breath and didn’t know what to say. I wasn’t your family or your friend or your pastor. I was a medical student. I was the person who annoyingly woke you every morning, quizzed you and poked you, and memorized everything I could about you. Now I wondered, what significance did that hold?

So, I told you that I had talked to someone about your rent check being late because I knew you were worried. You had never been late for anything. I told you that we had finally listened and turned off all the alarms so you could sleep. And then, because you were sleeping, and working very hard to breathe, and I knew this was our last conversation, I thanked you for being a better teacher than all the books in the world.

You were the first patient of mine to die.

I am not an important character in your long and storied life, but you are in mine. When I went home that night after we said goodbye, I opened my dog-eared copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and slowly underlined the first sentence as your voice read it to me in my mind. “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” Please forgive me that sentimentality.

Kelsey Schuette is a fourth-year medical student at the University of Minnesota, pursuing a career in pediatrics. This is derived from a talk she gave on behalf of the Gold Humanism Honor Society at the medical school’s white coat ceremony last fall.