Adeline’s mother

A glimpse at the person in the patient.

BY MARGARET NOLAN, M.D.

We have her on a mandatory 72-hour hold, since she has a history of alcohol withdrawal seizures. She came down from the ICU this morning, where she had been intubated for respiratory failure after inhaling an unknown substance. She is so young, thin and frail. Her clavicles are like bridges, rising over a sea of ink-soaked skin tattooed with roses and crosses and initials that do not match her own.

She says she can’t stay. She needs to get home to her daughter, Adeline. Hearing her name makes me pause; I did not expect it, somehow so full of love and care, so carefully chosen and purposefully given.

She says all her problems started when her fiancé died. She lets this sit between us for a moment. I remember from the chart it was an overdose. It occurs to me she doesn’t know that I know this. It feels unsettling that I do. She says her fiancé’s family is suing for custody of Adeline. She needs to get clean so she can keep her daughter. She must get home to be with her.

I listen as air whistles in and out, down her trachea and bronchioles and out into nothingness—her alveoli in wispy pieces from chemical damage of some kind. Her lungs gurgle and crack like rapidly boiling water. I’m not sure what she inhaled—only she knows, and perhaps her fiancé, who is now dead. I try to get her to tell me and she begins to cry but doesn’t answer.

She reaches into the pocket of her hospital gown and pulls out a tube of lip gloss, the sparkly kind that hangs on the aisle ends at Walgreens and comes in flavors like “cherry burst” and “cotton candy cream.” I watch her apply it and something in me stirs. I know she uses alcohol, marijuana, heroin, meth, OxyContin … but she also uses Bonne Bell lip gloss, and suddenly she becomes real.

Margaret Nolan is a second-year family medicine resident at Mayo Clinic in Rochester. This essay received honorable mention in the 2013 Medical Musings writing contest.