

The Problem With Compassion

The man in room 17 loses the element of surprise when his chair clatters loudly to the floor. The hospital curtain is drawn, but from my position in the corridor I can see a vague shape writhing behind it. As I scan the wall for an emergency buzzer, it strikes me that the noise from the chair might save his life. I doubt he'll thank me for it, though. They usually don't.

Eventually, I find the buzzer watching me like a discerning red eye. I prod it reluctantly and the eye glows bright as a frantic alarm echoes off the walls.

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep.

The noise vibrates in my ears like an aural defibrillator, but it fails to shock me, nor quicken my pulse. It did once, when I was a callow medical student, and to a lesser degree as a junior doctor. Not now. The further my career progresses, the more the line seems to blur between patients and paperwork.

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep.

It wails a lament for the man in room 17, but I can't bring myself to move away from the wall and help him. Instead, I hold on to the box in my pocket and make myself as small as possible, feebly awaiting the nurses to remedy the situation.

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep.

They rush past in a flock, as ducks might converge on discarded bread, without a glance in my direction. One of them flings the curtain open and gasps; they spring into action in a flurry of movement. Another nurse flicks off the buzzer. A third pulls out a pair of well-worn scissors and the rest hold the man up as she chops at the bedsheet around his neck.

A few seconds later, he splutters and coughs. They lower him gently to the floor. His face, previously the same shade of cerulean as my scrubs, recedes to a healthy pink colour.

Gary waddles onto the scene during their medical checkups, his scarlet manager's uniform stretched tight across his belly, and I pull back to evade the whiff of body odour that follows in his wake. He positions himself in front of the nurses, issuing instructions and waving his arms. Once he turns his back, I make my escape down the corridor, reassuring myself the patient is fine.

Then Gary spots me and ambles into my personal space with his finger aimed at me like a pistol.

'Edward! Just who I wanted to see. There are no beds left in ED, so why don't you assess this guy now? Then we can get him out of here and over to the mental health unit. Hurry.'

I look at him, then back at the poor man. He's both wheezing and sobbing at once.

'Let him catch his breath,' I respond. 'He's third in line to be seen, anyway. It'll be awhile.'

I stalk off before he finds a reply, his groan of exasperation echoing down the corridor behind me. My feet carry me through the Emergency Department, past monitors beeping wildly, children screaming in the arms of exhausted mothers, voices explaining and soothing and complaining in

uncountable accents and tones. The odour of hospital food makes my stomach growl, though I can't tell if it's from hunger or disgust.

At the fishbowl, the emergency doctors hunch over their computers, pecking keyboards with their index fingers, their grimaces hidden behind goggles and N-95s. A couple of them nod to me as I walk past, and one of them suggests I pull up my mask over my mouth and nose. I pretend I didn't hear.

North Shore Hospital has lost its lustre over the years, like a cocktail that tasted fresh and sweet once but is now an abject reminder of nights spent alone at the bar. As I pass the staff cafeteria a memory springs to mind from my training, when my mentor at the time, a rake-thin elderly psychiatrist renowned for taking no annual leave in thirteen years, remarked that I was far too compassionate to be a mental health professional.

'You need to close yourself off more,' he'd told me.

Boy, he'd be proud of me now.

At last I shove the double doors open and inhale a lungful of fresh air. It feels cleansing, which is ironic considering what I'm about to do. At this time in the evening the hospital's back entrance is deserted; my only company is a sullen, half-obscured moon and the rows of parked cars it illuminates. It is mercifully quiet.

A tentative wind raises goosebumps on my forearms as I fish inside my pocket for my lighter. From the other pocket comes a pack of ciggies, and moments later my muscles lose some of their tension when the cigarette flares and I welcome the smoke into me.

If I didn't hide my smoking habit from everyone I know, the irony, or perhaps moral failure, would bother me more. I still prescribe my patients nicotine patches and gum, even though I want to say they're useless because they did nothing for me. Most of them started smoking when they were in their early teens, anyway. It's harder for them to quit. It's not their fault.

I started last year, when I was 33. Maybe I could stop if I really tried. But these days it's probably the only thing keeping me from checking into ED myself.

The rest of the night swims past in an apathetic haze, and the man in room 17 makes it through without any further mishaps. On the drive home, I can still hear the plastic chair rebounding off the linoleum and the breathy, gagging noise of an obstructed airway. I can see the look in his eyes; not disappointment or regret, but resignation.

It's well past midnight when I heave my apartment door open and toss my keys onto a counter laden with pizza boxes. They slide across and fall onto the floor, where the noise wakes Panda from his spot on the couch. He mewls a sleepy greeting. I flick on the lights and he blinks, pupils dilating, before ambling over to brush against my shins.

As I shovel cat food into his bowl, the urge to sleep brushes the edge of my mind, but it's swept away by thoughts racing past like rabbits in a meadow. For some people it's easy to doze off after a 15-hour workday. Not me.

Dispelling any immediate thoughts of sleep, I open my laptop. A piece of paper spills out: a note to self, reminding me to renew my membership at Dice & Spork. I was a regular at the board game cafe once. Then COVID hit, people started getting sick - both patients and colleagues - and

suddenly getting a day off was harder than buying a house in Auckland. As my manager, Gary has the power to decline my leave, and he does it with great enthusiasm.

'Don't let us down,' he told me last week, jowls wobbling. 'We need you working to keep this hospital afloat.'

I'm ready to scrunch the note into a ball when I notice the bin is already overflowing with them. There are forgotten reminders in there for the clothes strewn throughout my apartment, the partially clogged sink in my ensuite, and, probably, for whatever is exuding the stench of decay from my pantry. Even the thought of everything I have to do has my hand unconsciously reaching into my pocket.

'Am I losing it, Panda?' I shake my head as if to dislodge it all from my brain.

The cigarette is nearly in my mouth when I make eye contact with him, now purring in contentment beside my laptop. No one has ever asked me why his name is Panda. I assume it's from the lack of visitors to my apartment and because it seems obvious, since he's all black with white patches on his chest and belly. The silly truth, though, is he's named after Pandemic, my favourite board game. I love it for the collaborative aspect of working together to fight disease, which is absurd considering how much I hate my job.

'Maybe you're right,' I say, scratching his ear and, with effort, putting the ciggy away. 'It's worth another go.'

The next day is a rare Saturday off. After waking up past midday, I almost decide not to go. But a few episodes of Love Island and an awful burger from KFC later, I force myself out of bed and

into the shower, hating myself a little less for it. I dress in something approaching respectability and step into an evening daubed orange-red by the retreating sun.

It's not much of a walk to Dice & Spork, only a few streets down from my apartment smack dab in the Auckland CBD, but it's enough to make me want to turn back. The city is alight; crowded with boisterous couples revelling in their youth, and people who seem to laugh and carouse safe in the knowledge they hold meaningful companionship.

Dice & Spork is no different. The store is arranged like a giant game of Snakes & Ladders, complete with fluffy snakes and ladders that must've been made from the cast-off timbers at Mitre 10. Teetering shelves of board games reach almost to the ceiling, and groups of youngsters dressed in fantasy garb chatter and laugh aside old-timers pushing figurines across miniature terrain. The mouthwatering aroma of fried chicken wafting from the kitchen has the remnants of the KFC in my stomach recoiling in shame.

The only free table seats four people. I pull Pandemic off a shelf and begin setting up the game, waiting for someone, anyone, to join me. The minutes trickle past. People keep walking by the table, their heads turned in my direction, then ignore me when I look up. Someone asks if they can take one of the unused chairs and I reluctantly agree. A three-player game, then.

She appears as if out of thin air, and the first thing I know about her is that she smells like tomato sauce and mustard, because she's balancing her phone in one hand and an American hotdog in the other. Her mini-skirted backside hits the chair with a soft *thump* and in an Irish accent she tells me without preamble:

'I'll be the pilot.'

Bewildered by her lack of decorum, her awful choice of character, and the drops of condiment spilling onto the pristine game board, I find myself speechless. She stares at me defiantly until I stammer a response.

'In the rules it says- '

'Fuck the rules,' she grins, the effect somewhat ruined by her mustard-stained teeth. 'We'll make our own.'

Whilst setting up our rule-less game, I learn this intriguing sprite of a woman is called Áine. The syllables spill clumsily from my mouth. *Awn-ya*.

She tosses her wild red hair over one shoulder as she tells me her parents named her after an Irish goddess. I ask what Áine is the goddess of, and she laughs and says she can't because there are kids around. She watches me brazenly, but I can't sustain eye contact with her; I'm afraid she'll prise my mind open and read the thoughts running haywire within.

As usual for my games of Pandemic, I play the medic. We battle outbreaks of disease in Bangkok and Seoul. When another strain emerges in Europe, she flies me across continents to find a cure. Pestilence spreads across the world, but there is no burnout in Pandemic; the doctors have endless stamina and mental health does not exist. How idyllic. All the while she steadily devours the hotdog, her opalite nose piercing glinting in No Dice's ruddy lamplight.

'So, you play the medic. You a doctor or something?' she says suddenly, through a mouthful of sausage.

I'm shocked by how easily the lie comes. 'No.'

She nods. 'Good.'

Áine doesn't press the issue further, simply looking back down at the board, but my heart takes some time to find a stable rhythm again. It's disturbingly freeing to pretend I'm someone else. Maybe it's a good thing. Maybe she doesn't like doctors. What could she have been through?

Part of my answer is revealed when she leans back to tie up her hair and the sleeves of her mauve cardigan slide down a fraction. Faded lines arc across her forearms, almost invisible against her skin. A familiar sight in my profession.

The evening races past, and we cure disease after disease until there are no cubes left. The world is empty again, same as it started, as if not a single person had been infected at all.

She holds out her hand. 'Well played, Eddie.'

I shake it, find myself distracted by how cool her palm is, and hold her hand a second too long. Flustered, I withdraw it too quickly.

'That was fun. Are you, uh, do you come here every week?'

'Don't worry. You'll see me again,' she says. As she leaves, the corner of her mouth curves up in such a wicked fashion that it confirms she can read my mind.

The week that follows is a dystopian blur. The mental health unit is short-staffed, as per usual, and several patients escape to run amok from Devonport to Warkworth. When the police finally bring them all back, one of them hides little plastic bags of meth in his underwear, thus establishing himself as the hospital's resident drug dealer. Everyone is psychotic before we realise what happened.

That night I sit on the couch and get through almost two packs of smokes, my guilt accumulating as thickly as the tar in my lungs. I flick through Facebook and Instagram, looking for Áine's social media accounts, but there's nothing to be found. Later, I check my work emails, more from habit than volition. What I see makes me sit up in my seat and swear loudly.

It's a smug email from Gary about a Health & Disability Commission complaint for a patient I discharged some time ago. As I read the email, heat rises further and further up my neck, and Panda looks at me with such concern I must have steam blowing out of my ears like a cartoon character.

The complaint is from a lady called Sharon. She's the mother of Aidan, a kid I looked after in the mental health unit last year. Isolated and naive, he would use alcohol and meth to fill the void whenever his teenage life grew too stressful. One day, fuelled by a 72-hour bender, he decided enough was enough, tied a climbing rope around his neck, and found a suitable tree in Albert Park. Only the midnight wanderings of a local homeless man saved him.

Weeks of therapy, medication, and social work later, we discharged him from the mental health unit, and he shook my hand and thanked me for saving his life. Even that had stirred my emotions a little.

In Sharon's complaint she outlines her dissatisfaction with my care and denounces my decision to put him back into an unsafe environment. She says he has fallen back into his old habits and tried to kill himself after getting drunk again.

Thankfully the kid is okay, but the injustice of it all weighs me down. This is the problem with compassion - you never get any of it back.

I don't tell Áine any of this. I don't want my clusterfuck of a job to put her off. The next time I see her, she has some red lipstick on, a shade darker than her hair. She's wearing a leather jacket and high-waisted ripped jeans that outline her legs in an unnaturally distracting way.

We chat as we play, often about things I've never stopped to think about but she seems to ponder all the time, like if life is a simulation or which animal we would ride into battle. Halfway through our eradication of an outbreak in Argentina, my phone lights up with a notification and she spots the photo of Panda on my lock screen.

'One of those tricked you into looking after them? You know they'd eat you if you died, right?'

'Panda wouldn't.'

'Of course your cat's called Panda,' she smirks. 'You really love this board game, don't you?'

'He looks like a panda too,' I retort, a touch defensively.

'Fuck off he does. *This* dude looks like a panda.'

Her phone glows with a photo of a tubby-looking cat with a white head and black eye markings. He nestles on Áine's shoulder, her smile radiant and mustard-less. She sees my expression and giggles.

'Yeah, I know he's fat. If we died in the same place, he'd eat us both.'

I spend the rest of the evening considering the logistics of Áine and I being close enough to die together.

As weeks pass, spring blends into summer and I begin to define my time by the weekends. The professional grind feels more bearable, if only because I have more to look forward to than guilty nights alone in bed with takeaways, or 'Bachelor Pad Thais', as Áine coins them in a moment of hilarity. She tells me she has no social media, which solves that particular conundrum, and we start texting instead. My nights are filled with giant green chat bubbles and the emotions buzzing inside them.

To my surprise - perhaps dismay - I find my cloak of cynicism falling away. When I'm with her I never fake a smile, never force a laugh, and talking about myself comes as naturally as rolling dice. She has this disarming way about her, an easy intimacy and a warmth of spirit that I find comfortable to lie within.

Our unspoken rule, perhaps laid down on the first day, is that we never talk about work. At our second meeting she told me she was a nurse once but stopped doing it, and we left it at that. She feels like a space-time anomaly, a gateway to another universe where psychiatry and hospitals don't exist and can't be mentioned even if we tried.

Meanwhile, the man in room 17, having spent months on the mental health unit, is finally discharged. He bids us farewell, not exactly cured, but alive to tell the tale of his unfortunate episode in ED. The HDC marks Sharon's complaint against me as 'serious', and there is a lengthy email chain in which they ask Gary, as my manager, to testify on my behalf. He refuses.

One star-filled night in January, Áine and I lose a game. A devastating outbreak in the Middle East is the final blow. Accustomed to saving the world by now, we stare down at the board in shock, then jab accusatory fingers at each other.

'This happened because you picked the damn doctor again,' she insists.

'Not true,' I fire back. 'It's because you took too many risks.'

She narrows her eyes at me suggestively.

'Fine, maybe you're right. How about I shout you some sorbet and we call it even?'

Strolling through the CBD, it strikes me I've never walked on these streets with a woman before. It's been years since I've walked with a woman anywhere. We pass the lights of the Civic Theatre, laughter and music flooding from inside, and wait at the traffic lights on Queen Street. There are couples across from us who stand with their arms intertwined and their eyes on each other's faces, and for once I don't feel like an alien species.

When I was training, I told myself there was no time to date, let alone get married. If I fell in love along the way, great. If I didn't then at least I'd be a bachelor in demand. There was always just another career hurdle to chase, another job to do, another patient to save.

Being with her makes it all seem so trivial.

Even though I'm looking straight ahead, so much of my attention is on Áine that it feels as if my eyes have migrated to one side of my body and I now resemble a flounder. It doesn't help matters that she's wearing a black bodycon dress that makes me look like a flounder paddling awkwardly next to an angelfish.

I don't know how to position my body beside hers, despite the foot of space between us. The closeness of her makes me sweat and fiddle with my collar. When she looks away, I sniff myself discreetly in case I'm reeking body odour. The results are inconclusive and I do it twice more. Whenever we glance at each other we share a little smile that gives me a stuttering tachycardia.

The sorbet is middling at best. As the coolness fades away from our mouths, we sit on some steps near Chancery Square and swap names of places that do better desserts. We look at the fairy lights around us, reminiscing on how the city has changed over the years. I scoff when she tells me she likes Auckland more than Dublin. 'It's the people,' she says. 'Kiwis don't give a toss about anything. They're so carefree and I love that.'

What is probably hours later, she stands and stretches all four limbs like a cat. She fishes in her pocket for something, then pauses and looks at me with a frown.

'Look, sorry if this isn't your thing, but I'm craving one right now. I don't mind if you- '

The cigarette stops halfway to her mouth, her face frozen in surprise.

'I'm craving one too,' I say, holding out my lighter.

The look she gives me is so impassioned that I get a feeling in my chest I'm afraid to put a name to. It swells even as the smoke fills my lungs. The smoke and sorbet taste warm and numb, sweet and raw. We exhale together, our breaths mingling in a cloud of smoke and night vapour, and it's the first time in my life I've had a smoke and not regretted it.

Dozens of Netflix rom-coms have left me in no doubt about what comes next, but it's long since become plain that there's nothing conventional about Áine and me. Once we finish her pack of smokes, we part with a hug - the closest I've ever been to her physically - and I'm careful not to hold on too long, even though letting go is the last thing I want to do. As she leaves I take in the ambrosial smell of her and hold that breath until my heart pounds a warning in my ears. Then I caper back to my apartment, and the rabbits frolicking in my mind's meadow are joined by squirrels and chittering fieldmice.

The sensation lasts so long I begin to understand how my manic patients in the mental health unit feel. Every fibre, every atom of my body strains against time, wanting it to quicken so the weekend can arrive and I can see Áine again. At work, people comment on the spring in my step. The annoying ones tell me they're glad I'm smiling again. Even Gary grudgingly praises my work.

I'm riding high in my hot air balloon of euphoria when rips appear in the fabric and the flames flicker. It starts with another email, this time carrying an official-looking letterhead from the Ministry of Justice. They've escalated the HDC complaint a level further, propagated by Sharon's persistence and Gary's unwillingness to support me. The email says there are grave concerns about my decision to send Aidan back to his flat instead of his mother's place, and it may have been directly responsible for his latest attempt. They expect me in court next month.

'Be careful what you say,' the pungent bastard declares one morning. 'You could lose your medical licence over this.'

The thought of that scares me in the way the emergency buzzer was supposed to.

So, it's a generous helping of fear with a dollop of guilt that convinces me to tell Áine the truth. I figure even if she doesn't like doctors she'll think a practising one is better than a disgraced one. What's more, the way her mind works is so unique I know she'll find a way to twist the destruction of my career and livelihood into a positive. And, most of all, I just can't bring myself to lie to her anymore.

On Saturday I get to our table first. In itself this is unusual since Áine is usually waiting for me when I arrive, but I push my doubts away, killing time by rehearsing my confession and idly watching the Warhammer fanatics tumble dice onto their sculpted felt terrain. Beside them a group of schoolboys polish off greasy chicken wings over a frenetic card game. By now I'm a Dice & Spork regular; the muffled rolling of dice and slap of cards on the table are a familiar backdrop to my meadow of rumination.

Yet as the minutes trickle past, it all gets more and more irritating. I try to occupy myself by setting up the game. She usually texts when she's late, but she might have left her phone at home. I check the AT app in case her bus got cancelled. Fifteen minutes pass, then half an hour.

Confident I know which character she'll pick, I start playing the game by myself, muttering justifications to her empty seat. The possibility occurs to me that she decided not to see me anymore. Maybe she figured out I'm a doctor, and she might have no interest in doctors. Maybe

we didn't look after her enough, weren't compassionate enough, worked too hard and lost our way. Or she might have simply gotten bored.

Eventually I give up on checking my phone every few seconds and just stare at the screen until tears prick the corners of my eyes. I sit there until my battery is on 6% and everyone else has long since departed into the night. The owner finally breaks my cocoon of silence when he hovers at my shoulder and quietly tells me they closed ten minutes ago.

Back home, there comes a point in the lost hours of the morning that I convince myself I will never see Áine again. Not even the chainsaw buzz of Panda's purring on my lap is a source of comfort. Before today I'd never looked up what Áine was the goddess of, instead letting my imagination run amok. I search it up on impulse as a final farewell, and what I find convinces me she is everything I will never have.

The next day, during my morning walk through ED, a familiar weight settles upon me. It's as if the Earth's core is attracting my feet like a magnet, pulling me down under the ground to be smothered to death or incinerated. Random noises like the chirping of an oxygen monitor or patients crying out in pain grate my nerves. It is all too loud and too bright. I clench my teeth so tightly I'm afraid they'll shatter. It reassures me she won't see them even if they did.

I don't acknowledge Gary's greeting as I pass him in the corridor. He makes an inane comment about the new patient's name and tosses me a folder with their details. They're in the infamous room 17.

Newly graduated me used to spend a while reading through the file, trying to get a sense of who this person was and why they'd come in with a mental health crisis. Burnt-out me used to take a cursory glance at the name, skim through the notes and proceed into the room.

Today I'm close to tossing the file back in his face.

Instead, I grip it in white-knuckled hands and go directly to room 17, red eyes watching me from the walls.

I pull the curtain open to find a woman with striking red hair and a hole where her opalite nose piercing used to be. Her pale neck is unblemished, her face solemn, her back stiff. When she sees me, she lets out a breath that leaves her body slumped. The mask slips and tears fall freely down her cheeks.

Áine beckons me with trembling hands.

Part of me, perhaps the callow medical student or the hopeful trainee psychiatrist or even the doctor I was a few months ago, wants to wrench the curtain shut again and walk out of ED. My professional instincts ring desperate warnings in my ears.

But, when I hold her in my arms, none of it seems to matter, and I think that if it all crumbles I'd stand amongst the ruins and smoke a cigarette without a shred of regret. Her scent is heady, intoxicating, the skin of her cheek so cool it makes me gasp.

There is a future in which I pull away, I tell her this is wrong, I leave the room. Where I keep on working, push myself further, perhaps defend myself from the HDC. Retire after a distinguished career. Save lives. Help people. Show compassion.

But, when I kiss her lips, her body shivers, and I can't control the heat setting my skin on fire, the need for her searing my tongue. The emergency buzzer wails faintly behind us, the raised voices barely audible, the footsteps on linoleum a dull distraction.

I picture defending myself in court against breaches of personal and professional conduct, telling them the problem with compassion is you sometimes make mistakes.

Being with her makes it all seem so trivial.