



As Simple as Pancakes

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I LISTENED WITH dread as my 16-year-old patient recounted recent events that had left him teetering on the precipice of incarceration. “Any adults helping you make decisions these days?” I asked.

“Only one,” he stated, describing a man in his late twenties he called “My Man.” He’d been hanging out with this guy who had been urging my patient to avoid the missteps he himself had made. As my patient related details from My Man’s lifetime of abuse and pay back, he observed astutely that the older man’s retaliations were seldom directed at the people who had hurt him but rather at whomever happened to be in front of him when his emotions surfaced. These violent outbursts only amplified My Man’s bottomless anger, sorrow, and self-loathing.

“I know where all this is heading,” my patient said.

“Where?” I asked.

“I figure I’ll be doing drugs, stuck in prison, or dead,” he stated matter of factly.

“And how do you feel about that future?” I asked, aiming to match the emotionless tone of his voice. We talked for a while. Inevitably, the discussion turned to his father. “What happened to your dad?” I inquired.

“He was deported when I was like four or five,” he explained. “My mother had three kids by three men, starting when she was 16. Me and my brother are half Dominican and half Puerto Rican, so we’re darker than the rest of the family. They’re all pure Puerto Rican, so their skin is lighter. Somehow that makes them better than us. All our lives, we’ve been hearing about how we are dark. That makes us second rate.”

I looked at his at his warm ochre complexion, the color of late afternoon sunlight. A lump rose in my throat. My thoughts drifted to his equally handsome older brother, also my patient, who has struggled with severe eczema and an exaggerated impression of how it has further darkened his skin. Worry about his appearance has contributed to depression, poor self-image, and truancy because on most days he feels way too self-conscious to show up at school. I re-layered all that on top of the older brother

believing he started life “darker” and “second rate” in the eyes of his own family.

My attention returned to the teen in front of me.

“After he was deported, I only saw my father once,” he continued. “When I was about eight, they sent me to the Dominican Republic for a month to visit him. That’s when I realized he was a jerk. I was on the plane for hours. Suddenly it lands. My heart is pounding. I am so excited to see my father again after all this time. He picks me up at the airport and doesn’t even seem happy to see me. He takes me to his mother’s house and disappears a few minutes later.” He paused. “I barely saw him for the rest of the trip. That’s when I realized he wasn’t ever going to be a dad for me.”

The lump was dissolving into tears.

“But my grandmother. She was another story,” he continued. “She really cared about me. I didn’t speak Spanish, and she couldn’t speak English, but somehow, we communicated. She could see I was upset about my father. She just wanted me to be happy. I kept asking for pancakes. She had never heard of pancakes, but she set out to find out what they were. She asked around, and someone gave her a recipe. One day she surprised me by making pancakes.”

He paused, seemingly transported back to her kitchen. Then he looked at me intently. “What kind of woman would care so much about a kid that she would learn how to make pancakes for him? What kind of grandmother would do that for a kid? She made the whole trip bearable. By the end of the month, I was speaking Spanish. We could talk to each other. We were really sad to say goodbye. We both cried.”

I was feeling pretty sad myself. A strange wave of despair and hope rolled through me. Despair because the way things were going, this kid really might be heading toward drugs, prison, or death. I’d known him since he was an adorable infant and could not stand to contemplate any of these outcomes. I refuse to believe these are his only options and wanted to shout out that message to him. I restrained myself, however, because somewhere deep inside I was also sensing hope and wondered if he was,

too. Why hope? I'm not really sure. Perhaps there is a glimmer of hope for a kid who knows that love can be found hiding in something as simple as a Dominican grandmother frying up a mess of pancakes.

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