

The Healer

by Angela Townsend

You don't get to feel your life change in real time. Looking back, you see the big moments. They wear brilliant disguises, brown grocery bags labeled "Errand" or "Inconvenience."

But when you are twenty-six and trudging to your annual physical, you do not glimpse a before-and-after that will change everything.

Living with Type 1 diabetes since age nine, I have seen enough doctors to staff a cruise ship. Grad school gifted me with one of the best, a ball of radiance with a red beehive. Upon my graduation Dr. Zitzman consulted the university to determine if there was any way she could keep me as a patient, but Princeton had no respect for our bond. So it was off to find my first real, adult doctor. If I can prevail upon him, he will also be the last.

You don't hear a name and know that you've just met one of your main characters. I only knew I had an appointment with Dr. David Fableman, founder of a three-location practice in our nook of New Jersey. Shiny-headed and shorter than me, Dr. Fableman was a frisbee of energy. In that first two-hour extravaganza, he glittered with fascination, a student not of diabetes but of *my* diabetes, empathetic about the co-occurring anorexia and emphatic that I was doing just fine. When I admitted my exasperation with endocrinologists, he corralled a smile. "Egos. Not always helpful. You and I can manage your diabetes together if you'd like."

As he grinned behind round glasses, he was concerned that I felt good about having chosen him as my doctor. Mind and mouth moving at a pace I'd only previously seen in the mirror, Dr. Fableman rattled off his own history, a "good, happy nerd" who graduated high school at sixteen. Insurance companies belonged in the inferno, but otherwise he loved his work. Every day brought the unexpected.

We were both in for the unexpected.

I must have gushed my whole way home on the phone to my Mom, my voice hitting an incomprehensible warp-speed that only bats can understand. She knew why this was such a big deal. Given my knapsack of chronic conditions, it had been a craggy odyssey finding a doctor I could trust, as both a body and a person.

We had no idea.

I could tell you how Dr. Fableman helped to break the bronco of my hemoglobin A1c, or how we taught my thyroid a thing or two. But the best medicine came elsewhere. When the insurance company declared my brand of insulin “non-preferred,” Dr. Fableman grew ten times in size. So proud was he of his “physician’s appeal” that he sent me a copy, underlining highlights such as, “even in the absence of natural compassion, I should hope your relentless profit motive will lead you to acknowledge that it is in your interest to provide her insulin rather than foot the bill for hospitalization with ketoacidosis.” There may or may not have also been a colorful line including the words “her death on your hands.”

I was granted my insulin.

When I found myself five smitten years into an unexpected career, writing and fundraising for a cat sanctuary rather than pounding through a Ph.D. in ethics, I blithered the guilt I experienced at Dr. Fableman. Was I being complacent to stay at this post, lazily happy doing something that came too easily? Should I not be pushing myself?

Dr. Fableman did not have to think his response through. “It sounds like you’ve found what most people look for their entire lives. So have I. Shouldn’t we be happy?”

When I had a sinus infection, a routine check-up, or a sudden fear of osteoporosis, Dr. Fableman gave me an hour instead of fifteen minutes. When he had ten other patients waiting, he gave me quotes from his favorite Broadway musicals and promises that “we’ll get through this together.”

When I had any doubt that the axis of the world tilts towards mercy, I had Dr. Fableman.

When I wore a ridiculous red blouse that ruffled in all directions, Dr. Fableman declared, “that is the most perfectly Angie garment I can possibly imagine.”

When I announced my impending nuptials, Dr. Fableman waxed fatherly. “I trust you. It’s inevitable that he’s unworthy of you. But I trust you.”

He hesitated. I hesitated.

“We’re only inviting six people to the wedding,” I blurted. “It’s just a tiny little thing on the river. If my fiancé was open to anyone beyond immediate family, you would be there.”

His smile escaped. “That’s a relief. But if you happen to see a little bald gnome in a kayak, you’ll know it’s me.”

When I went on and off birth control, Dr. Fableman was my sherpa. When I dabbled in Catholicism, he suggested it was “a very intellectually satisfying world for a mind of your caliber.” When I un-dabbled, he agreed that “you need a more expansive faith. Speaking strictly as a guy who has nearly none.”

When I cold turkey-ed my antidepressant of twenty years, Dr. Fableman admitted, “Not the path I would have chosen, but you’re not the average patient. It’ll get bumpy, but you’ll be fine.”

When I became manic, tripping over my sentences, he told me. “Movin’ a little fast today. It should subside, but we’ll keep an eye on it. ‘Hypomanic’ is the word.”

When I told him I would miss working from home after COVID, he was incredulous. “If it’s good for you, do it forever. Go in one day a week. Tell them this is how it’s going to be. You are a linchpin!”

When I turned forty and challenged myself to write forty thank-you letters to people across my lifeline, Dr. Fableman was an obvious choice. He was the only recipient who answered with a lengthy hand-written letter of his own, beginning, “Now let me tell you why I’m grateful for you.”

When middle age leered at me and my arms were empty, I uncrossed them in Dr. Fableman’s office. “I was never someone who definitely wanted children,” I gurgled, “but somehow I always assumed it would happen. I feel vaguely guilty about the whole thing. I have no idea what I want.”

Dr. Fableman buzzed the nurse to cancel his next appointment. “Listen.” His usual vibration slowed to grandfather speed. “You know me. I’m not a religious guy. AT. ALL. But I’m gonna kinda speak your language today.”

“Okay.”

“I don’t know what’s going to happen. And if you should somehow get pregnant, I’ll quote Jeff Goldblum in *Jurassic Park* and say ‘life finds a way.’ We’ll get through that together. But...” he leaned forward on his little rolling stool. “...I think maybe God or the universe speaks through our bodies and our histories.”

He took a deep breath. “Don’t get me in trouble for saying too much here.”

“I would never.”

“I think, if you look at the diabetes, and the low weight, and the age at which you got married, and all the little stories that have made your story, you can have peace. Call it the Spirit or destiny or anything you like, but I think it’s okay to rest in these clues that you already have your answer. Does that make any sense?”

It was the first thing anyone had shared with me that had ever made sense of this question.

His counsel came back to me like the refrain of a musical when the music stopped and I had nowhere to sit. My marriage was coming to an end after five secretly volcanic years. I broke the news in a late-night email, scarcely hitting “send” before the phone rang.

“Angie. Dr. Fableman.” He was calling from home. “Listen. I hope it’s not too late. I just had to call. I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine. I mean, I can imagine”—Dr. Fableman and Mrs. Fableman were an eon divorced—“but, well, I’m just so sorry.”

We both blithered. He said, without saying it, that he’d smelled the smoke of my pain, wished I would say something so he could say something. “But we’re going to get through this together.”

“That’s why you were one of the first people I told. You’re one of my anchors in this life, Dr. Fableman.” It was an understatement. “You’re one of my best friends.”

I didn’t see this coming sixteen years ago. But here he is, on my side and forbidden to retire. Dr. Fableman is a gift, the healer who happens to be a doctor. He takes care of me. He makes my faith bigger. He reminds me to keep my lens wide, for all the minor moments that have yet to make my life.



As Development Director at Tabby's Place, **Angela Townsend** bears witness to mercy for all beings. Angie has an M.Div. from Princeton Seminary and a B.A. from Vassar College. She has lived with Type 1 diabetes for thirty-two years, giggles with her mother every morning, and delights in cats and the moon. Her work has appeared in *Braided Way*, *Fathom Magazine*, *Feminine Collective*, *oddball magazine*, and *Young Ravens Literary Review*, among others. Angie loves life dearly.