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The fear in her voice

Her home is much as I remembered: immaculately clean, expensive art, and way too hot. She sits in her chair, a wisp of the woman she once was and more frail than I remembered. After a warm greeting, she raises her robe to show me her right leg and allows me to gently remove her slipper.

The foot is even more mottled, more black at the tips of the toes than blue. It hurts all the time, and the OxyContin does little to help. The foot is cool; the pulses imperceptible.

We discuss the recommendations of her local vascular surgeon—a rather heroic effort to perform a complicated bypass at the local medical school. Unfortunately, she missed the appointment for her urgent vascular evaluation: The office had called in the morning for a noon appointment, and without a ready means of transportation she'd arrived late, in the wrong office. (Her closest son lives over an hour away, and pleas for her to move closer are flatly rejected.) A new appointment is scheduled for the following Tuesday, the only time the doctor sees new patients.

She relays this story with a resigned weariness, complaining about the caretaker who took her to the wrong place. "I wish I could just die," she concludes.

"Maybe you should go to the emergency room," I venture. She mumbles something unintelligible. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear you," I say. But I *do* hear the fear in her voice, and I hear the pain and anguish. I want to protect her, to make it better. I love this old woman. Of course, I have my reasons. She is my mother.

As my mother awaits her visit with the vascular surgeon and a likely confrontation with a callous scalpel, I read—once again—about health care reform. Even with a "public option" and a trillion dollars of new investment, will my mother, and countless elders like her, ever be able to navigate our complicated health care system? Will elderly people who yearn for dignity and independence ever get the support required to safely remain in their own homes, secure in the knowledge that they can get the preventive and palliative care they need?

I wish I could reassure her. Instead I say, "Tuesday, Mom, Tuesday," and leave with the echo of the fear in her voice ringing in my ears.

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