

## A mirror image

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I was standing at the entrance to an alleyway in downtown Toronto, clipboard in hand. The hustle on the streets was starting to fade as dusk approached. I was part of a team interviewing individuals who were homeless about their health care experiences and I still had one interview left to do.

Gazing into the alleyway, now lit red by the setting sun, I noticed a man sitting on the ground, slumped against the wall. Every person I had interviewed so far had had a profound impact on my understanding of the health of the homeless, but when this man looked up at me, I knew this interview was going to be different. He appeared to be my age.

As I knelt down and introduced myself as a medical student, a wide grin spread across his face.

“You and I, we might be more similar than you think ... They call me the ‘hobo doctor’.” With that short introduction, he plunged into the myriad ways he had helped local homeless people.

“I’ve drained abscesses, pulled teeth, tied up dog bites, cleaned wounds ...”

As he continued his list, I paused from taking notes and had a close look at his face. Slowly, his tattered blue baseball cap faded away. So did the creases on his forehead, the dark circles under his eyes, the dirt smudges on his cheeks and the small cut under his lip. In fact, the face that was left was altogether too familiar. It was as if I was looking at a mirror image.

Observing our patients, we sometimes think to ourselves, “I could have been in their place.” That day, I had a different thought, a new thought: “They could have been in my place.”

Aware that it was getting to be night and I was taking up his time, I asked my last interview question.

“Is there anything you would like those passing by to know about you?” While waiting for his response, I glanced at his face once more. I had only seen the mirror image



for a fleeting moment, but it was inescapable. Where I once saw another homeless man, another stranger, another case, I now saw someone like me, a familiar face. It had become personal. I was struggling to give words to this strange connection.

“Well, I guess one thing I could share is that sometimes, when I get really sad, I sing for those walking by. Because when they smile, I smile too.”

His words sunk in deeply. A hundred faces passed by him each day, but among them, he too had seen some mirror images.

His blue baseball cap, a keepsake of his favourite sport, came back into focus. So did the creases on his forehead from months of facing the summer sun, the black circles under his eyes after three nights of being evicted from park benches, the smudges of dirt on his cheeks from hugging his friend’s dog earlier that day and the cut under his lip that followed him from the East Coast. He was still sharing stories from his life, even now, as he set up for the night.

The sun had just about set, casting dark blue shadows over the man’s face. I wrapped up the interview, thanked him for his time and hurried out of the alleyway. As

I turned the corner, I felt compelled to take one last glance back.

There I was, homebound, walking toward the last bit of light in the sky, and there he was, still sitting in the alleyway, cloaked in thickening darkness. We were mirror images for a moment but were now heading in opposite directions. And as I took my last glance at his face, I could still pick out some familiarity, but it was too dim now to say it was a mirror image. Maybe “dim” is not the right word; “obscured” is more accurate, because the reflection was still there; I just had to look closely enough to appreciate it.

As a trainee, I have heard much about connecting with the humanity of patients and being mindful of my privilege, but it took looking in a mirror to truly understand what that meant.

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This article has been peer reviewed.

This reflection is based on a true story but patient and location details have been changed. Consent to share this story was obtained at the beginning of the street interview.