

Correspondence—Medical student's essay

The leitmotifs we shared

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A vacation began, one with no clear end in sight. It was my first time departing with no specific plans to return, carrying only what I truly needed. As I packed up four years' worth of belongings, I prepared to move to my great-aunt's house in Bucheon. Always having struggled with letting go, I spent a significant amount of time deciding what to discard, eventually deciding to pack only the things I would never part with.

The first item was a blue waterproof bag. Two years ago, around this time, I arrived at Vienna Central Station in Austria, about midway through a trip to Europe. I was headed to my accommodations, carrying a massive 29-inch suitcase that was half the size of my body. Perched precariously on top was a large hemp bag I had bought in Giverny, France. As I crossed the street, the inevitable happened—the bag fell. A beer bottle I had impulsively bought to drink on the train

shattered inside, staining the black asphalt of the crosswalk. I hastily grabbed the Giverny bag with one hand while fumbling to drag my suitcase with the other, but it was futile. The traffic light started blinking. Just then, a stout, blue-eyed man approached, lifted my suitcase, and set it on the sidewalk. Then, he handed me the blue waterproof bag. "From South Korea? A student? I use this bag for groceries, but it seems like you need it more. Don't hesitate to use it. Welcome to Vienna, good luck, and enjoy your youth."

This act of kindness came at my most desperate moment. The bag's waterproof feature was so effective that not a single drop of beer leaked while I made my way to the hostel. After washing and drying it thoroughly, I carefully folded it and brought it back to Korea. Every time I moved my dormitory belongings, I used that bag, as it felt like the luck the man had wished upon me followed wherever it went. I started to believe that this waterproof bag would never allow my "good luck" to spill or drain, and that every semester would end well. So, with a fervent hope that I would get through this next hurdle, I packed my things into the lucky blue bag.

After luck, I packed happiness. The second item was a pink clipboard, once indispensable for hospital rounds and patient interviews during my medical school days. Although it no longer served its original purpose, I kept it tucked deep in my bag because of a single piece of paper pinned at the back—a lyric sheet for an unreleased song titled "Happiness." It was a gift from a patient during my psychiatry rotation the previous year. He had been hospitalized for alcoholism and struggled with withdrawal symptoms every morning, but by 10 a.m., he would shyly relax, listening to songs he requested on a Bluetooth speaker. One day, I struck up a conversation with him, asking, "How do you know so many great songs? Thanks to you, I look forward to this time every day."

He shared his story—how he had once dreamed of becoming a composer, enrolled in a university music program, but eventually gave up on his dream to work for his father's company, leading him to his current situation. As he spoke about composing, this calm man in his mid-thirties, clad in hospital garb, transformed into a ten-year-old boy, his voice bright and his eyes sparkling. That light was truly beautiful, and I found myself desperately hoping that it wouldn't fade. I begged him daily

to show me his first composition. A few days later, he gave me a sheet of lyrics, written in neat sections with colored pencils in purple, blue, and green.

“Your gentle breath comes to me like a light, reflecting happy tears in this moment. I will never forget how the deep sorrow within me disappears with a single smile.”

He explained that the song was about his first love at the age of twenty. The moment he said that, he transformed back to being a bright-eyed young man studying music.

A nurse told me later, “I saw him sitting on the bed, writing something. When I asked, he said it was lyrics for a song he was giving to the medical student, and it was the first time I saw him smile.”

I was profoundly grateful that the light in his eyes hadn't disappeared. With his permission, I kept the lyrics pinned to the back of my clipboard. During tough rotations, whenever I felt drained, I would flip the clipboard over and read those lyrics. I could vividly imagine the moments when he had carefully pressed each word onto the paper, returning to the dreamy, delicate young man he once was. I could see his radiant first love and pictured him somewhere playing his favorite minor chords on a synthesizer. While the blue waterproof bag was a talisman of luck from a benevolent adult who looked after me as a youth, these lyrics were another kind of talisman, evoking the thrill and melancholy of being twenty. In tough times, I thought of that young man's eyes, and for his sake, I prayed to every god I knew that he was leading a smoother life.

While packing happiness, I remembered something I had given my heart to. Near the end of my psychiatry rotation, a woman was admitted. She was the mother of a nine-year-old and loved roses. She often spoke fondly about visiting a rose festival in May and drew her child, her home, and the colorful roses surrounding it during art therapy sessions. This woman reminded me of a rose herself, standing tall and blossoming even as her thorns pricked and blood flowed, her petals tinted by that very blood for the sake of her child. I wanted to support her in some way. I found a rose that resembled her during a study break. The “Emma Wood” rose, with its soft pink blush, like a single drop of watercolor on white paper, was small yet full of delicately curled petals. Its meaning? “Confession of first love.” Since personal items were not allowed in the ward, I committed to memory its name, appearance, and significance before my next visit with her.

“There’s a rose that looks like you. It’s called ‘Emma Wood,’ a soft pink rose, and it means ‘confession of first love.’ When you leave here, you must find it.”

Her face, always drowsy from medication, brightened like a blooming flower bud.

“There’s a rose that looks like me? My goodness! I’ll write it down. When I leave, I’ll look for it. I’ll write down your name, too, to remember that you told me about it. Thank you.”

In his novel *Essays in Love*, Alain de Botton likens the act of constantly recalling shared experiences with a partner to the musical term “leitmotif.” In the novel, a man approaches the narrator’s lover and hands her a crumpled note that says, “I love you.” This becomes a leitmotif in the couple’s relationship, and they continually recreate this moment by passing silly notes like, “Pass the salt,” forging a private bond that draws them closer. A leitmotif, which is unique to the shared experience of two individuals, serves as a powerful glue, even when it appears trivial. As they repeatedly bring it up, they become willingly isolated from the world and fall deeper in love.

Just as the blue waterproof bag had become a leitmotif of good fortune in my own narrative, I hoped that the man’s first song and the “Emma Wood” rose would become leitmotifs for them. I continued to remind her until my final day on the ward, hoping she would hold on firmly to life even after her discharge. “Don’t forget to find the ‘Emma Wood’ rose when you get out. Promise me.”

I think I’ve found the reason I struggle so much with throwing things away. As in Kim Chun-Soo’s poem “Flower,” when an object enters my life, it transforms into something more—a flower, a leitmotif. Every time I pack my belongings, I reflect on the meanings attached to each item and the stories behind them. Inevitably, the people with whom I’ve shared these leitmotifs come to mind, and I find myself praying that their lives continue to play out in beautiful harmony. That’s why I can never throw anything away.

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All work was done by Minyoung Kim.

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Supplement 1. Korean version of this essay in PDF format.

Editor's note: This essay by Ms. Minyoung Kim, an undergraduate at Ewha Womans University College of Medicine, won the grand prize in the 2024 14th Korean Medical Student Essay Competition, hosted by the Korean Medical Association and organized by the Korean Physician Essayists Association (Fig. 1). Engaging in essay writing—such as crafting personal narratives—is highly beneficial for medical students, as it helps them organize their thoughts through writing, cultivate logical reasoning, and enhance their empathy and communication skills with others. Ms. Kim's essay might catch the judges' attention through its nuanced depiction of episodes

intertwined with cherished personal items, written when her study time was reduced due to a leave of absence from medical school that began last March. Particularly noteworthy is how she interpreted empathy with others as a leitmotif and structured her essay around this theme. We hope this beautiful work will be shared in Korean and English with medical students worldwide, allowing them to connect with Ms. Kim's leitmotifs.

Legend for figure

Fig. 1. Grand Prize recipient, medical student Ms. Min-young Kim (left) and award presenter, Dr. Hyung Joon Yoo (right) at CM Hospital, the president of the Korean Physician Essayists Association.

