

Proximity *or* That Could Be Me

Near

The intern watched a dermatologist scalpel a patch of cancerous skin from a man's knee. As blood flooded the surgical field, the intern thought, "That could be *my* knee. That could be *my* blood." He fainted. I read this in his journal.

I never watch the needle puncture my skin when my blood is drawn or IVs are established. I've fainted on multiple occasions even though I don't look. "That could be me," I thought.

Another intern journaled about a man transferred to ICU with a severe head injury from a motorcycle accident. The attending physician, with a resident and several medical students in tow, calmly explained to the anxious family that the extent of brain swelling was difficult to assess. The prospects for recovery would be clearer in a few days. In the ICU beepers chirped, monitors flashed red and yellow, and ventilators breathed. There, out of earshot of the family, a medical student pressed the attending, "What do you really think the outcome will be?" The attending shook her head side to side. "I have a motorcycle," I thought. "That could be me."

A disheveled man in a dirty frayed coat several sizes too large holds a cardboard sign at the intersection. I know what it says. I don't need to look. I don't want to look. Misfortune or poor choices or both. "Improbable," I think, "but that could be me."

I ease past the gaunt remnant in his wheelchair lodged in the doorway. An ignored TV overwhelms his tiny cell with sound and light potent enough to stir the odor of urine and disinfectant. He waits to be rolled into the Dining Room where tasteless sustenance is slowly spooned in by an impatient attendant. Blue-tinged skin stretched taut over bony hands and elbows. Scalp visible through sparse gray strands. Atrophied distorted limbs dangle asymmetrically. Pale gray eyes with cloudy corneas sunk in deep sockets convey a hazy reality. A look pleading for conversation or a simple greeting. Shallow whispers of breath. A frail heart that beats insistently and arrhythmically for no good reason. His brown corduroy bedroom slippers have a longer lifespan. "That could be me," I thought.

Distant

An unshaven man with brown skin and pleading eyes looks into the camera. He's one of hundreds of refugees in the sweltering sun. He waits in an agonizingly slow procession with his nephew for a dollop of rice and some tepid watery broth. Tomorrow, he'll join the queue again, in a drenching deluge that transforms dirt to sludge. Several hours in line, day after day, every minute reminding him of dependency and vulnerability. He enters the canvas tent sheltering aid workers from sun and rain. He thrusts his empty bowl upward. "That could be me," I think. "I could be the white man spooning aliquots. I could be the brown man grateful but disappointed with the meager portion so quickly dispensed after such a long, demeaning wait."

The concrete crumbles and rushes to the earth, gravity claiming the entire complex including the meager contents of the third-floor apartment and its inhabitants in Kiev or Gaza or Beirut. Mother, grandmother, and the four youngest children pulverized. The father expends his final adrenaline-boosted heartbeats searching the dusty rubble for his family, finding only oozing lifeless corpses. He died before the pungent smell of death permeated the crevices. "That could be me," I thought, but this scenario is harder to imagine.

The oldest son was not at home when the missile arrived. He rushes to the chaotic scene when stillness returns. Searching is futile. Instantly he is a homeless orphan in a demolished city that, in the imaginations of distant ambitious unrestrained political leaders, will be replaced with gleaming accommodations for the affluent. But first, he and his kind must be displaced or exterminated. The unstated directives: Eliminate all children who may have witnessed this destruction driven by fear, greed and unquenchable appetite. Eliminate women who could birth the next generation of vengeance. The orphan cannot contemplate all this. He is too disoriented to think about where he will find his next meal, or where he will sleep tonight, or the coming nights if, *Inshallah*, there are more to come. I cannot convince myself "That could be me."

Now

It is easier to look away, to choose a different newsfeed, or watch a sporting event or documentary, or escape into literature and music, or sip craft brews, or go

backpacking or birdwatching, or crew aboard a sailboat for two weeks. I could plan a pilgrimage hike on the Camino di Santiago di Compostela. “That could be me,” I thought. That *is* me!

Lucky me to be born middle class white in a country that preemptively launches destruction aimed elsewhere so that my lifestyle is unthreatened. But many of my black and brown brothers and sisters are not safe, not welcome, not even here in “The Land of the Free, and the Home of the Brave.” Not these days, when a masked federal agent flaunting law and order grinds his knee into the neck of an unarmed person he imagines threatens his life or his way of life.

Not even white citizens who openly oppose or document abuses can be confident of due process. Could that be me waving a sign of protest? Could that be me getting pepper sprayed, encircled by men in Kevlar, shoved down, my face ground into the pavement while my wrists are zip-tied behind my back, a pistol tapping my temple? Perhaps.

Could that be *my* knee on someone’s neck, *my* eager finger on the trigger? No!

I wish I didn’t know. I wish I didn’t care. Shame on me. Shame on us. In capitals.

GR Davis Jr.

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This essay was provoked by reading the journal entries of Wofford College students who shadowed physician hosts in January 2026, by a 2025 book written by Omar El Akkad entitled “One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This,” and by the Trump Administration’s deployment of Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents to Minnesota where they shot and killed Rene Nicole Good and Alex Pretti, two American citizens who were protesting their presence.