Presence of mind
By Deborah E. Schiff, M.D.

When I heard a year ago that a man had been shot dead on the tarmac at Miami International Airport, I jumped to the conclusion—even in this era of terror alerts—that he was mentally ill, not a terrorist. It turns out I was right.

I’m a pediatric oncologist. My enemy is cancer cells—a white blur on a CT scan, a blue blob under a microscope. But that hasn’t kept me from being drawn to psychiatry. How could I not be fascinated by patients whose enemy is their own minds?

When I was a second-year medical student, we met every Friday to practice our psychiatry interviewing skills. Patients volunteered to be our subjects. Most of them had clinical depression. They spoke in flat voices. Their faces showed no emotion. They took no pleasure in family, food, or sex. It pained us to hear their tales on those Fridays, as we anticipated weekends filled with parties and dates.

One Friday, 20-year-old Simon broke our streak of depressed patients. He had wavy hair and piercing eyes. The student interviewer—Mary, an earnest, religious girl—sat face to face with Simon.

“Why are you here?” she asked him.

“Early one morning I saw this amazing sky—red, pink, purple—and I thought, ‘This must be a sign.’ And then I heard God’s voice.”

Mary hesitated. Simon wasn’t a “diagnosis” to her. He was a young man, traveling alone, given a message from God. Finally she gave an answer in the form of a question: “Is he psychotic?”

Simon thought for a moment. “I knew my bag was filled with dirty laundry,” he said. “I rephrased the question: ‘Did you believe you had a bomb?’”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Did you have a bomb in your bag?” I dutifully asked him.

“Yes, but what’s wrong with him? What’s his diagnosis?”

Mary’s eyes grew wide. “You did? What did he say?”

“He told me to follow him. He said that school and work were false paths and that my true calling was to follow him.”

“Back off. I have a bomb in here and I’ll use it if you don’t go away.”

I’m talking to him, some lady tells me to get off the phone because she needs to use it. I tell her, ‘Shut up, bitch. Can’t you see I’m talking to my buddy from the airport to come get me?’”

“Did you have a bomb in your bag?”

“No, I didn’t.”

I rephrased the question: “Did you believe you had a bomb?”

“I knew my bag was filled with dirty laundry,” he said. “I tell him, ‘That’s bullshit. Get off your ass and come get me.’”

I asked Josh, “Why are you here?”

“I went to New York for the weekend and when I got back, I called my buddy from the airport to come get me, but he said he couldn’t. I told him, ‘That’s bullshit. Get off your ass and come get me.’”

Then there was Josh, a muscular young man in his early twenties. “Why are you here?” I asked Josh.

“Because Alpizar, a 44-year-old passenger, said there was a bomb in his car—”

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