

Two Palliative Care stories

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True Stories from the Front: Facing COVID-19

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TWO PALLIATIVE CARE STORIES

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“SHIT”

“**S**hit. It’s all shit. The hospital. The hospital food, dry, tasteless. The fucking cancer. The fact that nobody knows what the fuck is going on with me and everything is delayed because of COVID-whatever. The plastic tubes stuck up my nose making it bleed.”

That’s what you get for asking a forty-two-year-old with a new diagnosis of cancer how she is doing today. I bite my tongue. I expect shame and guilt to rush in but surprisingly her words soothe me. “This IS shit” I think to myself. Aliyah purposefully spreads her loud words across the hospital ward for all other health care workers to hear. This would normally provoke a general malaise, but somehow today it lands differently. She speaks, no, she SCREAMS, for all of us silently carrying on, heavier with every step.

I ask her to tell me more. No pause, no hesitation. She points at her four-year-old daughter’s drawing brightening the faded gray wall: “I haven’t seen Nia in five days because of the stupid pandemic restrictions. She asks me every day when I am coming home.” I ask for more. I feel my eyes getting wet and would normally look away, but I cannot break our eye contact. With our mouths covered by masks and our hands six feet away, we are only eyes.

Next to the purple and yellow butterfly-like shapes pinned to the wall, a poem by Maya Angelou: “Just like moons and like suns, with the certainty of tides, just like hopes springing high, still I'll rise. [...] Leaving behind nights of terror and fear, I rise. Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear, I rise.”

Aliyah is trapped in a wheelchair. She is stranded by nasal prongs attached to a noisy portable oxygen tank. Still, she is strong and fierce. Aliyah owns the room, holding her head high and looking straight at me, honest and unapologetic. She makes me want to sob and applaud at the same time. I want to join her, yell across the hospital corridors. I want to throw down my mask, my sterile gloves and my professional code of conduct. My stethoscope's is suffocating around my neck. I stay very still. I envy her life-affirming fury. Today. Right now. ■

THE RINGS

Her fingers had doubled in size, swallowing her golden rings. Her arms and legs were full of fluid. Simply checking her pulse left an imprint on her wrist for several minutes. Ruma asked us repeatedly to remove the trapped loops strangling her digits. Given the pandemic-related hospital visitors restrictions, her family members came one by one, each with a new strategy to battle the stubborn rings. Ruma's sister slathered cream on her hands, massaging them endlessly hoping the rings would slip off. Her son would pull gently and then progressively increase the force applied. Then Ruma would start moaning and the operation was immediately aborted. Her mother brought butter from home, a “secret trick”, but no luck. I would see the family members come and go, giving reports at the room's entrance as one entered, hopeful, and one exited, pessimistic. As the week advanced, Ruma's skin turned pale yellow and she drifted into a deeper sleep. She could no longer speak, but every once in while she would make uncoordinated gestures that seemed to point towards the jewels ornamenting her hands.

Ruma's family members became obsessed with the rings. Whenever a new nurse came on shift, they desperately asked for innovative tactics. Ruma's gastric cancer, diagnosed only a few months ago, had aggressively migrated from her stomach to her liver and travelled to the inner lining of her abdomen, filling it with liquid. As Ruma approached end-of-life, her whole family was exceptionally allowed at her bedside. In fact, they now lived at her bedside. When I visited, I would find them silently sobbing or plotting the next “ring removal mission.”

Removing Ruma's rings seemed the one thing everyone invested hope in.

As I gently pressed my hands on his wife's swollen stomach, Pankaj delivered the story of the last months in fragmented pieces. "She wanted to go to India" he blurted out. The pandemic had interfered with the couple's plan to visit Jaipur, Ruma's hometown. Many of her loved ones had not been able to travel to Vancouver to say their good-byes. As I moved on to auscultate her lungs, I heard Pankaj muttering under his breath "unfair, unfair, unfair." The rings seemed to bite into her skin with more determination than ever.

Lindsay is today's nurse. She suggests taping the fingers tightly to allow the rings to slip off. Ruma's aunt, mother, children and husband's faces all light up. A new approach to this lasting issue! Lindsay meticulously wraps Ruma's index finger, middle finger, ring finger and pinky. Then she moves on to Ruma's second hand. Slowly, Lindsay pulls jewels over tape. The bedside audience gazes in attentive wonder. When the last ring comes off, Ruma's son and daughter jump up from their seat. Shy screams of joy surround us. Caught up in the week-long quest, I am smiling from ear to ear and participate in the family cheer. Until I see Pankaj. Ruma's husband stares quietly at the rings nested in the palm of his hand. The wedding band stands out by its simplicity among the emeralds and the topazes.■