

ENCOUNTERS

Spotlight

In the theatre of our lives, we health care providers participate in interactive performances, sometimes hundreds of times a day. Through drama, comedy and tragedy, we are a constant, appearing in so many scenes. But whose stories are they?

They are not mine. You have reminded me to be a subplot, a complement to what is really needed. A joke, an observation or, more commonly these days as my experience grows and my hairline recedes, tacit support. Neither understudy nor headliner, a character central yet supporting.

You are the star. From the first act, when you said, “You won’t see much of me. I’m pretty good.” That you were, and more. Lithe and springy, chin always raised, a toothy grin in permanent residence. The history was remarkable for your positive choices: vegan, hiker, family man, work–life balancer, purveyor of kindness to all. The spotlight shone brightly, and you strode off-stage, young yet learned, a white knight. A gentleman.

And so the story went. The usual visits befitting the oft-writ parts were played: a bothersome cough, the unbalanced equilibrium of sleep after a long



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stealth shadow traipsing around the stage, with nary a sound underfoot its wispy slippers. We searched for the elusive. The villain was growing in the darkness.

Under the glare of the stage lights, you asked for a break, an intermission. A trip had been planned with the family

The theatre is silent.

Time passes. How long, who can say? You are wheeled to the centre of the stage. Swimming in a baggy drab green gown, your cheekbones contouring the thinned skin and lichen beard. Eyes darting across the hollowed orbits, pleading for answers I do not have. Science fails me, and religion cannot explain; I stand there, uncertain of what to say. Uncertain of everything. Why did I come? Did you want me to visit? I have not slept since the letters arrived, their verdict haunting every quiet moment. You drink softly from the cup by your bedside, motion to your wife and brother and friends, and thank me for coming. In the emotional maelstrom and the thoughts that drown me in confusion, you remain clear and firm and wise. Sensing my futile search for a response, you ground me with an unspoken question: *Whose story is it?*

I step back. The spotlight is solely on you, and we listen. You lead and we support. We teach one another, and you decide. We move past the pursuit of

**Bodies moving in an iambic dance,
two silhouettes now joined by a new stealth
shadow traipsing around the stage, with nary
a sound underfoot its wispy slippers.**

flight, confirmation that you were doing the right thing. “You’re the most boring interesting person,” I joked; in retrospect, silence would often have been the better choice.

One day a diversion from the script, an improvisation, an intrusion: low back pain. Questions asked and answers given, then bodies moving in an iambic dance, two silhouettes now joined by a new

— could you go? The medication was helping, a bit. Why not? Life is for living, for making memories and then cherishing them.

After two weeks, the second act opened with the reading of a letter. Trip was good, nights are drenching hot. Enter stage right, directly to the hospital. *?Lymphoma. CT scan. Dx: Metastatic colon cancer.*

answers. We search for solutions. All of us, together.

The curtains close and open again with my back to the audience. The computer screen with your words is visible to all. Updates come from you and about you. Preoperative, postoperative. Rehabilitation. This clinic and that ward, home to stretcher to hospital bed and back home. So many new characters, all interpreting the story. Your story. Complications and successes and visits. The scenes repeat. The words of the current letters are similar: *Admitted for complication. Treated. Released home in stable condition.*

I am offstage now. You are still there, lying restfully in bed. It is not until more than a week later that I receive another report, arriving like any other. *Admitted*

for complication. Treated. Passed away peacefully in the arms of his wife.

The stage is dark, save for a white light shining on you both, the darkened silhouettes of your family surrounding you in a semicircle. The single light dims and extinguishes. The curtains slowly close.

The audience is silent and still.

There is a murmur, a rustle of denial at first, but rumbling louder, growing to anger of what and who and why. The rage simmers to a din. No bargain will erase what has been written.

Outside the theatre, the sky is cloudy and the air bites unprotected ears. Very few move, despite the drizzle settling on us. Faces wet from rain. Faces wet from tears. We look down. Shuffle our feet. Try to understand.

One day we will accept that there is no more reason to be sad. We will realize that we hurt because we care so much. The wounds of imperfections and impotence will slowly heal, but the scars will be forever there, reminding us of your story, the one that taught us that there is so much more to gain when the spotlight shines on those we hold dear.

You were, are and will always be the star.

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This is a true story. The protagonist's wife has given her consent for publication.

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POETRY

ST depression

How do I explain
to my daughter
that I missed her concert
by two millimetres?
A subtle bend,
caught late as my thoughts
were leaving to join violins
tuning somewhere outside
these sterile walls.
But you brought me back:
your flinch, the gasp,
a dip in the green lines
scrolling onscreen
above your head.
Those two millimetres
changed our trajectories:
you hit the cath lab,
I missed the concert.
And now that I've
told your family
all about it,
how do I tell mine?

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