

Zipped

Category: Stress and Burnout

written by Mary Falk | December 12, 2017

“What do you think?”

“How long does she have?”

...“We need you here.”

As I make the two-hour drive north, I feel the weight of the world on my shoulders. I am the youngest member of my family, but everyone relies on me so heavily when it comes to matters of death. Developing a reputation for being good at helping people die is not exactly what I predicted when I became a nurse, but nevertheless, I am the one who gets called.

SuperK was a world-class friend: the type you could always talk to and rely on to put a smile on your face. It's fourteen months since she told me during a run that she was having abdominal pain, and I still feel like a fool because I had told her it was “just her rock-hard abs.”

The last year moved in a blur of appointments and false hope for SuperK and her family. Stage 4 colon cancer at age forty: it just can't be. She ran thirteen half-marathons in one year just before her diagnosis. She's never smoked a day in her life. It is jarring.

When I walk into SuperK's house, I can see she is near the end. Her dad asks me “if there is anything they can do for her liver?” Her mom tells me that this can't be happening. In a moment of slight lucidity, SuperK tells me that she wants to go to the gym and get stronger. Even now, no one has accepted what is happening.

For the next forty-eight hours, everyone looks to me for guidance. When she passes, I feel relief that she's out of the body that she grew to hate at the end. Her family is in shock. Her parents aged twenty years in front of my eyes.

When the funeral home people come to get her body, I make sure that her family is upstairs so they don't see the process. A white bag is produced, and I somehow end up helping the two men put her in it.

I zipped up the bag and told her goodbye as I zipped over her face. All I could think about is how many times we zipped around Burke Lake on our runs, and how this tragedy can happen to someone like her.

As she is carried out of her house, I internally zip up the emotions I am feeling, rearrange my face, and head back in to help her family.

The weight of the world has never been heavier.

Mary Falk
Richmond, Virginia