

A Moment in Hospice

Category: Not Knowing

written by Ingrid Chen | April 24, 2019

She is a collector: stamps, coins, wine glasses of various shades and shapes, Donald Duck memorabilia. These are her childhood treasures rediscovered from boxes in the attic. Her mother kept them all, not knowing they would serve a purpose someday. On the nightstand is a recent photograph of this radiant woman with chestnut curls.

The person before me now is an empty vessel and nothing more; her limbs limp, her breaths shallow, her eyes closed, her age: fifty-four. The dressings need to be changed around-the-clock to slow the march of decay. The wound tunnels deep, exposing her sacrum as the soaked gauze is removed. Her body is still. Not yet at peace but near the point of defeat.

Happy, the family dog, peers up at our world through the thicket of his bangs, not knowing why something is wrong.

An elderly woman grips the banister as she descends the stairway. I see strength in her tired smile. She opens a delicate vial of eucalyptus oil and rubs the ointment on her daughter's ulcerated heel. Fresh mint and sweet honey scents fill the room. We converse about December traditions and other trivial matters far removed from the reality of their lives: a welcome distraction. For a moment the piercing silence is broken by shared laughter.

The home nurse sheepishly confesses to not knowing what to gift his wife for Christmas. Though his situation is dire, it is not a particularly devastating one, relatively speaking. With two days left, we google "last-minute gifts" and try to solve a problem that we actually have some control over. "I didn't even realize that Monday is Christmas Eve," she says. Their world is at a standstill, and ours continues to spin.

Her daughter was independent, strong, divorced, worked for a marketing firm in Brooklyn and loved the outdoors. Six months ago her limbs hinted with subtle clues of tingling and her gut suspected a breast cancer relapse, not knowing there could be an even worse worst-case scenario: sixteen metastatic lesions to her brain and lower back. Status-post radiation and a miraculous second remission was a second relapse. The cancer was like a tornado that left a path of destruction so quickly there was not yet time to process the loss fully.

"I am so sorry," is what I manage to say to the mother who will watch her beloved daughter fade away.

Ingrid Chen
Mineola, New York