

Storm Shelter

Category: Waiting

written by Anonymous | October 4, 2020

After his wife died, he changed his mind. “No ventilator,” he told me, shaking his head. “No ventilator.”

And so, I thought, now we wait. He had been prepared to wait for his wife to get better when it was she in the hospital alone. No visitors were allowed, so he talked to her by phone for hours each day, even when neither of them would speak, even when she couldn't speak; he would listen to her breathing, willing it to ease, to settle into the pattern he knew so well from years by her side.

And when he got sick, too, lying in a hospital bed two floors away from her, he was prepared to wait out this strange illness that took his breath away. He was even willing to wait in the limbo of sedation and intubation while the illness swept over him like a slow, green-black hurricane that shakes the house above you while you crouch in the cellar.

But when she died, when his nurse came into the room to tell him, dressed in a gown and gloves and mask and visor and hairnet, without his sons there, he changed his mind. He no longer wanted to wait, no longer had anything to wait for.

Twice I helped him FaceTime his sons, held a tablet for him when he didn't have the strength to hold it himself. He wanted to see their faces as they talked about their mother, and he wanted them to see his eyes when he told them his decision. On the day he died, I walked into the room, gowned and gloved, and saw that he was taking his last breaths. No one else was there. The nurses were busy, the aides were elsewhere.

So I sat down at his bedside, held his hand, and waited. I watched as his body labored to breathe but saw that he himself wasn't laboring. I waited for his body to agree with him. I waited as if I were a member of his family, deputized by duty, so that I could tell his sons that he did not die alone. After a while, his nurse joined me, and we sat together, not speaking, working as hard as we ever had, as we ever would.

This is why we call them our patients—not because they wait, but because we do.

Anonymous