

# ***Solicitude***

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Shaking off the haze after being woken from restless slumber, I entered the Emergency Room to see a helpless figure hunched on the bed before me. Dishevelled. Breathless. Markedly more worn than expected for her age. Her eyes, wide with terror, for the first time in years taking in a view external to her own four walls.

She wanted help only for her anxiety, which left her so struggling for air that sleep was desperately elusive. My own needs loudly suggested to me that Diazepam and a warm bed for the night would have her home by late morning. But despite my aching fatigue, my great desire to rediscover meaning in this soul-sucking occupation meant that I needed to know more.

Here sat a woman so fearful for her life at the hands of a man who once vowed endless love that she had felt the sun on her shoulders but a handful of times in two decades. A woman once brilliantly full of life and charisma, now a shell of her former self, existing in solitude and squalor. A woman who had lost all contact with her greatest achievement, her reason for living, her only child.

She was dying. A relatively quick examination showed me as much. A malignancy left unacknowledged, so hungry it had engulfed half her chest wall and left her drowning in its fluid. She knew it too, deep down. Early diagnosis and any possible opportunity for survival were further victims of the overwhelming anxiety created by the man her heart had chosen to love.

But how imminently would it claim the rest of her? Was she fading away in front of me, so fast that she had no time to be told as much? Or was there a slim chance that our modern medicine could yet turn this runaway train around, and gift her more time to prepare?

As she turned blue in front of me – this desperate soul I had met only hours before – I knew we needed to try. I needed to give her the opportunity to take control of what remained of her life. Reluctantly I shipped her waif-like form off to the hustle and bustle of tertiary emergency, to confirm what one look at her body told us both.

They sent her back, post-haste. No investigations or treatment achieved. Anxiety once again the victor in its battle against life.

And so began our journey. Weeks and weeks of daily yarning, together unravelling the multiple traumas that had defined her life for just under seven decades. Every so often, a joyful silver strand of thought weaving its way in: a loving compassionate father; big hair and leopard skin tights; the passionate support of a wise counsellor; and 'My Boy'.

'My Boy' brought peace to her troubled face and slowed her rapid breathing. 'My Boy' had creative talent that any mother would be proud of. 'My Boy' was the only slim ray of sunshine that remained in her life. In my mind, 'My Boy' had to be found.

She was initially alarmed at the thought: 'My Boy' would be so ashamed to see what she had become. But the prospect of holding him one last time was eventually too tantalising to refuse, and she agreed. Armed with nothing more than the internet and scraps of information, I found him. 'My Boy'. I had long before given up hope of fairy-tale endings, but this delightful turn of events was challenging my cynicism and nurturing the tiny seedling of trust I had left in humanity.

It was as though he had been waiting for this phone call from me for years. He wasn't shocked. Didn't seem stricken by the news, but sad all the same. At her request, I tried to prepare him for what he could expect of her when they spoke – how much she had changed – but he assured me that he had seen it all before, and would do what was required of him, her only child.

She was simultaneously overjoyed and completely overwhelmed at the prospect of speaking with him after such a long period of disconnection. She didn't allow her heart to hope that he might visit her from so far away, repeatedly proffering reasons to me as to why he shouldn't come. She begged that I be present for their conversation – couldn't possibly face it alone. She knew she wouldn't manage if he rejected her, this last joyful part of her life and all the hope she had left in her world.

They spoke. She was dizzy with anticipation, love physically pouring from her eyes. He was warm and gracious, quick to assure her he would visit as soon as he could: 'It's the right thing to do'. The conversation was brief but fulfilling. She quickly fell into a peaceful sleep, exhausted by the realisation of a moment she had longed for, every night for countless years.

The next few days were marked by nervous preparation. Her hair was cut, plans made for his accommodation, concern for his safety en route. My nerves were more focused on finding a way to eke out just a few more days from her struggling body, to shore up this reunion.

But it soon became clear that his assurances were slightly hasty, and 'My Boy' once again faded into the ether. The promise of a happy ending so cruel when snatched away at the last. A creeping vine of fury grew from within me, wrapping me up in knots of guilt: my well-intentioned meddling was the cause of this final disappointment for a woman whose life had been riddled with injustice. Ultimately, it was likely that he was unable to face his own trauma, and I couldn't resent him for that. She lost all hope, all sense of safety, and a terrified delirium rich with taunting paranoia overtook her final days.

Despite my best efforts, she died suddenly in the night. Alone. The death she had most feared. We had provided a warm nest for her final weeks, but we still didn't manage to save her from that.

I wept tears of regret. Tears of relief. Tears for the loss of a vibrant woman's identity at the hands of one man. Tears for the unrequited love of a mother. Tears for the loss of time with my own family, while being a substitute for hers.

I called her by name, checked her pupils and her pulse, confirmed that her tortured breathing had finally ceased. My eyes registered how much more of her body had been ravaged by the insidious villain we had been racing against these last few weeks. I looked into her eyes, finally at peace, and thanked her for her courage.

I wiped my eyes, swallowed my grief, and returned to work.