Linda Brodsky Memorial Journal

The Gift of a Daughter

Brynne Ridgewell

I can hear the labored breathing the second I enter the PICU, a high-pitched whoosh, pause, whoosh, pause; fast moving air through a tiny hole, growing ever smaller. There is a girl in the bed. Her chart says she is 15, but the body looks so much younger. Her spine is contorted like a gnarl in oak, arms and legs limp and lacking the defined musculature of someone who has ever used them. Each limb is lovingly balanced on a pillow. I take in the anomalies of her form, but when I scan upwards to the head of the bed, I see her face is serene. "We just want her to be comfortable," her mother says, but it takes a few seconds for the translator to repeat it back to me in a language I can understand. The girl's parents have traveled a long way, halfway across the world and many years in time, in fact, to be standing here in front of me today. Twelve years ago they left their home country of Syria, a medically fragile child in tow, to escape a war that stole everything they ever knew and that, for a few ensuing weeks, dominated headlines here in America. They have been stateless since, transferring to and from refugee camps and countries every few years, until 3 months ago, when their status as refugees granted them arrival to a safer place to lay down roots - the United States. It should have been a kind of heaven. Instead, it is their graveyard.

I've known of the family since their arrival in the States; as the refugee health liaison for my medical school service project, I make it my job to assist medically complex cases during their first health screenings and appointments, upon arrival to our city. If I can't attend, I will find a student who can. In their short time here, this family has spent most of it in the hospital or doctors' offices with no time to make friends or build a community. The doctors and nurses have been fantastic, using the translator phone, offering warm hands and respect to this family who has already been through so much and needs just a little more time to understand, or a minute of grace before bedside rounds to adjust hijab. I am proud to be among them.

After she dies, I know many may not see the value in a life like hers. Her cerebral

palsy was debilitating, to the highest degree. The sentence, “She can often be seen sliding off the couch,” was in the first email I ever received about what to expect when encountering her and her family. More apparent though, is that her mother’s grief is an infinity, wide and wider still. It is enough to hold both the child that was and the life her daughter never had - to run, to grow, to fall in love and build a family, to get old and die hand in hand with those she loves; the story that all mothers want their children’s lives to tell.

I go to her funeral. I wasn’t sure if it would be okay but, when my own brother died, his doctor attended the funeral and that meant the world to me. There are about 14 other women in the Mosque, each dressed in the conservative fashion of their world. They come from Syria, from Afghanistan, Jordan and Palestine. Even though most of the women don’t know the grieving family, they've come to support their sister through such a painful time. I don’t know their customs, but they motion for me to remove my shoes and invite me into the prayer hall. I sit in the back and offer up a prayer of my own.

It occurs to me that this family may never have come to their new life in America without this daughter. This special daughter, for whom her mother and sisters cared so diligently, often sleeping beside her in the same bed at night, listening as raspy breaths escaped her trach tube. Without this daughter, they may never have been considered vulnerable enough to emigrate here. The way I see it, this daughter has given her family a most wonderful gift - safety and a home where her siblings can go to college and marry freely; a new start. And when her work was done, she left our crazy planet. Perhaps it's far fetched, but I’d like to believe her life meant something. That’s just the type of human I’d like to be. I leave the hall and am reminded of Abraham Verghese's quote in his famous Ted Talk: A Doctor’s Touch, in which he describes the one message physicians must try to convey to their patients: “I will always, always, always be there. I will see you through this. I will never abandon you. I will be with you, through the end.”

In attending the funeral, I want that mother to know that I, a near stranger, a healthcare worker, still see that her daughter was worth grieving over. That I see her loss. Maybe it’s not the easiest path, to lead with one’s heart so far forward. But, I decide, that’s just the kind of doctor I want to be: with you, through the end.