

THE WHEELCHAIR

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(It had been four years since my wife Mani passed away on January 17th, 2017. But her memories never faded out, and I started writing these personal essays to glorify her life story that didnâ??t end well. She had filled my life and two children with so much care and love that the only way I could pay my homage was to share her story with others. So this essay is the monologue of the wheelchair â?? her move around partner for over two years.)

Iâ??m the wheelchair brought in to serve one of the family members who got seriously ill and unable to walk. They have given me a place at one end of the long corridor fitted with large glass windows. Later, I learned the hallway was a refuge where I wheeled her to breathe some calm-down moments. I canâ??t shed tears, but I feel ripped off, failing to understand the traumatic plight she got pushed into by the quirky fate. â??With some lives, it plays cruel games,â?• I grieve myself.

The hallway is an ample sunny space that invites rich daylight and a copious run of breeze overlooking the family-owned school buildings and playground spread two floors below.
Close by where I stand, they turned a spacious rectangular hall into a nursing room with a hospital bed, where the doctors, nurses, and caretakers treated her. As she lay on the bed, I could recognize anxiety seen among the family members and failing hope in the eyes of doctors attending her.

There was something that amazed me amidst this foreboding status quo. I noticed she beams an encouraging, â??Iâ??m fine smile whenever you look at her. Perhaps, I guess her inner psychological dare dictated, â??I know, sure enough, how the cancerous monster had settled inside. Although I could hear the death clock ticking, I know how to handle its spite in my spiritual way.â?• I suspected she had enough courage to face the approaching departure than the dear ones surrounding her.
My primary task was to help her move whenever she pleased. But most of the day, I just watched her standing a little away from her bed, taking her medicines and infusions, comforting herself most of the time. I noticed that walking and even standing seemed difficult because they fastened each of her lower legs with cotton and strapped with gauze to contain the swelling. Itâ??s the agonizing sequence of malignancy intruding into her leg bones. I resolved I should stay close, making her life easier and better from then on. My journey went on with her for about twenty months, offering my undivided attention, before she closed her weary eyes, heaven-bound, never to open again!

I continued to devote my time to her. But it was hurting every night to see her getting ready for the recurring ordeal â?? removing the bandage that has secured her legs, both the cotton and gauge cloth sodden with yellowish secretions as they stripped it. I flinched, not able to stare at the degeneration threatening her legs. They were pale, swollen like a balloon filled with water, a thin line of pinkish cracks twisted along the length of the skin from which I noticed the discharge oozed in a continuous flow. We must wash it every night, clean the previous dayâ??s gush, and go with a fresh pressured pack with thick wads of cotton and gauge. Adjusted upon me, she never uttered a word of pain but surrendered with cruel calmness. Perhaps she had that perfect clarity. â??I know whatâ??s happening to me.â?•

I took my service as a worthy and dutiful calling and had become a devoted caretaker and protector for whatever days she meant destined. Wheeling her every day around the house, I grew fond of vibrancy on her face and her gift of tenacity to go through any inconvenience the uncooperative feet threw up troubling her. I heard she was the smiles beneath which the metastasized disease flooded and fast consuming her.

As days rolled by, I heard every lip in the house murmuring a prayer but happy at the arrangement: the help given to her. I, too, joined in their prayers, with a hope she would return to the normal life she enjoyed once. Sometimes she would inquire her husband, â??can I get my feet back to help me walk, â??I overheard often, â??and â??she walkedâ?? as if it was a blessing, freed from the curse, she walked away from me, from the corridors where we shared the sunshine and sunsets. And from all our lives, from the house she adored. She suddenly â??walkedâ?? away; breathed away â?? forever! Over months, I led a life, deluding what unfolded before was a cruel lie. Sometimes I couldnâ??t grasp her symptoms, the unfairness of mysterious illness where I found myself pitiably shaken to behold various twists of her ordeals and couldnâ??t pluck much hope in the family members surrounding her.

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Over eight months had passed since the day she disappeared from marching on me; from the nursing room where I witnessed sheâ??s being treated, examined, consoled, and humored. Now the bed remained empty, serenely held and well tucked in, unused and lonely, and moved into a corner. Meanwhile, nothing else to do; unnecessary awful thoughts numbed me. And I tear at the empty foyer; no stomps of anxious doctors, nurses, nor did any visitors, even the spokes and hub of my tyres sound raspy when I moved.

The days felt lonely, and I just stayed as I counted the passing days and nights, bruised by the loss. Going through the agony, I remained detached as a mere frame of memory without her angelic presence. Taking care of myself, I sat still, worried, with no work, staring at the walls and dull skies. But the family maid cared for me every day, cleaned, and set the cushions, towels, napkins used by her, kept them neat and adjusted as if they expected her to come back soon! As if she might return, like a butterfly, to its favorite blooms and receive the same honeyed comfort as she got always!

I still remember her morning words, rolling her eyes, beaming a sharp look. â??Open the doors and windows, let me see the morning Sun,â?• she used to say with a sweep of her hand â?? her unmissable morning routine. And everyone around dutifully followed. A few hours later, the nurses helped her settle on the cushions, her bandaged feet placed on my footrest. Off I rolled her out to celebrate the early sunshine and slow gust that ran along the sunny corridor. I fancied her soulful eyes came like fresh flower buds. A smile was on her lips, as cute as the way the babies hold. I watched her, with ever-increasing anxiety, and let a silent prayer, â??donâ??t let the smile fade away, donâ??t take away her from us.â?•

When her son was with her, she was a perfect mother. Her words were slow, tender and suggested how much she adored him. It was selfless love.

She reached out with sweetness as she cared for her son. I admired the way she showed it with a smile. Like any other kid, seeing his mother reduced to the wheelchair, he seemed disturbed; he wanted her mother to be normal. He understood that his mother was getting sicker. On some evenings, when she looked out over the parapet wall, a routine she loved most, she would speak herself out about some good feelings when the weather was pleasant, laughing and smelling the potted flowers. She would listen to the noisy road below; masking her disappointment, she would ask, â??Will I be able to walk around like everyone out there? Is this wheelchair my permanent place?â?• I sensed sadness clouded his eyes; he struggled, unable to utter a word. He just stared at her in silence. I knew he was choking beneath, not able to respond to her optimistic warrior spirit.
Having been through subsequent gloomy weeks, I sensed a fateful premonition: evident in the bustling urgency of the doctors, the tired face of her husband showing the waning hope hanging heavily. Of course, I wouldnâ??t want her to go through all this. But, was this happening to her, and am I to wait to witness this bleak reality? â?? The approaching dark shadow of helplessness was enough to prick my heart to wreck.

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Passing through these stages of hard emotions, I prized a few shades of hope when I found she enjoyed some flavors of healing fondness when Aradhya, her granddaughter, doodled around. She held her close with all the love of smiles she possessed. Then her face was never worrisome; I felt gladdened she got the best gift to relax in such a stressful environment she has been passing through. The tiny sparkling Aradhya â?? the three-year-old beam of sunlight and with blinking round eyes was the healer of the house, and when she was around, I noticed a glint of buoyancy in her grandmaâ??s eyes. And I enjoyed every moment.

Aradhya, with her looks of love and awe, giggling all the time, stood on my foothold, held me with her tiny hands, beaming all her comical smiles. Then, looking into her grandmotherâ??s pampering eyes; she never stopped chatting whatever her three-year-old mouth could utter. Sometimes she closed her eyes and rested her head on her grannyâ??s lap as if her blissfulness would take away from the house all the shadows that hung around.

Amidst her forbidding symptoms, itâ??s Aradhya who had become a sanctuary of her peace. She never took her eyes off from the little angel, holding her as closely as her decaying body would permit and accommodating her between her sari folds on the wheelchair; thatâ??s me. But, gratefully, how did I wish this subliminal flow of intimate moments gave her the new strength and painted a magical hope that would last forever?

Eight months have passed since she left us all, her soul seeking its heavenly- trail. Throughout, I knew she had never enslaved herself to the deadly malaise. Pure in spirit, she led a life as a real victor. However hard I try not to, looking back, the many family events reeled before me every day, though I have bonded with her family for a brief period. Today they saw me as an enduring icon. I must admit Iâ??m lucky and held in the family, awarding me a place of pride for the fact I had been closest in her most demanding situations. But, looking at the quiet, empty rooms, sometimes I donâ??t know what to feel; worse, I didnâ??t know what to do.

On some evenings, I see her husband settled on a small sofa arranged just near me, where I sigh all by myself. Although punishably left alone, I find him reading a book or holding a newspaper. I noticed, all

at once, his face turns dull as he peers outside the large glass windows as if reviewing the descending darkness hovering beyond or perhaps, as well within his moods!

As I reflected on the sad events that haunted the family, I imagined it would be an impossible challenge to connect the dots of the reality that loomed before him, making sense of the stressful fight that he had to confront every waking moment. I supposed fenced by stillness, perhaps, he sunk into silent retreat, wistful that the laughter, the good times may not sit among them again. Then, a few months later, I eyed a hint that he had reconciled and arranged himself to make plans for the challenges that lay before to tend his teenage children as a single parent.

Perhaps, I presumed, he got used to â??Iâ??m on my sort of situation like tragedies happen, but with dignity, I have to confront the future which would come, no matter, in any manner, and it shouldnâ??t cloud the head with wasteful fears and introspection.â?• So I have to accept the situation as it is.

On most days, I watched his intent face, trying to be normal again, and determined fingers hitting the keyboard in the late evenings, after work, jotting down the memoriesâ??of his wifeâ??Mani.

I believe he had reconciled to accept the overwhelming reality, introspected enough to face it and take the bold steps forward.

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Date Created
2022/01/04
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