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Gyrations

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This story is dedicated to mom and dad.

Clockwise and anti-clockwise! Usually, clockwise gave Seema more pleasure. However, this time she insisted on rubbing her clitoris anti-clockwise. Reverse masturbation helped calm down her intense stress and somehow, each reverse stroke spooled out everything that happened during the last ten days, as she said, *anti-climactically*. Ten days of frantic incessant calls at the hospitals where her parents were admitted to check on the availability of remdesivir, supply of oxygen, and food. The lung-racking present of hospitalization was gifted to her family by two unwelcome and uninvited guests—Corona Virus and Happy Hypoxia—while she continued staying at the campus hostel. The twin parasitic visitors seemed to enjoy outstaying their unsolicited visitation serving her parents with deteriorating oxygen levels, weakness, and cough. “Please, I don’t have the strength to speak to you.” This was the last complete sentence she had heard from her mother before her hospitalization, before her admission to the ICU, and before the beginning of her new life as a still photograph.

Ten strokes on the clitoris covered the journey of ten days, reminding her of her mother’s last ten

words before her father dialed the ten digits of her mobile phone to inform her at 3:00 am, “Darling, mamma’s no more with us!” Seema received the news after she had moaned for the tenth time, her left index finger still glued to her vulva that brimmed with tears before her eyes did! Moaning, mourning, in the early morning—she lay frozen in her room, where the air was heavy with the mixed aromas of fertility and death. The horizontal aluminum sheet pasted on the ceiling mirrored the image of her naked body. Her vision on the silvery surface appeared like a caramel stream. Her skin glistened with perspiration, her eyes transformed into a lachrymose fountain, her vagina debouched milky ejaculate, her mind discharged the fluid memories of her sucking at her mother’s breast. She stared at her hazy image dreamed up on the ceiling, and rubbed her eyes clockwise. This time it was more stressful. While the epithelial curtains blocked her vision, her mind staged the events from the day her parents were diagnosed with COVID-19.

12th April, 9:00 pm—that was the day her father didn’t speak with her on the phone. “He’s down with fever. I guess he is overwhelmed with office work.” Her mother’s voice carried a tint of fear along with exhaustion and Seema could sense that. “How about you, mamma? Are you ok?”

“Yes, I am fine. Just a little exhausted. How was your day?”

“Mine was great! Listen up, I am cooking dinner and am sort of running late for my online Narrative Medicine classes. I will call you guys tomorrow at 9:00 pm.”

“Stay safe!”

Every night Seema called her parents at 9:00 pm while cooking dinner half an hour before her evening classes. And every day their conversation ended on a note of safety and care.

Seema couldn't sleep that night after classes. She went for a walk and tried to drown her anxiety by plugging earphones in her ears and listening to the deafening bass beats. She avoided making eye-contact with people around her, pretending to be invisible. Something didn't seem right. She had talked to her parents the previous day on a video call and they seemed fine. Her mind continued building airy castles of possibilities. She returned to her room, and switched on her laptop to watch cooking shows on Netflix to distract her mind from thinking about the possibility of her parents being infected with COVID-19.

She didn't realize she had been asleep all night with eyes wide open and glued to the laptop screen showing the recipes of Modak, Aviyal, Suralichya Vadya, and Karimeen Pollichathu one after another. Each recipe brought back the taste of past memories, sweet kisses on the cheeks, pats on the back, and most importantly the satisfaction of seeing her confident reflection in their eyes.

The next day, 13th April, as soon as she woke up, she texted her mother asking if they were fine. Her mother instantly called, “Dad's gone to the office and I am busy with household chores.” The intonation and the information set Seema's mind at rest. Little did she know about her parents' secret of wearing masks at home and sleeping in different rooms

to save each other from being infected. In two days, her mother had perfected the art of camouflaging the truth lest her daughter become frazzled.

The second wave of COVID-19 hit her city hard in April. Hospitals were inundated with patients and there was a consistent paucity of ambulances, hospital beds, oxygen cylinders, and remdesivir. Seema followed the local news on Instagram and Facebook. Every night before going to bed she prayed for her family's health. Alas! Those prayers accumulated on the dust-stricken divine table like the ones piled on the desk of the government officers—visible to everyone except the one in-charge.

At 12:00 pm on 14th April, there was a call from home that made her convulsive, “We’re admitting ourselves. Mamma’s oxygen level has dropped to 52. Mine is fine at the moment. But we both are scared. I have booked an ambulance for us. Hopefully, it will arrive on time.” She didn’t say anything to her father except a repetitive “okay.” Her heart was palpitating fiercely making her nauseous and giddy. She plonked beside her single disheveled bed and retched up bitter, sour, sticky gobs of vomit. The air of the room felt rancid to her tongue, covered with remains of the spewed rice and daal. The semi-solid lumps of vomit were liquefied by the drops of sweat falling from her forehead and the cascades of tears rolling down her cheeks. She kept staring at the yellow, bitter, sour, lumpy barf, while the foul-smelling glaciers of undigested food kept melting, after their exposure to the torrents of bodily fluids.

She didn't cry, she didn't move, she didn't breathe. It felt as if her breath was entwined with her mother's and the invisible cord between the two conveyed to Seema her mother's concern to keep her daughter safe. For three hours, her father didn't respond to her calls or messages. And when he did he spoke assertively to her, "Don't call! When we reach the hospital, we'll update you."

"But why is it taking so long for the ambulance to arrive?"

"Didn't you hear what I just said? I will call you later."

Those words sent a chill down her spine. She imagined her home as a nuclear reactor ready to explode any minute. Digging her face in the pillow she kept crying, thinking of what she could have done. For the next nine hours, there was no news from home. She kept walking to and fro in her room, calling her friends, sharing her fear of losing her parents. Those 540 minutes seemed accursed to her. She had suffered from chronic bronchitis in the past. So, she knew what the experience of breathlessness could do to a person. She would hold her breath for a long time and then exhale, trying to put herself in her mother's shoes, attempting to experience the suffering from the low levels of oxygen in the body. And while she was making feeble efforts to sync her parents' experience of breathlessness with hers, she received her father's call at 11 pm. "It's all convoluted. The hospitals are permitted to admit only those patients who arrive in government ambulances and there is a shortage of government ambulances. I interacted with the po-

lice commissioner and he says he can do nothing. I am helpless. At the moment, everyone is. I don't know what more I can do for mamma. A good Samaritan has generously offered the spare oxygen cylinder reserved for his mother. So, she has the external oxygen support for now, but I don't know if she will make it to the hospital if the ambulance doesn't arrive in another six hours."

This was an earth-shattering phone call. She called her friends again and briefed them about her situation. At midnight they all gathered in the hostel courtyard, fondly named by students as Gossip Circle. They were all busy dialing A for Ambulance. Finally, it was Debbie's call that worked wonders for Seema. After 12 hours, a government ambulance was finally available.

Seema promptly called her father that the ambulance was on its way to take them to the hospital. Her father was relieved to know this. But his struggle didn't end there. The ambulance personnel knew the entire building was in the clutch of the life-threatening virus. They were not ready to climb the stairs and get the breathless COVID-19 positive middle-aged couple. So, they asked them to come downstairs by themselves. The moment Seema's father removed her mother's mask to take her downstairs, her head started buzzing and she gave him a swivel-eyed panicky smile, as if she was bidding him goodbye already. He quickly lifted her and descended three flights of stairs. He was really there for her all his life, all her life, in sickness and in health. In a matter of minutes, they were inside the ambulance and she was back

on external oxygen support. He was not, yet, the one who needed it.

All the city hospitals were packed owing to the surge in COVID-19 infections. There was just one government hospital that had 1200 beds for COVID-19 positive patients. The hospital was 30 kms away from home. The couple held each other's hands. Perhaps, they could see what was coming next. She asked him to come closer and whispered, "I had a great life with you. I am happy I decided to marry you." He tried to masquerade his fears and tears.

When they reached the hospital parking and realised that dying at home peacefully would have been a better option. More than a hundred ambulances had convened on the parking lot, and to the family, residing on the ninth floor of the staff quarters, they all appeared like toy trains (emitting blue and red lights) arranged in concentric circles. Seema's parents' ambulance was in the third circle. It took them three hours to get to the reception area, wherein there was no one to receive them except the cold glass desk. He lifted his wife in his arms and placed her on the stretcher. He was traumatized and exhausted. She pulled him to her and mumbled in raspy voice, "You, too, are infected with the virus. You, too, have the fever and cough. Don't overexert yourself." He kissed her sweaty forehead and held his breath and hopes.

Fortunately, a junior nurse quickly escorted them to the general ward. He was shocked to see every bed occupied. The worse was to imagine tak-

ing his breathless wife through the crevices, the cleft left by the ocean of the bodies lying on the floor. He saw two male nurses removing a body from a bed, so he quickly placed his wife there. The senior nurse who observed Seema's father's movements from a distance shouted at him, "Why should we give this bed to your dying wife?" He begged her with teary eyes, "Please! This is an emergency." The nurse was used to seeing death all around her. Seema's mother's case was just another brick in the wall. "Look Mr., all cases are emergency cases. What do I get if I assign this bed to your wife?" Seema's father was shocked and annoyed to see healthcare professionals take undue advantage of a patient's condition. He fished out a couple of grands and handed it over to the nurse. Feeling the warmth of the crispy, pink notes, the senior nurse was inebriated with happy greed. She said, "It seems she needs to be admitted to the ICU. I will quickly get the doctor for her. In the meantime, you must remove her gold bangles and diamond wedding ring. She doesn't need them there."

His hands shivered when he touched her bangles and wedding ring. The senior nurse could see him struggle. "Let me help you!" She removed the jewelry as if she were a salesman at a jewelry showroom asking for the ornaments to polish them. He could not bear the sight of the marital signs being taken from his wife. This signalled an augury for him. They were still holding each other's hands. A junior physician soon arrived at the scene and took Seema's mother's temperature and oxygen level. She called the ICU control room team and com-

manded the volunteers to escort the patient to the ICU. “Sorry Sir, you won’t be allowed to go with her.” Seema’s father looked at the anxious junior physician, who was filling out a form at lightning speed, and then at his wife. As the stretcher was being pushed towards the elevator, they continued to hold each other’s hands. The senior nurse applied all her strength to unclasp their interlaced, shivering, moist fingers. He felt as if the nurse was truncating their wedlock. The mouth of the elevators soon swallowed her and the team of ICU volunteers. That was the last he saw of her.

He called Seema and briefed her about everything, pretending to sound hopeful and confident of his wife’s return. He called the COVID-19 service cab and took one last look at the hospital building trying to take deep breaths before hopping in and placing the online instructions for his destination. Being a long-distance ride, the cab service offered him free headphones to listen to or watch songs, video clips, etc. He connected the headphones to his phone and watched all the videos of his wife singing and dancing at festivals. “She was an artist, my wife. The best at interior design, singing, dancing, cooking, and making me laugh.” The driver looked in his rear-view mirror and smiled at Seema’s father, “I am sorry Sir. I hope she rests in peace.” He was annoyed at listening to the driver’s caring response: “What do you mean “rest in peace?” She is alive. In the ICU battling COVID-19. But ALIVE!”

The driver was scared to see Seema’s father’s reaction, “I am sorry if I have offended you but you

just said that your wife was a great artist. So, I assumed. ...” Seema’s father didn’t realise he was already speaking of her in the past tense and sense.

He reached home, unlocked the door, and poured his heart out on the pillow where his wife’s head had previously rested. That noon he skipped lunch. Instead of pulling up their blanket, he wrapped himself with all her shawls, trying to embrace her aroma, her warmth, her love, her care, HER (if possible)! It was in his sleep, that he started feeling the discomfort. He walked to the kitchen to drink water, but he couldn’t swallow it. So, he called Seema, “Book an ambulance for me. I think I, too, need to be hospitalised.”

Seema dropped her mobile phone unable to believe what her father had just said. “Yes, daddy. Don’t worry.” This time she didn’t call her friends. She booked a private ambulance to take her father to her uncle’s clinic that had recently converted into a COVID-19 facility with basic amenities. She called her uncle and briefed him about her father’s condition. He assured Seema that her father had received a first dose of vaccine, so most probably his condition wouldn’t worsen like her mother’s.

The ambulance, she had booked for her father, didn’t have an oxygen mask. So, they stopped on their way to the hospital to get one. Once Seema’s father was admitted at her uncle’s hospital, she was somewhat relieved to know that her mother and father were receiving medical care. She felt helpless, but even she knew she could have done nothing more than what had been done.

For the next nine days, she kept receiving messages from her parents, which were mostly about their health updates. Her father would write very short messages; however, her mother's messages were a linguistic potpourri. She would mix the scripts of English, Gujarati, and Marathi and type long messages. She would send Seema photographs of her cardiogram and oximeter every alternate day. She would call junior physicians and ask them to speak on a video call during the less busy hours. The interactions with her parents made Seema hopeful of their speedy return home.

On the ninth day her father was discharged from his hospital. When Seema and her father texted her mother about his release she replied, "J now I can sleep happily." This message made Seema queasy. She felt suffocated in her hostel room, so she went to the campus grocery store to buy mineral water.

Her father was home but didn't quite feel it. Four hours later the hospital authorities informed him: "I am sorry. Your wife has passed." He kept staring at the rotating blades of the fan, reminiscing their anniversary celebrations, Seema's first birthday, their wedding day, the day when he first met her ... The cyclic movements of the fan brought him closer to the vortex of whirling memories.

About the Author

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