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Medevacking Mum

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Mum was in Scarborough Hospital, an imposing colonial structure built on a hill overlooking the harbour. The whole family had come down to Tobago for my niece's wedding. After forty odd years, we were all mostly Canadian and American, but family events, along with the promise of curried goat and the hottest peppers you will ever taste kept us forever connected to the islands of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mum was barely conscious and struggling to breathe, and her x-ray showed lungs full of fluid. I held her soft frail hand and tried unsuccessfully to slip into the role of medical professional. She had overexerted herself during the wedding festivities and tipped her already delicate cardiovascular health into a serious episode of congestive heart failure.

This is supposedly easy to treat. The medical team would give her some Lasix, she would pee it all out, start to breathe better, and we would get her on the first flight back to Canada. Unfortunately, her blood gases indicated a precarious breathing sit-

uation and the probable need for some form of respiratory support.

This cannot be done at Scarborough Hospital or anywhere on Tobago.

“Your mother is going to need to go to Port of Spain, for CPAP at least, maybe even a respirator. I have made arrangements. The helicopter will be at the airport in 45 minutes to fly her over.”

The medical officer who informed us of our mother’s condition saw the worried looks on our faces. He was a personal friend of my niece’s new husband and had even been at the wedding.

I am a doctor and so is my brother. I spent a great deal of my early career doing long range air transport, mostly of critically ill infants and children, from the Canadian Arctic to tertiary care in Montreal. At the time, I loved the adrenaline rush, and I took the maxims of aviation medicine to heart:

Any hospital is better than an airplane or helicopter

Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong

Nothing lasts forever—including oxygen, batteries, and fuel.

Those training maxims were there to remind us that transport is an extremely vulnerable time for patients, and helped ensure that the transporting team of healthcare professionals was as prepared as possible for all eventualities.

When it is your mum, all those maxims do is remind you how quickly everything can go wrong.

My brother and I decided I would accompany her on the helicopter over to Trinidad, and there I

was: the baby brother in the family, getting ready to medevac my mum, absolutely convinced she would not survive the ride.



The helicopter lifted off smoothly from Tobago's A.N.R. Robinson Airport in Crown Point.

My mother was strapped to the floor on a stretcher. She was in and out of consciousness. The only therapy she could really receive was some oxygen by nasal prongs. Before take-off, my mum looked at me and said, "Will you pray for me, Selo?" My name is Saleem. In Trinidad, this shortens to "Selo" because the Christian name, "Selwyn" does this, and "Saleem" is most like "Selwyn." Even pet names become acts of trans-civilizational interpretation in Trinidad.

Mum was scaring me. For Muslim Indian women of her generation, it is seen as important to leave this world with the glory of God on your tongue. This means that if people think that it is their time, they want to die saying one of two basic phrases: "*la illaha illallahu*" ("There is no God but God"), or "*Allahu Akbar*" ("God is great"). My mum was hedging her bets and alternating between the two.

I was powerless. Her nurse and I were buckled in to our seats and not allowed to get out of them to tend to her. On aircraft, what the pilot says goes, so the best we could do was watch and hope she kept breathing.

Crown Point is on the extreme southwestern tip of Tobago, which is the closest part of the island to Trinidad. As the helicopter rose, in the distance I saw the mountains of Trinidad's Northern Range, shimmering in and out of focus in the convective air currents produced by the tropical midday sun.

I had forgotten how intimate a helicopter ride is with the land below it. In a helicopter, you are just low enough to be part of the scene beneath you. When I was working in the Arctic doing medevacs on fixed wing aircraft, what was below you was still 5 kilometres away. Here, we could almost see what the people below us were wearing.

We rounded the peninsula of Toco and made landfall on Trinidad over Manzanilla Beach. I looked forward and could see Port of Spain some fifty kilometres away, and then on to the Gulf of Paria, with South America on the other side. Directly below me was a thick strip of coconut palms, with a few cows grazing the grass in between the palms. I always knew I was in the real tropics when I saw coconut palm groves gracing the land just after the sandy part of a beach.

Following the coconut palms and looking south, I saw endless fields of prime agricultural land, stretching towards the Central Range, and then again to the more rugged Southern Range. The sugar cane industry had collapsed, but I could still see fields of cane here and there. Sugar cane brought my people to the Caribbean, with Indian indentured labour replacing African slavery on the plantations in the 1840s. We became ourselves, a recognizable people, on those plantations—and

there now had been almost 170 years of India in the Caribbean. As a people, we were sometimes vividly nostalgic for the subcontinent that we left behind, singing Rumi into newborn babes' years, unconscious participants into the great tradition of Sufi mysticism. But we also looked resolutely forward, having been transformed by generations spent among the descendants of African slaves, Hakka Chinese people, French Creoles, and many others. These people were our friends, neighbours, and occasional lovers.

While I listened to my mum's purse-lipped respirations and her praying, I could not bear to watch her suffering while not being able to do anything about it, so I looked out the window and down and across to those fields.

Those fields had given rise to this woman.

I could see in my mind's eye an unbroken chain of my foremothers—veiled, barefoot, and cutlass wielding, cutting cane on the plantations, making sure the next generation learned to read and write, and pickling mangoes in the sun. I thought of my father, gone from us about eight years, and all of my forefathers, hotly debating philosophy, Gandhi, or maybe apartheid, all in one afternoon. They were unschooled yet so scholarly and insightful.

I thought of how the outside world, specifically doctors and nurses back in Canada, might look at my parents and see only two uneducated immigrants, rather than the matriarch and patriarch of a huge and, by most measures, successful family. I had seen this happen before on hospital wards, or maybe in multidisciplinary team meetings where

“psychosocial” issues are discussed. When we health professionals did this, we denied our patients the respect of being understood as complex beings. Within most of us there is a mixture of love, loyalty and courage, with maybe a little self-interest, jealousy, and fear thrown in to keep things interesting. I had engaged in this kind of dismissive behaviour myself. There was generally an excuse for it (full bladder, empty stomach, long night...), but it was always born of ignorance, nonetheless.

Silently, I thanked my parents for making me, and for allowing me to inherit such bountiful cultural riches. I am a child of the tropics, huddling comfortably in the central heating of my house in Montreal, eating spicy food. I have been given the gift of ease at manipulating cultural objects with origins on five continents.

Breathe, Mum, just breathe.

As the helicopter moved through more populated areas, I saw my parents’ mosque. It rose like a giant green and white Taj Mahal out of the savannah lands near Champs-Fleurs in St. Joseph. We flew right above it. It stood there all Eastern and out of place in this creolized land, with its minarets and Arabic arches. I had heard stories of my family being part of a true community centered around that mosque, but it was an experience that I never really shared, since most of my growing up had been in Canada. I belonged to the random Toronto schoolyards and strip malls of the seventies and eighties, where you could easily have classmates from twenty countries. This was

its own kind of good, and I took refuge and comfort within its curious mix of Marcia Brady wafting at us on the airwaves from Buffalo, Swanson's TV dinners, and dim sum.

But it was not this.

On that day in the helicopter, I felt the impotence of being unable to act, and with my mother's laboured breathing beside me, I appreciated that mosque as a statement of presence. We are here now. Let us make some history.

As we moved past the mosque and into Port of Spain—"Town" as it is called, or in Trinidadian vernacular, "*Tong*"—I looked back at that mosque and understood it as part of my story. I am connected to this place, through my mother and my father. Its strong sun has shaped me, but my clay is far from set.

We are almost there, Mum.



This story ends with my mother doing alright, for now, at least. The rest of the medevac went fine. She stabilized, and we got her home back to her two loves (beyond family)—*Hockey Night in Canada*, and *CNN*. She loves Candy Crowley and Farid Zakaria.

I became a different physician after that day spent as a powerless family member. In that helicopter trip I felt the oppressive weight of personal history under my feet. I felt threatened by the potential rupture of a relationship that might have occurred if my mother had not been so lucky. I felt

how you have only what you can take with you, but that it is sufficient and that you can be part of an unbroken chain of history and meaning.

When I see a patient, the best thing I can do to show my respect is to situate them in a history that has meaning for them. I try to be open to understanding this person's particular version of being human, and I am willing to be forever changed, if only just a little, by our exchange. Like I said, my clay is not yet set, and I hope it never will be. To engage with another and to risk being changed by them demonstrates the relational nature of caring, through the best of science and the best of my heart. I have been both transformed and humbled by a five-month old with a Grace Jones hairdo awaiting a heart transplant and reaching for my tie.

At the medical school where I work, we often talk of teaching students to fulfill the simultaneous roles of "healer" and "professional," which are enacted in the course of performing their duties as physicians. I have always been a little uncomfortable thinking of myself as a "healer." Firstly, I do not know if "heal" is a transitive verb or an intransitive one. Do patients heal, or indeed, if it is a transitive verb, is it God who doing the healing? For me, the only way I can be a physician is to see myself as a witness to the miracle of healing, at most with a little nudge here and there through a few well-placed and hopefully skilful acts of science.

When I am at my best, and perhaps most humble, my story never really begins with my birth. Sometimes it starts generations ago, on a ship leav-

ing Calcutta, rounding the Cape of Good Hope before heading on into Cape Town, and then onwards to Guyana and Trinidad. At other times, it might begin when my family emigrated to Canada on an Air Canada propeller plane from back when you dressed up for air travel, leaving Trinidad, and island hopping northwards through Barbados, Antigua, and Bermuda. There is always a journey in a story, and to truly appreciate another's story is to choose to travel with them through varied landscapes of meaning.

As the sixth kid, and the only one who grew up in Canada, I never have an easy answer to the question, "Where are you from?" I try to say what I think the asker wants to hear. If I misjudge, maybe by unhelpfully saying that I am Canadian, then sometimes the question comes out a bit more aggressively: "So, where are you *really* from?"

On that helicopter, medevacking mum, and just for that day, I knew the answer: I am of this place, and I am the issue of that feisty woman lying on the floor of this helicopter, who is instructing me even now how to fight for your life and breath.

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