

Essay/Personal Reflection

Cite this article: Rousseau P (2019). Untold stories: Cancer clinic waiting room. *Palliative and Supportive Care* **17**, 248–249. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478951518000111>

Received: 21 February 2018

Revised: 11 March 2018

Accepted: 15 March 2018

Author for correspondence:

E-mail: palliatedoctor@aol.com

1. In the fluorescent lights of the clinic, he appears an old man, his hair splotched gray, his body stooped and aged, his brow lines deep and shadowed. Delores, a long-term patient in the clinic, sits next to him; it's the only empty chair. She's flamboyant and gregarious, but her body is pallid and broken, her face a triangle of bone around sunken, dinner plate eyes.

She turns to the man. "My doctor, Dr. Bilbert, he's good, saved me two, three times, pulled me right from the grave. He's smart, real smart, best doctor in the clinic." Her voice scratches like sandpaper.

The man nods, never looking up.

"Is he your doctor, too?" she asks. He nods no.

"Who's your doctor?" He shrugs his hunched shoulders. Listening seems like work to him.

She looks around the room. She realizes her words were loud and excited. She lips an apology, pulls a blanket over her thin arms and thin legs, brushes her thin hair to the side—several strands fall to the floor—and sinks into her chair with an out-of-date magazine.

2. The glimpses are quick, almost furtive, as if unintentional, but they aren't. They're purposeful, pondering, comparing. Everyone glimpses. They try to look without looking like they're looking. *What does that person have? Will they be alive this Christmas? Who's the sickest? Do I look as bad as him?* The glimpses never stop, especially when a new patient arrives, or someone cries.

3. Some sit in wheelchairs; most sit in faux leather chairs lined in neat rows. Walkers rest everywhere, even for the young. Many have traveled long distances and know no one. They're strangers in a strange land, yet an intangible thread of cancer connects them all; fear, and for some, helplessness, patrol the spaces between them. And while they're in physical proximity, each is alone—internally alone—for disease and death are lonely journeys; mortality is lonely. They've been propelled to the fringes of society, far from the banality of life and the bliss of health. Their suffering is ineffable, their wounds not always visible. I scan the family members, and know they too have a loneliness, one of expectant loss and mourning.

The faces seem exhausted, some even acquiesced. But all hope for a cure, and if not a cure, a few more days, a few more weeks, a few more months, a few more years. But the ones who seem acquiesced, they're ready, they're tired, their bodies contorted like calligraphy. They feel the pull from six feet under.

One sits with a vomit basin to catch her insides. Three sit with surgical face masks, their blood counts depleted, all one breath from pneumonia. Two wear bandanas covering hairless heads, their bodies skeletal and transparent. Seven drink oxygen from nasal cannulas. One rests on a gurney, eyes closed halfway to heaven. All want life to be normal again, yet all know it'll never be normal.

4. It's an awkward ambiance. The room seems organized and orderly, despite the sickness and sadness. But a veneer of calm lurks in the center of every commotion, like the stillness in the eye of a hurricane. The Cancer Clinic is such a center, set in a milieu of composed calmness, a tumult of disease swirling beneath. It's like a pyramid of canned vegetables in a grocery store: pull one can from the bottom and life unravels.

5. One man sits apart from the others, a deviation of the lined chairs, like a marginal note in a book, off to the side, but no less important. He catches the winter sun as it sifts through half-shuttered windows, warming the shadows on his rumpled face. His body is brittle, fragile, kyphotic, too small for his clothes. He seems a relic, an artifact. I notice his lips keep him comfortable. They move and move, wetted by a swollen tongue. Then they move again, repeatedly, robotically. I listen carefully, and hear the whistle and despair of his whispered words: "Please help me Jesus." I study him. He never looks up, his eyes

set on the carpeted floor. "Why carpet?" I wonder. I study its designs, and realize they're not designs at all, but stains. It's stained. "It'll always be stained," I mutter, "and full of contagion. It's the Cancer Clinic." Maybe he's studying the stains. But why carpet?

6. The background noise is persistent if not bothersome: the ding of arriving elevators, the constant hum of television, the scratching and squeaking of walkers on a marbled floor that ends in a stained carpet, the hushed mumbling of frightened voices, and the overhead paging of patients' names. They'll all be called to the back behind pastel walls where, for some, chemicals will flow through veins hardened like iron pipes, veins that used to bend like the branches of a willow tree and bulge like a blue estuary.
7. I inhale. There's an impenetrable grief in the air, and a smell of sterility and sickness. And in one corner, the corner where the gurney rests, the rank smell of death. It's a troubled air, and seeps like spilt mercury into the hearts of patients and families.
8. Family members and friends attend some of the sick. You need someone to be present when you're sick, someone whose eyes

meet yours. They're like bodyguards, for one needs guarding when the word "cancer" enters a life. It's like a sudden sundering of reality. Vocabulary changes; there are unfamiliar words and bewildering definitions. It's a new language, one of vulnerability and uncertainty. So they, the family members and friends, are there to help, to learn the language. They stand out, they look healthy, vibrant, not yet sick, though worry fills their eyes. Horrific worry. The worry we all learn. The worry of death and loss and the unfillable void.

(Backstory: I stood and observed the waiting room of a cancer clinic for 30 minutes. It was a room of sick people, their families, and their friends. There was occasional laughter and murmured conversations, but overall, the ambiance was one of solemnity, uncertainty, and vulnerability. However, when I sat down to write about the experience, I realized there was no "story" to tell, no probing of characters or plot, no beginnings or endings, only the raw scaffold of humanity framed by my detached observations. Nevertheless, the seeds of story were everywhere, for time in a cancer clinic obliges a frank, if not blunt, reminder of the unpredictability of life, the pull of mortality, and the presence of suffering, the *raison d'être* for all stories human.)