Lost in translation

Orlanda Goh, MBBS

Day 21—

Pst, pst.
Zee lays in bed. Her hair is in one thick ponytail. It is higher than she usually tied it. We know from photographs clipped to a line like clothes hanging out to dry. They run from stand to stand; from monitors to IV saline.

Pst, pst.
She may not approve of her current hairstyle but it allows her head to rest flat on the bed. It doesn’t matter either; chlorhexidine may not be her type of scent. Her eyelids are not closed and yet her eyes aren’t open. Zee is absent, but present—only as much as the girl in the photograph.

Pst, pst.
Her chest rises, her chest falls. We watch them behind sliding doors; time slowly crawls. Her mother is reading to her. Is there a clearer way to tell her her daughter’s condition may not worsen nor change for the better? Of course, it can’t be when this mother is stroking her daughter’s hair.

Each new day, Zee’s mother willfully weaves her fairy tale. This mother’s bedtime story prolongs this tragedy. Abruptly, an innocuous blood vessel raged and took her life. Stubbornly, we now rage against the gentle dying of the light. We tell the translator to say, there is a place for comfort elsewhere—Zee’s brother interrupts. He translates and mutates the reality of his sister’s mortality.

Listen to Dr. Goh read this poem, available exclusively on Neurology® for the iPad®.
Psst, pst.
Mother grasps, her still-warm hand, responded by a
pst, pst.
Her daughter is here—she is laughing in the picture pasted on the wall. She is as cheeky as she was in that picture of when she was small. Or perhaps she is but a ghost of her past, her body a warm coffin her loved ones can behold.

In the morning the Attending speaks.
Hi my name is Doctor.
Speak no Eng-lish!
Hi.
I am the doctor taking care of your daughter
Your daughter has a big bleed in the brain her exam today hasn’t changed much we think we can send her out to another hospital tomorrow.
No.
Stay here.
Other hospital no machine.
Psst, pst.
Zee’s mother grasps, her still-warm hand, holding a pocket-sized dog-eared paperback. She reads strange words I do not understand—perhaps a childhood song or a holy verse in the native tongue of their homeland.
Psst, pst.
Her hair must have grown half an inch now. Dry scabs of skin surround the roots of hair on this very still head. Mother sings her songs to bring her home, not knowing perhaps, she is already there.
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