

Right Brain: Echoes of loss

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For there is nothing heavier than compassion. Not even one's own pain weighs so heavy as the pain one feels with someone, for someone, a pain intensified by the imagination and prolonged by a hundred echoes.

—Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*¹

I come into your room every morning to try to wake you. I start by gently speaking your name and then say it loudly into your ear. I pinch your skin and press on your sternum but you still do not acknowledge me. I open your eyelids. You stare straight ahead, not moving to the sound of my voice. I always hope I will see your pupils react to the light when I flash it into your eyes; they do not. You don't cough or gag when I move the tubing into your throat. I see the tiniest of movement when I stimulate your corneas with a drop of saline. Relief floods me. Some reaction is still there.

I look at your pictures that your family has placed on the walls. You are laughing with your friends, enjoying an inside joke. You are grinning at the camera with your nephew in your lap in front of his birthday cake. You are the life of the party, they say. A perfect son, says your parents. The best big brother, says your siblings. I have never seen you smile. I fear I never will.

We talk about you in rounds and watch you from the doorway. Your breathing is present but not without the ventilator to support you. We talk about the infection that has spread from your meninges to your ventricles, we talk about the blood clots present in your cerebral veins, the spasms of your blood vessels. We talk about how all maximal medical therapy has not improved your condition.

I sit with your family at your bedside in the afternoon. I tell them the same news as the day before. You are not getting better. We are giving you every treatment we can. We will wait.

This morning, I speak your name; you do not respond. I pinch you; you do not respond. I shine a light in your eyes; you do not respond. I place the tubing in your throat; you do not respond. I touch your corneas; you do not respond.

I look at your new CT scan in disbelief. I cannot make out the gray and white matter of your brain. I cannot see the sulci or gyri.

I sit with your family at your bedside in the afternoon, like we do every day. Today, I tell them different news. I tell them your brain is severely injured. You have gotten worse despite every treatment we can give you.

“What do we do now?” your father asks.

I feel a tightness in my throat and a burning in my eyes. Tears start to brim in the corners. My voice cracks. “We let him go.” Your parents cry for the son they are losing, the light of their lives. Your siblings cry for their protective and generous brother.

I cry for what I could have done, what I should have done. I cry for you who I will never know, whose smile I will never see, whose laugh I will never hear, and whose spirit lives on in the

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broken hearts of your family. I think about wiping away my tears, hiding them from sight. My rational side tells me to excuse myself to find the nearest closet or stairwell to finally let my tears fall freely, as I have usually done. In medical school and residency, I had been taught to remain stoic, to maintain a healthy distance. Maybe my colleagues will think I am weak or too emotional.

In the moments that we decide that we will not continue aggressive medical measures, that we will focus solely on your comfort, that we watch you take your last breath, the overwhelming weight of your family's pain remains in my

heart, intensified by my imagination and echoed in my words.

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Reference

1. Kundera M. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. New York: Harper Collins; 1984.

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