
FICTION | FALL 2020

Dislocation

By Galem Schram

Gurgling mucus accompanied each forced inhalation from Mrs. Nguyen's ventilator. Phlegm never bothered Makana during physical therapy sessions with his pediatric patients who had tracheostomies. Two weeks ago, he discovered that the same noises from grown-ups' lungs made him feel queasy.

He scanned the governing oxygenation value on the monitor above her hospital bed. Its waveform hovered between eighty-nine and ninety percent. Makana took a steady breath and reminded himself that the wispy-haired seventy-year-old sprawled before him on a bed typically reserved for children had once been a child, too.

"Good morning, Mrs. Nguyen!" Makana shouted through the N95 mask pinching his face. He waited for the Vietnamese interpreter's translation of his greeting to issue from the loudspeaker on his phone, which dangled from a Ziploc bag in Derek's outstretched hand. Derek was a newly-graduated therapist redeployed from the orthopedic rehab clinic to assist Makana in this pop-up COVID-19 Intensive Care Unit. In the two weeks Makana had known him, Derek's anxious eyebrows had not descended from his crown. This did nothing for Makana's own anxieties about working with adult patients for the first time since he was a student five years ago, but he, at least, had the professional courtesy to hide his fears.

"It's eight-thirty on Friday, April the tenth, two thousand twenty! Time to wake up!" Makana dug his fist into Mrs. Nguyen's sternum. Her glazed face furrowed into a pair of consonants: a "V" between her eyebrows and a "W" above her upper lip. He introduced himself through the interpreter, and informed Mrs. Nguyen that he was going to suction the mucus from her lungs. Her feeble body convulsed as he snaked the sheathed catheter through the incision in her throat. Pressing the thumb valve to create a vacuum, Makana withdrew the tube with a prolonged squelch equal parts satisfying and nauseating. The gurgling stopped, the oxygenation value rose to ninety-six percent, and Mrs. Nguyen's crusted eyes were staring daggers at him.

She could not wiggle her toes or squeeze Makana's hand on command. Neither could she turn her head when Derek shouted her name. Makana wondered if they'd get better results if they weren't dressed like plastic-wrapped aliens.

"Should we leave her in bed then, like yesterday?" Derek asked with a hopeful glint visible through his face shield. Their session had been derailed the day before when they discovered Mrs. Nguyen lying in a soup of mustard diarrhea. That was Derek's first exposure to what Makana had affectionately dubbed "tube-feed poopies," another concept cuter in the pediatric population. With any luck, Mrs. Nguyen's delirium prevented her from remembering the tedious cleanup that usurped any energy she may have had for physical therapy.

"Her attending is worried she'll decompensate again if she doesn't start getting mobilized," Makana replied. "Her oxygen is above ninety, and she's more alert today. Sitting up in the chair is her best shot at emerging from this altered mental state," he said with manufactured confidence. From her cabinet decorated with Disney princess stickers, Makana withdrew a full-body sling.

"It's going to be okay," he reassured Derek with a smile lost in his mask as he unfolded the sling. The interpreter repeated to the room that it was going to be okay in Vietnamese.

"See? She thinks so, too," said Makana, pointing to the phone Derek had placed on the window sill.

Makana had a second reason for wanting Mrs. Nguyen out of bed for the first time in thirty-five days. The hospital's zero visitors mandate meant that he had never met Willard, her grandson. He knew from reading Mrs. Nguyen's chart that Willard had driven both of his grandparents to the emergency room on the same evening. The virus killed his grandpa by the second midnight, and for weeks his grandma clung to life on ventilator support so intense she had to be sedated in order to endure it.

With eyes locked onto her monitor and his right hand securing the ventilator tubing, Makana helped Derek to roll Mrs. Nguyen from side to side, tucking the sling beneath her. They hooked the sling to the overhead lift. Makana placed the urine drainage bag atop her stomach for the transfer, and then instructed Derek to press the up arrow on the control pad. The sling lifted with Mrs. Nguyen tucked inside like an infant in an oversized car seat, her atrophied calves dangling uselessly below her.

When her toenails cleared the mattress, her oxygen saturation read ninety-four percent. Makana guided her floating body over the bedrails, and oriented it with the recliner.

"Good job, Mrs. Nguyen. We're nearly—"

A hollow gasp resounded from within the sling, and instantly the ventilator's alarm shrieked. Derek cursed.

"She's okay!" Makana shouted reflexively. "She's coughing. Lower the sling, Derek, I can't reach her yet." The monitor began to siren in unison with the ventilator, warning that her oxygenation had dropped below eighty-five.

"Should we p-put her back in bed?" Derek asked. Makana grabbed the control pad from him and lowered Mrs. Nguyen into the recliner. In a flash he had unhooked the straps from the overhead lift, and propelled the suction catheter into her trachea. Tears spilled down her wrinkled blueberry face as it guzzled the viscous secretions. Makana withdrew the catheter, then pressed his palms above her breasts. He willed her breathing to steady, and mercifully, the ventilator's siren stopped, followed by the monitor's. Undulating silence echoed between mechanical puffs.

"You did it, Mrs. Nguyen," Makana sighed. A bead of sweat trickled from his back into his waist band.

After assessing her blood pressure, the therapists wedged pillows on either side of her frail torso and behind her neck, then angled her chair towards the window overlooking the East River. Derek used a towel to clear the mucus tears from the corners of her eyes so she could see it.

As he reached for the hospital's loaned iPad on her tray table, Makana noted that perspiration glued the isolation gown to his forearms. From the iPad's screen he peeled off a sticky note written by the nurse. *Call my grandson if I get agitated*, it read. Makana dialed the number written beneath, and then propped the iPad against his stomach to face her.

"Hello?" came Willard's fragile voice. Makana watched his patient's gaze list from the river to the screen.

"Ba Noi! Oh my God! You're sitting in a chair!"

Galen Schram is a hospital-based physical therapist at NYU Langone Health in New York City. He has worked with patients across several departments including pediatrics and emergency medicine and currently specializes in cancer rehab. From March to May of this year he was redeployed to work exclusively with patients hospitalized with the novel coronavirus. He graduated with his Doctor of Physical Therapy from Columbia University in 2013. One of his favorite courses during graduate school was an introduction to Narrative Medicine. At present he is enrolled in Columbia's Narrative Medicine Certification program. For Schram, writing stories has always been both exciting and therapeutic. He has ambitions to publish a novel. He lives in Queens with his partner, an occupational therapist and frontline worker. His short story "Dislocation" appears in the Fall 2020 *Intima*.
