

Living

By Divya Anand

AK, 79F

The patient, AK, is a seventy-nine-year-old female. She is presenting with the kind of energy I've never had in my life. She is visiting her son and his wife and their adorable two-year-old daughter for the holidays and is only here on her son's account. She lives alone in a stone cottage on a farm in Pennsylvania that gets chilly and hollow at night. She is having "no trouble at all with that, thank you." She has left it under the care of her neighbors, Matilda and Frank. She has four alpacas and states that they're social creatures and will die of loneliness without each other. She gets them sheared every year and spins her own wool to make blankets for the children in Harrisburg's public schools.

Annie K has a face that tells you how beautiful she was when she was young. She has dark gray curls and a small frame. As she sits in front of me, perched on the edge of the exam table, I feel like I could wrap my hand all the way around her upper arm. She shows me a picture of her toddling granddaughter, and the blankets, and a small army of Christmas socks.

Her late husband, God rest his soul, was in the steel industry in the early seventies. He left everything he had to her when he died ten years ago from pneumonia. It was a terrible storm, and they lost power for a week. She kept the fire going day and night, but he refused to sit close enough to it to keep himself warm. He had the predisposing condition of profound cantankerousness that made it rather difficult to help him, and in the end, she could not save him from himself.

"He was a stubborn man," she says. Her face, almost unwillingly, forms a gentle smile. "Do you have a husband, child?"

"No, ma'am," I say.

I dreamed idly of having a husband once. It was the kind of dream that applied to a later version of me; a calmer, kinder, more forgiving one who had room for an imperfect partner. *Won't that be nice, one day, when the time is right. When I'm settled down.* The time was never right, and there was always something fresher and bloodier than married life coming up. The idea of *having someone* felt warm, but the idea of *being married* felt like drowning. I told my mother I was waiting until I was debt-free. I told myself, *maybe when I'm attending.* Then, *maybe when the cat dies.* Then, *maybe when I feel like I can breathe.*

One morning I woke up and looked in the mirror and I was forty years old. I jogged in the morning and drank tea after work. I tell myself I could never deal with someone else's hair in my bathroom anyway, but it's a feeble mantra when pitted against the loneliness I feel when I come home from work to sit in front of ESPN on my four-seat couch.

Annie was never able to bring herself to do anything with the money. She couldn't spend it, and she couldn't ask for help, so she locked it up. Her son found the combination safe under her bed two years ago while looking for her glasses and realized that his father lived and died for Annie and Annie alone. "The face he made," she says. "I will never forget it.

"One mustn't fault him," she says. "My husband provided for Jim so well when he was young." It was she who insisted on having a child, anyway. She has a bank account now. The patient denies any new problems, other than her chocolate lab Lily passing away a month ago

at the age of seventeen. “She was an old lady like me,” she says. She reports that it was simply Lily’s time to go and not a minute sooner or later. She rates her pain as a two out of ten. It improves when she is with her alpacas, the sweet clueless creatures, and worsens at night when she sees Lily’s worn-down dog bed sitting on the bedroom floor and when she sees the left side of her mattress still empty, the smell of flannel and tobacco long since faded away.

The patient is surrounded by other patients. “We suffer from old age and are blessed with it too,” she says. Matilda had a horrible hernia last year, and Glen just got a pacemaker. They come to Annie’s Sunday lunch anyway. Annie feels well and she looks well. “You,” she says, wagging her finger at me. “You can try all you want to make a sick person out of me.”

“You are sick, Annie. You have cancer, not a hernia.”

“The hernia treated Matilda worse. Don’t tell me I have cancer like I don’t know it, child. I know what cancer means. I certainly will be sick, and when I am, I’ll come back to you.” She scolds me kindly, like my mother would. It hurts.

“Chemo could give you a year. Maybe more.”

“I don’t want ‘a year, maybe more’. And I don’t want you to send me to a psychiatrist for saying so.”

The musical quality of her voice makes me yearn for something I can’t put my finger on and I look down at her CT scan. I could never do what she is doing. I’ve always thought my happiness was just around the corner, and maybe if the weather was perfect tomorrow, I would finally feel it.

She has absolutely no difficulties with her ‘housing situation’, as I’m calling it. Frank comes around to fix her plumbing and appliances every so often in exchange for a sweet potato pie. She states that she could fix them herself — she’s been managing her house alone for a long while now—but, “ah, you young people. That’s not what life is about.”

“Life is about living,” I say tiredly. My office is always too cold.

“Living is more than just not being dead,” she says.

Annie K does not wish to discuss chemotherapy further. “Why would I rob myself of even ten good days to give myself three hundred miserable ones?” She is laughing. I have done exactly that to more people than I care to count. “My son has gotten me a credit card. I think it’s time to use some of that lockbox money, don’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say.

She is giving her baby granddaughter a college fund and going to Italy. “I’ve never been to Italy. I’ll love it,” she says. “I have dear friends in Naples. I’m prescribing myself some ocean air.” She winks at me. “Will you let me go?”

“I can’t stop you,” I say. “But it’s not what I recommend.”

“I don’t give a damn,” she says with a smile. She wishes me the merriest of Christmases and a joyful start to the New Year, and for a moment, despite the cancer, I wish for her life to be mine.

She is my last patient of the day. I walk out to the parking lot, and it’s pitch-dark at 4:45 pm. Wet snowflakes rain down. Tomorrow morning when I sit by my window with a mug of coffee, maybe the sunlight will hit the snow just right.

Divya Anand is a second-year student at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School.

© 2022 *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine*