

## Over the Hot Air Balloons

By Nancy Chong

I still get anxious when I see the 800 number from the call center pop up on my phone screen. Not that I am unprepared, but you just never know what type of a case you will be assigned, which hospital you will have to report to, and what kind of information will be shared about the survivor.

At 10:00 PM, the second hour into my six-hour evening shift, I hear my phone ring. I pick up my phone and become aware of the racing beat of my heart.

“Sexual assault. Eight years old. Survivor is in the pediatric emergency room department at X Hospital with her parents.” This is the only information I receive.

I panic a little. My legs begin to shake. Beads of sweat pool on my forehead. My throat starts to feel dry.

I have never been assigned a case to support a child survivor. Just last week, I was supporting a Spanish-speaking, 43-year-old Ecuadorean man and the week before that a 27-year-old Indian woman from Queens in the same ED. I begin to feel a prickling sensation in my hands. I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

As a child sexual assault survivor, I have learned my journey towards healing is splintered and protracted. It’s what motivated me to be an ED advocate for survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence in the first place. Only recently have I started to absorb ways to be more open about the abuse with my family, partner and friends—but being called to the ED to support another child who has gone through a similar harm is paralyzing.

I whisper to myself aloud, “Could I do it?”

I pick up my cell phone and call the hospital directly to check-in with the main ED contact. Five rings, waiting on hold for nine minutes, and two transfers later, I reach a nurse in the pediatric unit. I confirm with her I am on my way. I find out the survivor’s name is Pia. The nurse tells me Pia has just finished her screening tests and is now in a room with her parents.

Forty-five minutes later, I reach the emergency department at the hospital following a seemingly endless Uber ride. After passing through a maze of swinging plywood doors and exposed gray hallways, I find the head nurse who I spoke to earlier. She maps out the way to the pediatric emergency room, a quarter of the hospital I don’t know.

The first thing I notice is the wallpaper plastered onto the pediatric unit walls—with patterns

of animated hot air balloons against a sunny blue skyline—reminding me of the high, dry plateau of Cappadocia.

I walk into Exam Room 3, where I find Pia waiting for me on an exam table. As she gets up, I hear the crinkle of the paper bed cover, creasing just in the center of the bed where her small body was resting.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get here sooner, how are you doing?” I ask Pia.

Pia looks up at me and shrugs. “I’m feeling okay. I was a lot more scared to tell my mom what happened earlier, but I’m glad I did. It was my idea to come to the hospital right away.” She turns on her phone and resumes playing her Candy Crush Saga game.

I look over at Pia’s parents, who are sitting close to the door, leaning against the wall. Pia’s mother is collapsed deep into the blue plastic chair and her father has his head down. When I tug my chair closer to ask a few questions, Pia’s mother pulls herself up and taps Pia’s father’s left shoulder to wake him up.

They both glance at each other then turn their fatigued bodies toward me. Pia turns off her phone and props herself up at the edge of the exam table. They are ready. I open my bulky, black advocate portfolio binder on my lap, and flip through until I find a clean sheet of lined paper. I fumble through my canvas bag and find a pen.

As I catch a glimpse of the forms I would need to fill out, I am disturbed by the realization there are still so many steps I have yet to cover. The kit. The advocate report form I have to slip under the social worker’s office door before I leave the hospital. The completed Office of Victim’s Services claim for compensation application I would need to mail out. The list of resources I need to remember to share with Pia’s parents right before they leave.

However, when I look into Pia’s reassuring gaze, I breathe deeply through my nose then put the forms away. None of this matters right here in this moment because what Pia did to get to the ER, I could not do a decade ago myself.

I murmur to Pia, “You are so brave. I want to share with you that you coming into the hospital today, is not something many people are able to find the strength to do.” I pause. “I am here to listen. I am here for you and when you are ready, can you walk me through what happened?”

I have listened to many survivors before but listening to Pia, I never once have to ask her to clarify or slow down.

Every pause, every deep breath, and every tear Pia sheds—I understand and embrace.

I realize when Pia and I leave the emergency room, we will always be survivors on a path towards healing.

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