

Honor Walk

By Galen Schram

Cybbi wasn't sure what the hell Ms. Delatierra's doctor was expecting from him when she placed the consultation for physical therapy on Monday. According to the chart, Ms. Delatierra lay somnolent in the medical intensive care unit while her diseased liver fought in vain against the bacterial infection flourishing in her lungs. Cybbi wrote a few sentences into the chart to clarify why he was deferring his evaluation. Before logging out, he noted the patient's date of birth and winced.

On Tuesday Ms. Delatierra turned fifty years old. Cybbi laid eyes on her for the first time when the surgical team wheeled her hospital bed to the procedural suite down the hall. Tangles of black hair radiated across her pillow from her jaundiced, bloated face like sickly sunbeams. They were going to insert a catheter into her heart to deliver antibiotics.

That night they removed Ms. Delatierra's breathing tube, and with the reconquered sovereignty of her vocal cords, she asked the doctors what they were doing in her daughter's apartment. Cybbi chuckled when he read this in the chart. He figured that the antibiotics must have been effective if she was already regaining consciousness. Consequently, he figured, it was time to introduce himself.

He understood his role as a hospital-based physical therapist to be a sort of bridge between the doctors' and the social workers' priorities. He cared less about Ms. Delatierra's bowel regimen and more about her ability to walk to the bathroom. He cared less about how many months she had sober and more about how she would negotiate the flight of stairs to the church basement where her AA meetings were held. Cybbi loved his job because he got to provide the hands-on support patients needed to solve problems other hospital personnel overlooked.

The words *Happy Birthday Mami!* were written in glitter paint on a posterboard taped to the wall by Ms. Delatierra's feet. Surrounding the sparkled letters were three frayed photographs. Cybbi confirmed his patient was sleeping soundly to the hiss of oxygen blowing into either nostril through her nasal cannula before examining the poster. In the first photo stood a younger, less yellow and swollen Ms. Delatierra with the same fringed haircut his mom had in the nineties. Two gap-toothed girls in matching pink nighties and pigtails were squeezed between her and a heavysset man with a Santa hat. Cybbi recognized the same four-membered family in the other photos as well: one where they surrounded a life-sized Mickey Mouse before a whimsical castle, and the other in the front row of a church pew. The sisters were dressed like miniature brides in that one.

He parked a portable oxygen tank and a wheelchair beside her nightstand, noting the wooden rosary beads wrapped around a laminated index card featuring a closeup of Pope Francis.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Delatierra? It's time to wake up?" Cybbi said, annoyed at the way his voice naturally phrased the introduction like a question. When she didn't stir, he rubbed her forearm. Her nurses must have struggled to find a vein because it was bruised with a half dozen puncture marks.

She cracked open sticky eyes. Where he expected to see white was instead the color of dehydrated urine. She mumbled a string of incomprehensible syllables.

“What did you say?” Cybbi asked.

“—told me the chaplain was a woman,” she clarified, her eyes drifting shut again.

“I’m not a chaplain. I’m Cybbi, your physical therapist,” he clarified. She didn’t respond, so he pressed a button on her bedrail to raise the head. She blinked awake.

“Oh, hello sir,” Ms. Delatierra said from this new sitting position as if she just realized he were there.

Cybbi asked if she knew where she was. She turned her attention from the orange *Falls Risk* bracelet on her wrist to the IV pole beside her.

“The hospital, sir. They want to remove the water from my stomach, sir.”

“They did that already,” Cybbi said. “You had a paracentesis this morning, and the doctors drained three liters of fluid.”

She began to fumble with her blanket, lifting up one half of it and then the other. “Where’s my phone? I need to show you something, sir.” She pointed to the nightstand. At her direction he slid open the top drawer to reveal a notepad with the words “Im sorry Diana” sloppily written on the first line. He found a smartphone beneath the notepad.

“I think the battery is dead. Do you have a charger?” he asked.

Ms. Delatierra’s lip quivered as she shook her head.

“I’ll see if the charge nurse has one you can borrow. I’ll bet she does,” he said, trying to sound reassuring.

Ms. Delatierra swallowed hard and then asked him to call her “Ranza” instead of “Ms. Delatierra.” He asked her to call him “Cybbi” instead of “sir.”

When Cybbi asked how she was moving around before coming to the hospital, she said that she was strong enough to carry her newborn grandbaby up a flight of stairs. Then he asked if she was ready to try getting out of bed and she nodded. He pulled a pair of scissors and extra-large purple gripper socks from his pants pocket, and after cutting a slit into the top of each so they wouldn’t dig into her calves, he unfurled them over her ankles. They had the consistency of water balloons.

The scent of stale sweat wafted through his surgical mask as he helped ease her into a sitting position with her feet dangling over the side of the bed. After a minute Ranza could hold herself upright without his assistance, though she panted as if she were in a race. Cybbi pressed a button on the bedside monitor to assess her blood pressure.

“The nurse told me the chaplain is a woman,” she said between breaths. “Can you imagine! Maybe I will go to school to be a chaplain. Maybe it’s not too late for me to do that.”

“Of course it’s not,” Cybbi answered, distracted by her pressure that had dropped twenty points. It wasn’t until after he instructed Ranza to kick each leg ten times that he realized what a boneheaded thing that was to say. What did he know about her prognosis?

“A professional woman of God...” she mumbled to herself as he tightened the Velcro of the abdominal binder around her middle to help stymie any further drop in pressure. “I couldn’t be a Sister because I got married young. I wish I knew I could be a chaplain. Maybe then everything...” her voice trailed off and she pat her tangle of dewy hair.

Cybbi sighed in relief when her monitor showed that her pressure had stabilized. “May I?” he asked, gesturing towards her hair. She nodded, and Cybbi combed it with his fingers. Then he ripped the elastic band off the base of two plastic gloves from above the sink, and used them as hair ties to fasten Ranza’s thick strands into pigtails.

“Thank you, sir,” she said. “Your mother should be proud of you for being a good doctor.”

“I’m a physical therapist, not a doctor,” Cybbi corrected, though Ranza wasn’t listening. Her face brightened as she looked over his shoulder.

“Florita!” she shouted. A young woman stumbled into the hospital room hunched forward beneath a backpack twice as thick as her torso. The bags beneath her eyes were two coasters.

“*Dios*, Mami! You’re sitting up!” she exclaimed. Her backpack hit the linoleum with a solid thud as she ran to embrace her mom.

“This is my chaplain,” Ranza said by way of his introduction. Ranza’s daughter looked to Cybbi’s nametag with a puzzled expression.

“Mami, he’s the physical therapist! You have to walk with him or they won’t put you on the list to get a new liver, okay?”

Cybbi felt his cheeks burn from the acrid truth of her words. He was saved the trouble of a response when she delved into a rapid-fire monologue.

“I’m Esperanza Delatierra’s youngest daughter, Flor Delatierra, and I’m the one who can provide her twenty-four-seven care after her surgery, if you give it to her. The social worker told me that’s important, that she has help around the clock to assist her with the *immunosuppression*—” she said the word deliberately, “—medicines, and to get her to the check-up appointments and all that. I’m sure I can handle it. I have one more year of school left and it’s all online so I can work around my mom’s schedule. I’ve already been taking care of her, sir. She lives with me and I cook and clean for her, make sure she goes to her meetings that she has to go to. She hasn’t missed any, I promise. Even when we had COVID I still made her attend virtually.”

Flor looked desperately at Cybbi, and the way her eyebrows pinched into an upside down V made him feel like one of the demigods whose job it was to judge souls entering the Underworld. The silence extended several heartbeats too long before he managed to speak.

“You are a fabulous daughter.”

Flor sighed so heavily he thought she was going to crumble.

“Florita, please can you plug my phone? I need to show him Ava.”

“Mami, he doesn’t need to see Ava.”

“Please, *mija*. I want to show him.”

“Okay, okay. Let me find a charger,” she said. Flor sunk to her knees and began to fish within her monstrous backpack.

Cybbi plugged Ranza’s nasal cannula into the portable oxygen tank, fastened the tank into the metal holster at the base of the IV pole, then unlatched her heart monitor from the stand above her bed and hooked it onto the pole. At his instruction, Ranza shimmied her buttocks towards the edge of the mattress until the balls of her feet touched the floor. He counted to three loudly, and with one hand supporting Ranza’s waist, she pushed to her feet. Fully upright, her head barely reached Cybbi’s chest.

“I feel floaty,” she said. He instructed her to squeeze and release her hands repeatedly while taking deep breaths. After a minute she announced she was back to Earth. Flor giggled.

He told both of them that his goal was for Ranza to walk to the door. She guffawed.

“Mami, you suffered through two childbirths. I think you can walk ten feet,” Flor said.

Ranza swayed so dramatically from side to side with each step that Cybbi wasn’t certain she was bending her knees at all. He held one hand firmly to her hip to steady her, and the

other pushed her laden IV pole. He asked Flor to follow behind with the wheelchair. A few feet before reaching the doorframe, Ranza paused.

“Please. Sir. No. More,” she gasped as her heart monitor alarmed. He motioned for Flor to convey the wheelchair closer, and his patient plopped into it. Cybbi watched her heart rate begin to decelerate from one hundred sixty beats per minute.

“That wasn’t very good. Does she get a second try?” Flor asked him urgently as he silenced the alarm. Once again Cybbi shook the image of himself standing on the bank of some Underworld river sorting the good souls from the bad.

“We’ll do more tomorrow. That was a lot for today. She’s only been breathing on her own for a few hours.” He tried to project calmness, though Ranza’s unsteadiness on her feet and heart rate had made his low back sweat. He pushed her wheelchair and IV pole to a spot beside her bed, then reattached the monitor to its stand and the nasal cannula to the oxygen source in the wall.

Ranza’s breathing slowed back to normal. “Please show him Ava,” she said.

“Mami...”

“Florita.”

“Okay,” said Flor, lifting her mom’s phone from the nightstand where she had placed it to charge. She typed in a code to unlock it, then turned the screen to face Cybbi.

“My mother wants you to see my niece.”

Because the phone was still tethered to the outlet, Cybbi had to step closer to make out the image. On the home screen was a sleeping baby with plump cheeks and a pink bow atop her head that stretched the length of her whole body.

“She’s just a baby, sir, and I need to get better so I can help take care of her.”

“Mami, you know Ava is not a baby anymore. She’s four years old,” Flor said, and then redirected her gaze to look just over Cybbi’s shoulder. Tears brimmed when she added, “My sister won’t let my mom see her, you know, because of...well, it’s been a very long time, sir, and it’s not been easy for any of us.”

“I’m so sorry,” was all Cybbi could think of to say. Both women looked to him pleadingly and he found that his cheeks were burning again.

“I-I...” he stammered. “Actually, may I please see the picture one more time? That baby looks just like her grandma.” Ranza’s face split into a proud smile and relief washed over Flor’s. She unplugged the phone and handed it to him. It promptly died in his palm.

“Adorable,” he said into the blank screen just as someone knocked on the door. Ranza gasped.

“It’s her!”

A tall woman with cropped hair and a rainbow stole poked her head inside. She scanned each of their faces before asking Cybbi if she was interrupting something. He shook his head and motioned for her to come closer. When he reached over Ranza to return the phone to her daughter, Ranza kissed his cheek.

Blushing, Cybbi excused himself from the room.

“Ms. Chaplain, ma’am, I have to show you my grandbaby. She looks like me!” he heard before closing the door behind him.

Galen Schram is a writer, student of Narrative Medicine and physical therapist from New York City. His stories have been published in *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine*, *Bellevue Literary Review* and *Pulse—Voices from the Heart of Medicine*.

© 2023 *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine*