

Charms of a silver watch

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His face looked sore, and there was a gaping hole in his left cheek that bore down to the upper set of his dentition. The wound ruthlessly tugged at his lower eyelid, causing him to tear with despair. His eyes were the true reflection of his disease, which had spread beyond measure, and an even truer reflection of what the oncologist would say next. Yet he sat there accepting of his new-found identity of being labelled a cancer patient. His demeanor could not be missed; he was the textbook picture of cancer cachexia—skin and bones, and practically nothing else. Cancer was eating him away like a slow boat on its ephemeral last journey.

His eyes glistened when he saw the timepiece on the oncologist's wrist. It shone in a celestine way from the rays of the morning sunlight coming through the window blinds, as though giving him some divine hope. It was a silver watch, Tudor style, big and encompassing, mark of an aristocrat; the glisten took him into another world, only to be brought back into his own by the oncologist's thin and superficial voice. "Umm ... You should get a bone scan and a chest ct. Oh! Wait a minute. How old is the previous one? It was done in June. Ah, yes, you do need to get a new one and a bone marrow biopsy, and you should see the surgeon as soon as possible."

The oncologist looked up from his scribbled notes and fixed his glance onto his watch. "It's eleven," he said in a sly tone, tapping his fingers on the glass table. "I have a meeting. Nurse, make him the appointments." And in a moment he disappeared.

The medical student was taken aback. A moment before, the oncologist had been in another room; he seemed to have changed colors like a chameleon. Of course, the patient in the other room was an educated elite class gentleman, referred by a surgeon colleague, coming from a cleaner part of the city, speaking crisp English, and presenting an overall aura of being more sophisticated than the simple-minded person travelling from a flood-affected city, in a public bus to see the "messiah" oncologist for the disease that had slithered into his body so silently. The oncologist could only care about sitting pretty looking at the dials of his silver watch.

The medical student remained frozen in a trance. He knew that the silver watch was a symbol of status for the oncologist, but to him it was a mark of arrogance or rather sheer ignorance. The oncologist had lost the golden opportunity of being held in sublime and sincere prayer, the kind that genuinely comes from the heart of one who is most grateful to his God for sending a "messiah." The medical student thought that even if he had lost that opportunity, the least he could do was just show some sympathy out of the selfless motivation of what all

doctors stood for—humanity. And yet, he had lost the chance easily, letting it slip by him without realizing that it was more costly than the dreaded silver watch reminding him of how little time he had for the poor.

The medical student jolted out of his reverie when someone called his name. He heard the patient lamenting about how the monsoon had destroyed his herbs, submerged his home, and washed away the dowry that his wife had been collecting for their daughter's wedding. He was broke. How would he pay for all the tests that were ordered, and who would pay the surgeon's fees? They had on them when they embarked from inner city Hyderabad on the bus this sunny morning not more than a couple of thousand rupees.

"Maybe if you request the surgeon, he might see you for free," offered the medical student in a small voice, betraying his own tone.

The nurse took control now. "These are the tests that you must get done. And here ... Show this at the counter and get the surgeon's appointment."

"What about medicine. When will I get medicine for this?" asked the patient, pointing to his oral lesion.

"Look, sir," said the nurse, looking over the rim of her spectacles and choosing her words carefully. "The medicines for this ailment are very strong and are not given just like that till you get these tests done."

Damn it, thought the medical student. Even a fool can tell that he is not asking for chemotherapy at the moment, but painkillers; it was the damn duty of the oncologist to understand his pain foremost and provide him with strong painkillers.... Oh, but the glistening watch had made the patient forget his pain and hope for a cure ... and it had made the oncologist fail to realize that there was any pain at all. The patient would already be six feet under before any tests would be available for evaluation.

Suddenly, the patient stood up. There was no glistening in his eyes, and the rays of sunlight that had so distinctively shone till a few moments ago were now dispersing. In a moment the patient was gone. The medical student, now alone, moved toward the source of the sunlight: the windowpane covered with blinds. He slipped his hand between two slats, pressing the lower one down, trying to make the air of misery vanish from the room. He saw a few birds chirping softly on the windowsill as though ready to turn the gloom into happiness and sunshine. He searched the blue sky for a cloud with a silver lining promising better things ahead. He saw it ... a Boeing in its ascent across the sky taking almost miraculous flight. He looked across to the next building ... as though to remind himself that with every end there

was a new beginning. There ... There from the distance, he saw a sweeper flounce his wiper in rhythmic motions, left and right, left and right. He then looked down at the long stretch of red-bricked road. His untrained eyes saw the oncologist walking, the charms of his silver watch glistening in the morning sunshine.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

I have read and understood *Current Oncology*'s policy on disclosing conflicts of interest, and I declare the I have none.

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