

For the Love of My Mother

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In life, above all, my mother prized modesty and dignity. That was why she gave readily to the poor. “Those are the first things you lose when you are helpless,” I remember her saying.

In death, however, she lay in a hospital, in Renton, USA, thousands of miles away from her comfortable New Delhi home, naked as an urchin from one of her hometown’s slums, stripped of the two things she had treasured most when she was alive.

That image has haunted me for the better part of the last two years. I have attempted to break free from it, lose it somewhere in the rough and tumble of everyday life. Yet it has stayed with me, like a determined pursuer, to disturb my sleep, with the unrelenting persistence of an interrogator.

My story begins in May 1998, when my brother, Vijay, went to India to bring my parents to the US. My mother had been suffering from nausea and coughing spasms. In addition, she was losing weight. Both, my mother and my father, felt that moving to Seattle would help her,

as it would take her away from the heat and pollution of New Delhi which were affecting her health adversely.

I was looking forward to seeing my parents very much. It was three years since they had been to America. During that time Vijay and I had made trips to India. However, it was a long time since the four of us had lived as a family under one roof and I was looking forward to this. True, my

mother was ill, but, surely, once she was away from the awful heat and pollution of New Delhi, she’d recover in no time.

When I saw her at Seattle Airport two weeks later, I got the shock of my life. I remembered my mother as an energetic woman, brimming with vitality. The shrunken, woefully thin woman, seated in front of me in a wheelchair, looked anything but vital.

I turned to Vijay, who patted me on the shoulder and said, “Don’t worry, she’ll get better.”

Unfortunately, she did not get better. She kept up a brave front and was genuinely happy to be with her entire family. Her health, however, steadily declined. About four weeks after her arrival on July 13, she had an especially trying day, and lost consciousness close to midnight.

We called 911 and asked for paramedics. By the time they arrived, her heart had stopped. They laid her down on the living-room floor and attempted to revive her. Around 1:10 a.m. her heartbeat returned. The paramedics decided to move her to the Valley Medical Center. We asked if one of us could ride with her in the ambulance, as is the norm in India. The request was denied. So we followed in a car.

It was a ten-minute



With her husband and two sons, Vikram (left), Vijay (right)

drive from our apartment in Renton to the Valley Medical Center. On the way all three of us were hopeful. Surely, the fact that she had recovered her heartbeat was a good omen. We reached the hospital with hope in our hearts, only to be informed that she had passed away.

The doctor on duty said she was dead by the time the ambulance reached the hospital. Evidently, she had died on the way over. All attempts to revive her had failed. In the end her heart, the one part of her that had kept going, even when the rest of her was wasting away, simply packed up.

We were too stunned to speak. For a while, we sat in the waiting room unable to comprehend that it was all over. Finally, my father asked to see her.

She lay on her back, still wearing her white petticoat and green nightgown. Her eyes were open, fixed on the ceiling in a blank, unblinking stare. Her mouth was open as well, the tongue poised just above the lower teeth, as if she were about to speak.

We were with her for about thirty minutes. All I can remember about that time and, for that matter, much of the rest of that night, is walking about in a disbelieving daze. My father broke down, as he closed her eyes for the final time. My brother wept uncontrollably. My mind, however, was numb to the point of no feeling. My tears came later. The next morning, without warning, they poured out in a flood.



In her younger days

It was almost four in the morning when we got home from the hospital. In England, where my cousins live, it would be close to midday. In India it was early evening. Vijay picked up the phone and began the painful task of calling relatives. It was a couple of hours before he was done.

We busied ourselves making arrangements for the funeral, and by the end of the day, we had identified a funeral home. Before my mother could be moved there, however, we learned that no Valley Medical doctor was willing to sign her death certificate. Without the death certificate, there couldn't be a funeral. So my brother spent most of the morning of July 15 locating a doctor who would sign the certificate. Finally, a sympathetic Indian-American doctor, who had been consulted during my mother's treatment, came forward. Finally, she

was moved to the funeral home on the afternoon of July 15.

According to Hindu custom, the female members of the family dress the deceased woman for cremation. My mother was the only female in our immediate family, and the extended family was spread all over the world. So the task fell upon my father, and Vijay, as the eldest son. The funeral home agreed to let them bathe and dress her, after initially refusing to let us see her prior to the funeral on the grounds of insurance liability. When we asked about the clothes she was wearing when she died, we were told there weren't any. She was naked when she was moved from the hospital.

This news came as a shock. Preserving the modesty and dignity of the deceased are integral tenets of the Hindu faith, as well as Indian culture. More importantly, they were values my mother prized uppermost. It was impossible for her to be at peace now that they had been violated.

In the light of this development, we wondered whether we should go ahead with the funeral. Ultimately we decided that while we would have the cremation, we would not take her remains to India to be immersed in the holy waters of the Ganges until the matter was resolved to our satisfaction.

Therefore soon after the funeral on July 17, Vijay took up the case with Valley Medical. On August 3, he wrote to the concerned administrator, asking for an investigation into the

disappearance of the clothing. He further asked for the clothing to be returned to us as soon as possible. Three weeks later, on August 25, the hospital's patient representative wrote back to say her initial investigation had yielded no results. The nurse in charge on the night in question did not recollect seeing any clothing, while the nurse who had actually cared for my mother was an agency nurse whom the hospital had been unable to contact, despite their best efforts.

My brother wrote back on September 4, reiterating our desire to recover the clothing. On September 16, we received a letter from the hospital, in which it was stated they had finally been able to contact the agency nurse. The clothing, the letter claimed, was "cut completely from bottom to top by ER staff to expedite CPR efforts". Furthermore, according to them, it had traces of vomit on it. With the result, when my mother was ready to be transported to the morgue, the hospital staff had decided to dispose off her clothes in the garbage. They claimed they did not ask us before doing so because we had already left. Now there was no way to return her clothes because they had been incinerated.

The contents of the letter shocked us. All three of us had seen what my mother was wearing after she died, and the clothes were intact and unblemished, not ripped and dirty as the letter suggested. Furthermore, we had remained at the hospital for a good while after she died, first with her in prayer and remembrance, then completing the documentation required by the hospital. The staff had plenty of opportunity to ask about her clothing. And even if we were gone by the time they got ready to transport her to the morgue, we had left our address and telephone number with them.

Over the next two months, we attempted to articulate our point of view in both letters and meetings with hospital personnel. Their general

attitude was insensitive and patronising. For them it was simply a case of some clothes getting lost, rather than a violation of the modesty and dignity of the deceased. Time and time again, we were told that no effort had been spared to save my mother and that the law had been followed to the letter. We were confused and frustrated. We hadn't questioned the quality of the pre-demise care or even hinted at the breaking of laws.

Matters finally came to a head when, in a letter to Vijay dated November 20, a hospital administrator wrote off the hospital charges, as a "gesture of good will" to us, yet said that, while my mother was treated with "great care and respect" by the hospital staff, it was "most unfortunate that we (the hospital) were not made aware of you and your family's specific preferences at the time." The man was clearly insinuating that our negligence was to blame for the fact the hospital staff had violated my mother's modesty and dignity, and unilaterally disposed off her personal effects. My father wrote back, stating that this was not the case, and the hospital staff had violated all ethics of acceptable behaviour when they had chosen to dispose off her personal effects without informing or consulting with the family. He further went on to say that if the hospital were to continue in this vein, we would have to consider legal action. At this point, the hospital administration finally climbed down from their high horse. They issued an unequivocal apology and agreed to commit themselves to making sure that such a thing never happened again. They even invited us to help them in the process.

Over the next few months, Valley Medical implemented several changes in procedure. A question about "religious or cultural practices which might affect hospitalization" was included in the admission history. The patient care services postmortem procedures were revamped to read,

"there may be cultural, religious or personal needs of the family...related to death," and a check box was added to the postmortem/anatomical donation record to indicate that cultural/spiritual/personal needs had been addressed. And last, but not least, area funeral homes were notified that all deceased individuals from Valley Medical would now be clothed in a paper gown.

On March 14, 1999, we held a prayer service in honour of my mother at the hospital chapel. In the summer of the same year, Vijay and my father took her remains to India. On September 18, 1999 they were finally immersed in the holy Ganges.

At long last, she was at rest.

Epilogue

When you come to live in another country, you expect cultural problems. There is much you do not expect to comprehend and, in turn, much about yourself that is not understood. Doing right by the deceased, however, is neither merely Indian or Hindu; it is universal. It should not require an intervention from the family of the deceased. It is something that should come naturally.

It is within this context that our experience must be viewed. It would be easy to criticise Valley Medical. But this hospital, however, is only one manifestation of a malaise that afflicts the whole of society. Society reserves its most callous treatment for its most helpless members. And no one is more helpless than the deceased. They have no voice with which to articulate their concerns or make sure their dignity is protected. They are wholly dependent upon others to do right by them. This is an elemental fact that we all need to understand and appreciate. For if we do right by the deceased, whom do we help most if not the living? □

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