FROM THE INSIDE

Fly me to the moon

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*Fly me to the moon/Let me play among the stars
Let me see what spring is like/On Jupiter and Mars [1]*

“I bet you didn’t know that my mom was the world’s biggest Sinatra fan”, she wagered.

To be honest, I did not. I hadn’t really known her mother much at all. My first day on service was her first day back in the intensive care unit (ICU) after a brief interlude on the floor. She had been in the ICU the previous week, minimally responsive. She wouldn’t talk, eat, respond, or really do much of anything for that matter. *Failure to thrive*. After several days of observation and countless tests, she was deemed to be stable for transfer out of the ICU.

Her stay on the floor was brief. I met her early in the morning, a BiPAP mask cinched tightly to her face, pulse oximetry dropping like a stone as she aspirated, unresponsive. One look was enough to tell me that she needed to be intubated; her bronchoscopy revealed fluid the color of Coca-Cola. Secretions and blood had been dripping down to her lungs, filling them throughout the night and sealing her fate.

*In other words, hold my hand
In other words, baby, kiss me*

I called her daughter immediately after the procedures, as she progressed into three pressor shocks. “Your mother is dying. I’m so sorry. Can you come to the hospital?”

“My brother is sick. He can’t stay in the hospital long. Do you think we can be with her at the end? Will it be quick?” I normally don’t like to prognosticate. It feels like

the wrong thing to do, to promise someone that their loved one will die quickly and painlessly, only to have them hang on unexpectedly long while family members glance at their watches. In her case, I was sure. “Yes”, I responded, “come on in.”

*Fill my heart with song/Let me sing forever more
You are all I long for/All I worship and adore*

They entered the room, hesitant, clad in facemasks, gowns, gloves, homemade eye shields.

“You can touch her”, I reassured, “Talk to her.”

They moved towards the bedside, pulling up chairs, a path blazed through the forest of medical equipment that filled the room.

“I bet you didn’t know that my mom was the world’s biggest Sinatra fan”, she told me.

“Well, let’s put some music on, then”, I responded.

Despite my quick invitation, a part of me hesitated. *Would this make it harder, I questioned myself, to witness her coming death?* In the ICU, death is an ever-present companion, but I had to admit, a bit of depersonalization at the end of life made its constant company easier to bear. *This is not about you*, I reminded myself, *this is about the patient and her family*.

And so, unaware of my internal conflict, she pulled out her iPhone, cued to YouTube. Frank Sinatra’s voice crooned out from the speaker, filling the room and taking the place of the now-silenced monitor alarms.

*In other words, please be true
In other words, I love you.*

The brass band played their interlude, serenading us as we turned off the vasopressors, and I steeled myself for the inevitable. Early in my training I had decided that it was easier to not know—to not know that she loved

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Sinatra, that she had a daughter, that she had a sick son, that she had a life outside of the hospital—to witness death, time and time again, perhaps it was easier to not know the details.

*Fill my heart with song/Let me sing forever more
You are all I long for/All I worship and adore*

But now, standing witness as they kissed her cheeks, tears streaming down their faces as the color drained from hers, I couldn't imagine it any other way. Death was as much a part of this job as it was a part of life. I could no more banish death than I could stop the setting of the sun, but faced with its inevitability, we could at least pull up a few chairs and appreciate the sunset.

While I was sure she had never thought her life would end like this, in a way, it was what she would have wanted: to be surrounded by her family, love, and her favorite music. Yes, there was death, but it was a good death, and it was a death on her terms. It was exactly what her family needed. It was exactly what I needed.

*In other words, please be true
In other words, in other words...*

Then, clasping her hands, they sang the final words to the song in unison, a perfect coda:

I Love... You.

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Declarations

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Received: 27 July 2021 Accepted: 21 September 2021

Published online: 29 September 2021

Reference

1. Bart Howard (1964) "Fly Me to the Moon." Performed by Frank Sinatra and Count Basie. *It Might As Well Be Swing*. Reprise Records