



# Waiting in Atta

Hashim Kareemi<sup>1</sup>

Received: 7 January 2023 / Accepted: 2 May 2023 / Published online: 16 June 2023

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians (CAEP)/ Association Canadienne de Médecine d'Urgence (ACMU) 2023

A fresh layer of frost crunched as we walked the snowy path to the small airport at the far end of town. There remained a reddish hue on the horizon under the stoic steel blue, as one sees with the sun's rise in the cold northern springtime. It was breakup season so we'd need to take a helicopter over the Moose River to land back on the island after we returned to Moosonee. But for now, we had to await the propeller plane to fly us out of Attawapiskat, and I was growing impatient.

We tucked in close to each other on the only open bench in the sparse terminal, trying to make small talk with the curious locals and never quite succeeding. "Go for a walk?" she asked me and I obliged, leaving my pack with the attendant behind the single desk.

We re-emerged into the cold morning and walked down the road through rows of patchy bungalows. "I don't even know where we're walking," she laughed hesitantly. I nodded and followed quietly, trying not to startle the welcome calm surrounding us. Only a few hours earlier had it suddenly fled, when I had been in bed in the groggy bliss between a restful sleep and a snoozed alarm when her frantic rapping on the door had jolted me up in bed when she yelled a little too loud, "Kid. VSA. Now." The doctor's suite was adjacent to the main hospital door and I could already hear the din of rushing footsteps and car doors slamming as I threw on jeans and whatever shirt lay on the chair in my room. By the time I was at the door, she was already gone. Being the only doctor in town, it would be her, had to be her, to conduct, in vain, the resuscitation of an eight-month-old girl with absent vital signs.

I looked at her now as we wandered determinedly through town. She always seemed to move with purpose, a notion and deliberation behind each look or word; she was fiercely independent. Days later, she would tell me she wished she

could leave everything and become a wilderness expedition guide. She was to me already, showing me the land and the ice, calling the bluffs veiling my unease on the frozen shield.

But she walked differently now, a stop to contemplate a building and where we were in town, anxious glances at her watch to ensure we did not miss our flight. Maybe she just wanted to escape. Maybe she was uneasy around me because I had seen her cry.

It had been at the end, not of the life but of our attempts to save it. Somehow the chaos of four nurses and three medics in an undersupplied trauma bay was not enough to shake from me the instilled student lesson of "Do as You're Told", so after drilling a second intraosseous line into a second cold shin, I proceeded with chest compressions. It was difficult to focus on the breath count over the grandmother wailing by my left knee, desperately clutching a mottled hand.

"We have to stop," I had heard her voice crack from the head of the bed. "It's been forty minutes, we've done everything we can." If she had not been speaking to the grandmother, I swear she was convincing herself. I nearly shouted in agreement but no one had told me to, so I continued my grim work, kneading a sickly dough of flesh and bone. I looked up in surprise to see tears in her eyes, wondering how they had not yet fallen or when mine had.

We walked past a church, past the white Mother Mary's statue, the devastating irony of her silhouette against the half-frozen river that the dead child's mother had to be pulled away from throwing herself into. Mary stared at us softly, arms outstretched, offering an embrace. She stared back at her for a while.

It was all a bit much for me. I walked back towards the airport alone, impatient for the plane to depart.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** I have no conflicts of interest to declare.

✉ Hashim Kareemi  
hashimkareemi.md@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Department of Emergency Medicine, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada