

The Visit: A Short Story

"No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted"

... Aesop, The Lion and the Mouse ****

It was a Tuesday morning. I had finished my breakfast and was getting ready to leave for the Hospital. Just as I got into the car, I got a phone call from Dr Shilpa, the house physician in the Department of Oncology, informing me about a reference on the ninth floor regarding a young girl, Kusum Sharma, who had abdominal pain.

I entered the gates of the Hospital, parked my car and headed straight to the ninth floor. I knocked at the door and entered her room on the Northside. I introduced myself and greeted everyone who was present. I saw Sarla, Kusum's mother, braiding Kusum's hair.

"Late jao Kusum. Doctor Saab aye hain. Unhe der hogi,", said Sarla.

"No, no, no! Koi baat nahi, mujhe bilkul jaldi nahi! Aramse hone do," I told her.

I waited for a few minutes, gazing into nowhere towards the Sea link, and after they both were done; I gave my best smile to Kusum and said: "Hello Kusum!"

Kusum Sharma was a pretty and petite twelve-year-old from a middle-class family, the only child of her parents. The family hailed from the industrial town of Kanpur. Her father Vishwanath Sharma was a teacher in a primary school and her mother, Sarla, was a homemaker.

Kusum was a bright girl, doing well in her academics and the family was very content and happy.

Their quiet, smooth sailing life had, however, been abruptly shaken up. The child had been diagnosed with Lymphoma. Let me tell you one thing. The “C” word, the moment it is announced, is quite terrifying and frightful for the patient and the family. The world around the Sharmas seemed to have been devastated, shattered and collapsed. Vishwanath and Sarla, for the sake of their beloved child, had to summon their courage, their fortitude and needed to be ready to face the daunting reality of their daughter’s health with tenacity and determination.

They had heard about the reputation of our hospital as a Center of Excellence in Medical Oncology. The parents had, after a lot of research, chosen the Raheja Hospital for Kusum’s chemotherapy.

During her admission and after two cycles of ‘Chemo’, Kusum complained of some abdominal pain. I was therefore called in to see her as a surgical referral.

Before I begin with the history taking, which is then followed by clinical examination, I always make it a point to generally talk to the patient and the family– the life that they lead, the town that they stay in; it is small talk, like a little prelude or a preamble before getting down to professional business. It goes a long way to allay the fears, the apprehensions, and the anxieties, and helps in calming down the jangled nerves. Besides that, it also serves to break down the barriers in communications with the concerned doctor, and especially when the family faces an unknown doctor for the first time. After this kind of interaction and reassurance, a comforting rapport is therefore swiftly established.

I examined her; there was really nothing surgical about her and what the anxious family needed was a kind talk, some soothing words of encouragement and cheer. I suggested some

baseline tests after which I got talking to Kusum and her family.

Well, I came to understand that she was in 8th grade in Kanpur, and was a fairly good student.

"Kusum, padhaike alawa aur kya karti ho?" I asked.

"Mai gana seekh rahi hoon Sir"

"Bollywood?"

"Nahi doctor Saab, classical seekh rahi hai," interjected her mother.

That sounded very, very interesting. My eyes lit up. It is rare to find young boys and girls taking lessons in Classical music these days. And, I find that very delightful. As the conversation went on, I enquired about her Guruji and ragas she was learning. She told me that she had passed the first examination in music. She would attend music classes twice a week and she just loved what she was learning.

I smiled at her and asked, *"Kya kya seekh rahi ho? Bhoop, Bageshri, Bhimpalas? Kuch sunaogi phir? Kya sunaogi?"*

She smiled and glanced at her mother.

"Gao beti, aapne jo Bhimpalas seekha hai, useeko sunao."

She sang a popular piece in Bhimpalas *"Jaa jaa re apne mandirwa"*. How beautiful was her singing and with such devotion?! It wowed me! The confidence and poise with which she sang were very impressive. She carried herself with humility and a respectful demeanour of a small-town girl.

"Jaa Jaa re apne mandirwa" is a melody which has been popularized by that erudite and the learned Dr Ashwini Bhide-Deshpande.

Next day, I called Ashwini. I narrated the girl's story to her

and politely enquired with her if she would care to meet this girl and her parents.

"The little girl will be ecstatic by your gesture. Truly", I told her.

Without hesitating even for a moment, Ashwini agreed.

"Will I be able to bear to look at her?" she asked. She was perhaps imagining a delicate girl, post-chemotherapy, hair loss and all that, and with a look of a sick child. I assured her that Kusum was quite in good spirits and Ashwini's presence would go a long way to elevate them.

"When will it be possible for you to visit?", I asked Ashwini.

"Tomorrow at ten, is it possible?" she replied.

It was then decided that Ashwini would come to the hospital lobby at ten in the morning and call me from there.

The following day, Ashwini was at the hospital at ten sharp and she called me. I went down to the lobby, we exchanged pleasantries and we took the elevator to the ninth floor. After a little tap on the door, we walked into Kusum's room.

Ashwini smiled warmly. The family stood stunned, overwhelmed and dazed. I had not informed them about the visit by Ashwini. They couldn't believe what they were seeing and what they were experiencing. To the Sharmas it seemed like a dream as if it was one of the finest occasions in their lives. Tears of gratitude started rolling down their cheeks.

Ashwini asked my permission to hold Kusum. She took her in an embrace and softly spoke some encouraging words to her. She spent a few moments with the family and made gentle enquiries about them. Throughout this interaction, Vishwanath and Sarla stood with their palms locked, stupefied and in a trance. After blessing the girl, and a polite *Namaste* to her parents,

Ashwini prepared to leave. And before she left, she presented two of her autographed music CDs to the girl. It was a moving and a poignant moment for all those present in the room.

That is the story of **“The visit”** by Dr Ashwini Bhide Deshpande, humane, compassionate, and magnanimous!!

I met Kusum’s parents about six months ago. Kusum is now studying in the second year of MBBS in Government Medical College, Kanpur.

Personally speaking, it was very heartwarming and gratifying for me to be a part in connecting a stalwart, Dr Ashwini Bhide Deshpande of the Jaipur Atrauli Gharana and little Kusum, and bringing a few moments of joy and bliss in the lives the Sharma family.

“Sometimes it takes only one act of kindness and caring to change a person’s life”... Jackie Chan

Dr Ashwini Bhide Deshpande

Bhide-Deshpande holds a Masters degree in Microbiology and earned her doctorate in Biochemistry from Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, a Sangeet Visharad from the Akhil Bharatiya Gandharva Mahavidyalaya Mandal and a Masters degree in music.

“Ashwini Bhide is not only a music scholar but is also blessed with a beautiful voice. I have personally known Ashwini since her early teens and it makes me so happy to see her blossom into such a wonderful Khayal singer. She has earned the reputation of being one of the top young artists of India... Having learnt many old compositions, she has been able to retain the spirit of the tradition through the dialects she has used as well as pay attention to the subject matter!”

--Pt Ravishankar

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