

### A Mirror in Holland

**By Preeti Raghwani, University of Notre Dame, Fremantle, WA**

It was the final consult on a Friday afternoon towards the end of a long eight-week paediatric rotation. I was tired... emotionally, cognitively, physically. But I showed up as best I could. Because I am a mother. Because I am a mother who lost her child. And in some small way, I know what it means to sit across from uncertainty and try to keep breathing anyway. So, I was there...tired, yes... but present, in the best way I knew how.

A mother walked into the consult room holding the hand of her six-year-old daughter, we will call her Zara\*. She was bubbly, bright blue-eyed, full of energy for the end of a long school week. Her mother, on the other hand, wore the unmistakeable look of worry, a kind I wasn't unfamiliar with. Her posture, her guarded glances, her silence at first... I could feel her unease before she even spoke. Thankfully, I was paired that day with a consultant who was remarkably gentle, an intuitive and empathetic paediatrician whose demeanour suggested he had daughters of his own.

He began the conversation carefully, meeting both Zara and her mother where they were. He explained that Zara's genetic testing had returned no pathogenic variant. In some ways, this was meant to be reassuring news. But a parent searching for clarity, grasping for an anchor in the face of their child's struggles... it was not. The mother's voice quivered. Her body stiffened. I felt her defences palpably rise. And in that moment, something inside me cracked open.

She reminded me of myself.

It had not been long since I was sitting in a similar room, hearing similar words. "We don't have answers for you yet." I had once clutched onto my daughter Ziya's hope the same way Zara's mother clutched at possibility... desperate, afraid, already grieving a dream that was

\*Zara is a pseudonym – All names have been de-identified

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dissolving quietly in the background. Ziya's condition would later be diagnosed as a rare, life-limiting disease. Her story is why I found myself in the wilderness that is medicine. Her life... the impossible beauty and the heartbreak of it, it is what brought me to this privileged path. And in that moment, watching Zara's mother, I found myself momentarily back in my old skin seven years ago. A ghost from the past, now silently sitting in the corner of a new room within me.

The paediatrician continued with patience and grace. He spent nearly an hour gently introducing the possibility that Zara may fall somewhere on the autism spectrum... perhaps in the moderate range. He avoided labels carefully. He offered support. But I could tell Zara's mother was caught in that place between hearing and believing. She was breaking, quietly, as her internal compass lost its bearings. She had prepared her whole life for Italy, and suddenly she was in Holland. She didn't know the metaphor yet... but I did.

As she grieved silently in the chair, I silently grieved with her. I wanted so desperately to say: "I know this place. I have been there. You are not alone." I wanted to tell her about Ziya. But I also knew that this was not my story to insert myself into. This was her moment. Her grief. Her Holland. Their story.

So, I wrestled. How could I offer something meaningful without overshadowing her pain with my own?

I turned to the paediatrician and gently asked if I might say something. He nodded. And so, I said: "Have you ever read Welcome to Holland?" I asked. "It is a short poem by a woman named Emily Perl Kingsley\*\*". You can find it online. It might offer a different way to see what you are walking through now."

That was all.

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The consult wrapped up not long after. I thanked the paediatrician for allowing me to speak, and he curiously asked me about the poem. I showed him where to find it and he smiled. As I walked to the lift, I was swimming in emotions... gratitude, humility and the ache of uncertainty. I was quietly proud, that my Ziya had helped someone through me. The true unsung hero of my life had found a way, yet again, to reach through me.

But I also questioned myself: Was it too much? Was it enough? Had I overstepped? Where, I wondered, is the line between the mother and the doctor in me? Between shared humanity and professional distance? We are in the business of helping people, so how do we do that without projecting our own pain, or burdening theirs with ours?

Lost in thought, I did not notice Zara and her mother catch up to me at the lift. Zara was quietly standing beside her, blissfully unaware of the deeper weight that moment carried. Her mother looked at me, eyes glistening, and said: "I read it. Welcome to Holland. I still need to grieve... but it helped." In that instant, my silent tears met a quiet knowing. Ziya had guided me again... to be right where I was meant to be, in that exact moment.

To bear witness to someone else's pain without overshadowing it is a delicate skill, one I am only just beginning to learn and am eons away from mastering if ever. My first instinct as a doctor in eighteen months' time will always be to connect, to comfort, to show the way. But something I need to always remember is that perhaps the role of a healer is not always to fix or explain. Sometimes it is to just be there...present. To offer that soft landing. To leave behind a tiny seed.

This encounter shifted something deep within me, not just as Ziya's mother, but as a future doctor. I will need to create many rooms in the house of my mind, some open, welcoming,

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reflective. Others sealed for safety, where my own traumas and treasures reside. Over time, I will learn when to open those doors... and when to leave them closed. Over time, perhaps I will be able to create a room for every kind of situation and learn to move between them with the precision that each situation requires.

There will inevitably be days when I stumble. When grief leaks through. When I help patients and, in turn, help myself. I hope to be an observer, an advocate, a mirror, a healer. I will never fully separate the woman who once sat in the parent's chair across from the clinician all those years ago fighting for her child's life. And maybe I should not. Because in the end, it is a privilege to be invited into people's stories. To hold their questions, their fears, their hopes... even just for a moment. And if, every now and then, I can offer a perspective, a presence, a poem... then maybe that is enough.

That day, I arrived tired... but present. And in being present, I was changed. Not by what I said, but by what I saw... a mother's first step into Holland, and the quiet way we find one another there like a mirror in Holland. I am grateful for the reminder that even a whisper of compassion can echo far beyond the room it was spoken in.

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