

## The Boxer

By Aniq Azim

I don't tell my husband, but at night I think about Tom.

When I met Tom, he was already bed-bound and translucent.  
His skin was placed on bone like loosely laid gift wrap.  
His eyes were transfixed upon a spot on the ceiling, half closed, like he was asleep.

At first, we were waiting for a liver transplant.

For three days, I pumped laxatives into him and waited for him to tell me all the stories his son had already shared:

About Tom, the boxer, from a line of boxers. Tom, the fighter, undefeated, roaming around the world, showing off his courage. Tom, the father, distant, tough, but always proud of his boy.

We just need to get him to poop out all the toxins from his blood, I explained to his son, with confidence.

After three days, I sent Tom to the ICU for dialysis, to help him circulate the toxins out of his blood.

It's where he needs to be, I asserted, while I briskly paged the ICU fellow downstairs, begging them to accept him.

My last page was just: *he looks so bad.*

On the fourth day, the ICU sent Tom back up to me to die.

The intensivist tried not to be unkind: "Look at him, how could anyone think of trying to do a transplant on this guy, when he might not even make it through the night?"

Tom's wife had told me he had been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis the year before, and at first, he didn't think much of the pain and swelling in his joints.

But it turns out the swelling was just a clue that Tom's body was launching an attack on itself.

The last front: the liver.

The victim: Tom.

On the fifth day, I told Tom's son that he was dying. By now he knew the drill. "From toxins in his blood?"

Yes, I affirmed.

The mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell.

The liver helps clear toxins in the blood.  
When the liver fails, the kidneys can fail.  
The phrases we use to explain that bodies and people are as fragile as paper, as delicate as gift wrap.

Tom's wife didn't come to the hospital that night.  
"He had so much machismo," she said. "He wouldn't want me to see him like this."

Sometimes I wish I didn't have to see him like that either.  
Or maybe that I didn't see him like the full-faced man he was in the picture by his night table.  
Young, strong, a boxer without rheumatoid arthritis or a scarred, malfunctioning liver, or toxins in his blood.  
Some contrasts are so stark you cannot make sense of one thing in the face of the other.

When I heard Tom had died, I understood it to be a natural progression of his disease.  
I walked down the hall, sighed, thought, "That was a sad outcome."  
I walked into the team room with a cup of burned coffee and a determination to get through the day.  
I made fun of a coworker, I browsed around on my phone, aimlessly scrolling.  
But- the night before Tom died was the last time I slept in a month. Now I am awake. I am always awake.  
These are hidden battles- for sleep, for health, for a liver, fought in private, fought alone.

When I run, I run miles away from the hospital, but I also run to get away from the hospital.  
When I cry, I think of Tom and Janice and Hector and all the others, losing and dying, but also free.

Some days, it feels like I am fighting to live.  
I hope Tom is in another place, fighting for joy.

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