

What a Wonderful World

By Stefanie Stockhamer

I approach your room. It's the first bed in Room 9. You're my last stop before an overdue coffee break and patient rounds. I introduce myself, and a weak grin spreads across your face.

You can't speak with words. Your last stroke got the best of them. Still, you speak to me. With your eyes. With your hands. With gestures and intonations. Completely aware of everything around you and yet so frustrated that the words just won't come out. Global aphasia robbed you of your ability to speak words, and yet the light in your eyes speaks a thousand languages. We communicate as best we can, and with help from your wife to fill in the gaps. You're weak and thin but still, your sunken eyes are overshadowed by your smile.

As our conversation goes on, the formulated talk of symptoms, current medications and medical history dwindles. We start to chat about life. I ask you if you like music. You nod in enthusiastic agreement. I say: "there's a group of medical students that volunteer playing music for patients in the ward after hours. Would you like us to come back later?" You grin and give a thumbs up, and your wife tells me that that would be wonderful. I say goodbye and leave with a warm sensation in my chest.

The next day, the biopsy comes back and it's graver than we could have imagined for a 60-year-old: pancreatic adenocarcinoma. During rounds, your wife weeps. I try my hardest to hold back tears. As a third-year medical student, I knew the prognosis for such a malignancy. But you? You're quiet. I can see in your eyes you're worried, but too weak to show it.

I can't seem to shake off the news for the rest of the day. You're so young. You have so much life left. How is this fair?

My classmates, Rachel and Shira, often volunteer with me. I tell them about you and ask if they have a few minutes to spare to play something to cheer you up.

That evening, we arrive at the ward and do what we do best. We sing.

Some patients smile and sing along. Other patients don't show much interest and interrupt to get a nurse instead. I wasn't sure how you'd react.

We start with *What a Wonderful World*, a song written by Bob Thiele and George David Weiss and made famous by jazz legend Louis Armstrong. Rachel strums the guitar melodically, our quiet harmonies just loud enough so as to not disturb others. At that moment, something changed. You were no longer sick. You were a young, curious child who just tasted cookie dough ice cream for the first time.

Up until this point, I'd only ever seen you lying in your bed. Now, you sit straight up, cross your legs, and lean into the guitar. Feeling its vibrations as the melodic tune flows into your ears. You look into my eyes as I begin the second verse, and tears start streaming down your face. Mine too. At the end, you give us a round of applause. Your claps meant so much more than words could have offered.

The days go on. I keep singing. You keep smiling. Your wife tells me about the trips you used to go on together when you were young. I close my eyes and imagine you parasailing on the Red Sea in Sinai. It makes me smile. Some days are harder than others. You're too weak to open your eyes, but I still sing.

I'm not there when you pass. Quickly, your bed becomes occupied by someone else. It's funny how things are in medicine. No time to grieve because the next patient needs us. I wipe my tears, take a deep breath and continue on.

In the months since you left, I still sing for patients every week, hoping to provide some form of comfort and healing in their most vulnerable times. In their smiles, I see you.

And I think to myself. *What a wonderful world.*

Stefanie Stockhamer is a fourth-year medical student at Ben Gurion University of the Negev Medical School for International Health in Beer Sheva, Israel. Originally from Toronto, Canada, she grew up singing in choirs and musical theater productions. She continues to foster her passion for music through her volunteer work with the music therapy program at Soroka Medical Center. She is a firm believer that music is medicine and has the power to heal beyond a physical sense. She looks forward to continuing to provide holistic care for her parents as a family physician.

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