

PRINCESS OF THE NIGHT

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I'd like to see princess of the night.”

New-onset confusion, probably a UTI. I glanced at the man sitting next to me, scrunched up in his wheelchair. He was fresh from the shower this morning, wrapped in towels and two gowns. His hands folded neatly on his lap. They were not pulling on his catheter.

“Maybe later, Norm.” I smiled at him, switching his GCS assessment from a 15 down to a 14. Hopefully they'll start him on some macrobid. “I'll get you some pain meds and we can do your dressing in a bit.”

He asked to see princess of the night again when I walked in to change his vac dressing. Another task on my to-do list for the day. Beth pulled out her third IV of the day, Steve started on a heparin drip, at least Ron is sleeping now — he was trying to throw a bedpan at me two hours ago.

Please don't be aggressively confused, just be sweetly confused. I thought to myself as I peeled Norm's dressing back. At least I'll have 30 minutes of peace and quiet while I do this, away from all the chaos outside.

"Have you ever seen one?" He turned his head as I was cleansing the wound.

"The princess? I would say, The Little Mermaid is my favourite, what about you?" I opened another bottle of saline. This wound is getting deeper, might need to get plastics to look at it.

He chuckled, hands on the bedrail: "No, not the princess. Princess of the night, the flower."
Right, he was a botanist. I moved my dressing tray closer.

Slowly it was coming back to me, I was the one who did his admission and asked about his life. He told me about his career, his wife who passed from cancer, and his daughter who moved to Asia. Was it Korea? Or China?

But I had seen so many of them, engineers, chemists, plumbers, teachers, freelance artists, married, single, divorced, cheating on their partner, five kids, no kids, deceased kids...they began to merge together into one. Their lives weigh on me as one, and fade as one. My Tuesday became the worst day of their lives, and they drew their last breath as I was standing in the grocery store, picking between two tomatoes. There was too much to do, always too much to do.

I was burning out as a nurse, and everyone could see it but me.

"...it blooms during the night, and wilts before dawn."

"Just for one night?" I dropped another silver dressing into the sterile tray. A thud came from down the hall, followed by "Get the lift!" Sounds like another fall, please don't let it be Beth.

"You can go see if they need help, I can wait." I caught his eyes this time.

"I'm okay, they have enough hands out there." Plus, I'm already sterile. I began to apply dressing on the bony parts of the wound.

He turned his face away from me. It was a sunny day, the first day of summer. He could see the ocean from his window.

But he'll never touch the ocean again or feel the whispers of the woods. An elective surgery turned into an infection, the wound dehiscenced, then it was washout, antibiotic beads, then washout again, vac and a JP drain. The senior nurses said that he'll never leave this hospital again.

"I would love to see one bloom someday. I don't think anyone grows them here in Canada, but in Asia they have a few buds. They are called *tan hua* in Chinese. My daughter saw one in Hong Kong. She said it was beautiful, so beautiful, yet so fragile. Everyone gathered around it and they held their breath as it bloomed. It was as if they breathed too heavily, the flower would wilt."

But he'll never see one.

People leave the hospital one way or another. One time, when I was drowning between patients, I sat on an empty bed to take a deep breath. Then it suddenly crossed my mind, the last patient who laid on this bed, did they leave the hospital with family? Or did they die?

People who work in healthcare are different, we hold people's lives in our hands and see them in their most vulnerable states. The four walls of the hospital have likely heard more prayers than many churches. So, we armour ourselves with knowledge, we must be intelligent, smart, clever, and wise. Only by doing so, can we look a crying family member in the eye, and truthfully say "we did everything we could."

But the brain can only retain so much, we remember the Krebs cycle, the coagulation cascade, the twelve cranial nerves and their functions. So, to make room, we sometimes forget that behind that bilat amputee with DMII, HTN, GERD, CKD, is a man who wants to see a flower bloom.

"Didn't you say that you'll be going to med school?" He adjusted his gown. The back of it was wet, was it from the shower this morning? Or was it sweat? But the air conditioner was running, so it couldn't be that hot.

Perhaps he was in pain, and I was too focused on the dressing to notice. After all, he never said anything.

"Yea, I start this August."

"Well, congratulations." He pushed his hair back as he smiled. For the first time, I noticed that he had been chewing on his nails. I also do that when I'm nervous. "You'll be a fine doctor."

I never saw him after that day. He went into septic shock on my days off, then passed away in the ICU.

The purpose of the flower, as botany would describe it, is to carry out sexual reproduction. Their beautiful appearances attract insects, which helps with pollination. Most flowers bloom in the spring and summer, when bees and butterflies are the most active.

So then, what is the purpose of princess of the night? To just bloom in one night and fade away at the crack of dawn. It takes too much energy to grow a flower only for it to wilt in such a short period of time. Its flashing beauty gathers many around in awe, for the fleeting time, and life's fragility.

Was it worth it?

I thought about Norm for a long time after that. I thought if heaven was where the dead go, then it must be filled with all these flowers, since they are so short lived. Then perhaps he would be surrounded by them.

But I don't believe in that, so I ruminate on how fragile life is. How we are like flowers, some are like roses, some are like peach blossoms, and some are like princess of the night. They spent the entirety of their lives doing something that others cannot understand, something unfruitful, something beautiful.

Those people shine the brightest, and the world would hold its breath when they bloom.

In Buddhism, the word wisdom nurtures not only the mind, but the spirit and heart as well. In the vast sea of knowledge that we swim in, it can be tempting to dive deeper with every second, greedily grasping towards every bit of light we can. We are so thirsty for knowledge, to feed our minds, that we forget to breathe, and look at the flowers on the shore.

And when the princess of the night blooms, it is the most mesmerising. ■

Biographical note

Kelly Zhang is a medical student at Dalhousie University. Prior to joining medicine, she worked as a registered nurse in British Columbia and Nova Scotia. In her spare times, Kelly enjoys reading and trying new recipes.