



A sunny day in Seattle

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“I am so glad it is not raining today, my mother hated the rain,” Monir told me. “It has been sunny every year when we gather, even though it has been rainy every day before.”

We were standing at her mother’s grave with her family. Every year, for the past seven years, on the anniversary of her mother’s death, the family gathered. Her great-grandchildren played in the soft grass of the cemetery as family members shared stories and memories of Batoul. I shared with the family how I enjoyed teasing her by asking her when she would get a boyfriend, always knowing her answer. She would pull out a picture of her husband who had died decades before and say, “This is the only man I want to love.”

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Many times when we meet patients for the first time it is not memorable. Our relationship with them grows visit by visit, until it seems like we have known them our whole lives. My first visit with Batoul was probably my most memorable first visit with a patient. I visited with her, hearing about her life in Iran before coming to the United States. She talked about her four children, including one who was still in Iran. I asked her to change into a gown so I could do a complete exam.

When I returned a few minutes later, Batoul could not speak. She was paralyzed on her left side. As I was assessing her neurologic status, her ability to talk returned, and soon she could move her left arm, then her left leg. I sent her immediately for an ultrasound of her carotid arteries. When the ultrasound probe was placed against her right internal carotid artery, she had another transient ischemic attack involving paralysis of the left side of her body. Within hours she had a surgical procedure to correct the unstable blockage in her carotid artery.

After the surgery, Batoul did everything I advised to get healthy. She immediately quit smoking and she began an exercise program where she would walk five miles every day. This meant walking in the rain that she disliked so much, and it rains so much in Seattle. She preferred walking in shopping malls when it rained. She never missed a day walking for the next 20 years. She changed her diet to help get control of her diabetes. She stopped eating the saffron rice she loved.

She shared all her favorite foods that she could not eat with others. If her appointment with me was anytime between 10:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., she would bring me a banquet of amazing Persian food for the clinic staff, including lots of her favorite saffron rice. She loved to bring cream puffs, another food she loved but she would no longer eat.

How many times do we not reinforce the messages of health that really work, because we get discouraged when our patients do not follow through? Batoul took the healthy life style advice to heart, thereby making a dramatic impact to live the life she wanted.

For the first five years I knew her, Batoul would always talk about how much she wanted her son to join the rest of her children in the U.S. She worried for his safety in Iran, and she missed him. Every year, I would write a letter to the immigration office about how it would benefit Batoul's health to have her son in the U.S. (I hate letter writing more than anything else I do as a physician. Well, maybe not as much as being on the phone for prior authorization, but close.)

Batoul shared the good news with me that her son, Saad, would be moving to the U.S. She was so relieved. This

news had a significant positive effect on her blood pressure, more than any of the medications I had prescribed for her hypertension.

Batoul hosted a Persian banquet to celebrate her son's arrival. My family attended the banquet with me. My daughter, Carly, and Batoul became good friends. Batoul's granddaughter Sarah was present to translate as Batoul spoke very little English. Over the years, Carly and Batoul would have lunches together, finding a way to communicate even though Carly spoke no Farsi. At her appointments, Batoul would say with the few English words she knew "I love Carly."

Batoul did so well for many years. Despite almost having a devastating stroke on the first day I met her, she remained healthy for almost 20 years.

The final 18 months of Batoul's life were very difficult. Monir, Batoul's daughter, called me one day to tell me that the night before Batoul had left her apartment in the middle of the night and was out on a major road screaming that a baby was in danger. She was hospitalized at a geriatric psychiatry facility for several weeks. On most days she seemed her normal self, but she would suddenly become upset and ask about the baby. She was eventually discharged to live in a group home. Some weekends she would stay with Monir. Monir told me that Batoul would often lay on the couch rocking an imaginary baby in her arms.

As the mind is lost, sometimes deep memories and unresolved pain come out. Batoul never told me about her fifth child. After her death, her family told me that she had given birth to a son, her first born child, who died before his first birthday. Batoul never talked about this loss with anyone, but it never became less painful.

I have reflected on how much Batoul's life has had a lasting impact on me. She gave me the gift of trust from the day I met her. She shared her family, and embraced mine. Her children were the most important part of her life, and she asked me to be their doctor. I do not think there is a greater honor that we can have as physicians than when a patient refers their family members to us. A visit rarely goes by with any of her children when we do not talk about the lessons we learned from Batoul.

The green grass between the grave stones was fresh and inviting to the great-grandchildren of Batoul as they safely played under the watchful eyes of their parents, enveloped in the love and spirit of their great-grandmother.

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