

Full

Julie Ahn

“Honestly, I think a huge part of our patients’ problems is not their cancer, but their life.”

Sunny clicked the lid off her drink bottle and took a series of long gulps. She emptied two thirds of it then made two light dabs to her mouth with the sweater on the back of her hand. The last patient had been tough.

She continued. “Here’s what I think. Most people live life passively. They are washed through life by the currents that carry them. They never think too much about it. Most of the time it isn’t a problem, until it is. Life doesn’t leave you alone forever. Eventually, it will test you. The problem with living life like that is you have nothing to hold onto in a crisis. You’re spun around in circles, and it is impossible to re-orient yourself. You don’t know which direction is the one you are meant to be facing.”

Greg pulled his head out from the cupboard he’d been rummaging.

“Sunny. What is this crazy-talk? This is your version of hanger. Most people get a bit moody once we hit this point in clinic.” He sat back in a chair and stretched his arms behind his head. “You? You just want to talk about the meaning of life. Does that always happen when you haven’t eaten for a long time?”

Sunny threw her pen lid at him.

She picked up the next file, bracing for a small sink in her heart. She had read it this morning when she was preparing for

clinic — new diagnosis, stage four lung cancer. At 59, this one was relatively young and a woman, both less common traits.

She held the file up to show Greg.

“Life’s yellow card — crisis. It always comes to debt collect us. The debt is every moment we lived a life that wasn’t meant to be ours.”

He shrugged as he picked up his next file. “It is what it is.”

Sunny took a slow breath to fill her chest to capacity and pictured herself as an oversized puffer fish floating around the clinic room. She slowly released, before taking another. She was a peaceful puffer fish, bouncing gently off the walls. She deflated, with a quick turn to make her way to the waiting room.

“Coral Lees.”

A tidy woman stood up, wearing pressed beige slacks and a crisp white shirt. She reached over to pick up her bag. It was a strange clutch — half disco ball and half Rubik’s cube with a sparkly chain. It was an oddity next to her conservative attire.

Sunny gave a warm smile, “hello,” and her patient gave a nod back. Sunny always kept it simple. Once she had casually said, “hello, how are you,” to a patient as she met him in the waiting room and he had responded with a loud, “Well I’m dying of cancer aren’t I.” She’d been caught off guard as his big declaration rippled through the waiting room full of his fellow cancer patients. She’d dropped the line after that.

She saved her introduction for when they were seated in the clinic room. “I’m Sunny, one of the medical oncology doctors.”

“Hi Sunny.”

She had come alone. That was less ideal. Bad news was always better given to a team. It was a hard task for an individual to absorb all the information.

"I'm sorry we have to meet under these circumstances. I work with Dr Kim who will be your specialist. We will be looking after you from here."

"Unfortunate isn't it?" Coral gave a smile and a shrug.

"Your GP started looking into things because you'd been coughing some blood. Can I check with you what your understanding is of things so far?"

"I know there was a spot in the lungs on the chest x-ray. His expression said it was bad. A biopsy said it was cancer, he said which type but I don't remember. I got some more pictures taken after that then ended up coming here, I don't know what they showed."

"Okay, we'll cover all of that today. I just want to start by learning a bit about you since it's our first time meeting, if that's ok."

"Sure."

"What do you usually do day to day?"

"I play." There was a full stop at the end of her response. Sunny paused mid-typing. "Play?"

"Yeah. I spend my time doing what I want, things that I find interesting. A bit of freelance writing here and there, but not much these days."

Sunny tilted her head.

"What's interesting these days?"

"Well I met a young blind girl on a train a few weeks back. We had a long ride so we spent a while talking. Since then I've been learning about blind people. The things that they've done, the things that people are doing for them. You know there's a robotics guy over in America whose goal it is to develop cars that blind people can drive? Not a self-driving car,

an actual car where a person with no vision can receive feedback and respond to actually drive. Pretty fascinating if you ask me.”

Sunny was intrigued. “No I’ve never heard about that before. But that is pretty cool.”

Coral nodded.

“How’s your health otherwise? Have any other medical problems?”

“I had a lump cut out of my breast about twenty years ago and my thyroid about ten years ago. That’s about it.”

“Any regular medications or allergies?”

“Nah I’m in pretty good shape.”

“Do you smoke?”

Sunny hated asking this question. It always felt like a loaded question with the lung cancer patients, though it was necessary. It could bring out a lot of defensiveness.

“I smoke. Last thirty years.”

“Would you say about a packet a day? Bit more or less?”
“Probably about a pack is right.”

Sunny clicked through the smoking history template. “And who lives at home with you?”

“Just me.”

“Do you have any family around?”

“My parents are both dead. I don’t have any siblings, never married, and never had children. But I have good friends around. My next of kin is my neighbour.”

Sunny studied her patient’s posture in her peripheral vision as she neatly documented the rest of her history. This was a strange patient. She didn’t have a trace of the tense energy she was used to seeing. First diagnosis patients, seemingly more

often the women, were commonly wound into pretzels by the time they made it to their first appointment. And she had a funny way of speaking. She couldn't say she was devoid of emotion, but she was like a bright student giving answers to a math test — simple and direct.

Sunny wheeled her chair back from her desk slightly and turned herself to face Coral.

“Like your GP explained to you before coming here, your biopsy shows you have lung cancer.”

Coral acknowledged with a nod.

“The additional scans that he ordered for you afterwards were for what we call staging — to check if it has spread anywhere else. The good news is that there was no cancer in the brain. But when they did the CT of your abdomen and pelvis, they've found cancer in the hip bones.” Sunny paused.

“What stage does that mean I am?” Coral asked. Patients always asked this question.

“Because the disease has spread to other parts of the body, it means you're a stage four.”

Coral nodded. “I had a friend die of lung cancer not too long ago. Stage four means I have something like four months to live right?”

“That's a very common question. But it doesn't really have an answer. Everyone is very different. You have a few things that can be considered an advantage — being healthy and a bit younger. But I'll be honest, these cancers can move very quickly.”

Coral nodded slowly then stopped. “Okay.”

She didn't fidget, cross her legs, or touch her face. And she looked calm, not shell-shocked.

Something slipped out of Sunny's mouth. "Are you okay?"

She was kicking herself as soon as it left. She personally hated that question. It felt inadequate for their oncology rooms. But it had slipped out. But it wasn't because she thought she wasn't okay. The reason the question escaped was because she thought this patient actually was.

Coral smiled at the young doctor with a curious expression and fresh face sitting in front of her.

"Sunny, I've lived a good life."

She reached down to the chair beside her to place her Rubik's disco-ball clutch on her lap like a pet. Like she was making a point.

"People find me strange. I've floated in and out of worlds, never staying in any place for very long. But everywhere I went, I always found the things that were important to me. Sure, I never built a family of my own. But when I was young I partied too much and took too many risks. I did work I found meaningful. I fell in love over and over again, and filled my life to the brim. I took some big risks. One thing I could never quit was smoking. Every man I loved smoked like a fireplace. And I accepted that a long time ago. I could have easily died much younger, but if I didn't I would be here one day, being told I would die of lung cancer."

She shrugged. "We all go sometime. My time could have easily been much sooner. I took every opportunity I had, and I lived the life I wanted. Now I'm in your hands."

For a moment, Sunny had forgotten she was the doctor to a patient. Whatever this woman was saying, she was uncommon.

She responded. "Okay. We'll go together from here."