

## By the sea

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### Abstract

This short story is inspired by my grandmother's childhood during the 1940s cholera epidemic in rural Egypt. Despite hearing stories about the epidemic since my childhood, it was only through the current pandemic that my appreciation and understanding of the social and psychological impacts of that event started to take shape. I am humbled to have had the privilege to learn from and hear first-hand these stories from my grandmother, and I hope that through writing this story I am able to pass on her voice. My goal is to share this perspective and knowledge with the medical community. The story illustrates the lifelong and intergenerational impact of illness on the well-being of individuals, families, and society as a whole. Understanding this is especially important in light of the pandemic we are currently living through. I also hope that my story highlights the power of narrative in bringing healing in medicine and inspires others to share their own stories.

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We were both sitting by the seashore, under the watchful gaze of stars that crowned the night with whispers of stories untold. The waves gently kissed our feet, and the breeze thoughtfully embraced our words, carrying them to one another. My grandmother's eyes stared into the horizon, with depth that only decades of life and loss could hold. She carefully held my hands in hers, with a strength I didn't know she still had. I listened with all my might to the beautiful words that came next, hoping they would last as long as the waves of the sea rushed towards us...

She began with a time gone by, forgotten by many. It was the night her father came home from a long journey, shrouded in a long dark cloak that made him indistinguishable from the night. As soon as he opened the door, his five young children rushed towards him with an urgency only the deprivation of human connection and the innocent love of a child could create. His presence lifted the heavy weight of fear from the home, a fear that had shackled them for many weeks. My grandmother had already lost her little sister to the cholera outbreak earlier that year, which was a loss that was hushed by silence and comforted by grief. In the distance, they could hear the policemen coming around to each home to reinforce the curfew orders that had turned isolation into their daily companion.

In that moment the footsteps of the men outside echoed the heartbeat that my young grandmother could hear in her father's chest. In between the streams of tears that flowed down her beautiful brown eyes, she could see the flickering candle on the dining table that

they lit every night in memory of her sister. A small reminder of the warmth that a loving young soul could create. A glimpse into a sea of memories that told the story of the life she once knew. The warmth of the candle radiated a hope she could almost touch. It seemed that, in her father's embrace, time had stopped, and the relentless fear of death had found its final resting place far from their home. In the whispers of the night, she fell asleep surrounded by an alien sense of comfort.

A novel feeling of hope washed over her as she realized that they were past the darkest part of the night that had claimed every moment of their existence for the last year. This knowledge came from within and filled her mind with a forgotten sense of peace that threatened the sadness that had long dominated her thoughts. With every passing day, this knowledge grew stronger inside her and she slowly broke free from the prison of uncertainty that had gripped her heart since her sister died. With every rising sunrise, the days grew longer, and the daily news of deaths around the village slowly started to fade away along with the relentless screams and cries of pain. As the winter of discontent gave way to a more hopeful spring, the true magnitude of what happened slowly started to take shape. The eyes of her brothers and remaining sister now carried an invisible scar that only came to life as tears in the night. And as the years moved along, the tears slowly dried, but the memory of their loving sister never went away. The warmth of the candle they lit in her memory never left their hearts...

In that moment, she looked again at me with her

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strong gaze, made only more powerful by the streams of tears that now engraved her face. She gripped my hand tighter and whispered that the journey of healing that she had started so long ago had not yet ended but had only just begun. Her beautiful strength and courage had paved the way for an even more meaningful journey of reflection and gratitude to be shared with generations to come. She still had gratitude for her sister who is gazing upon us from the stars above, making this powerful moment of connection last a lifetime. “We may never have all the answers for what has happened,” she said, “but we do have the strength to honour those we lost, and that strength begins with first giving ourselves the time to grieve.” At that moment, a calm breeze blew across the sea and wrapped us in a gentle embrace as the midnight rain started to descend, announcing its arrival to the silent night. The raindrops made a sombre dance as they descended upon the waters, mirroring the weight of the conversation they had witnessed. The sky was finally shedding its tears as it realized it could no longer hold them back.

And after a few long moments of gazing at the sea, she finally looked at me and said, “This too shall pass.”