

COVID: Theme and Escalations

By Kasia Nikhamina

My mother is dead.

I dream she wakes up.

“Mamcio, you’re back?! I have to tell everyone. They will be so happy.”

“No,” she says. “Don’t say anything. If I ever even have a headache, your father will not let me hear the end of it.”

I wake up.

I say to the mirror: “My mother is dead.”

“Dead” feels like a bad word. I don’t say it outside, to people.

I say: “I lost my mom this winter.”

Our mother got sick on December 17, 2021. At first, she insisted she’d just caught a little cold by taking out the trash in short sleeves — but the next day, our bustling mother was completely leveled, and the pulse oximeter was reading 92, 90, 87.

Three times we sent our mother to the ER. Not the closest one in Queens, but the good one in the city, NYU Langone. The year prior, she’d been treated for uterine cancer there, they’d taken good care of her, although she was a Medicare patient.

The first two times, ER sent our mother home.

On December 26, her third visit, our mother was admitted with COVID-19.

Anna, our sister, was at the hospital the next day for the duration of visiting hours, eight hours. And the next day. And the next.

A nurse gave her a gown, a face shield to wear over her N95.

It was against hospital protocol for Anna to be there, but the doctors said the nothing.

Anna, in her heeled boots, which our mother would later criticize as “impractical,” but whose “clickety-clack,” said Anna, injected a sense of urgency to her walk, her conversations with the doctors.

Our mother had refused the vaccine, swayed by our father’s conspiracy theories.

At least she usually wore a mask at indoor gatherings; he didn’t. But she’d gotten lax about it lately.

Now she was sick.

On January 2, 2022, I showed up at the hospital with a bundle of food. Maria, our sister, would come in the afternoon. We were giving Anna a day off.

They would not let me up.

They did send someone down for the provisions I’d brought. “Snacks,” the receptionist called them.

Kneeling in the Kimmel lobby, I halved the portions, so as not to overwhelm our mother, orange slices, apple slivers, squares of banana bread I’d baked, and packed everything together neatly. Wrote her name on the bag, her room number. Wrote “Smaczneho,” bon appetit.

“It will take me a week to eat this,” our mother told me on the phone that night, but her relief was audible. That she’d called me of her own volition, felt like huge progress since that morning, when she’d said nothing, and I’d stayed on the line, listening to her breath, the breath of the machine.

Outside Kimmel: a huge sculpture of a dalmatian, an NYU-purple bandana tied across its face.

The next day, Anna returned to the hospital.

“I’m in,” she texted.

The following day, they turned her away.

We’d be able to visit again when our mother tested negative for COVID.

We lived in the MyChart app, reading reports and results, googling terms, trying to make sense

of the hierarchy, the day attending, night attending, residents from pulmonology and other departments. As soon as we got comfortable, they rotated.

As our mother's official proxy, Anna called the doctors every day. She spoke to them on her personal phone, on speaker, while Maria and I listened from a three-way call on Anna's work phone. A trick to avoid getting disconnected while merging calls.

Over and over, the doctors asked:

"Do we have permission to intubate? We need to know her wishes, in case it comes to it."

Our father stonewalled. "It's up to your mother," he said.

"Do everything you can to save me," said our mother, but also, "If they intubate me they'll kill me."

We acknowledged her fear, while reassuring her the doctors didn't want to intubate her, but might have to, to save her life. We told her we believed in her, we loved her, we wanted her to get well.

Ultimately, the doctors were convinced our mother wanted to live.

"FULL CODE," they wrote in her chart.

They said if our mother went on the ventilator, she had a 30% survival rate.

It seemed like our mother was getting better. She was spending thirty, sixty minutes out of bed, in the armchair, at lower oxygen.

A nurse washed her hair, she sent us a selfie.

Then her lung sustained a puncture. She was put on bed rest.

The doctors said: "This disease is measured in weeks, not days."

On January 15, we got the okay to visit. Anna and Maria headed in.

On January 16, I went for the morning shift.

I had imagined a crowded place, but the COVID ward was spacious, with wide empty hallways. Each patient had their own room. Each room had an anteroom, with a computer, supplies.

The room next to our mother's was empty. A crisp bed. Television turned on: a ballgame.

I tried to feed our mother: small bites, sips of water.

Our mother was breathing with difficulty, her heart galloping, even though she was just lying in bed.

I walked and walked to find a nurse.

The first two deflected: they weren't assigned here.

The nurse who finally checked on our mother, told me it was her first shift on the COVID ward.

"She's in God's hands now," a second nurse told me.

Uneasy, I met Maria in the lobby, briefed her, went home.

That night, as visiting hours were drawing to a close, Maria called me and Anna. We heard a doctor speaking into another phone.

"I'm bringing you someone."

He was transferring our mother to the ICU.

Later I Googled him, found out he studies near-death experiences. His photograph didn't match his guardian angel voice.

In the ICU, our mother was on a BIPAP breathing machine all night, they were trying to stabilize her.

"I have my own nurse," she texted us in the morning.

We had viewed the ICU as a bad thing. Now we wondered, why didn't they transfer her sooner? For instance, as soon as they discovered the lung puncture?

What did we know of lungs? That they are supple, soft, until COVID ravages them, rendering them stiff, cracking them?

Our mother's chest scans were posted to MyChart.

If I had looked at them — would I have understood how dire it was?

Instead, I was only reading the radiologist's interpretations: "Maybe slightly decreased pneumothorax."

On January 19, we again got the green light to visit.

“Say everything you want to say,” the doctors said, which we heard and did not hear.

Our mother was fussy about how things were arranged on her tray.

“Ask them if they switched my oxygen tank today,” she asked. “What if they forgot, and it runs out?”

The oxygen was in the wall. The nurse traced the hose to show us.

The tanks were nitric oxide, it opened the blood vessels, improved the flow of blood to tissues and organs.

Our mother wanted the curtain open at night, never mind the hallway light. “I want them to see me.”

Every morning, the nurse asked her questions to confirm she knew where she was, and why.

Our mother complained about this exercise, after. That’s how we knew she was herself, deep inside, behind the barricade of spoiled lungs and frantic heart.

It took her an hour to eat ninety-seven percent of a soft-boiled egg, but at the end, she said wryly, “You forgot the salt.”

“Every morning, she looks so tired, we think, today is the day we move her to the ventilator,” said the doctors, “but always by afternoon she has rallied just enough. The next 24-48 hours are critical.”

We went back and forth to the hospital every day, holding two conflicting notions at all times in our throats: we believed our mother had a chance, and we also were afraid.

When I was a kid, and we were new in America, my mother shopped with coupons, studied the weekly circulars, for maximum savings. Before we left the grocery store, she reviewed the receipt. If she caught a mistake, she sent me back to the cashier to sort it out. Sometimes it was a question of a dollar, or even a dime.

“The dimes add up,” she said.

I knew they did. At seven, ten, thirteen, I knew it.

In the hospital, sometimes my mother would summon a nurse, but they didn't come immediately. Then she'd say, "Go find a nurse," and I'd hang up my gown, and go stand into the hallway, outside her sight line, and wait.

No matter how great my mother's discomfort or even pain, I could not pull a nurse from another patient's room. I knew they'd heard her "call button," they would come as soon as they could.

I trusted them. I saw the care they took. How they relayed patient information to each other at the end of a shift.

"Anna brings me eight dollar yogurts," our mother told me. White Moustache, with sour cherries, in glass jars.

She requested a specific kind of plastic spoon, with a shallower but wider bowl than the hospital-issue ones.

For what seemed like months, but was only a couple of days, I stopped into every single supermarket, bodega, CVS, looking for this kind of spoon.

Then our mother stopped eating. The many weeks of oxygen had dried out her trachea, it hurt to swallow. She asked for a lozenge, which was denied ("choking hazard"). Anyway, it would not have helped.

The doctors threatened a feeding tube. We negotiated smoothies.

It took her 90 minutes to drink 12 ounces, and then she wouldn't touch soup, or anything else, because it would "mix" in her stomach.

The soft bread Maria had cut into tiny hearts, lay in a Ziploc, on the tray.

On the wall opposite our mother's bed: photographs of our family.

Unopened bottles of Ensure stacked high on every possible surface.

On January 31, as our mother sipped her evening smoothie, I told her that Ilya and I were planning to leave in a few days on the road trip we'd originally planned for January 1st but had deferred when she got sick.

After nine years running a bike shop together — including two during a pandemic bike boom with no staff — we desperately needed a break. My husband had described himself as “a ripped sail.” Winter was our only chance to recover.

I almost didn’t tell her. Her heart rate was high, her O2 saturation not great, when I arrived that day.

But I had the evening shift the next day, too, so I thought I’d tell her that night, and talk to her again the next day, after she’d had a chance to process it.

“Ilya and I work alone,” I told her. I felt ashamed (but then I always felt that way when I admitted any struggle to her).

“I work alone, too,” she said.

We sat in silence while she finished the smoothie.

It wasn’t yet eight.

“Go home, Kasiu, maybe I’ll doze a little.”

“Spij, Mamcio. I love you. See you tomorrow.”

I was agonizing over what I had done, when we got the call.

After 5 weeks on high flow nasal, and about a week of nights on the BIPAP machine, our mother had fatigued.

They had to intubate her.

The next time I saw my mother, she looked as if she had been caught by surprise, her mouth an O, with a tube in it, the ventilator tube. Her arms at her sides, bruised from six weeks of constant blood draws.

On one upper arm, under her hospital gown: the decades-old scar from her polio vaccine.

We didn’t know how long our mother would be on the ventilator. If it was going to be longer than ten days, she would need the breathing tube to go into her trachea instead of her mouth. Then she could stay on the ventilator indefinitely.

But first the doctors had to assess if her body could handle the insertion of the trach. (Our mouths puckered with the word.)

If it could — and if she came off it eventually — she would need extensive rehab to learn to

walk and talk again.
I imagined our mother, raging, mute.

Ilya and I packed our bags but did not leave New York.

Our mother was turning again, slipping again. A secondary infection. The required antibiotic overwhelmed her kidneys. Another puncture in the lungs. Her heart labored.

They would add something to her system, to address one issue, and then they'd need to add something else to balance it out. And again.

We refreshed MyChart constantly, looking now at the carbon dioxide in the blood, measured every four hours.
On February 10, they ran out of escalations.

They would no longer add anything, but neither would they take anything away.

I sat at the foot of our mother's bed.

Her nose, her chin, sharper than I remembered, bluer.

I could not look at her continuously, so I looked out the window, at the river.

There was some garbage on the floor, a tissue, cellophane wrapping from a sterilized instrument. I picked up these things, and threw them away, making sure they went all the way inside the garbage can, as our mother would have liked.

She was a "kruszyinka," a crumb.

Melissa Crumb had been at the tiniest kid in third grade. Our mother had giggled over this. Melissa Crumb wanted to be a horse jockey. I was reading the Marguerite Henry horse novels then, starting with "Misty of Chincoteague." Every month, there'd be a new one in the Scholastic book order, and my mother would send me to school clutching \$3.95, sometimes in coins.

My mother's heart stopped at 12:46 PM on February 10, 2022.

That night I tried to log into her MyChart account. It was locked.

The next day Ilya and I drove south, found ourselves near Chincoteague, between Virginia and Maryland. We stayed the night.

In the morning, we hiked for hours until we found the herd of wild horses I'd read about as a kid. We stood at the edge of the field and watched them.

Then we got back in the car and drove to the Grand Canyon. We looked inside, and then we drove back to New York.

All across America, I sat in motel lobbies, writing my mother's eulogy.

On January 24, I'd sent our mother a selfie from my run. She replied with two question marks.

I imagined our mother's phone tethered to the charging port at the foot of her bed in the ICU.

Our mother herself, tethered to the oxygen in the wall.

In the past, when our mother had texted me, her emojis had also rendered as question marks.

Now — as then — I assumed they were hearts.

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