


battements chaque Noël, à des mariages, à la naissance d'enfants et de petits-enfants, à la rencontre de nouveaux amis et à la réminiscence de vieilles blagues. Quel *honneur* ce serait pour moi d'être là, avec elle, au moment où ce muscle fidèle déciderait de s'arrêter. Ce n'était pas quelque chose dont il fallait avoir peur, mais plutôt quelque chose d'inévitable. Et après des années à avoir subi des examens et des traitements, elle savait aussi bien que moi que cet instant approchait. Ces minutes représentaient *son* cadeau d'adieu à *moi*.

En repensant à cette soirée, je comprends que cette expérience, que très peu de médecins prennent le temps de vivre pleinement, représente un privilège. Il n'y avait

pas de chaos, pas de culpabilité et pas de sentiment tragique de responsabilité pour obscurcir mes pensées ou gâcher la pureté du moment. Nous savions toutes les deux que son corps ne pouvait pas être réparé; il était irréversiblement brisé. Son esprit, cependant, demeurerait intact et serait fonctionnel jusqu'au moment où il serait libéré de sa prison. Encore aujourd'hui, je suis émerveillée devant la vaste étendue de la réalité qui règne en dehors de la médecine physique, et je n'oublierai jamais les 43 minutes que j'ai passées à tenir la main de cette étrangère durant la dernière heure de sa vie. 

D^{re} Ching passe sa deuxième année de résidence en médecine familiale à Abbotsford en C.-B.

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Best French story by a family physician

Wisteria

Patrice Laplante MD MCISc CCMF

I had been told; I had read as much and I didn't quite believe it. Yet the wisteria ended up gaining the upper hand and irreversibly taking over the crosspieces of my arbor. Oh, of course I put up a fight at first—fearless pruning, guided twining, but it's a cunning, agile plant and grows so vigorously that any attempt to contain it quickly becomes futile. Now, many years later, it's impossible to tell whether the wisteria is supporting the arbor or vice versa. Why did I think it would be different for me than for other gardeners? That, unlike them, I would avoid this well-known pitfall? Some experts believe that only cement or stone arbors make suitable supports for wisteria What a pity! For then it is no longer the plant that is the focal point, but the structure.

This story began in 1995, in the small town where I set up my practice. A man of about 40 years of age had been walking around downtown over the previous few months, his face and arms covered in huge, raised, crimson patches. Kaposi's sarcoma. An unmistakable diagnosis. Striking stigmata of his advanced HIV. He seemed to enjoy showing them off. The first case of Kaposi's I had ever seen. He frightened me. He was so thin, so repulsive. Why did he choose our town? He could only have come from Montreal. He was disturbing; I would see people turn around as he passed by. Why didn't he stay at home? But he walked with a sure step, head held high, a proud look in his eye, immune to judgement. I must admit that despite my disgust, I had to admire him for showing himself in this way. Not

a week went by without my seeing him. In any case, he was impossible to miss. I don't think that he ever noticed me until the day he came to my office for the first time. His name was Sylvain.

I struggled hard to conceal my unease and even my disgust. It turned out he was the one who tried to put me at ease. Such warmth, openness, humour, intelligence. In 30 minutes, he made me forget his puffy, repulsive face so that all I could see was a magnificent, engaging, ever-so-kind man. His story was a sad one. After battling his disease for a number of years, he had accepted that the end was near and left Montreal to move closer to his family. He had split up with his partner 2 years previously, was now living on his own, and didn't have many friends. He refused all treatment, even AZT, despite its promising results. He accepted that we couldn't give him much to treat his Kaposi's. It wasn't his patches that pained him the most, but all the losses he had faced—his relationship, his house, his garden, his job. He wasn't afraid to show his patches, he wore them almost like badges of honour. A testimony to his freedom from shame, acceptance of the unconventional, courage in the face of difference, ignorance, ugliness, and fear.

It took us 3 consultations to write up his medical history, go over his personal and family history, with the conversation going off in tangents each time. He wasn't easy to manage. He was a man of many passions—cooking, drawing, art, music. Even though he was becoming more and more repulsive (one patch on his nose had become slightly necrotic), in spite of myself, I think I was becoming more and more attached to him. Once when he came for a consultation, he brought me

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cookies and jam that he had made himself. I had never been given a gift like this by a person with HIV before I must admit that, at the time, I was a little afraid to try the cookies, or the jam, which ended up at the back of the fridge. During the consultation, he told me that he was planning to plant some wisteria in the garden of the apartment block he lived in. It would remind him of the one he left behind in Montreal. Wisteria. It was the first time I had ever heard of the plant and I didn't have any idea what it looked like. There was no such thing as Google yet His description of it was impressive. "Huge arms that embrace you, protect you, imprison you Grows at a phenomenal rate Fragrant flowers in a pretty sky-blue colour that are nearly 50 cm long." He was full of praise. As time was getting on and I was falling behind with my clients, I felt myself getting impatient and quickly changed the subject. He was hurt, I think. Such a lovely plant


Sylvain was admitted to hospital the following month when I was on duty on the floor. *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, another first for me. For one long week, he struggled to overcome it. "I didn't think pneumonia was as bad as that," he confided to me the day before he died. I was very distressed. He was the first young patient I had lost. I returned home with a broken heart. I took the jam out of the fridge and served myself a generous helping. It was delicious and gave me a measure of comfort. My resistance had vanished completely. Sylvain had helped me overcome my fear and taught me not to be afraid of difference and ugliness.

One Saturday in spring, I had just come off duty. My father had persuaded me to plant a few strawberry plants in the vegetable patch I had just started in my

backyard.* At Canadian Tire that morning, I spotted some strawberry plants in boxes and, alongside them, a jumble of raspberry plants, blueberry plants, roses, and other decorative shrubs that I wasn't familiar with. At the back of the section, I found a curious-looking box with a single frail, dried-up stem poking out. There was a wonderful picture on the front of the box and a name, "Chinese wisteria" I couldn't resist.

Thus began my passion for gardening, which has endured to this day. Over the years, many other patients joined Sylvain in my garden.* So now I have Evelyne's rose, Benoîte, Rodgersia, daisy So many plants that, year after year, remind me of the ties that grow between a physician and his patients!

The wisteria is still there. The slender 2-mm shoot grew into an impressive trunk over 15 cm in diameter that always amazes visitors. Not to mention the tangle of twining stems and the foliage that provide a cool, shady spot and shelter for the many birds that build their nests in it.

Tonight, I look out my window at my garden and the wisteria clinging to the arbor, the same way patients cling to our hearts, in spite of ourselves. And, like my arbor, I don't really know any more which of us benefits the most from the support. 

*It was 2 × 3 m at the time. Today, the garden is over 1000 m² in size and contains nearly 1500 plant varieties.

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