

#PERSPECTIVE

Living with C word

It seems like a long time ago, but I can still remember that warm August afternoon in the summer of 1997. My friend Salma Wafa, who was a doctor, was visiting that day. While we were having tea, she suddenly asked me, "So, did you go to the doctor? What did he say?" I was totally taken aback and told her how busy I had been and just forgot. Immediately, she stood up and said that she will take me the very next day. Two months ago, I had told her that I had a lump and she had advised me to go to a doctor immediately. Since there was no pain, I soon forgot about the whole thing.

The next day, she took me to a surgeon who examined me and asked me to go to his clinic the following day. He mentioned a certain amount of money which I was supposed to take with me as he was going to do surgery. I was in a state of shock hearing all this. Salma told me not to worry, as he was one of the best surgeons in Dhaka. I went home and told my husband about it. He too was taken aback. He asked me why the surgeon was in such a hurry and wondered why I had not been asked to undergo any blood tests. At that time, we were not aware of anything and had hardly ever been to the doctors in Bangladesh. So, the next day, my husband and I both went. Dr Salma was there too. I was not scared, even though that was the first time I was

worry, as it could be cured. I could hardly believe my ears and kept thinking "It can't be me, if I die now, what will happen to my children?" My youngest son was only five years old. I suddenly remembered that when I was young, whenever I showed my hand to anyone looking at my palm, they would say "Your lifeline is very short." So now I knew why they said that. Outwardly, I was very calm as I thought if I broke down; the rest of my family would too. So, I listened, as Farouk, my husband, started talking about what to do next. He had already talked to the doctors in the family as well as his friends. Farouk was by nature a very practical person, whose mind always made strong decisions based on facts. Unlike him, it was my heart rather than

everything. My other friend Anees (who is from Mumbai) made the appointment with the doctor. My sister's brother-in-law, Jahangir Bhai, who was in AB Bank, called and said that he would have everything ready for us in Mumbai, as they had a branch of their bank there. He told the manager to take care of us. When all these people came forward, it seemed like God had sent angels from heaven. By then, I was overwhelmed by everyone's concern and love for me and didn't feel sad or guilty. I wasn't afraid of death anymore as I had faith in the way people prayed for me. I knew I would survive.

Then the moment came when I had to say goodbye to my children, my mother, and my siblings. Farouk's brother-in-law,

There were elderly people, and children — some looked healthy like me, others pale, thin, some on wheelchairs. I can't remember how long I had to wait but finally, my name was called and we walked in with the nurse. Inside, the doctor stood up and asked us to sit. He was a very tall and handsome man, and greeted us with a smile. He looked at the reports and looked up to me and said, "Don't worry, the tumour is in the initial stages, and you look healthy and are still young."

I could not believe my ears! Did I hear right; I was forty-two years old! I had a twenty-year-old daughter, a sixteen-year-old son and a five-year-old child. Then he talked to me asking me about my profession and my children. When he heard that my youngest son was only five and that I had nursed him, he said I was a highly unlikely candidate for breast cancer. "But sometimes we also can't explain why it happens." Listening to him gave me a sense of relief. I asked, "Will I survive? This is an incurable disease and I feel that I am being punished by God for something I have done."

He told me very gently that "Cancer is a disease just like the common cold or measles, if properly treated, it will go away and as for doing something wrong, didn't you see children, even babies outside? Do you think they did something wrong?"

Another very important thing that he said was, "You know medicines and chemotherapy cannot cure you. If you have a positive attitude and believe you will get well for your family, I am sure you will." After this, I believed that this was my destiny and I thought that there must be a reason for this and that I should accept it. I believed that God had given me a second chance. I promised to myself that if I got well, I would go and help other cancer patients.

The next few days were very hectic, running from one hospital to another. Finally, everything was done. For me, the worst test was the CT scan. I felt so claustrophobic in the machine, like I was being strangled and it made me so sick. After the scan, I could hardly sit up and was half lying down on the chair with my eyes closed when I felt a nudge. I opened my eyes to see a small boy offering me candy, "Have this, you will feel better." I hugged him and could hardly keep back my tears. The boy was taken aback. What do you call an action like this? A random act of kindness from a total stranger, a child. It was just so innocent and touching. As the days passed, there were many more such incidents. We got so much help and understanding from total strangers. I remember thinking that maybe when we face bigger problems in life, we go beyond our everyday selfish ways and extend a helping hand towards others, especially after realizing that others have the same problems and are going through the same dilemmas.

I will not go into the medical details of my treatment, as in the last twenty years,



going under anaesthesia. Soon it was all over, and I could go home that very day. I had not told anybody about this, so all was fine. They took some sample for biopsy (which I was not sure why). They said the report would be ready after three days. I hoped and prayed that it was nothing serious and then consoled myself with the thought that it couldn't be that I have a serious disease as I was perfectly healthy.

On the day of the report, I was okay, till I saw my husband's face as he entered the room. He didn't have to say anything. I knew it was what I had dreaded! I pretended that I did not notice his expression and asked him, "bad news?" He tried to smile and said, "Well certainly not good news." He came and sat down beside me with the report and said I had breast cancer; but not to

my mind which always ruled any decision I made. I am a very emotional person and I usually cry during every sad movie and even at weddings when the bride cries. Now, surprisingly, there were no tears. I had become stoic.

The next few days are a blur now. I remember our house being full of people all day. Relatives and friends all came to see me. I was working as a teacher in Scholastica School at that time, and I remember that Sister Emelda, our principal from my previous place of employment, Greenherald, also came to visit me and said she would pray for me. I had taught there for almost a decade before joining Scholastica. It was overwhelming. From morning to late at night, we had company. In fact, the children were upset that they could not spend time with me. All this gave me confidence that I would come back as so many people prayed to God for me.

In my mind was a cyclone of thoughts! Why me? I must have done something very wrong to deserve this. There was this feeling of guilt; all the times I had hurt others' feelings, and I thought this was how I had to pay for my sins. Friends and well-wishers came all day, some tried to console, others to give advice, all with good intentions. There was a lot to be done once we decided where we wanted to go for the treatment. After a lot of thought and planning, my husband decided that "Tata Hospital" in Mumbai was the best option, as it specialises in various types of cancer treatments. Next, we had to take care of the formalities of visa and tickets. My friend Pervin's husband, Iftekhar Bhai came and told Farouk that he would take care of

Dr Imtiaz, offered to go with us. This was a blessing, as I felt that Farouk was totally devastated. Dr Imtiaz travelling with us was a big relief and source of comfort. I tried my best not to be emotional and showed a smiling face to everyone. My sister had come from Chattogram, and did all the packing and my sister-in-law reassured me about taking care of my children. Of course, my mother was there to stay with the kids.

Once on the plane, I kept thinking and praying that this could not be the end. The two-hour flight passed and I could see the flickering lights of Mumbai. I could make out the dark ocean below and it seemed like we would land on water. Finally, the plane touched the ground and we got down. This was my first visit to Mumbai. As we walked out of the airport, a man holding our names on a placard was waiting, and took us to our hotel.

The next day, we went to the famous Tata Hospital which was quite far from the city. My first impression was amazement at its sheer size. It was a massive building. I felt quite lost, so I kept staring at it as I looked around and saw hundreds of people all around me. Men, women, and children going in and coming out. It took us some time as we stood in line at the reception and were told where to find the doctor we wanted to see. Once we found Dr Deshpandey's office, we saw hundreds of people sitting in chairs in front of it. I approached a desk where I wrote my name and was asked to wait. That was disappointing, as we knew there would be a long waiting period. As I sat there for a couple of hours, I noticed how patiently everyone waited without any complaints.