Manuscript title- The peace of my mind

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Around a year ago, I was posted as the in-charge of COVID-19 ICU. I gleamed as I felt to be the chosen one. Or maybe was simply exited to face something that I never prepared for. I used to live alone, as my family was in a different city owing to my wife`s job. But the excitement died down, rather soon. I was becoming more irritable, may be because I was mostly away from my family. May be because I spent the longest time with the most critical of them and then see most of them succumbing. May be because, I saw no end to it. At one point of time I no longer wanted to be there and started to have self doubts. In the peak of the pandemic, though my family joined me as we prepared to welcome our second baby, I was still not my former self.

After availing the six months of maternity leave available to Indian working women, I took my family back to her place of work, 300 kms away from where I work. And again, that emptiness came back. After that yearlong battle, the number of patients in the COVID-19 ICU was coming down. But I still had a melancholy in me. I was not sure who am I and what I am supposed to be. A failing father, husband or a doctor failing his patients?

I again longed for my family, may be that is why I started to discuss about family ties with the patients. Or, may be because they longed for a near one in those hard times. Or, may be simply because now I had more time for each patient.

That morning, my mood went grouchy the moment I entered the COVID ICU as my visors got foggy. Cursing the weather and my luck, I opened the door o and went to the first patient. But, I had to sit down at the nurses’ station as dyspnoea stuck me again. Wondered again if my life will ever be same again after my severe COVID-19. Got up in a few minutes later and tried to put a smile and went to that particularly `indifferent` patient. He/she has been particularly difficult to start a conversation with. We could never discuss anything beyond the ailments. Even then, I know I spoke with an elated tone, `` Your RT-PCR tests came negative. I have already met your family downstairs. You will be shifted out today``. There was a silence. This time it was a bit more awkward. I was not expecting that for sure.

I know his eyes blinked, was not sure if I saw the eyes becoming moist though. I was about to say something, but stopped. He/she leaned towards me and said, `` I live in ……., come and have food with us if you take that road, anyday`` Taken a bit by surprise and tickled by sweats inside the PPE, I said jokingly "You haven't seen me, how will you know it's me?". He/she said with a choked voice "I will know you by your eyes and voice".

A sense of peace descended on me. I do not remember, but maybe I smiled at him behind my foggy visors and went to the next patient. Now, as I seat in my room, I wonder even though I still don’t not know, who am I and why I am here, he/she probably know who I was and why I was there for those days spent with us.

Abstract: The appearance of the caregiver and her/his contact has always been the scaffold of the relationship between the caregiver and patient . The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged it. The duty bound frontline workers in the midst of the personal crisis brought about by this pandemic has witnessed hitherto unknown experiences.