

Hafsa

Hafsa is an elderly Indian Muslim woman who has had a stroke. Her daughter has moved into her house to provide her care.

The photograph has arrived of my cousin's baby daughter, in a pretty pink frame too, ready to be put on the wall with the others. It's what Doctor Lakhani talked to me about on her first visit; before anything else. Who all these people were, my very large family, from near and far. I could see my son was becoming annoyed, even then, wondering why she was spending time concerning herself with these photographs when there were far more important things to discuss.

She'll be here later today, and it's always nice to see her, even though I can't talk to her anymore since the stroke. I miss it. All those conversations over several months. It was always so interesting; not what you'd expect from a doctor. She reminds me of myself a little when I was that age, although she's far cleverer and kinder than I could ever have hoped to be. And she's the last new friend I will make; although I'm not stupid, I know that I'm just one of her many patients. But I enjoy her company and she's in my house so if I want to call her a friend then I can.

I'm not afraid of what's coming. I know that I'm very ill. The last two years have been spent with the doctors and surgeons prodding and poking but I've had a good life and now my son and daughter look after me which is all that a mother could want. When I came back from the hospital the room was newly painted with a vase of roses on the bedside table. It was strange at first, sleeping in the bed which had been moved so that now I look towards Mecca, though it's not so easy to see the neighbour's cherry tree which will soon come into blossom.

My daughter stays here and cares for me and my son comes every day to help me perform my ablutions and recite Ya Seen Surah to me, now that I cannot speak the words of Shahadah, nor even mumble La ilaha illal-lah.

My son is such a devout young man. When Doctor Lakhani said that we might want to consider some help with home care if things became difficult, I could see he wasn't pleased; although he is very polite and would never say what he thought until she left. That Allah will turn his face from those who do not care for their dying parents; that carers could not fit their schedule around prayers. That there are so many little things that he and his sister do every day that need to be learnt. How to cut up my food so that I can swallow it easily. How to move me gently into my wheelchair for my favourite walk around the park. The jewellery I like to wear on certain days.

I told them that the Doctor is a good woman who is thinking of what is best for all of us and that in this case perhaps having a carer come to visit might be acceptable. Especially with my daughter

looking so tired. But none have come, and I have to accept that it's up to my children now to decide how things should be. And not being able to talk means it's easier if I just accept everything that they do.

I think they might be seeking guidance though because during the last visit Doctor Lakhani suggested bringing medicines to the house in case things became very difficult. And later the Imam came round, and my son closed the door so that I couldn't hear what they were talking about.

Sometimes I would like to be alone with the Doctor even if I can't tell her the things that I want to. I can sense her trying to hear the words that are in my mind but not inside my mouth. Looking right into my eyes which is where we do most of our talking now. But my son is always here, standing by the window, watching carefully. She talks to him too of course, when there are things that she says we all need to discuss as a family. And then he always just nods quietly.

I wish my children knew that I feel blessed by having such a woman help me through these final days. I think I'd like a photograph of her on the wall too. I could just about fit her in. Or at least know that one day my son will thank her for all that she's done. What she did.