

Shift Report Prize, Runner-up for Fiction

Through Her Eyes: A COVID-19 Story

by Alison Shely

It started with a little cough. He hadn't really complained about it much. Then came the fever and the chills, and the cough began to wrack his whole body. It was when there was blood that I finally convinced him to go to the hospital. I wasn't expecting it to look like a war zone, but it did.

It started with one case, then progressed slowly to two, then three, then suddenly twenty, fifty, and then there were hundreds. As cases climbed, chaos in the emergency room did as well. I had never seen it like this in my ten years as an ER nurse. Patients were spilling out of the rooms and into the hallways, strangers were sharing beds and passing oxygen masks back and forth, and doctors and nurses weren't going home at all, catching a few hours of sleep in the hospital waiting rooms or in their cars between codes. It was like a war zone.

A little nurse comes up to us as soon as we walked in through the doors and helped him into a wheelchair. "Hi my name is Anne," she says. "I'm going to be your husband's nurse for a while."

I nod a little, barely hearing what she is saying through her mask, face shield, and hazmat suit. Soon she's throwing a mask over my face and forcing me into a gown as well, saying

something about protecting me, too, and I just nod again. She wheels him into a room and helps him into a bed. There's another patient in a stretcher right next to it which she seems to ignore. She's saying something to my husband, soothing him as she helps him put a mask on his face.

“What's his name?” she asks, much louder, so obviously her question is directed at me.

“Allen,” I say quietly. “He's fifty-three.”

“And yours?”

“Tammy.”

“Okay, Tammy, I'm just getting Allen hooked up to some oxygen to help him breathe and then we'll get the doctor in here okay?” I nod slowly, still not really taking it in. “He already had a positive test?”

“Yes,” I say quietly.

“And you?”

“Negative, yesterday.” I see through all her protective gear that she's smiling, her eyes go up a little and she nods.

“Good, let's keep it that way, so keep those masks and stuff on okay?” I nod again. She leaves the room and I try not to look around at the other patients in the room.

I had just admitted a new patient. A 53-year-old man named Allen, here with his wife Tammy. I could tell by looking at him that it was going to be a rough shift; he was pretty far along already. His wife looked terrified, so I tried to use my calmest “nurse voice” when talking to her, even though I could feel my own anxiety level rising.

On my way to grab one of the doctors in the ER, I grab everything I can think of that I might need: IV tubing, intubation supplies, an IV pump, saline flushes, and more. I also take note of the location of a code blue cart. Recently, we've had three to five carts at once when we used to only have one and they migrate around the unit as needed.

"Dr. James!" I shout as soon as I see him. His medical student is trailing behind him, scribbling notes furiously. He stops walking as I catch up with him. "I got a new patient, COVID positive a few days ago, coughing up blood, high fever, already on 100% non-rebreather mask with only an 85% pulse ox."

Dr. James nods slowly as he processes this. "Okay I'll be right there okay?" he says. I nod and start my way back to Allen's room. As soon as I get closer though I know something is wrong.

I stood there in the doorway for only a moment before I slowly made my way over to the bed where my husband lay.

"Tammy," he whispered as I got closer. I nodded vigorously and took his hand in mine.

"I'm here, Allen," I said, trying to muster all the courage I could into my voice. "I'm here. It's going to be okay."

He nodded a little but I could tell he was struggling to breathe even with the mask on. We sat in silence for a few moments before he started gasping and alarms above his head started ringing.

I hear the alarms ringing and feel my feet running before I can even register it. I run into Allen's room, pulse oxygen is reading 80% and dropping, he's leaning forward in bed, struggling to breathe. Tammy is clinging to him and sobbing.

I stick my head out of the room and see Dr. James, his medical assistant, and other nurses running to help, all looking exhausted and some covered in blood. Dr. James is at the head of the bed pulling off the frame and shouting directions to his medical student and the respiratory therapist.

"What's happening??" I hear Tammy screaming as everyone else swarms around her, pulling at her husband's clothes, pushing him back in the bed.

"We have to put a tube down his throat to help him breathe, ma'am," Dr James says. He usually has excellent bedside manner, but I can hear the exhaustion and slight panic in his voice.

"Why? What's happening?" Tammy just screams again, refusing to let go of her husband, still clinging to him, making intubation much more difficult.

"I need you to step aside for a minute, ma'am—we're trying to help him," Dr. James says. But she won't move, and I don't know what else to do, so I wrap my arms around her shoulders and physically pull her away from the bedside. Dr. James and the respiratory therapist immediately get to work.

"It's okay," I attempt to whisper in Tammy's ear. "It's going to be fine, they're just helping him breathe a little better. It's going to be okay." I hope she can't feel my body shaking and the tremble I feel in my voice as I watch his oxygen saturation drop even lower.

I don't know what's happening, all I see is doctors rush in and shove a tube down Allen's throat. Nurse Anne is holding me tight, feeling sturdy against me. I cling to her for any sense of grounding. She whispers in my ear that it's going to be okay and I believe her. It's hard, but I do. She seems calm and like she knows what she's doing. So I leave my husband's side and cling to her, the only stable thing in the room.

He's intubated without problem but only seconds after the tube is in and hooked up, I see the flat line. The alarm screams inside my head, one I now hear in my sleep. I let go of Tammy and rush over to the bed. It's too high off the ground for me to do compressions, so I jump up on the bed next to him and start. My whole body is shaking and despite the screeching alarms, all I hear is my own heartbeat in my ears,.

"Code blue!" people immediately start screaming and the cart appears seconds later. Dr. James is shouting out commands and staff is everywhere. While I'm doing compressions, I look over and see Tammy, practically cowering in the corner.

"Tammy, it's going to be okay," I shout over everyone else. I pause compressions for a moment to grab the pads from the nurse to my right and throw them on his chest. "Talk to him, Tammy," I yell. "Let him know you're here."

I climb off the bed and start charging the defibrillator.

Any grounding I had felt was gone in an instant. Alarms were going off and nurse Anne had left my side, jumped up on the bed and started CPR.

CPR.

Which meant his heart had stopped.

I have never seen so many people in the same room or moving that fast. I back up into the corner, partly out of fear but also to get out of the way. It's a flurry of activity for a moment, but also feels like I'm moving in slow motion. When I hear Anne shouting at me.

She's telling me to talk to him.

What good will that do? I automatically wonder but she shouts it again, more urgently this time. I take a few tentative steps forward as Anne jumps off and attaches the shock pads to him.

"Allen?" I say quietly, questioning it, but I look up and lock eyes with Anne who nods.

"Allen I'm here okay?" I say a little louder, "I'm here with you and it's going to be okay!"

"CLEAR," nurse Anne shouts.

A huge jolt overtakes my husband's body.

We got him back after one shock. The medications most likely slowed his heart too much or he vasovagaled while being intubated. Whatever it was he was back. Dr. James starts throwing orders in the computer while the other nurses and I start to clean up and get the crash cart out of the room. Tammy is trembling in the corner again, the defibrillation definitely was shocking for her.

I turned to look over to my charge nurse, “Can you get him settled for me?” I ask and gesture toward Tammy. He nods and starts to put a hospital gown on Allen while a few other nurses start getting his bed fixed up.

“You okay?” I ask. I know this is a stupid question, because of course she’s not okay. So I don’t wait for her to answer. “You did great, you know?”

“Why did you tell me to talk to him?” Tammy asks. She’s trembling so she lets me guide her over to a chair next to Allen’s bed. “I was just trying to stay out of the way.” Anne is quiet for a long moment, looking lost in deep thought.

“There’s a lot of good research that shows that people come back from a code better and faster when their family is there and they know it,” I say. “I know it’s hard, and it was a lot to ask of you in a bad moment so I’m sorry about that. But you did great. And he’s okay.”

She looks over at him in the bed and reaches for his hand, but hesitates.

He definitely looks better now. More relaxed and not hungry for air. But he also looks small compared to the large hospital bed. He looks fragile with all the wires and tubes that are now connected to him that are keeping him alive. Anne says she had me talk to him because they can hear you when they’re like that. I like to think he heard me and that’s why he came back.

I vaguely hear Anne talking, like we’re under water. I reach for him but hesitate, thinking about how fragile and small he looks. Anne stops talking and now she’s looking at me.

She starts taking off her gloves and takes my hand in hers, “Oh you don’t have to...” I start, “You shouldn’t expose...” I try again but seem unable to keep my thoughts straight and Anne shushes me. She takes my hand under hers and guides it up to Allen, right on his chest, right on his heart. I suck in an inhale, expecting him to fall apart under my touch.

“See?” I hear Anne say, “He’s not going to break. He already proved how strong he is.”
She removes her hand but I leave mine, feeling the comforting, steady heart beat under my hand.

I get up to walk out of the room. Allen’s good for now and he has Tammy. As I reach the door I hear, “Wait.” It’s small and quiet. I turn to see Tammy standing up now resting her head on her husband’s shoulder, rubbing his chest soothingly. “Thank you,” she whispers.

All I do is nod. I hear this all the time, at almost every shift. But something behind her voice makes my breath catch a little, like there’s a lump in my throat threatening to burst

But I push it back down and smile. “Of course,” I say. “I’ll be back if you need anything.” Tammy nods at me, then closes her eyes, leaning on Allen.

I turn to leave this room and do it all over again in the next one.

About the author: **Alison Shely** is a nurse practitioner, nurse coach, and nurse content writer who specializes in articles, guest blogging, and healthcare worker wellness. She has been in nursing since 2014, working in intensive care, women’s health, and primary care as a registered nurse and family nurse practitioner. She has written for a variety of publications, including [Rncareers.org](https://www.rncareers.org). Her specialty topics include mental health, health and wellness, yoga philosophy and practice, and community health. She also serves as a health coach and mentor to other nurses and healthcare workers concerning healthy lifestyles and mental health. Visit her website for coaching details and other writing samples: npcoachalison.com