

MAGNETIC RESONANCE

Background

June Alexander is 63-years-old and was born in Jamaica. She settled in London in the 1950s and has multiple myeloma. June spent most of her working life as a hospital 'domestic' (a cleaner). She received her diagnosis, treatment and much of her subsequent care in the same hospital where she had worked. June is an active member of her Pentecostal church and finds a spiritual meaning in her pain, believing that suffering brings her closer to god.

I am here. I am still here.

Dear, sweet Jesus, Lord, I am relying upon you alone for my deliverance.

Whatever is your will let it be done. I am in your hands Lord. I am prepared.

'Mrs Alexander?' the radiographer's voice smiles through June's concentrated reading. June pushes the leaflets back into her bag and follows the young woman along a startlingly bright corridor, deeper into the hospital. June has seen her many times before in the hospital. She had a baby two years ago and returned to work six months later with a short, no-nonsense bob.

The radiographer explains what will happen during the scan and takes June to see the scanner. The giant white capsule stands alone in the room. A small dark portal in its very centre is the only clue to its use.

'It's like a sepulchre' June murmurs under her breath.

As Gita leads June to the small changing room, June wants to ask the radiographer about her baby. Did she have a boy or a girl? How is she finding motherhood? But she knows that she cannot ask. Gita is seeing her for the first time.

Undressed and wearing a pale-blue cotton gown, June lies on the platform at the entrance to the scanner with Gita standing by her side. Her nervous laugh echoes throughout the room.

'I'll be all right. Although I did make mention to the doctor, that I don't like feeling closed-in'.

'I know Mrs Alexander. I saw that in your notes. Let's just start and see how we go, OK?'

'All right Dear. Let's see.'

June closes her eyes and prays as the machine swallows her headfirst. She knows that she will have to learn to live in this new place of morbid sensuality, until the uncertainty, fear and unrelenting intrusion feel like home. She fights to control every instinct in her body that wants to expand, flail, scream, anything that will reclaim some movement and space.

Her ability to repress any outward signs of resistance and to push them deep into the very marrow of her bones is far from new. It is more of a habit that has become deeply ingrained, almost natural. It is how she has survived, although June has never been entirely sure of its worth. In these tight moments she wonders what happened to the hard balls of fear, anger and hurt that she has buried deep inside herself.

As June adjusts to the darkness inside the machine, shafts of purple and red noise hammer their way through the chamber. Her senses flounder. She becomes disoriented, disassembled. Entombed with no place to run, her thoughts begin to spin. Just underneath the surfaces of her skin, displaced fears are pulled into alignment.

MAGNETIC RESONANCE cont.

Daughter. Niece. Cousin. Aunt. Wife. Mother. Believer. Migrant. Hospital cleaner. Patient. June's mind races through a lifetime of disjointed events and comes to rest on a journey.

She had been a bright, hopeful twenty-seven when she had left Jamaica. 'It were rough. Very rough' is all she has ever told her children when they had asked about this time in her life. She remembers the bus when people would get up and sit somewhere else if she sat next to them. Some would even alight and wait for the next bus. She remembers the long search for rooms, the doors that were closed in her face. And she remembers going to a church. It had been her first Sunday in England. After the service the minister had approached her with a warm smile and asked her questions about herself, her family and where she had come from. He had seemed genuinely interested in the newcomer. And when the last of his congregation had left, he had continued to smile.

June was unprepared when he said, "Please, don't come back. It's nothing personal, believe me, but if you keep coming I am sure that some in my congregation will go elsewhere and I will lose them. I would love to have you here, but please don't come back."

"Beg pardon?" is all June could say, but she did not need a reply. With a bow of her head she found her legs and managed to walk away from the church with her head dizzy, but held high. It would be months before she went to church again.

All through those times, she had not fought back or shown her anger. She was to become agile in the silent erasing of hurt and of self. As the cold shock of attack turned to hotness in her cheeks, June learned to focus her attention on a distant horizon. Perseverance was everything. She had a family back home, people who had worked hard to raise the £24 for her boat ticket and who were looking to her with hope. She had to press along and wait for better days. There was no going back and so she had leaned on her father's words, "When you are stuck in a hole, pray."

Now, despite her efforts, June cannot concentrate or distract her mind with prayer. The scan has taken her on another unexpected journey. It is as if she is seeing and feeling herself for the first time and she feels a painful tenderness for the new-born hurt that has been pulled to the surface.

Far removed, in another room, behind a computer screen and a white coat, Gita's thoughts move between the illuminated surfaces and textures inside June's transparent body and the barest biographical details of June's life, summarised purely for medical purposes in her case notes. These movements between image and fragmented story touch the radiographer, even when she has tried to stay focussed upon the technical details.

As Gita images different slices of June's body, looking at it in cross-sections, lengthways, and in horizontal cuts, she cannot stop herself from thinking that which ever way you look at it, six children will soon be without a mother.

June takes her time in getting dressed. As she puts on her coat, Gita knocks on the door and enters the room. She is clutching something against her thigh that is stretching her long, slender fingers to their limit. She moves towards June, reverses her hand and holds up the image up for Jean to see. "This is my little boy, Amrit. Beautiful isn't he?"

TUTOR GUIDE

MAGNETIC RESONANCE

Suggested exercise

One way of using the story is to read Magnetic Resonance up until the penultimate paragraph, marked by * (or if you are using the sound file, play the audio recording of the story to that point).

Then ask students to complete the ending of the story themselves.

This is a technique that is used in narrative medicine. It is a simple, but powerful way to help students to get closer to the story and the worlds of the two characters – June Alexander and the radiographer, Gita.

Ten minutes is usually enough for this part of the exercise. When everyone has finished writing, students can share their stories in pairs or you can ask for volunteers to read out their writing, asking the wider group for their thoughts of what they have heard. Then read the case story ending and invite more discussion.

Magnetic Resonance is a story about how illness, its treatment and dying can bring up memories and difficult emotions for some people, perhaps experiences they have not even talked about to their loved ones. You can use the story to think about and discuss:

- how experiences of racism and other forms of social exclusion can be experienced as pain (you can use references from the neuroscience research on social pain from the Case Stories website to examine these issues in greater depth)
- patterns of coping with painful and difficult experiences in a person's life
- how faith can affect the meanings and experience of an illness
- difficult experiences of everyday care technologies
- how professionals cope with their own feelings and their closeness to the pain of others