

# Lawrence of Arabia



Life  
Books

A true story about living  
and leaving with dignity.





My name is Michael Lewis. I am a therapy aide at the day care hospice.

My duties involve helping patients make the most of their physiotherapy sessions by strengthening and assisting them physically and emotionally through palliative care.

I started as a volunteer in the hospice in 2011. I joined as a staff in 2015. In this time, I have seen the dance of life and death from up close.

People come to a hospice like ours when they are certain that whatever is ending their lives cannot be stopped. And I have been asked if the time and energy we spend on these patients, who may not have much time left, is worth it.

My answer is always the same: it is more precious than all the gold in the world.



Patients need to know that every second of their lives matter. And I want to make sure that through palliative care, they can live their lives to the fullest, even until the very end.

Let me tell you a true story that might help you understand why.





I remember it like it was yesterday.

It was on a bright afternoon in June 2015, that Mr. Lee was brought to us. Mr. Lee had terminal stage cancer of the brain.

He was a very tall, handsome man. And the former Chief Financial Officer of a very successful company. The disease had taken its toll.

His tall frame was now just skin and bones. And his once brilliant mind now closed to even the simplest of stimuli.

Mr. Lee was accompanied by his devoted wife. And his two grown-up daughters and their husbands. I could see the pain in their eyes. I imagined him to be a firm but loving husband and father. The once mighty patriarch was now a shadow of his former self.

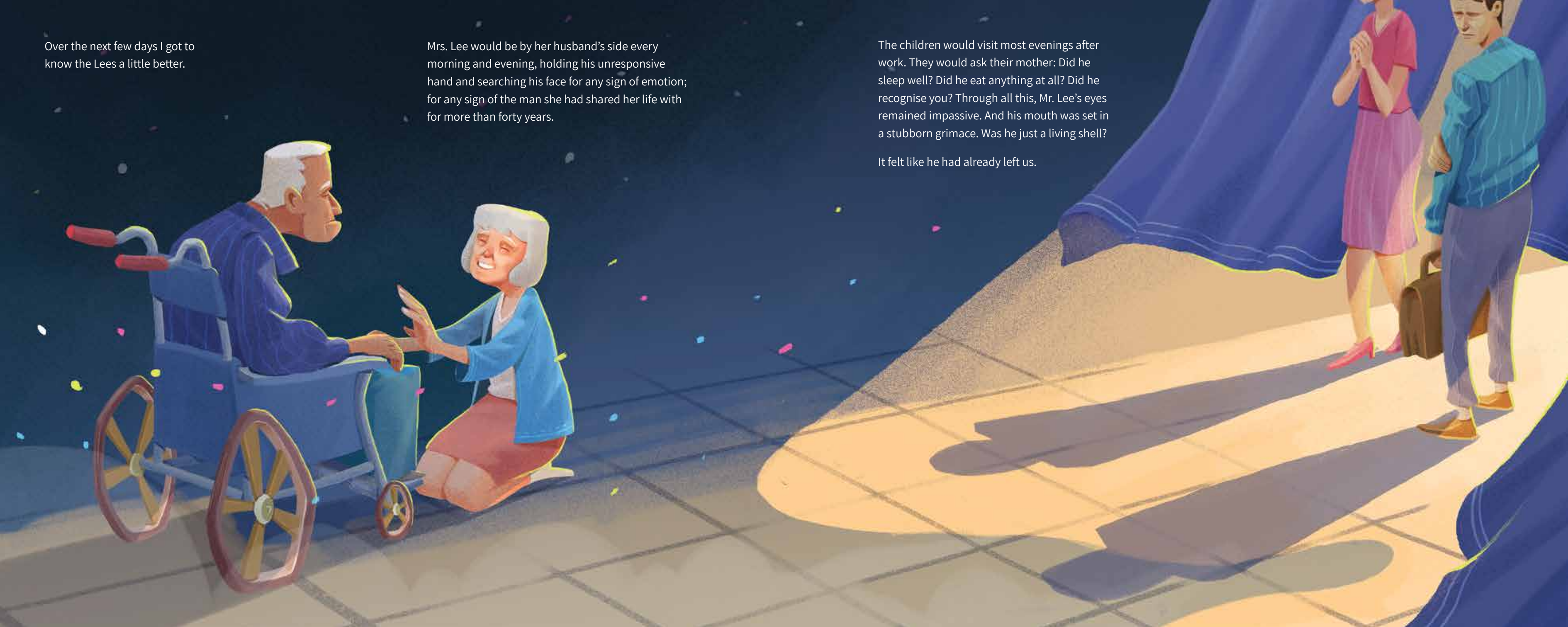


Over the next few days I got to know the Lees a little better.

Mrs. Lee would be by her husband's side every morning and evening, holding his unresponsive hand and searching his face for any sign of emotion; for any sign of the man she had shared her life with for more than forty years.

The children would visit most evenings after work. They would ask their mother: Did he sleep well? Did he eat anything at all? Did he recognise you? Through all this, Mr. Lee's eyes remained impassive. And his mouth was set in a stubborn grimace. Was he just a living shell?

It felt like he had already left us.





As I conducted physiotherapy on Mr. Lee,  
I would chit chat with Mrs. Lee.



And from her I learnt that Mr. Lee used to be an avid ping  
pong player. That his guilty pleasure was sugar butter toast.

And that at company events he was the soul of the party. His closest  
friends used to call him Lawrence of Arabia. He had even dressed up  
as the historical character on more than one occasion.



There was something in me that needed to connect with Mr. Lee. I started talking to him as I went about my work.

“Mr. Lee, would you like to play ping pong again?”

It was a one-sided conversation.

“Mr. Lee, how about we eat some sugar butter toast?”

“Mr. Lee, tell me about your company parties.”



But then one day that week,  
something overcame me.

I walked into Mr. Lee's room, looked  
straight into his blank eyes, and said,

“Hey, Lawrence of Arabia!”

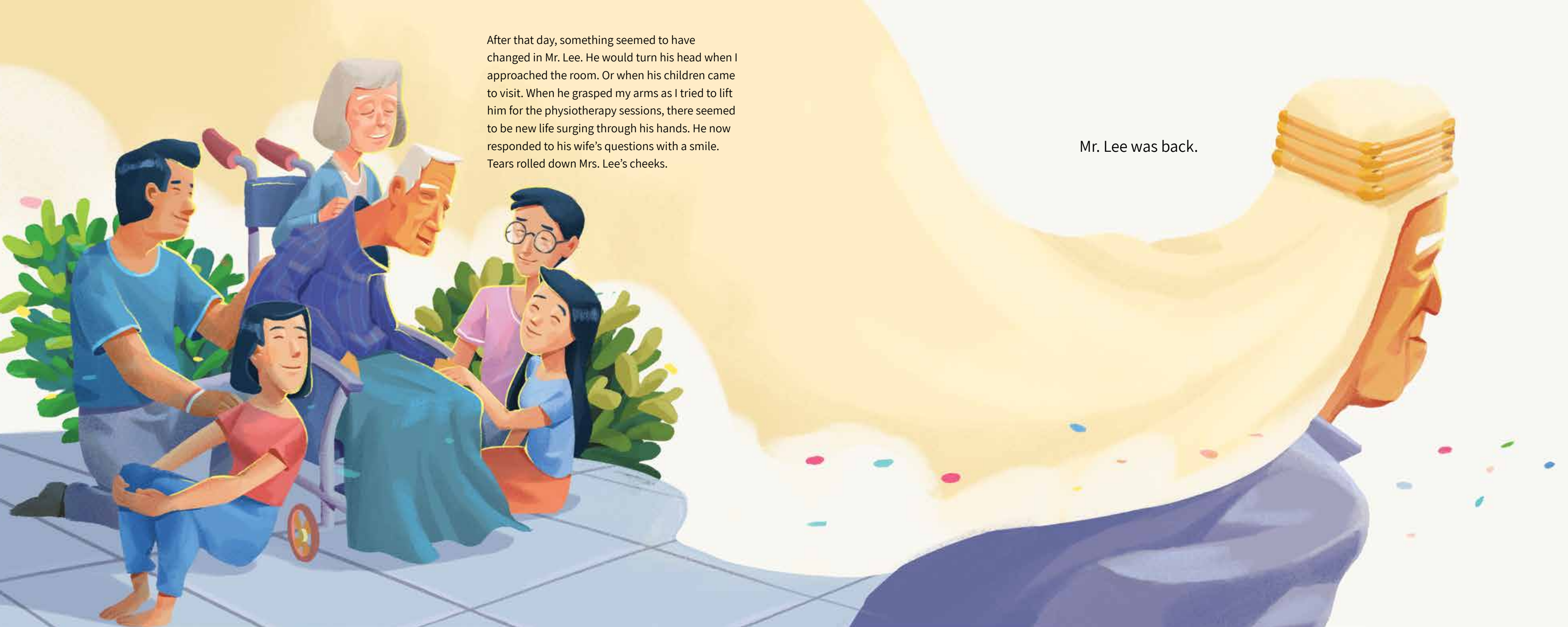
I felt my heart skip a beat as Mr. Lee's eyes flickered with life.  
They seemed to grow brighter and bigger. And his lips curled up  
into the smallest of smiles. He seemed to will me to go closer to  
him, and as I did, he struggled to read my name on my uniform.  
I introduced myself to him. And he nodded the slightest of nods.





After that day, something seemed to have changed in Mr. Lee. He would turn his head when I approached the room. Or when his children came to visit. When he grasped my arms as I tried to lift him for the physiotherapy sessions, there seemed to be new life surging through his hands. He now responded to his wife's questions with a smile. Tears rolled down Mrs. Lee's cheeks.

Mr. Lee was back.







Mr. Lee left us not long after that. Brain cancer is a very exacting foe. But what his wife and children remember most about his sickness is not the pain or the sleepless nights.

They remember the week when Mr. Lee came back from wherever he had gone inside himself. They remember the moments, even if it was very brief, when the loving husband and father had recognised and reciprocated their love.

This was the first time I realised the power of palliative care. It taught me that no matter how tough the day is, tomorrow is always a new day.

I think of Mr. Lee often.

Brain cancer had taken away his body and his mind, but it could not take his dignity away.

He had lived before he left.





## Why palliative care?

Besides therapists like Michael, palliative care is provided by a multidisciplinary team consisting of doctors, nurses, social workers, counsellors, and trained volunteers.

They bring comfort and support to patients and their family members by caring for them physically, emotionally, psychologically, socially, and spiritually.

Patients choose palliative care to focus on their quality of life in the time that they still have. It is not to give up living. Palliative care services are available as home care, day care, inpatient care, and consultative services.

If we are to spend our final days with dignity and the least possible pain, we must plan ahead and make our decisions known when we are able to with sound body and mind.

## About Singapore Hospice Council

Established in 1995, Singapore Hospice Council (SHC) is a registered charity and an Institution of a Public Character (IPC). We are an umbrella body representing organisations that actively provide hospice and palliative care in Singapore.

SHC is committed to improving the lives of patients with serious life-limiting illnesses and to giving support to the loved ones of these patients.



The e-copy of the book can be downloaded at [library.singaporehospice.org.sg](http://library.singaporehospice.org.sg)

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Reprinted Mar 2020, May 2022

ISBN (Softcover): 9789811188374

ISBN (E-book): 9789811188398

Created by BLKJ. Illustrated by Tran Dac Trung.

Special thanks to the volunteers who have helped make this book possible and to the contributors from Assisi Hospice.



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