

MY FATHER'S DOCTOR

By Jennifer Chianese

It was unusual for the evening news to be on the television in my apartment. I doubt that I was actually watching it that August evening in the year 2000. More likely, I was mindlessly passing through the channels seeking an escape from reality. I was twenty-seven years old and had recently started the second year of a pediatric residency. My days and nights were relentlessly busy and stimulating, punctuated by medicine's excitement and challenges, the sadness of chronic illness and death, and the refreshing joy of resilient and exuberant children. But the picture on the television screen alerted me to a sad tale and transported me to the reality of my past.

It was the same picture that hung on my family's refrigerator fifteen years earlier. The picture was clipped from a newspaper article and it depicted the young, smiling Dr. Katherine Rhodes (name changed to protect identity). I remembered the accompanying article well - it stated that she had graduated second from her class at a prestigious medical school and it announced her appointment as the first female chief in her surgical subspecialty. She was on the news that summer evening because she had killed her elderly parents.

Seventeen years earlier, her smiling and self-assured face was a beacon of hope for my young and frightened parents, who had recently discovered that my thirty-seven-year-old father's worsening back pain was due to renal cell carcinoma. Dr. Rhodes was to perform the surgery that would remove the primary tumor. My father was an optimist, at least that was the attitude he projected to me. Clearly she had the credentials. He put his faith in her to get the job done. Ten years old at the time, I knew there was no such thing as a unicorn but it would not take much evidence to open my mind to the possibility. While I could sense the word "metastatic" changed my mother's tone, I was taking my father's lead on this one.

Because my father had come from a family in which it was culturally indoctrinated that women had lower status than men, one might have expected him to have a less enthusiastic response to a woman physician. On the contrary, the fact that she was a woman brightened the dark and frightening road that lay ahead of us. Unlike other men in his family, none of who, including himself, were professionals, he had high hopes for his two daughters. Having not gone to college himself, he had already been planning the trips we would take together to choose the university at which I would study. She was proof that even this challenging career was possible. She offered the opportunity for us to observe firsthand how a woman could navigate the path of a physician.

As a ten-year-old keenly aware of fairness, it was clear to me my parents evaluated and treated her differently, albeit more generously, than her male counterparts. They noticed and discussed what she wore on the days she met them in her office and compared it to her hospital attire. They praised the compassion in her bedside manner. My father sent her flowers on the day of his surgery to optimize her state of mind. He addressed her by her first name. He said it with adoration but, still, the lack of

respect had my preteen body sinking in my chair, covering my face in embarrassment. “*Daaad, she’s a doctor, not a waitress.*” He noticed a picture of her on a sailboat in her office, discovered that sailing was a hobby of hers and encouraged her to take time off from work to go sailing. One morning during rounds, he was concerned by how pale she looked and probed her with questions until he determined that she had the flu. He was in awe of her dedication but concerned for her health and well-being, and did not miss the opportunity to review this aloud with me.

In fact, he had reviewed every stage of her education and career with me, after interrogating her. Although I tapped my foot impatiently, crossed my arms, and rolled my eyes through these lectures, I admired her, too. I remember speaking with her only once. She said, “this is a difficult time for your parents. You need to be on your best behavior.” I took her words very seriously. How could I be better? I felt guilt for times I had been sullen or talked back to my father. Increasingly, I found myself frustrated, angry, and, sometimes, even embarrassed by my father. He was not the man I used to know. He wore compression stockings. There was a scar two-thirds of the circumference of his abdomen. He had become thin and frail. He was mad at us for details he never before noticed - the way we watered the plants, cleaned the yard, set the table for dinner. And he was in pain. He became gripped with spasms of pain, silently clenching his jaw, but sometimes, audibly battling what I understood to be a beast dividing and conquering, spreading from his kidney, working its way up into his liver and around his spine. He winced and contorted his body, crying out and sometimes screaming as though an invisible warrior was bludgeoning him.

Just half a year prior, my strong and vigorous father sat next to me on a chairlift. I watched with horror as one of his skis released from his boot and dropped to the slope below. My worried face turned to his laughing blue eyes. He chuckled, “Don’t worry. It’ll be fine.” My mind set in motion, trying to figure out how we would get him off the chairlift, down the mountain, get his ski. . . . He sat back and took in the “beauty of the day, the sun shining and the reflection off the white snow. Wow, look at that guy’s form! What a jump!”

Blah, blah, blah. I was accustomed to this. He always did this. Trying to pass his positive outlook on to me, teaching me some future life strategy, “live in the moment,” blah, blah. . . . while I did something useful and kept an eye out for ski patrol. When it was time to dismount from the chairlift, to my surprise, he gracefully skied off the lift on one ski, continued down the mountain until he found his other ski, clicked it back on and finished his run. That was about as frightening as life got for me prior to his illness, and he seemed to have it all under control.

A year later, cancer controlled him and our lives. My parents came to accept that there were no more clinical trials for which to qualify; chemotherapy and radiation treatments were prolonging the pain. He grew more withdrawn and I dearly missed the engaged, spirited father I had known. It was my job to give him his medicine when I returned from school each day. I barely recognized the jaundiced and trembling hands that accepted the pills but knew they were the hands that had once learned to play the notes of *Heart and Soul* alongside mine on the piano. As he told me many times, he never had the opportunity to take piano lessons when he was a child. It remained unspoken how much he wanted that and so many other opportunities for me.

The week he died, he was in the hospital with my mother while we stayed with family near our home at the Jersey Shore. We attempted to distract ourselves, spending time at the boardwalk. The amusement park at the boardwalk was a place full of some of my happiest childhood memories. There was the ice cream, the rides, the booths with giant stuffed toy prizes, and the excitement of

people everywhere. I recall once seeing my father stop as we were walking in a throng and flash a big smile towards a small crowd who had similarly stopped to look at him. Confused and slightly embarrassed as others started to push around us, I asked him what he was doing. He responded, "Well, those people are looking at me like they remember me from somewhere. I don't think I know them, but I'm going to give them my best smile and see what comes of it." Being a shy person, I was uncomfortable. Within minutes, we were talking to these folks, discovered that they didn't know him, and left them having had a warm interaction, feeling like we made new friends. Just as he helped me to move beyond my comfort zone with meeting new people, my father accompanied me on rides, stretching my limits in terms of my fears and risks I was willing to take. For me, it did not take much. The Ferris wheel was among my most feared rides due to the heights when it reached its peak. I recall moving to the floor of the carriage clinging to my father's leg, while he rubbed my head, encouraging me to enjoy the view.

My most salient memory of the boardwalk the week he died is of a roller coaster, one that I had previously been too frightened to ride. It was the highest one with the steepest drops. It swooped out over the Atlantic Ocean, with the sound of the waves crashing against the dock below. It was an old, rickety roller coaster that rumbled shakily, but roared ferociously along its tracks when it picked up enough speed. Perhaps, had life gone differently, this would have been the summer that my fears of its height and instability would transform to the giddy thrill experienced by a preteen, suffused with the false belief that I had survived a near-miss with death. I was not to experience that trajectory. This summer I sought the heights to which it climbed, the views that rendered my life and my sorrows less significant. I sought its instability and the peace in the dream that it could plunge to the ocean below. After weeks of maintaining my composure for others, I looked forward to uninhibited screaming in a place where such behavior was culturally sanctioned. My bellowing sobs were lost in the roller coaster's calamitous roar as it dropped precipitously, my cries drowned by the shrill screams of others. I wept for my father, his insurmountable pain, his young body invaded by disease, his dreams vanquished. Just as my father's death was imminent and inescapable, the cart climbed peaks it was predetermined to descend. It violently lurched around turns, leaving behind the vision and hopes my father had for my future. I wept for the emptiness that I anticipated in my life after his death.

In the hours left before my father died, life continued to feel like that roller coaster ride, and I was nauseous and dizzy with grief. When my mother returned home to tell us of his death, it was as though the cart finally let go of the tracks and plunged into the ocean below. The cacophony of amusement park sounds faded and I felt the abrupt shock of the cold water and its impact. Though I knew it was coming, the pain was searing and worse than I expected. Then came the quiet and the darkness. The bottom of the ocean enveloped me.

On medical school interviews eleven years later, my experience with my father's illness inevitably came up. There were no physicians in my family. I knew what I knew of medicine from the physicians I had observed caring for my father. What I had come to admire was their knowledge, their ability to make sense of the chaos that had encroached upon our lives. In the end, we valued most the doctors who communicated compassionately and clearly with us and who acknowledged the extent of his pain and addressed it with all of the tools available to them.

Though I knew I did not want to be a surgeon, Dr. Rhodes' influence on my decision to go into medicine was profound. After my father's death, when I finally looked up from the bottom of the ocean and noticed the sun was shining and it was a beautiful day for a swim.... *"Yeah, I know Dad,*

blab, blab, blab, blab...”, the picture of Dr. Rhodes, once on our refrigerator and then in my scrapbook after his death, was among the buoys that kept me afloat and gave some direction to my life after his passing. It reminded me of the conversations I had had with my father, of the potential he saw in me. And while I would have much preferred to have him on the journey with me, somehow he had given me enough to do it without him. While some of my youthful resilience and exuberance was lost, my tenacity grew with the intention to finish what had been started.

In my apartment that summer evening during residency, when I first found out about the tragic events in Dr. Rhodes’ life, I tucked the information away with all the other painful stories I collected on a daily basis, knowing I could not process its significance at that time. It had been years since I last thought of her, and I had since found so many new role models to emulate. I would grieve her unraveling in my own time.

Through the years, the many sorrows of my work got bundled together and I periodically grieved them in chunks, when time allowed. There were the children who lost parts of themselves and their childhood to chronic illness, the families who lost their children to unexpected tragedies, the children who died after courageous battles with disease. I also grieved what happened to some of my colleagues. There is a higher incidence of mental illness among physicians than the general population, and I suspect that the intimacy with sadness without the space to grieve contributes. I worked closely with another physician who suffered from depression, who I tried to help, but she also went on to kill her mother. I have known two physicians who committed suicide.

Dr. Rhodes was about the same age as my father when he was her patient. I wonder how it felt for her to remove the tumor on a young man, knowing that, at best, it would only add a few months to his poor prognosis. I wonder if and how she grieved his death. A year after he passed away she retired from her practice as a surgeon and moved to a Caribbean Island. Perhaps she was able to go sailing more, as my father had hoped for her. The defense attorney argued that she suffered from chronic depression and the murders were the result of a bout of psychosis. A voice told her to kill her parents. She was admitted to a state psychiatric facility and eventually released to live on her own, her depression declared in remission.

I am forty-two years old now with two children of my own. My work is fulfilling and I am happy with my choice and the path I have taken to become a pediatrician. My children are central in my life and I am enthusiastically present in theirs, much in the way my father was in mine. My father might have steered me away from my career as a physician had he seen the turn of events in Dr. Rhode’s life, concerned that the pressure was too much for her. I would have reassured him that his passionate expression of love for his children created more of the same in me for my own children, and, for that reason, I would do everything necessary to maintain my emotional health.

It has been thirty years and I still grieve my father’s loss. Through the years and myriad of emotions that comprise grief, I occasionally feel anger towards him. One of my biggest and most loving supporters gradually withdrew, became less interactive, became less aware and then he was gone. It took my adolescent mind years to understand that this was not a reaction to me but a response to illness and impending death. For years I held out a hope that I would find a letter he left for me, some statement that he loved me and that he still believed in me, the way he did before he was ill.

It took having my own children and the experience of being a parent to find him again. I see him in the blue eyes of my son who flashes a smile at me during some daring stunt with a look that says

“Don’t worry, Mom, I’ve got this!”, reminding me of the look my Dad gave me on the ski slope. I have found him in myself when I help my daughter with soccer, trying to recall his methods for teaching me to be less timid, or when I advocate that her intellectual gifts not be overlooked due to her shyness.

It is only recently that I found his last living gift to me. One summer evening far from the ocean, as I was grappling with decisions of how best to balance my work schedule to accommodate the needs of my family and myself, I felt the wind kick up. I closed my eyes, tasted the salt in the air, and listened for the squawk of the sea gulls and the rhythm of the waves against the sand. And there it was in the wind that rushed through my hair and coiled around my ears - the whispers of our conversations about his beloved doctor, who he treated differently than all the others. I heard his reminders to balance my happiness with my devotion to work. I felt the compassion he had for Dr. Rhodes, the affection and fondness he projected onto her as he envisioned the daughter he would not see grow up but so wanted to be there to support.

Jennifer Chianese works as a general pediatrician with Bass Wolfson Pediatrics, affiliated with Children’s Community Pediatrics of the Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh. The experience of discovering dyslexia in her children was the impetus for her to begin writing. At first it was a tool for dealing with the emotions of struggling to find help for a disability neglected by educators, psychologists and doctors. She is hopeful that writing will become a means for speaking and advocating for her patients and all dyslexic children faced with the stress of inadequate education and diagnostic systems currently in place. In the midst of writing about dyslexia, the story “My Father’s Doctor”, which seems to have been buried for years, presented itself and demanded to be written.