

Learning About Death
Second Place Prose 2003

Clearly all patients die, but somehow that wasn't obvious to me when I started my training. During the first two years of medical school, the facts came at us with blistering speed and the answer to every question was either a, b, c, d, or e (including what to have for dinner). Then came the autopsy.

It was one of the many assignments in our physiology course. I was neither looking forward to it nor dreading it - just one more thing to do. A check box with the words 'attend autopsy' next to it, a vague sense of annoyance that this activity could not be neatly scheduled into my already too busy existence.

The pager went off and I headed to the morgue with my classmates. What I experienced there will be forever indelibly imprinted deep within me. As I entered the room, the first thing I saw was a naked dead woman my grandmother's age having her chest sawed open. I remember the curve of her hands draped off the gurney and the exact color of her chipped pink fingernail polish. I remember the smell of death and burnt bone that was so different from the formaldehyde stench familiar from gross anatomy. I remember wanting to leave or pass out or cry or vomit and expending absolutely all of my energy to do none of the above and pretend that the person lying there was just a body and an interesting learning experience and not a woman with a family who had been alive that morning. I remember that her name was Madeleine and being oddly disappointed knowing that I would never be able to use this name that I loved for any of my future children. I remember being so overwhelmed and underprepared that I considered leaving medical school for good that day.

Soon after came my dream. In it, I had to do a rotation on the death ward. To get there, I had to go through many sets of double doors. The halls were dark and deserted except for a lone, silent, stone-faced guard at the last set of doors. Beyond him was a brightly lit room (the same room where we had attended the autopsy) filled with many people working industriously. Someone opened a huge freezer on one wall and I saw rows and rows of heads and feet - dead people lying down, waiting for anatomy class. I fled back down the dark hall. In a room off the corridor, there were four beds with very sick, very old people sleeping. Some of them were in large plastic garment bags. Depending on how sick they were, the bag was placed at the bottom of the bed or it was up around the waist or at the neck of the person/patient. They all had very sweaty legs in their bags. A tall female doctor in a long white coat was working there. She was envious of me that I could leave and she could not.

After that, I became scared of even being in hospitals, which was problematic as an about-to-be third-year medical student. I was truly afraid of seeing dead people and was on the watch for them everywhere now that I knew there was a morgue in the basement. I remember my racing pulse and sweaty palms outside the gift shop in the lobby of the hospital when I spotted a stretcher with something on it covered by a white sheet, my relief when it turned out to be linens.

My first funeral. I remember sitting by the little girl's open casket with her doctor and hundreds of others, all of us crying. I cried for Madeleine, for me, for this girl and her family, for her doctor, and for my future patients who would die while I was their doctor.

Those patients have since been numerous and each has given me a gift in their passing. How to do a paracentesis, eight times in eight days. How to gracefully accept a gift of gratitude, to feel very uncomfortable that it was cash, and to buy a plant that I still have and to donate the rest to charity in the patient's name. How to open the window so a soul can leave. How to call a stranger in the night and tell them that their mother has died. How to teach students and residents to do these things well but to never neglect themselves the way I had at my first autopsy.

When my grandmother became gravely ill, I was a new attending and that dream from medical school came back to me. Only then, after many more years caring for many more patients, could I understand it. The doctor in that room had been me at the end of my training. Anxious and afraid. Would I be able to handle the immense responsibility of caring for dying patients? How was I going to balance seeing all this death with leading my own life? I found out when my grandmother died.

She was scheduled to have a CT-guided biopsy to get a tissue diagnosis for the mass on her lung. She had her IV in, the radiologist there and had actually climbed up on the table in her gown before she decided that she did not actually want a biopsy or any further treatment. She climbed back down, thanked everyone for coming, apologized profusely for taking up their valuable time, and went home. Then, after years of reminding my family that I was a doctor and in the hospital because that was where I worked and not because there was something wrong with me, suddenly I was the expert. My patients, in their own dying, had given me gifts to then give to my other patients and to my own family. During my training, I had gone from being terrified of death to being awed and comforted by its many blessings and celebrations. My nana died two months later in her own bed surrounded by family including my own infant daughter who loved to play with her oxygen tubing. Some of her last words were "Thank you all for coming."

Nana shared the end of her life with us. Out of respect for my medical education, she donated her body to a medical school. At the beginning of her death, I'm sure that she was someone else's 'attend autopsy'.

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