

What I Never Got to Tell You

By Michelle Silver

My greatest frustration is being too young to have formed an adult relationship with you before your untimely death; too young to appreciate what you were going through; too young to think of the questions I'm now dying to know the answers to. Now, sixteen years later, these are the stories I have experienced for you; the reasons I have grown because of you; the things I never got to tell you.

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As I remove my gloves on my way out of the hospital room, I catch him whimper out of the corner of my eye. He turns slowly as to not worsen the pain; eyes closed to forget while his body betrays him by releasing a sound of pure exhaustion. I find temporary solace in the minutes I spend with him each day addressing his symptoms, and the hours he spends each week with his wife when she visits. This gratitude is quickly overshadowed, however, by the even more hours he spends alone, staring out the window, whimpering. He is a 75-year-old man with lung cancer getting worse each day—just like you were. But I never saw you like this.

I quickly exit to make it to the bathroom before my tears come as I process, not only my first of many terminal patients as a doctor, but also one that hits so close to home. I think to myself: *you'll get better at this. You'll get used to these situations and stop being so emotional.* I am so overwhelmed by my inability to fix him that I distract myself with small details to keep going, such as his dose of pain medications and the liters of oxygen he needs. But this man never left the hospital—just like you didn't. And that visual never left me.

June 2020

Fast forward to the end of my intern year. I am, once again, facing a 75-year-old man with lung cancer who is getting worse each day. He has the exceedingly rare and difficult cancer that you, too, suffered from. Instead of managing the small details, I am faced with the task of advancing care. This means creating space to discuss the next steps in the context of his fatal condition.

The moment I walk into his room I am brought back to my patient from last year, and then brought back to you. No degree of planning prepared me for this visceral reaction. My rehearsed statements take a backseat as I think about the conversation I wish I had with you.

So, I listen.

I listen to him talk about his wife who loves to knit and his daughter who teaches middle school. I see him light up as he describes the ocean by his beach house and gestures to a pile of photos at his bedside, the first of which is his four-year-old granddaughter with her pail and shovel. I listen to him complain about how terrible the hospital food is, and how it tastes nothing like the burgers he makes at a family barbecue. I listen to how uncomfortable the bed is, and how the natural lighting in the room is blocked by the tree outside his window. I listen to him describe his exhaustion from struggling to breathe, and I hear the labored breaths. I listen as he asks me if I think he will get better.

I think of what you would have wanted to hear, and a story comes to mind.

It was the last time I visited you at home before you went to the hospital. Grandma laid out a bowl of freshly cut melon, one of the few things your stomach could palate. I asked if I could have a slice and saw a look of panic over her face as she reflexively screamed, “No! Your grandfather needs this.” You reply, “It’s okay, let our granddaughter have the last slice.” As I ate that sweet, fresh melon slice you gave a reassuring smile to let me know it was okay—that, despite my skepticism, you were okay. Now I see that you truly were okay; that you had come to terms with your reality in a way that would take me years to understand. And with this memory I look to my patient and tell him that he, too, will be okay. That his time may be limited but we will find a way for him to share his last melon slice with his granddaughter. He agrees, and we have our plan.

This conversation concludes the end of a long shift. As soon as I get home I am again in tears. This time, however, I recognize strength in these tears. I recognize the emotional perseverance that endured throughout the most challenging and demanding year of my life. I recognize the type of productive empathy I hope to keep for the remainder of my career.

And with this recognition, here’s what I never got to tell you:

I want you to know how graceful you were in your ability to smile and make the people you love feel secure in times of uncertainty. I want you to know how much I admire the way you prioritized spending time with your family. I want you to know my appreciation for your ability to see the big picture, particularly in the face of your own mortality. I want you to know it was okay to die. And, most importantly, I want to thank you for continuing to influence me for the better.

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