



An Old Friend

For Jocelyn

During my first year of medical school, I met an old friend whom I hadn't seen for years. One of my first patients, she was to teach me the most important lesson of my medical training; the magic of story.

The first semester had been full of lengthy, regimented, theory-laden lectures. The topics seemed irrelevant to the daily practice of medicine or to people's lives. I labored under the delusion that I could learn it all, or at least collapse valiantly trying.

As our training progressed, we inched closer to patients. Our textbook assignments and lectures gave way to case scenarios discussed in small groups. We met the patients only as anonymous adults or children referenced by age and gender. We knew nothing about their lives or who they were as people. One afternoon this all changed. Our small group was meeting for our scheduled pathology rounds, looking at the clinical presentations of disease through microscopes or on slides of preserved specimens. It was a beautiful, warm autumn day, and the wind was blowing the last of the leaves from the trees. I was daydreaming of being outside, perhaps going for a run, vaguely aware of the discussion going on in the background.

The Lava Lamp Lessons

Then the class turned to the last case study in our handouts. The patient was a 17-year-old female who had developed knee pain over a few days to weeks. She was diagnosed with osteosarcoma of the femur, one of the most common bone cancers in teens and young adults. Her leg was amputated at the hip in an attempt to save her life. Despite aggressive treatment, she died.

The story sounded familiar. In my thoughts, I was suddenly back at Kelvin High School in Winnipeg, Canada, during the autumn of 1979, my senior year. In the distance I saw the silhouette of a girl at her locker, sorting through her backpack and books. She turned, and I recognized the beaming face of Jocelyn Hutton, a slender brunette with an infectious smile and a magnetic personality. I had not thought of her in years.

The last time I had seen her was several months later, around Christmastime. She had been diagnosed with osteosarcoma. Her leg was gone. She was in a lot of pain, but her smile was just as unforgettable. She had told her father that she believed her vocation was to tell others that it's OK to die. She died a short time after our last visit. The home she lived in is now a hospice known as Jocelyn House, in a lovely, quiet neighborhood of Winnipeg.

Back in the classroom, I opened my eyes, and my attention returned to the slides.

“What year did this case occur?” I asked.

The instructor didn't know. “It must have been years ago,” she replied.

My classmates' banter quieted. A few glanced at me, then looked away. I felt a growing unease in the pit of my stomach, and my heart rate quickened.

An Old Friend

The patient's chest X-ray was displayed, showing lungs filled with a tumor that had spread from the leg cancer.

"What's the date on the X-ray?" I asked.

The instructor looked carefully and said, "1979."

The same year Jocelyn was struck by cancer.

I looked up at the screen once again and stared. The instructor advanced the slide projector, and a picture of Jocelyn's cancerous, amputated femur appeared on the screen. Some of my classmates, realizing that the images displayed on the screen had a connection with my past, bowed their heads. I continued to see Jocelyn's face before me as we filed out of the classroom.

I soon found myself out in the concourse by the seminar rooms. I sat by myself, but wasn't alone.

A few minutes passed, and then a classmate approached me. "Joel, who was she?"

"She was a good friend with a beautiful smile," I said.

The gift of Jocelyn's story opened my eyes to people's lives and their enduring legacies in a way my medical studies never did or could. It was a wonderful gift and a special blessing to have my life touched by her again. And I thought that's the best part of what old friends are for—and what stories are all about.



Sweet Corn

For my mom

Nine Lynwood Road is the address of the Old Farm where my grandparents lived in upstate New York, just outside of Peekskill. Just nine acres with a few old buildings and bungalows, the farm was surrounded by fields of sweet corn in the summer when we visited my mother's parents. Daily you could hear blasts from the guns in the fields that would serve to scare the crows. The sound would boom through the branches of that huge old Oak that canopied the house and gravel drive—old wooded yard chairs gathered in back by the open grill. Lazy hammocks hung about the tall grass. The old well was close by with the green pump that was always fun to push and pull under the vines and grapes that hung above. In the evening the grill would be lit and the sweet corn cooked over the fire that I tended as best as a nine-year-old could. When ready, the corn would be dripped in butter and salt. The meals were always relaxing—peaceful—as the corn slowly disappeared and vanished from sight.

I went back to the Old Farm a few years ago. The acres have since been split up by housing developments and partitioned by fences. I walked up the old driveway—the farmhouse with a new addition but otherwise unchanged. I saw the old water pump lying

The Lava Lamp Lessons

stripped in the bushes, paint peeling off. That old Oak stood still in the centre—wind blowing through the high branches. I went up and touched the trunk like I had done decades ago. A warm wind blew and rustled the memories and feelings of sweet corn a time long ago.



TV Ratings

My unlisted number rang yesterday. It was Mary from the Nielsen TV rating company contacting me to become a “Nielsen TV rating” family. I was contacted because I am “unique” and there is “no one else like me” who could give them the “information they need.”

I said “I’d be happy to help, although there’s one problem.” “What’s that?” she asked.

“I haven’t watched TV since February 1996,” I answered. “Oh,” she said, “...that is unique.”

She paused for a moment then added, “You know, I don’t watch that much TV either.”

Perhaps I’m not that unique after all.



Doggie~Laser~Lock

For Bailey and Paul

I set off recently on my daily walk with my smooth collie Teva. As we strolled down the back lane past my neighbor Paul's house, I was overcome by a sudden weakness—as if caught in some intergalactic tractor beam immobilizing my forward momentum. My gaze was slowly pulled up and to the left where the majestic figure of Paul's rough collie Bailey, Teva's best buddy, was overlooking and staring intently at us through the silver wire fencing enclosing the yard.

Teva stopped. I stopped. Bailey looked at Teva, Teva looked at me, and I looked back at Bailey.

I then began to feel the presence of the two mind-melding canine four-leggeds invading my neuro-synaptic clefts, depleting the neurotransmitter reserves and gaining control of the sodium-potassium intracellular pumps and ionic exchange pathways. Extracellular calcium and neuromuscular fibers began to have multi-system failures in both smooth and striated muscle integrity. Neuronal functioning at higher cortical levels impacting conscious intention became essentially nonexistent. With the complete

The Lava Lamp Lessons

breaching of the sensory and motor synaptic pathways and other multi-system failures, laryngeal spasms ensued followed by diaphragmatic tonic-clonic contractures. These slowly began to crescendo and grow in intensity until finally a critical threshold was exceeded and out shot from my oropharyngeal structures the sonic explosion of “*Come on, Bailey!*”

Bailey instantly darts toward the gate and soon is down the steps next to Teva as they both turn and trot down the back lane, side by side, toward the creek.

I eventually regain my composure and dutifully try to catch up to the two canine four-leggeds.

That Doggie-Laser-Lock will get you every time.