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A Piece of My Mind

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Separation Anxiety

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The typed letter in the ordinary business envelope arrived like any other, the depth of its impact anything but ordinary. "I would like to thank you for allowing me the privilege and honor of serving as your physician over the years," Dr S, my primary care physician, had written, and she went on "with a heavy heart" to inform me of her impending departure from her hospital-based practice. Pertinent details regarding physician coverage for continuity of care, including the name of the physician "replacing" her in the practice, were kindly provided. And she wished me the "very best in the future."

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Replaced. How is one’s physician, the one who listened, laid hands on, and made clinical judgments, the one entrusted with the intimate details of a life, actually “replaced”? I paused, letter in hand, trying to absorb the meaning of it all. I felt empty and adrift in a sea of sentimentality while chastising myself for such emotions, reminding myself that I teach medical students that physicians have a life too. About the balance between self-care and altruism. Maybe she needed to move for family reasons. Perhaps rumblings about financial instability at the hospital or a heavy patient load had worn her out. There’s a crisis in primary care, I know this. I let my mind off the leash—Aha! She’s gone to *find* herself in Europe. Gee, I hope she’s not ill. Been there, done that.

My prior internist, Dr C, had a small-town-doc demeanor in a hectic, anything-but-small-town practice. Rustling through my chart, he’d enter the examination room with rumpled white coat and salt-and-pepper hair that always appeared as if a trip to the barber shop was overdue. He was a busy guy but had an intensity of focus in the minutes we spent together that made me feel acknowledged and cared for. And thankfully, I guess I should say, I didn’t see him all that often—no puzzling diagnoses for healthy me, mostly routine, run-of-the-mill stuff. I do recall one episode, though, when I dragged my tired, sick body to his office after at least two weeks of coughs and extreme fatigue and more. He didn’t judge nor admonish, but his glance let me know I should have presented sooner. Working, four young kids, umpteen carpools, I shared, and his next glance was one of understanding and compassion—he prescribed medication that turned it all around and got me back on track. I liked Dr C. A lot.

So when I called to book my physical and learned he had passed away, it hit me hard. Yes, physicians die. My physician died. With an image of his healthy self fresh in my mind, the question rolled off my tongue: “Was it sud-

den?” “Pancreatic cancer,” the receptionist replied, “only a few months.” I wondered what that knowledgeable guy felt when he received that diagnosis. I thought of him administering to his patients while being betrayed by his own body. I pondered a caregiver’s life cut short and the loss of his wisdom in this world. “He was a good doctor,” I whispered into the telephone receiver. “Yes, he was,” was the reply.

I found Dr S and moved on. And I was fortunate—she was thorough but not mechanistic, engaging in conversation but not losing the forest for the trees. She was present. When I lost substantial weight in a relatively short amount of time, I headed right over to her office for a checkup. I had made significant dietary changes and beefed up my exercise regimen; still, the rapid rate of weight loss was spooky. “Your diagnosis is willpower,” Dr S informed after some tests and made my day. We laughed together at my next visit as her eyes widened at the weight comparison in my chart, celebrating the triumph of a middle-aged gal winning the battle of the bulge. She was tickled pink and it felt awfully good. Then, a few months later, I faxed her a copy of my published article on my healthy lifestyle changes—during my routine physical, we had discussed this life high as well as some other articles I’d written. No, it wasn’t an elementary school student rushing home with the “A” paper to show Mom. Rather, Dr S knew my body so well, maybe I just wanted her to also know my mind.

She’s not my physician any longer, that letter abruptly announced. What happens now to my life narratives, the written and the spoken, the less-than-flattering black-and-white transparencies of baby boomer messed-up body parts, the secrets I’ve shared? Could you please return to my life, Dr S, and not complicate my life? I didn’t even get to say thank you.

Intellectually, I know full well that practice shifts occur within medicine and that physicians retire and even die. But there’s the affective component as well. I have taught about and have experienced the sacred nature of the patient-physician relationship, and I contend the gravity of its loss cannot be denied. There’s the loss of that ease of trust, the structure, the known. And being faced with the need to start all over again. Perhaps it works both ways. Turning back the clock, I distinctly recall the “termination” process for my patient from my graduate school psychotherapy clinic when I completed

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