



*For Aliza and Liam  
And all future Story Keepers.*

*In memory of my grandparents and parents  
Who knew when to leave and where to stay.*

*“It is not a labour I chose, but rather one for which I was chosen by destiny as I near my journey’s end. I regard it, despite all its imperfections, as my masterpiece ... as an effort which is the culmination of a whole life dedicated to the search for truth.”*

*Henri Matisse*

# THE MAKING OF ME

I was the new doc in a small country town. I wanted to be accepted. I wanted to be respected. I tried so hard to do the best I could for all my new patients.

She was the town matriarch. She had multiple chronic illnesses. She had the power to make me or break me.

I had suggested that she see a specialist in the city. I wanted to make sure she was on the right treatment. I didn't know the specialist. I hoped that he would treat her well. I wanted his care to represent an extension of my care.

She came back to see me after the visit to the city. She was still on the same treatment.

I was keen to know how the specialist had treated her. I asked her about this.

She said that he was the best doctor she had ever seen.

I asked her why.

She gazed down at her hands. Pensive. Silent. She gently cupped her right hand in her left. She then slowly ran her left thumb over the tips of the fingers of her right hand. She appeared to be in a trance. She finally spoke, as she continued to explore her own hands as if for the first time, "Before he sounded my heart... he... he took my hands in his... and he... he just looked at my hands... for a really long time... it was amazing."

I was mesmerised.

For the last 30 years, her story comes back to me as I pause to look at my patients' hands before I examine the rest of their body.

I stand by the side of this person lying on my examination couch. I give them my full attention. I take their hands in mine. I look at their hands closely.

In silence.

Slowly. Respectfully. Intentionally. Methodically.

Every day, I am reminded of the matriarch's teaching of the sanctity in this moment of commune. To pause and connect prior to further laying on of hands.

I learn so much about my patients as we share this quiet moment.

I wonder what they learn about me.

I am grateful to the town matriarch.

I think she may have been the making of me.

# I'M LOSING MY PATIENTS

The blank death certificate sits in front of me. No matter where a life starts, where it journeys, the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death is the concluding punctuation mark on a person's medical narrative.

I approach the completion of the death certificate with reverence. My final task in the care of a patient. A moment to pause. Reflect. Say goodbye. To honour their life within the rigid confines of a bureaucratic document.

This ritual is becoming increasingly frequent.

My patients have been growing older with me. Despite medicine's advances and my best efforts, they are dying. It is their time.

I'm losing my patients.

Just last month, I lost three.

Lilly was an elegant matriarch. She was my oldest patient. Each of her frequent visits ended with her gently touching my arm and saying, "Bless you, Hilton". I had cared for her husband Don before his death. Now it was Lilly's turn. Her heart was failing. "I hope that one night I will go to sleep and wake up dead. Just like Don did". Her wish came true a few days ago. *Who is going to bless me now?*

Len had been a child throughout Germany's bombing of London. I had once ruined his Christmas by sending him to hospital to have a heart pacemaker inserted. He would have died without it. He wasn't ready for that. The pacemaker kept him going for another decade. Not always easy years. But, "Better than the alternative", as he often said. Len was a poet. Each visit to me was accompanied by the gift of a poem, "From when the muse was upon me". The last time I saw him he told me that he was feeling better than he had for years. Another gift. He woke up dead the following week.

Joe had been a postman during times when delivering the mail included many a garden path conversation. Even as his dementia progressed, Joe still enjoyed animated conversations. I loved how his disconnection with the present transported us to a simpler time. Until that gift too was snuffed out by dementia's relentless march.

I finish writing the death certificate. I pause and offer gratitude for the blessings, the poems, the conversations and all the other gifts my patients have shared with me.

I walk out to greet my next patient. The waiting room is full. Many familiar faces look my way.

I am troubled by a nagging thought.

A persistent pestering question.

*I wonder who will be next?*

# BEARING WITNESS

I had only ever seen one person die. I mean, really seen them die. Last gasp and all that. Thirty years of doctoring and witness to only one death. Until now. Now it is two.

Not that I'm some sort of demi-god super-doc whose patients never die. Of course my patients die. For some, I had the privilege of midwifing them on their final journey. For others, it was all too sudden and unexpected. But though I saw their struggle with life, I never saw them die.

For each of these, I tried to stem the tide, swim against the rip, keep my finger in the dyke, spit into the wind, push the shit uphill. But as my wise grandmother used to say, "*Mein lieber Gott vergisst niemanden.*" *My dear God forgets no one.* Despite my best efforts and the magic of modern medicine, Nature still has her victory in the end.

There were the timed and documented moments of death in hospitals. The failed resuscitations. But did I see these people actually die? I don't think so. They were already dead by the time the emergency pager went off. We could not bring them back to life. They were not Lazarus. We were not God. I did not witness them die. I saw them fail to rise. Doctors 0 – Nature 1. Again and again.

Rod Stewart was belting out 'The First Cut Is the Deepest' around the time I was cut by a last breath for the first time. I was on night shift, the solitary junior resident on a male medical ward. James Ward. Spit Alley, we called it. Full of public patients, NFR [not for resuscitation] veterans in the days when ANZAC diggers were still alive.

Then, I was a young sapling with no firm grounding in the bedrock of medicine.

I was scared. Shit scared.

At 6.00pm, they all go. The day staff. The senior residents. My fellow juniors. Leaving me alone with the nurses and with the enemy, our defensive moniker for the patients.

The pager bleats. An admission from Emergency. "We've got an old guy with anaemia. Probable bleeding ulcer. We're sending him up."

I enter the ward. Grab his file. Draw back the curtain which separates him from the 30 other inmates on James Ward. I am confronted by a ghost of a man, scarecrow hair, chest-length beard, pallid face, dinner-plate eyes. He greets me with a deep guttural moan. Reaches out a desperate hand. And dies. Despite all my training and the mythology of doctor as hero, there is not a damned thing I can do about it.

His final breath. My first death.

Thirty years later, I was witness to a second death. It was not a patient this time. It was my mum. I was with her on the palliative care ward. No longer a doctor pushing shit uphill, but a son assisting Nature to do her thing.

And Mum was remarkable. Such grace. Such dignity in her dying, just as in her life. She was ready to die. Not afraid of death. Exhausted after 20 years of treatment for breast cancer and then terminal ovarian cancer. She was sad to be leaving her family. But ready to go. Definitely ready to go.

She had said goodbye to her home. She had said goodbye to her friends. She had said goodbye to my sister who lived overseas and to all her grandchildren. She even said goodbye to her oncologist, who had walked with her for two decades. "I hope you don't feel that I'm letting you down by dying, after everything you have done for me."

I was blessed to be with her at the end. As her breath was transformed. From laboured grunting to soft sucking. Slowing. Easing.

Which was her final breath? The last inhalation? Or that explosive sigh a few moments later? It scared the life out of me as Mum's body relaxed completely for the first time in her life.

I sat and silently encouraged her to let go. Bearing witness to the end of a good life.

***In loving memory of Ray Koppe, 28/02/1935 – 24/09/2010***

***"Our Ray of sunshine, forever in our hearts."***