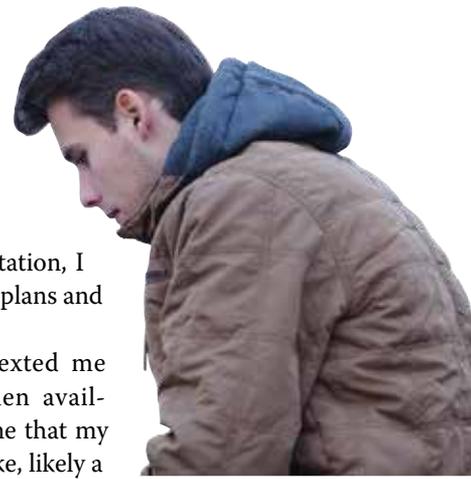


When home is far away



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“Hello, who is it?” my grandmother softly asked on the other end of the phone line. “It’s me, Grandma! David Jr.” A pause followed, “Are you not in Asia, *mijo*?” I began to laugh, as my global health trip began the following day. “No, I’m still here in Rochester and wanted to wish you a happy birthday!” My Latina grandmother not only loved talking with me on the phone, but she also enjoyed telling me about her good health, how she had been religious with her Warfarin dosing and INR checks. She was sharp for 92 years old. “I can’t wait to see you in eight weeks! I love you,” I closed.

It had been more than a year since I was home in West Texas. During that year, my life has had some profound alterations. I completed my intern year with great success, and broke off my engagement of almost two years. I struggled for months learning to stand with confidence on my own two feet as I coped with living alone again.

As time passed and the nights grew longer and the days shorter, a glimmer of brightness settled into my heart. I remained afloat amidst the hectic second year of residency. I was taking ownership of my patients during 28-hour calls. Though the hunger pangs for companionship gripped my chest without warning, my congenial and compassionate colleagues helped me to keep breathing.

During each demanding month or working holiday, I looked ahead to a reassuring thought: my first trip home in a year was now just a couple of months away. Home, where I would be near people who loved and supported me my entire life. I would have time with my only living grandparent. I would finally meet the children of my best friends, many whom I consider family.

As the airplane wheels left the ground toward Asia, I thought of that phone call with my Grandma, and a nostalgic heaviness crept up my spine. Tears filled my eyes; I missed home.

While in Nepal, news of the COVID-19 virus broke. The local hospitals immediately made preparations, and academic discussions took place daily during morning reports. Without consistent access to negative pressure rooms, hospital strategies were comprised of group isolation techniques with open windows to decrease spread of the virus throughout the center. Leaving Nepal after the month-long rotation and at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was uncertain of what to expect when I arrived back in Rochester, Minnesota.

The following month, my rotation in the cardiac intensive care unit flew by. Anticipating a restful few days at home in

West Texas following my rotation, I called my parents often with plans and ideas for my brief visit.

One day my dad had texted me asking that I call him when available. I called, and he told me that my grandma had suffered a stroke, likely a result of her atrial fibrillation. Though stable, she would reside in the neurology intensive care unit for a few days. I asked my dad if I should come home early. “No, she should be fine until your visit in a couple of weeks,” he said.

Days later, I called my family while they visited my grandmother who was rehabilitating in a local nursing facility. I was able to speak with her, and, though partially aphasic, she could understand my homebound plans in the coming weeks. She told me as best she could, “David Jr...I ...sleep....before you come.”

Two weeks before my departure home, Seattle and New York City became epicenters of COVID-19 in the United States. Spread was imminent and rapid. Flights began to change, and cancel. Hospitals became overwhelmed. My program called for all-hands-on-deck with healthy reserves in place. Our country was in danger.

My next call home would not be easy as I knew the tough decision I had to make. “Mom. I need to tell you and Dad something,” I opened the conversation. The rest of the disappointing conversation was somewhat of a blur; I tried to pour some hope over the soul-crushing fire searing in my chest and theirs. “I know this will not be permanent, but I think this trip needs to wait,” I explained. No future plans were made.

I can see our country staggering from the detrimental impact of this pandemic. Though sitting in my apartment, resting, and staying isolated working remotely is not typical during residency, this quiet time brings impatient, nostalgic aches for home in the pit of my stomach. I want to run home. I even mapped out a driving plan, roughly 20 hours long, that would give me 24 hours at home avoiding all known COVID-19 cases during the pit stops.

My heart is hopeful to see my grandmother again. My soul pines for another hug from my parents. Though seemingly dramatic, I know my situation is not unique. I know many hearts ache far more than mine across this illness-ridden world. I do not write from fear, but from certain hope that this will not last forever. My heart breaks because we have all been impacted in one way or another. Yet, I will remain calm and be a ray of hope for my colleagues and patients as they were for me months ago. We will get through this together.

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