

Myocardial infarction

My father had a heart attack exactly six months ago. A myocardial infarction, the pathogenesis of which I can now recite from memory. Back then, however, I didn't know, and when the attending cardiologist told me about the stents he was going to place in my father's almost completely occluded left anterior descending artery, I stared at him and began to laugh. Just hours earlier, I had held the massive heart of my anatomy lab cadaver in my hands, traced the coronary arteries, marveled at its muscular heft. My hands still smelled vaguely of formaldehyde as I sat in front of the cardiologist in a state of shock.

The events of that evening have been firmly implanted into my memory, vivid and indelible. Retellings of what I didn't actually experience myself – what my father was doing when he began to feel the pangs that he first brushed off as indigestion; how he walked around downtown Iowa City for an hour, hoping that the pain would dissipate – have also made their way into my memory of the events that unfolded. Fear, uncertainty, the thrill associated with the awareness of something being not quite right: I remember these, too.

It all began with the phone calls to my father – three calls that weren't answered, one that was. "I'm waiting for someone to take me to the emergency room." Later, he told me how, after walking had exhausted him, he'd waved down a couple near the Sheraton Hotel, handed them his cell phone and asked them to call an ambulance. Mystified by the simplicity of his cell phone, they, in turn, found a hotel employee to accomplish the task.

The walk to the emergency department was tense. During our brief phone call, my father had told me to go home, to pretend as if nothing had happened and continue studying for an upcoming exam. I thought about this as I walked through progressively unfamiliar territory, uncertain about what I was about to encounter. I passed through hallways that no longer appear unassuming; was led to a room at the very end of the emergency department and suddenly knew what to expect. The other emergency department that I'd had exposure to, in a hospital nearly two thousand miles away, had a few designated cardiac rooms in ominously close proximity to the designated code room. This emergency department was similarly designed.

The scene inside the room was chaotic. People everywhere, one of whom casually told me that "he's having a heart attack" as he handed me a bag containing my father's possessions; they'd placed my father's glasses inside his shoes and I knew he, a retired surgeon with tendencies toward OCD, would be outraged. My father, bare chested save for strategically placed electrodes, shivering and grimacing on the hospital bed as he delivered a history of his present illness to those within hearing distance. Patient perspective of the chief complaint, to complete the clinical note: "I'm worried that it might be a dissected aorta." His heart, visualized by echocardiogram, with its weakly contracting left ventricle. As he was transported to the cath lab to remedy his occluded vessels, I followed the footsteps of my ancestors and made a vow, appealing to the beneficence of some divine being if only he would survive. My father's last words to me before his gurney disappeared into the cath lab were "please don't cry." Fearing that I couldn't speak without continuing to do just that, I gripped his hand and hoped that it would convey the things I left unsaid.

While my father was in the cath lab, I sat in an empty waiting room with a television blaring Broadway show tunes. Looking back, the show tunes seemed garish and ridiculous, but still vastly preferable to silence. Restless and on edge, I took pictures of the room to presumably serve as a sort of memento

mori in the event that my father did not survive. As the sole member of my family present during this ordeal, perhaps I thought that the rest of my family would appreciate some documentation of the event, some evidence that it actually happened. What I thought they would derive from crooked photographs of uncomfortable waiting room chairs and a gurney covered in mussed up blankets is uncertain. And to be honest, I never actually showed the photographs to anyone in my family, though they continue to hold great significance for me, after all this time. My father once lamented the fact that nobody bore witness to the suffering and passing of his own father, who was dead from a ruptured aneurysm minutes before anyone noticed. These photographs are proof that I bore witness to my father's suffering, that although we were physically in different rooms, he was not alone.

Other thoughts weighed on my mind as I waited in the cath lab. What would happen if my father did die, so many miles away from home? Did he actually want to be buried in his motherland, even farther away? Was it fair that he should die without ever achieving the dream that every immigrant has: to see his children become successful, to have some payoff for the endless struggles in an often unwelcoming country that were endured in the hope that life will be easier for his children?

When I saw him, later, in the ICU, he looked fragile, old, dazed. Days later, after he was discharged and for weeks thereafter, he would repeatedly tell me that "I feel like I am in a dream, and I can't wake up."

Our lives changed after he was discharged from the hospital, becoming ritualized in an entirely new way. We developed schedules for medications, the preparation and ingestion of bland heart healthy food, cardiac rehabilitation sessions. He receded further into himself, becoming consumed by a dream; I struggled with the reality of his mortality, and with the burden of caring for an ill parent. Instead of studying, I tried to justify my grief, and every Sunday found myself commemorating the completion of another incident-free week. There was always a question, in the back of my mind, of whether it was acceptable to feel so much distress about my father's illness. He'd survived, after all, with most of his capacities intact; for this I am extremely grateful. He had been familiar enough with his body to know that something wasn't quite right, and he had sought medical attention earlier than many others who experience the same type of heart attack – it could have been worse. Perhaps my grief was rooted in my guilt over what I was unable to do for him: I couldn't escort him personally to his rehab sessions; I couldn't stay with him during the day, so he often spent hours alone in an empty apartment. Perhaps my grief was rooted in my inability – or reluctance? – to come to terms with the reality that his illness was a portent of what the future holds.

We'd never really discussed situations of acute illness or death before. Like most children I'd always assumed that my parents were practically infallible, that despite their older ages, they would remain in relative good health for years. I'd vowed to care for my parents in times of illness, somehow believing that serious illness would evade our family until I'd finished my education, as if illness is an entity that can be sweet-talked with offerings, as if rites of intercession can keep it at bay until one is psychologically ready to bear its burden.

The myth of my parents' infallibility was perpetuated for years. My parents belonged to a generation of Iranians who, as children, were taught to eat their sorrow, to preserve appearances by keeping their emotions hidden, to bear down on their pain and prevent it from bubbling up and taking on the form of a monster. My father, a meticulous and orderly man in his seventies whose every actions were ritualized and precise, was an almost perfect adherent to this upbringing. In the time prior to his heart attack, in the years in which I was cognizant and attentive to my surroundings, I'd only witnessed open displays of

emotion from him on a handful of occasions. Two of these occurred in the months before his heart attack; in hindsight I wonder if these, like many other signs I missed, were a prelude to his illness, warnings that something was not quite right. Were these missed signs proof of my inadequacy as a daughter, evidence to bolster something that I have often been accused of – that I never pay enough attention to the world around me, to the very people who I once vowed to attend to in their old age?

Time passed, and after eleven weeks since my father's heart attack, I suddenly stopped acknowledging what had come to be a strange sort of anniversary. My father began to emerge from his dreamlike state, began to heal. The long-established rituals of his life had been disrupted by his heart attack, but he was, slowly but surely, gravitating toward a new set of rituals that kept him grounded in the waking world. I no longer struggled with my grief, found myself settling into my new role as quasi-caregiver. He returned home over the winter break, and our lives, while irreversibly changed by his illness, carried on. His heart attack became a thing of the past, the emotions associated with the experience shrouded in the haze of time...until recently, when I disengaged from studying and realized something: my father had a heart attack exactly six months ago.