

Appah

I've had to pronounce death twice in my life.

The first time, twenty-three years back, I was a third-year medical student at U.C. Davis. I learned the protocol from my supervising doctor.

Then I had to do it again, yesterday. For my father.

The morning began with a frantic call from my mom. My father wasn't waking up, she said.

I drove to their home faster than you can say home hospice (which is what my father was on).

His cheek was warm to the touch, but his mouth hung open. His eyes were closed. There must be some mistake, I thought. I felt his forehead with the back of my hand. He was warm. Too warm. He couldn't be... I couldn't even say the word...

I leaned forward over the bed railing and put my ear to his mouth to listen. I choked up. I couldn't even swallow.

He wasn't breathing!

I felt for a pulse in his neck and wrist, wishing I'd brought my stethoscope. Still nothing. Dread made my heart gallop. Part of the pain protocol was to squeeze the skin between the toes. The thought of doing that to my hypersensitive dad made me squirm. Appah is the world's biggest crybaby. Only yesterday he'd bellowed, "Cold, too cold!" when I gently rubbed Vaseline on his dry toes. I didn't want to hurt him anymore.

I hesitated. The family depended on me, the *doctor*, to tell them if he really had passed away. Taking a deep breath to summon the remnants of my vaporizing courage, I leaned over the foot of the bed and gently lifted the blankets covering his feet. Heaving a deep breath, I dug my nails into the soft tissue next to his big toe, my half-closed eyes glued to his face.

Surely, he'd yell and jump up in agony.

He didn't twitch.

Please! I silently mouthed. *Please, Appah!*

It was then that full realization percolated into my stunned brain—the truth I'd tried to steer away from my logical mind. The first hot tears tracked silently down the side of my face as I set aside my protective medical filter to become his daughter again. I allowed the pain of this loss to fully grip me. The finality of his passing squeezed cold tendrils of constriction around my heart.

Appah was gone. He was really gone.

Fragments of thoughts tumbled out in disarray. This man who'd shown the world so much passion for 94 years could no longer feel a thing. This was no patient, this was my proud father—an emotional man, who would choke up and cry when he gave a heartfelt speech to the family at Thanksgiving. His still-open mouth would never utter another word. I dragged my gaze to dry lips that would never make us laugh again; never share his famous tall tales.

This beloved man had helped my mother provide us with the most cherished childhood that four children could imagine. He'd instilled in us that we could do anything we wanted. He was right. The four of us had thrived under that philosophy, both in Kumasi, and then later in California. We'd made him proud with our achievements. You could see that in the glowing way he spoke about us to anyone who would listen, as we rolled our eyes. He hailed every accomplishment as if we'd won the Nobel prize. He never failed to attend events of even the smallest significance, from my piano performance to a lecture to medical students which he proudly attended. When I left my first husband, my father took the place of their father to my two toddlers. He loved nothing more than to make them laugh as he held them close.

The silence from the other room was deafening. My mom. I had to go tell my mom.

Not yet; not yet. I wanted to prolong this final communion with my father.

Appah was the heart of our family's engine. The charisma and magnetism he exuded drew people in at every party we hosted in Ghana. He'd shared that Sri Lankan fortune-teller's prophecy with anyone in the universe who gave him the time of day. Brushing aside my skepticism, he steadfastly and obstinately clung to his conviction for forty-one years, then shed tears of joy that fateful day when I walked onto the stage to pick up my Doctor of Medicine diploma.

My wonderful, incomparable father. I stared at him with reverence. His feet were still uncovered. Knowing it was illogical, I gently tucked the sheet back over him. He'd always exuded a warm cocoon of support that blanketed us whenever it was needed. When we encountered hardships or mishaps, he was philosophical. I loved the way he reframed events to give them a positive spin. If we were stressed because we were running late to school, he'd cheerfully chant, "It's better to *be* late, Mr. X, than *the* late Mr. X." I smiled through my tears. Now *he* was the late Mr. X.

A pack of cards lay on his desk shelf behind me. We would miss him so much at our traditional Sri Lankan 304 card game, which

required memorization and calculation. Multiple years as chess champion at Nottingham University coupled with decades of duplicate bridge in Kumasi, had honed his brain into a sharp instrument all the way to the end. His dramatic and flamboyant bids turned each game into an adrenaline-infused spectacle. Many a time his temper would rise so fast that he'd push his chair back and storm out of the room, requiring cajoling to return and keep playing. My sister Viji and I had inherited that same temper. Once when he attempted to give us driving lessons, tensions ran high on all sides. I smiled ruefully as I remembered how, after one such explosion, my sister and I abandoned the car, and our father, and then had to walk miles back home.

My dad had lived in Sri Lanka, England, and Ghana, but when political instability took hold and our lives in Ghana deteriorated, he recognized the potential and promise of America. It became his unwavering mission to move our family to California where his sister and mother had already settled. When he later became a naturalized citizen, he always professed his pride in all the gifts America had given to us. I remember his patriotism as he donned his finest clothes to head to the park every year to serve as an election officer.

Later, in his room, with much trepidation, I opened a low drawer where he kept important items. I emptied scores of pills from his pill drawer, sad that pills could no longer help him. As I did so, I came across a card I'd made for his 90th birthday. He'd obviously treasured my creation for four years. It was too much. Tears rolled down my cheeks. Even after his death my father was showing me how much he loved me. I set the card down as if it were hot and slammed the drawer shut.

I had to call for a body pickup. As I waited, I recalled the day my father took a tour of my workplace, the U.C. Davis Donated Body Program. He'd never so much as blanched as we toured the morgue, or when I discussed the process of body donation. On the contrary, he'd been *excited* to learn that preserved body parts might instruct medical students as long as thirty years after a person's death. The experience moved him so much that he made it his mission to donate his own body to the program. I'd forbidden him from filling out the donation forms until I had quit working there. I didn't want to open one of the coolers one day to discover my own father wrapped in a white linen sheet lying on the cold bed. He'd waited three more years, then signed up.

They came to pick him up four hours later. The two men in their forties, dressed in black, were somber and respectful. They allowed me space to cry for a few seconds. My mom walked in from the living

room. I knew how hard this must be for her. She'd always been squeamish about anything that was death related. I had to hold her the last couple of feet to my dad's side. She flinched as she held his hand.

"Goodbye, Maha," she murmured simply, but I saw how much she was hurting. She bestowed a look of utter love on him that only someone who's loved a man from 19 to almost 93 can express. Then she pulled away and collapsed into a chair in the kitchen.

"This is how I'd like to go too," one of the men said to me. It was clear that he was trying to cheer me up. "Make it to my 90's and go one day in my sleep."

I nodded, still choked up. "I ran this program for years. It's... er... different when it's your dad."

The men nodded in understanding. This time when I reached out tremulously to touch my dad's face to whisper goodbye, I had to fight the instinct to recoil in horror. It was like claspng an icicle.

I'd seen and handled hundreds of dead bodies, but I wanted to reach out and scream at the men to stop when they removed the sheets covering my dad. My dad loved warmth. He'd don several layers of clothes, but this never prevented him from declaring that he was cold. We're talking *tropical heat* in the home in mid-December in frigid Davis with the thermostat cranked to 82. At some deep level I cringed to think that his body was freezing already but would be colder still without a blanket. I fought to remain rooted in place as they wrapped him in a blue tarpaulin and loaded him onto the gurney.

As they walked to the van with my father, I reflected on the events of the last few weeks. After he was hospitalized, my 94-year-old father had lost his ability to walk. He'd strongly rejected any suggestion that he go to a nursing home. He'd asked to die at home, surrounded by those he loved. We'd honored his wishes. One by one, all his children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren had come to his home to say goodbye.

My father had wanted to call the shots about his exit. He wanted to die with grace, not lie helplessly as the lifeforce slowly drained out of him while monstrous machines bleated out their alarms and tubes poked into every orifice to maintain life in a sterile setting. We'd accepted his terms, his autonomy, his sound mind. He'd gone on home hospice with our support. It was the least we could do for a man who asked for so little but gave us so much.

Despite strong beliefs in the Hindu faith, he'd made it clear that he wanted no fuss to serenade his transition to his final resting place. In a final act of selflessness his body was to be gifted to others after his

death. He did not want to saddle us with cremation or funeral costs. As an architect in Kumasi my father designed his buildings using locally procured materials. His philosophy was to avoid wasting natural resources. His body was a natural resource.

I was prouder of my father at that moment than I had ever been.

“Appah,” I whispered, as I caressed the blue tarpaulin to maintain contact one precious, final time before they took him away. “Appah, I love you.”