

## **A LASTING IMPRESSION: WHAT I LEARNED IN COOPERSTOWN**

*Ann Salerno*

I learned what primary doctors do.  
I learned to ask the right questions.  
I learned to listen to stories.  
I learned that everyone has a story.

I learned that history is king.  
I learned that people like a doctor who smiles.  
I learned that doctor really does mean teacher.  
I learned to appreciate the amazing opportunity I have to be entrusted with the lives of others.

I learned that a smiling 66-year-old woman with Down Syndrome can really brighten your day.  
I learned that 70-year-olds can act like 16-year-olds when they are in love.  
I learned that 91-year-olds can sometimes look better than 61-year-olds.  
I learned that it's important that elderly folks be independent.

I learned to allay the fears of little old ladies.  
I learned to treat the low back pain of big young men.  
I learned that most people don't get admitted.  
I learned that no one wants to be in the hospital at Christmastime.

I learned about farmers.  
I learned that cows get mighty angry when they are thirsty, and that they may push you down and break your bones.  
I learned that people get really excited about hunting.

I learned that the big city isn't the only place to see great medicine.  
I learned that little hospitals can make a big difference.  
I learned that great nurses are key.  
I learned that there actually are a lot of people who do take their medications.

I learned that sticking 10 medical students in a big old house in a small town for a month can be great fun.  
I learned to share a bathroom and one phone.  
I learned that a Christmas tree can brighten up an old house with ugly furniture.  
I learned that you can get really cool Christmas gifts from people you just met.

I learned that doctors spend as much time with people as they do with paper.  
I learned to press pause less often when dictating.  
I learned that insurance companies are a pain in the butt.  
I learned that Medicare doesn't care.

I learned that losing your wallet is a huge pain, but not the end of the world.  
I learned that small town store owners will go out of their way for their customers.  
I learned how to change my car battery.  
I learned that the supermarket is the place to be on a Friday night.

I learned that it snows a lot more on the other side of the Catskill mountains.  
I learned that you never grow out of sledding.  
I learned that baseball was invented in Cooperstown.  
I learned that sewing machines were a good idea.

I learned that there are a lot of people who are depressed.  
I learned that there are a lot of people with hypertension and high cholesterol.  
I learned about PMR.  
I learned that smoking is really bad.

I learned that you don't have to remember every drug we learned in pharmacology classes.  
I learned that you don't have to do a stress test on everyone with chest pain.  
I learned that some people will never stop talking if you let them continue.  
I learned that doctors get great desserts from their patients.

I learned that my career choices are unlimited.  
I learned that doctors can have time to do cool stuff like bike and hike.  
I learned that I don't want to live in a town where everything closes at five o'clock.  
I learned that I do want to live in a town where the doctors go to the high school play.

I learned that doctors have the coolest job in the world.  
I learned that seeing patients is very tiring.  
I learned that this job is right for me.  
I learned that behind each exam room door, there sits a new experience-a person to learn from, a person to teach, a person who has the opportunity to leave a lasting impression.

## ON TURNING 27 IN COOPERSTOWN

*Emmy Ludwig*

Mrs. G. is 97 years old. That's 70 years older than I turned, yesterday. I meet her when I walk into her exam room. I can't see her at first.

The curtain is drawn.

So I ask her if she is hiding from me.

She sits straight up but not too tall on the exam table, wearing

Big blue framed glasses,

White hair swept up in a lightweight knot,

Achy knees dangling off,

Ending in little brown shoes.

Somehow, after addressing her knees (oh, they hurt so much in the morning),

we're talking about Cooperstown.

Were you born here?

No darling, I'm from Canarsie Brooklyn! Of course I was widowed young, at 36. I

remarried, eventually. But nothing is ever like your first love.

Of course, as ever, I ask for the story.

On this birthday night—it's a full moon—

After complaining about my advanced age to everyone,

And talking endlessly on the phone to everyone

(but feeling a little bit apart from everyone) I treat myself to a surreptitious much-maligned terribly hypocritical outdoor cigarette.

Under the truly perfect full moon (made that way just for me, my adoring, wanted-to-be-a-doctor-too-father tells me) I think about the stories I am collecting.

So how did you meet him?

Oh, my girlfriend and I went to Coney Island to have a hot dog and a ginger ale. We went to a dance hall.

She giggles. I was 17.

He asked me to dance and then wanted to get my number. But I was leaving for the summer so he took his ring off his finger and put it on mine, and told me:

This way I know you'll come back to me.

And I did come back to him. It isn't much but I still have it. And there on her century-old finger is her husband's ring.

Eighty years after he gave it to her.

Under my moon, I remember that Mrs. G. married her dancing partner and moved with him to this peaceful clear place where I am allowed to rest for a little while.

Allowed to drink up all the leaves and water and fires and kindness that I can.

I have no ring. But drenched in the crispy air, besotted by the fall, and full of stores, I become another year older. It's enough.

Mrs. G. is ready to leave. She has a new prescription and a flight to Florida to catch. In the last few minutes of her visit she clutches me in a hug.

I wish I could know you more.

How did you live so long and so well?

I kept my sense of humor. And God knows best.

Not a bad epigraph, really. I will inscribe it on my moon, in my someday doctor brain, and maybe consider a trip to Coney Island.

## HOPE

*Sue Cullinane*

We took the office van to Hope, in the North Country, for a home visit. A brief history on the ride included “lung cancer,” “real simple people,” and refusing Hospice because of a nurse’s “attitude.” Two miles past Northville, right after the End of the Rainbow Camp sign, go up the dirt path, and it’s the green trailer in the back.

The van pulled through the pine trees scattered with trailer homes and rolled to a stop in front of the canned-pea green trailer. It was this one because of the old station wagon parked by its side. A bounding, barking dog named Brownie met us, offering an easy focus of attention for our entrance.

Mr. O. filled the doorway—a sort of St. Nick—looking man wearing an old undershirt over his belly cinched into his green work pants by a belt. Big, thick glasses obscured his eyes. He seemed apprehensively appreciative as we climbed the two steps into the smoke-filled living room. After introductions, he sat at the kitchen table as ‘Tricia, the nurse, went off to the back room. I stood awkwardly—tall, and conspicuous in my white coat—trying to somehow apologize silently for my voyeuristic intrusion and 29 years of amassed privilege, Dr. M’s warm, booming voice made us all feel more comfortable as he knelt down on one knee to talk with Mr. O eye-to-eye.

The kitchen, a raised continuation of the living room had counters piled with pizza and doughnut boxes, dishes in the sink. On the table, a fly swatter lay ready next to an old cookie tin filled with orange, plastic pill bottles. Mr. O’s right hand rested on an ashtray, his fingers stained brown around a lit cigarette. He propped his head with his left arm, covering his mouth with his hands. He pointed toward the new, glossy box of narcotic patches and explained that he would replace the current one tonight, this being the third day.

“But,” he said through his fingers, “she’s still in pain.”

“Are you staying in the bed with her?”

“I’ve been sleeping on the couch here for the last few, so as not to bother her. She worries me. She only ate a bite of pizza last night and a bite of doughnut this morning.” He got quiet, looking askance at Dr. M. “I know when you go, you go, that’s it...Plans? What do we need a will for? We don’t have anything to give anybody but a pile of junk. She’s got a bunch of kids, but they don’t come round to visit. It hurts her feelings. I don’t like to leave her none, except to go down the road when we need some food or pills. I don’t want to bring her to the hospital. We been together since she was 21. It’s just been us. No, I never seen anyone die in person, in the house like.”

He was quiet while Dr. M described death, “a quiet passing in the night, maybe a shudder of the body, no need for pain.”

“We don’t like to talk about it or think about it much. When it’s time to go, she’ll go. I’m glad you come, though.”

Dr. M. rose saying, “We’ll go see her now.” ‘Tricia came back and sat with Dr. O and we walked back by the worn couch under the window, through a middle room filled with the vibrating whir of the respirator and oxygen tanks. We passed into Mrs. O’s room. It was dark and offered only a thin margin around the large bed to walk. Pine-filtered sunlight fell in through high slit windows near the ceiling—casting a dusty haze over Mrs. O, a small figure taking up a sliver of the far side of the bed. She was neatly buttoned up in a faded pink quilted robe, with a lace collar, that reminded me of one my grandmother had worn. Long, silver hair flowed from her head over the pillow; thick eyebrows of the same hue lay above her tiny, crystal-blue eyes sunken under her high cheekbones reined in by her nasal cannula. She folded her delicate, bony hands on the edge of the covers on her chest. She looked ancient and yet childlike—as if the cancer had dissolved years as well as her flesh. Flies hummed and boldly approached her, but seemed to respect her space. Her hand felt tiny and cool in mine as I said, “Hello.”

Without movement, she steadily affirmed Dr. M’s inquiries as he reviewed her background. She nodded as Dr. M talked about the lovely summer, their spot in the pines, her 86 pounds, shortness of breath, the near frost. We could see and feel the hard tumor pushing out of her rib cage over her left breast. She did not retreat from our pressing hands, but told us of her pain. She smiled at us, and her eyes sparkled. She thought it would be soon. “No, we don’t talk about it, we don’t think about it. Yes, I’m afraid of pain. I’ll go when it’s time.” She was serene as she spoke and looked at Dr. M, then at me.

In his customary manner, Dr. M turned to me to ask any questions I may have of a woman with lung cancer. I felt my academic enrichment would have to wait for another time. She was a beautiful woman. That’s all I could say, and, “Thank you for letting me in.” Her eyes captured mine as I held her cool hand good-bye, and the pain in my chest silenced me. Dr. M clenched as well, something I’d never seen him do before.

We retreated and choked cheery good-byes and a “take care now.” In the middle room, I asked quick, distracting question about home oxygen respirators to ready ourselves to face Mr. O with strength. He looked up from the table. “It means a lot to us that you come.” Dr. M sat down and told him, “It’s all right if she goes, or falls when you’re not here. You’ve been wonderful to her. Put on as many of the patches, two or even three, if she feels any pain.”

Mr. O clutched his mouth, holding everything in place. A few tears pooled at the rim of his glasses. We stood, held hands, clenched teeth, and fought tears. I was blurred and blinded leaving the trailer. The cool air of the woods helped us make bright good-byes all at once. The now-resting Brownie watched us go. Dr. M, ‘Tricia and I walked together to the van, alone in our own thoughts; we waved as Mr. O turned back into the dark doorway. The van crept over the pine needles through the trees leaving the husband and wife their privacy. To say I understood their love, or comprehended their suffering would be self-indulgent and patronizing. I can only say simply—that was an hour in a day that I don’t think I’ll ever forget.

## I WANT TO SEE THE DOCTOR

*Erica Shoemaker*

“No, I want to see the doctor.”

“You see, I’ve brought this whole list of questions and I want to talk to the doctor. I want to ask her about my vitamin pills. Is it all right to dissolve them in water because they are so hard for me to swallow. And my arthritis.....”

“Well, if you insist.....if there is no way around it. Then I suppose you will have to do.”

“You go and ask her how I can lose weight. I’m losing my figure, you see, and I wonder if it might have something to do with the ice cream.”

“Well, I eat the whole container, I’m afraid. It’s just that it’s there in my freezer and it’s so hard to stop. I didn’t used to look like this, but how would you know? It’s true though, I was lithe and light on my feet. When I was a young lady, I lived in Greenwich Village and danced with Ruth Saint-Denis, although I doubt you know who that is, but in my day she was really quite the latest thing, you see. We gave concerts in the park and did gypsy dances and Oriental dances, especially the Turkish dance which was my favorite because you wore swishy purple skirts and red brassieres and I was really quite good, you see. It didn’t last long because I was so good that Madame Saint-Denis she got jealous and I had to leave, so I went back home with my mother and we visited the grave of my brother killed in the Great War. A pilot, a brave pilot, but the Germans shot him down and he came back to us nothing but a body. We had a full service for him in the Presbyterian Church with an oak casket and white lilies and yellow roses and.....nobody grows lilies anymore why is that?”

“Where was I.....I can’t remember. Why is it I can’t remember anything? Ask the doctor why I can’t....hold anything in my head....or remember? Where is my list?”

“Breathe. I can’t breathe easily now. You see, it’s blocked up like that. Pfft. The doctor tells me it’s because of my cigarettes. I sneak them on the back porch, but I want to ask her about the cod liver oil because when I was taking that cod liver oil I never got pneumonia. I think the world of cod liver oil, don’t you? When I was a girl, my mother used to make us drink three tablespoons of cod liver oil each night before bed, and I don’t understand why she told me not to take the cod liver oil like I used to when I was a girl and my mother was going to be a doctor just like you, you see, but then she met my father. She said he was the handsomest man she had ever seen and he used to sing to her outside her window and it made my grandfather so mad she had to marry Papa just to shut him up. Mama died and Papa had to run the whole farm himself, we had cattle and hogs and we grew corn and hay for feed and Papa would take us out into the field and hold us by our arms and whip us around and around we got so dizzy, but it was fun, more fun than any Ruth Saint-Denis whirligig dance anyway somehow.”

“The list.....where is my list? I can’t find it, but I want to tell that doctor how mad I was when she told me to move into a home. I get along just fine, you see, I have friends around the

corner who help me shop and who cares if I can't get up and down the stairs so good. I'd like to see her climb my stairs—its 24 stairs total, with two landings and I can make it just fine if I take a couple of breaks and pet Millie for a few minutes. I showed her I could manage because I didn't come in for a few years after she said that. I'd like to see her when she's 92; can you believe that—92 years old and only one great-grandson. He's a genius and handsome he has nice teeth, like you and he's going into the pilot's Air Force school and I want to see him graduate and fly those plans around and around like whirling dervishes.”

“You go tell the doctor I want to live another four years.”

“Tell her to make me live another four years.”