

Riñones al Jerez

Category: Getting the News

written by Sarah Buttrey | January 3, 2017

“You do *not* need an MRI,” I told my father emphatically as he stood in my living room, explaining to me that his beloved doctor had ordered this for his low back pain. He was hoping for a quick fix before meeting his brother in Spain. “You need physical therapy.”

I dislike playing doctor to my family, not trusting myself to dissociate emotion from evidence, but this was just too much. Sure, his back hurt him sometimes, but there was nothing to suggest anything dangerous going on, nothing an intervention would fix. Nothing but the dreadful aches and pains of growing old.

My father, however, is not famous for patience, and he is not my patient. Have an MRI he did, and his back was fine, with the usual bony changes of age. That said, there was a giant gumball three centimeters across on his kidney. This had nothing to do with his back pain, but there it was. He called to tell me, and there we were, on two ends of the phone, me trying to interpret to him the new fact of his likely kidney cancer.

“Your doctor will send you to see a urologist. You will at least need a biopsy.”

“Will he take my whole kidney out?” he asked

“I don’t know.” But honestly, I didn’t care. Three centimeters in a renal cell carcinoma was the magic limit, still within the realm of treatment with surgery alone, still offering the possibility of many more years of arthritis and troublemaking. I was so very glad that he hadn’t listened to me, his doctor daughter.

Given the urologist’s blessing, he traveled to Spain with my mother to meet my uncle. In Bilbao their last night, he ordered *riñones al jerez*, kidneys in sherry, and as he worked his way through the meal, he shared the news of his own kidney and the surgery that would happen the next week. So very like the both of them.

Years before, his brother had shared—weeks late—the news of his heart attack while giving a lecture. “Death before dishonor,” he announced, proud of having stood firm through the crushing chest pain.

How will I be, I wonder, when my own news arrives? How will it come, and how will I share it? Will I even have the chance?

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