

# La Emergencia

Category: Emergencies

written by Karen E. Lasser | November 1, 2022

A stereotypical pathologist, my father was a man of few words and fewer friends. He spent long days in solitude with his microscope, examining tissues and cells. In 1982, almost 20 years before his own diagnosis with metastatic breast cancer, he published a rare case in which breast cancer cells invaded individual chest muscle fibers. He later examined his own breast biopsy.

My father and I often went out to dinner together to Colombian, Peruvian, and Cuban restaurants and would converse in Spanish. When the waiters asked my father where he was from, he would reply "Costa Rica," never acknowledging or explaining the falsehood to me. He admired natural beauty, hence his fondness for Costa Rica; he associated Colombia with poverty, drug trafficking, and violence. Maybe he was constructing an alternate past.

When I was in college, in the late 1980s, my parents divorced. My father and I had a limited but reliable relationship. We spoke by phone weekly, had dinners together, and sometimes went to classical music concerts. We were not terribly close but shared a love of languages, music, art, and literature. My father also took care of my Siamese cats when I traveled.

The rupture in our relationship took place in 1999, not long after I met the man I would marry. In hindsight, I expect my father would not have liked anyone I chose to marry.

I'd been trying to be the dutiful daughter since my father's diagnosis, accompanying him to appointments and chemotherapy sessions. One weekend, I traveled with my future husband to Amherst College, where he was giving a lecture. I had told my father he could always page me in the event of an emergency; this was in the days before cell phones. While I was in Amherst, my father had a medical emergency and paged me—but I never received the page, as my beeper was out of range. A few days later, I received an angry letter from him, informing me that he was disowning me. I had not been there for him in his moment of need. Despite my efforts, we never reconciled before he died.

This past summer, I finally told my teenage daughters what had happened between me and my father, the grandfather they had never met.

These days, most of my patients are Spanish-speaking, from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Honduras, and Peru. Recently, I dreamed that my father and I had reconciled and were speaking Spanish together.

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