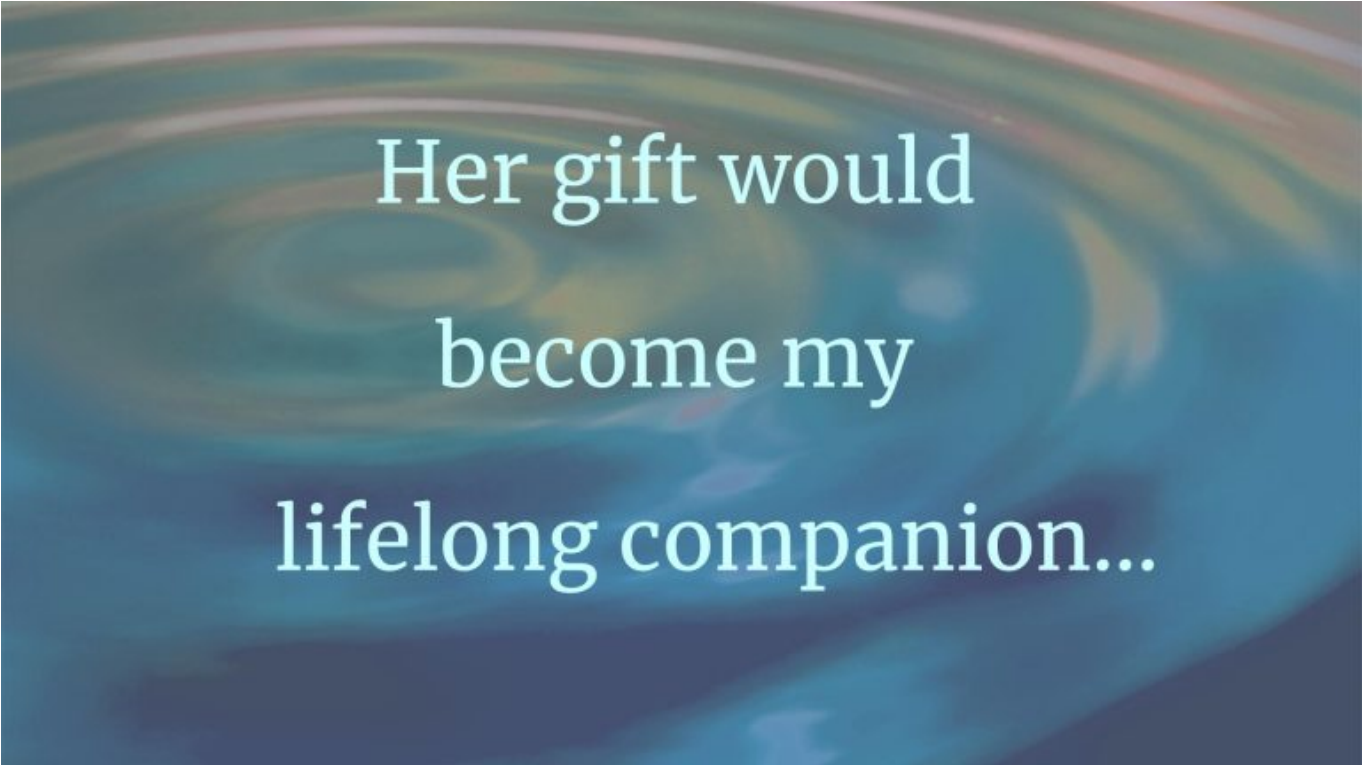


My Blankie

Category: Stories

written by Anna Cmolik | October 22, 2024



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become my
lifelong companion...

One evening, at the age of four, I ran frantically into my bedroom, tears burning in my eyes, and started overturning the furniture, peering under my bed and scrabbling through piles of clothes. I bounded back downstairs into the kitchen to check the chair I'd sat in for dinner. Over and over, I asked my four siblings and my parents:

"Have you seen my blankie?"

Finally, I retraced my steps to the piano bench. There sat my blankie, a soft, bright yellow mound. I let out a sigh of relief, safe at last, and headed off to bed.

My surgeon dad often tells my blanket's origin story. Upon learning that my parents were expecting their fourth child, Mrs. Smith, the wife of one of my dad's patients, began knitting a baby blanket, canary yellow with scalloped edges.

Little did she (or anyone else) know that her gift would become my lifelong companion—accompanying me through a bout of respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) as an infant, being dragged behind me in true Linus fashion throughout my childhood and now, twenty-five years later, still bringing me comfort and security during my expedition through medical school. In fact, in a very real sense, my blankie was one of the earliest parts of my own journey into medicine.

When I was in middle school my blanket began to unravel, but I was determined

to keep it in pristine condition. I sat down to repair my "patient," meticulously reweaving the strands. Admiring the tight knots holding the wool together, I imagined myself a surgeon like my dad. My blanket's post-procedure scars served as reminders of my admiration for my dad and the mutual respect he and his patients shared.

Medicine has been embedded in my life from the start. Many mornings, as a child, I would wake up at 5:00, perch on the edge of my bed and wait for my dad to come and take me into my parents' bedroom. There, blankie in tow, I would watch *The Munsters* while my parents prepared to leave for the hospital, my father packing his stethoscope and my mother putting on her glasses as she prepared to read X-ray films.

Those early mornings felt sacred; sometimes they were the only time I would have with my father for the next several days. Even on evenings when he *could* be home, the nighttime was often shattered by the shrill of his beeper and the hum of his car as he drove back to the hospital to care for a patient.

The hospital itself is a place I associate with fond memories of time spent with my dad. Many Sundays, I spent the morning drawing pictures in his hospital office, following his team through rounds or sitting at the nurses' station eating candy until I felt sick. I associated the ICU not with patients on the brink of death but with the cloyingly sweet taste of strawberry Dum Dums.

In medicine, as everyone knows, people's personal and professional lives often intertwine. To guard against potential abuses of this powerful bond, medical ethics forbid physicians to accept presents of great value from patients. I fully acknowledge the wisdom and necessity of this rule, while knowing that Mrs. Smith's gift remains my most treasured possession.

The blanket (now eggshell-colored) serves as a reminder of the powerful human connections underlying these blurred personal and professional boundaries: a gift given to my dad, meant for his child and embodying his profound impact on his patients and their families.

In my blanket's interwoven threads, I see the interconnectedness that physicians find in the hospital. I see a tapestry of the lessons that care teams learn from their patients. I see the personal sacrifices that health professionals and their families endure in the effort to ensure patients receive the best possible care.

Although the blurring of the lines between medicine and family often meant that, growing up, I was parented by my older siblings, carted to sporting events by other parents and needed to conduct myself a bit more independently than my friends, the career my parents chose left an indelible mark on my soul. It was their work in hospitals that first inspired me to pursue medicine, seeking to create and foster human connections in the same way that they have.

My siblings joke that, on my wedding day, I'll wear my blankie instead of a veil.

That may not be entirely true. But I do plan, during my next steps along the path to becoming a physician, to carry a strand of yarn from Mrs. Smith's gift in my white coat pocket.