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And Then You Die

I was sweating, lying on a lawn chair by my apartment's pool in Virginia. I had just registered for summer classes and I felt uneasy.

"I'm thinking about quitting grad school. I don't think this is what I want to do forever. I feel like I gave up on this dream to become a doctor and I'm always going to regret it. What do you think?"

I was panicking so I called the one woman I knew would make me feel better—my mom. My mom is a beautiful woman with a really loud laugh; the kind

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of woman strangers find magnetic and friends cherish. She walked carefully the line between parent and friend and raised my brother and me well. She made time to be homeroom mom, came to our extracurricular events, cooked us meals, sat at the table and looked us in the eye, rubbed

our backs, said our prayers, and allowed us to grow. She has worked at the same hospital for her entire career (to date); she's loyal and committed. She takes the good with the bad and always comes out joyful. Colleagues have referred to her as a "Patch Adam's kind of doctor."

She has always been my role model, but

when I called in a panic at the end of my first year of a psychology doctorate program, she seamlessly transitioned into her new role—mentor.

She began by challenging me.

"Have you thought about this? Do you think you may just be scared to start seeing patients? You know that being a physician will also be difficult and scary?"

Why did she have to take that approach? No. I hadn't really thought about it. I was just soaking in the sun when this overwhelming 'psychology grad-student self-diagnosed panic attack' surprised me. I was standing face-to-face with what most 22 year olds face: doubt.

"I feel like my calling was to be a doctor, and it felt hard, and I gave up."
There was an ache in my voice.

"Ok."

She heard me.

I finished summer school. Then I moved back to Texas and into my mom's home and began taking the medical pre-requisites and studying for the MCAT.

Nightly she encouraged me, "I always hated this part of it, but it'll be worth it."

So I learned to sit at a table for hours on end, studying; a concept very foreign to me.

She would come home from work and share stories of her day and I began to listen in a new way, looking to cue off her empathy, learn from her reasoning and logic, and understand the ways she navigates the bureaucracy of the business behind medicine. Still, as in the past, I celebrated wins with her and grieved incredible losses. At the end of all of these days she made time to talk with me about life, to call loved ones, to visit her mother, to be present at patients' funerals, to cook great meals, to watch mindless TV with me, to read great books, and to plan mother-daughter trips to Vegas, and the beach and I could breathlessly go on, and on, and on.

Daily I was confronted with this beautiful, imperfect, strong woman's existence, and my own doubts about if this was a life I could manage. A life of hard work, of exhausting days, of really high highs and at times really low lows.

I might find myself weary at the end of the night, complaining, and my mom would grin at me and say, "and then you die!"

We would laugh and I would appreciate the weight of her playful words. She's right. "And then you die." If I have to preface, "-and then you die," with a life story, I want it to be a messy, busy, full life like the one she lives. Maybe it's because she confronts death so frequently, but she's one of the few people in my life to constantly tell me, "If I die tomorrow, I want you to know I have had the best life. Seriously, the best life."

Now I'm in medical school, the dream one step closer. She continues to mentor in a most meaningful way. She absolutely listens to me go on about specialties, and what's going to be on my test next week. She comments about what it was like for her. However, I always feel like the most direction she

offers is in some of the phrases I hear her reiterate week-after-week, and year-after-year.

"Live a balanced life."

"Of course you want to work hard, that's what makes life so good."

"I'm going to a patient's funeral this week."

"You're compassionate."

"And then you die."