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For a long time, I knew my mother only as my mother. That is to say, as a typically self-centered child, I had no concept of her life before my birth or outside of the happy narrowness of my own existence, much of which revolved around my relationship with my mother. With the inexorable broadening of my understanding that came as I matured, I became aware that my mother did lead a life apart from my own, and that one of the central strongholds of her distinct identity was as a physician.

This realization, however, was slow to dawn. As I grew older, I was aware of the fact that my mother went to work on some days of the week, and sometimes the shrill tones of her pager might announce during meals or playtime that, even while she was at home, there were others who, like me and my three siblings, demanded her attention. In my early school years, I learned to recite my name, address and phone number, and, somewhere along the line, that my mother was a doctor. For the most part, though, I saw my mother only as what she embodied to me: a caregiver, a playmate, a consoler, a disciplinarian, a storyteller. Similarly, my idea of what it meant that she was also a doctor was vague; sometimes during dinner she would tell my father stories about patients that were too complicated for me to follow, and at other times she might look into my ears with an otoscope. These aspects of our interactions, while they might connect her to the role she played in the lives of others, did not define her to me. So, though I knew that she was a doctor, when my teachers or classmates at school called her "Mrs." it did not strike me

as incongruous with another title, another identity. Like all adult rituals, from coffee drinking to long phone conversations, the act of going to work was mysterious.

When I reached my teenage years, my relationship with my mother became more nuanced. As my siblings and I grew older, we were increasingly prone to sharpen our senses of humor at one another's expense, and my mother was not left out; she became someone with whom to joke, tease, and exchange embarrassing stories. My idea of my mother now extended to pictures I had seen of her awkward prom dates; perhaps not yet removed from the essential self-centeredness of childhood, I inevitably compared her to my own goofy teenage self.

It was these impressions that set me up to encounter such a collision of identities when I first observed her in her work environment. As a high school student, I took advantage of a day off from school to accompany my mother to work and follow her as she rounded on inpatients in the morning and then spent the afternoon seeing patients in clinic. It was a mild shock to watch the woman who at home asked me how to do simple things on the computer exhibit such professional competence in a realm apart from the one in which I knew her so well. For some reason, it had not been clear to me, until this point, that she knew so much medicine. I was used to seeing my mother as the one the family teased for her poor sense of direction but her quiet authority on the wards proved a stark contrast. On morning rounds, I watched her answer residents' and students' questions and gently

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guide their presentations until they were confident in their assessments and plans. When I was introduced as her daughter, each one of them told me what an excellent clinician and teacher she was.

But it was in clinic that afternoon, seeing my mother's interaction with her patients, in which her role was best illuminated. Like her students, each patient I met told me how fortunate they felt to have her as their doctor, emphasizing her capacity to listen and the generosity of time she spent with them. I watched her do just this with each patient, straying from a focused history to allow her patients to discuss whichever aspects of their lives were troubling them. I listened as some of them shared things that I had never heard a person admit before, surprised that my mother seemed somehow to know exactly how to respond to pronouncements I would have stumbled over. Afterward, she told me that she felt her patients were grateful to her simply because she listened to them in a way that the current formula of healthcare rarely allows. Though I agreed that the opportunity to give voice to their concerns was valuable in itself, I also recognized that she performed more than the role of a simple receptacle; both her supportive advice and the lack of censure with which she carefully responded to the concerns of each patient demonstrated understanding and regard.

That she was as important to other people as she was to me was somehow astounding, but it was in fact exactly the same qualities that I depended on in her as my mother that made her so beloved to her patients and her students. Just as she gave me and my siblings her time and attention, she gave her patients compassion, advice, and the time to express themselves. As I saw my mother interact with her patients, I realized so much about the role of a physician as healer that had up until that point somehow escaped me, despite the central role that her sympathetic ear had always played in my own life. Little wonder, then, that her patients felt the same way about her that I did. With this shift in perspective, aspects of the person I knew as my mother were re-framed in her role as a physician: her generosity, her unconditional acceptance, her ability to forgive, her humility. Even the keen sense of observation that I had seen evidence of in her artwork could be rein-

terpreted in the context of the physical exam. I was captivated by these ideas and my sense of adventure was piqued when I considered the role of the physician as the detective, piecing together clues to the mysteries of illness.

But it was primarily my realization that her patients loved her which pushed me to consider medicine. I stopped seeing my mother as an extension of myself and instead saw her as someone whose role in her patients' lives I would be gratified to come close to emulating. In no other career could I see compassion and humility so successfully blended with capability and authority. Additionally, as I have become more immured in the culture of the medical profession through medical school, and thus more aware of what is at stake in attaining the role of a physician, her example of persistent empathy has been all the more inspiring. The first two years of medical school have, despite attempts to the contrary, privileged knowledge over compassion simply by dint of their organization. But I know that if my mother was able to survive the trials of medical education without losing the qualities that had drawn her to medicine, I can as well. My mother not only taught me that it was possible to combine compassion and competency, but also that medicine, like motherhood, is a vocation rather than a profession.

