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The Diagnosis

by Lucille Lang Day

Her long gray hair was matted and tangled, her heavy shoes battered, her faded print skirt soiled and frayed at the hem. She looked around the waiting room until her eyes settled on my mother, a small, elderly Chinese woman two seats away. When Mother looked up, the raggedy woman said, "The UFOs've landed, and Richard Nixon won't do nothin' about it. What kind of government is that? Richard Nixon won't do a damn thing."

"Richard Nixon dead long time," Mother said, gently touching her neat white curls as though to make sure her permanent was still holding. I thought, *Mom, this isn't China! You don't have to be polite!*

"We're gonna have a nuclear war," the stranger continued, "and did you know I was in Afghanistan? I was a secret agent." She turned halfway around in her green plastic chair and bent over, laughing.

"I'm a babysitter," Mother replied.

"And they handcuffed me. It hurt like hell. Look at my wrists." The woman pulled up her sleeves to reveal ugly, but healing, gashes. "My ankles the same. And, they won't give me transportation. How can I leave?"

"My husband come here by ambulance. Can't breathe. Is serious when you can't breathe." My mother looked down, rocking slightly in her seat. "He waits to see doctor. This my daughter, Shirley." She pointed at me.

I was fuming. My mother is an old-world Chinese. She would be polite to a statue. I grew up in San Leandro, California, and if someone acts crazy, I walk away.

"You know Bette Davis?" Raggedy Ann's eyes were very wide now.

Mother nodded.

"You know Clint Eastwood?"

She nodded again.

"Well, Bette Davis and Clint Eastwood stopped the UFOs. The government wouldn't do nothin'. Richard Nixon wouldn't do nothin'." Now her eyes were bulging as though ready to pop right out of her head. "But Bette Davis and Clint Eastwood drove 'em off. They did it in Berkeley."

"You know two American planes shot down over Pakistan?" Mother asked.

"Yeah, and one of the pilots said there's gonna be a nuclear war. I saw it on television."

Unable to sit still for any more of this exchange, I got up and walked to the guard's desk. I knew that I looked haggard and bedraggled myself in my tennis shoes and old blue jeans, but I didn't care. I was worried about my father, and I was tired. The large, round clock on the wall said 2:00 a.m. I just hoped the hospital personnel could distinguish between me and the likes of Raggedy Ann.

Mother was still talking to the woman about the planes shot down that day over Pakistan. Although the pilots hadn't been found, Raggedy Ann was describing their interviews. She was clearly deranged, and I wondered if I should say something about it to the guard, a bald, young, African-American man with wide shoulders. Could the woman be a danger to my mother? Did loyalty to my father require that we spend the night in the waiting room with her?

A heavysset female police officer entered the room and started taking pictures of a young Latino man who had swollen eyes, a bloody face, and a thick, bloody cloth wrapped around his left leg. Now the room was a cross between a police station and a mental institution. I had to get out.

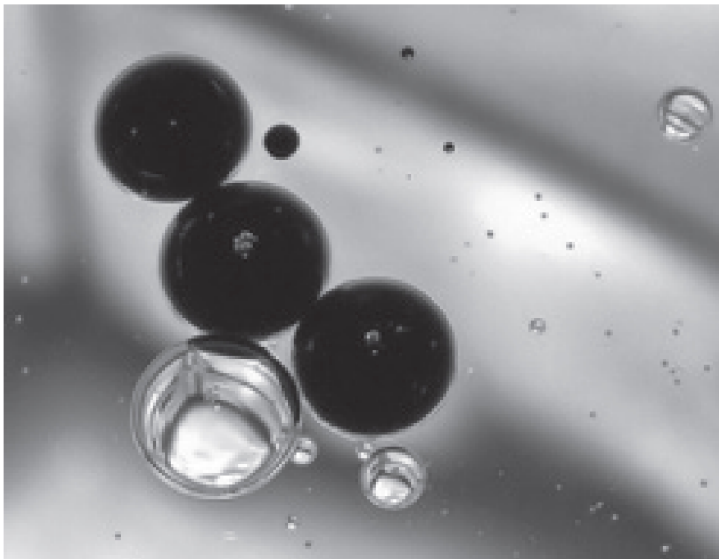
"Can you find out how long it will be before a doctor sees Richard Wong?" I asked. "He's my father."

The guard's face remained expressionless. He didn't answer but left his station and entered the patient care area. When he came back, he said, "He'll be seen within an hour."

Even another hour was too long to wait. "I'm going to take my mother home. My name is Shirley Gee." I pointed to the door separating the patient care area from the waiting room. "I said they could call me in an emergency. They can also call me to come pick up my dad. Please let them know."

The guard nodded slightly.

My mother, now standing beside me, said, "No be silly, Shirley! He can't go home. Can't breathe!"



In the car I wondered if I was doing the right thing. What if my father was dying and my mother couldn't get back to the hospital in time? But, I didn't believe he was dying. When I first arrived at the hospital, I gave him his hearing aids, and he was breathing fine by then.

After giving Mother two pillows, a comforter, and a blanket in hopes that she could get some sleep on the sofa in the den, I wondered whether I should try to get some sleep myself or stay up and wait for the call from the hospital. I

decided to sleep. I was a light sleeper and would wake at the first ring of the phone by my bed.

Although I didn't think my father was going to die that night, I was worried about him. He'd been ill for two months, and his doctor hadn't been able to figure out what was going on. It had started on January 1st with double vision and loss of balance. Then, he'd become

progressively more unsteady and now walked with difficulty. For the past two weeks, his left eye had been shut, and for the past two days, he'd had trouble chewing. At midnight tonight, he'd felt like he couldn't breathe.

I was almost asleep when the phone rang. My heart started beating wildly. I grabbed the phone and switched on the light.

A slow male voice said, "Is Stick there?"

My name is Shirley Gee, my husband's is Donald Gee, and my mother's is Amanda Wong. None of us could be called Stick. "There's no Stick here," I said.

"I'm sorry. I must have the wrong number," the caller said before hanging up.

I wondered if the call could have been from the hospital, but I figured the staff couldn't possibly be disorganized enough to have the right number but ask for Stick. Stick was such an odd name. How could anyone be named Stick? Well, I thought, if that was the hospital, they'll check the name and try again. Before switching off the light, I checked the time—3:10 a.m.

I didn't get right to sleep but tossed, thinking about when I was a kid. Dad wanted my sister Diana and me to know more about Chinese culture, so he took us to Chinatown in Oakland and San Francisco. In Oakland Chinatown, there were as many Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese as Chinese, but we saw every opera at the Chinese Theater at 9th and Franklin. In San Francisco, Dad showed us where to stock up on dried roots and shark fins and where to eat near Grant Avenue. At home we ate a lot of rice and chicken, but on the excursions with Dad, we tried things like Peking duck, mu shu pork, and ginger garlic scallops. When I asked Mother why she never cooked these things, she said, "The ghosts don't make roast turkey with cranberry sauce every day, either," so we got our Peking duck and mu shu pork at restaurants and at banquets for graduations and weddings.

It seemed like every one of my parents' generation had a laundromat or a restaurant. I would have preferred a restaurant, but my dad had a laundromat. When my classmates in high school and college asked what he did, I said, "I'll give you two guesses." It was such a cliché.

My parents' first language was Cantonese, and it was Diana's and mine too. All of our relatives and Chinese friends also spoke Cantonese. I knew, of course, that Mandarin was different, but I didn't know how different until I got to college. I thought learning Mandarin would be a snap for someone fluent in Cantonese, but I couldn't understand a word and had to drop out. Someone said it was like a chicken talking to a duck. Languages were never my strong suit. I majored in statistics and now do research in epidemiology. My own kids, though, learned Mandarin in a bilingual program in elementary school, so they speak both.

I was awakened by my mother's voice on the phone in the hall. "Pick him up? He can't breathe!"

She opened the bedroom door. "Shirley, get up. Hospital wants you get your father. They say they call last night. You sleep through phone!" It was light outside. The clock on the dresser said 7:30 a.m.

"I didn't sleep through the phone. Someone called at three and asked for Stick. Why the

hell did they ask for Stick?" I suddenly realized that my father's name was Dick. The caller was slurring "Is Dick..." so that it sounded like "Stick" and asking for the patient instead of for my mother or me. "I'm going to call the doctor," I said.

"I just talk to him. They don't know what's wrong."

"Did they do a CT scan?"

"I don't know."

I dialed the hospital. "What's the problem with my father?" I asked when the doctor came on the line.

"You probably know more about it than I do. Hasn't he been under observation for two months?"

"Yes, but he hasn't even had a CT scan. How do you know he doesn't have a brain tumor?"

"He hasn't had a CT scan?" He sounded surprised.

"No."

"Well, we can do that here. It doesn't take long. Why don't you come over now to be with him?"

"I'm not bringing him home until they do that CT scan," I said angrily after hanging up.

"Don't cause trouble," Mother said.

My dad was already in the waiting room when we got there. He was wearing his own pajamas and plaid robe and talking to Raggedy Ann. He was as bad as my mother: too damn polite for his own good.

"Helen, meet wife, Amanda, and daughter, Shirley," he said. Helen! They were on a first-name basis!

I said, "We've already met," then walked over to the triage nurse. "I want to see the doctor," I told her.

She scowled. "You already spoke to him on the phone," she said, loud enough for everyone in the waiting room to hear.

"My dad hadn't had a CT scan when we spoke. I want to talk to him again."

"He's had his CT scan and he's signed his papers. He's ready to go," the woman said, again very loudly.

"I'm not leaving without talking to the doctor!"

Mother said, "Shirley, calm down."

Another nurse, a soft-spoken African American woman, came over and said, "What's the trouble here?"

"I want to talk to the doctor before taking my father home."

"I didn't know what was going on. I just heard yelling."

I didn't feel like I'd been yelling.

"Of course you can talk to the doctor," the nurse continued. "He's stitching someone up,

but I'll let him know you're here. He'll be with you in ten or fifteen minutes."

Dad said, "If it's that long, I go to bathroom." By now, Helen was gone.

I watched him walk away. He was bent over and moving slowly. Although he was seventy-seven years old, two months earlier he'd walked upright like a young man.

As soon as he disappeared around the corner of the hallway, the doctor came out. He was young—about thirty—and smiled warmly as he extended his hand. "Hello, I'm Dr. Bradley."

"Did my father have the CT scan?"

"Yes. There were no acute changes."

"How about chronic changes?"

"No. It was completely normal."

"What other tests did you do?"

We checked his throat, trachea, epiglottis, and vocal chords—that whole area—to see if there was a mechanical problem that would interfere with breathing, but everything was normal.

"Then what's causing his problems?"

"We think he had a stroke on New Year's Day." He meant January 1st, of course. For the Chinese, the New Year begins in February. I was born the Year of the Pig. My American friends always think that sounds awful, but pigs are known for fertility, determination, and wealth, so it never bothered me. This year, we missed the New Year celebrations because Dad was sick.

Back when his double vision first started, he saw an ophthalmologist who said there was nothing wrong with his eyes. Then Dr. Kohrt, his GP, ordered blood tests and a urinalysis that showed his kidneys were fine. Next, Dr. Kohrt sent him to the Vascular Lab, where a Doppler test confirmed that his carotid arteries were supplying plenty of oxygenated blood to his brain.

Dad still hadn't returned from the bathroom when Dr. Bradley said he had to go attend to other patients. I was worried he'd passed out in there, and I was thinking about asking a nurse to check on him, but before I did so, he came shuffling around the bend in the corridor.

"Well, body working fine this morning!"

Mother said, "The doctor just talk to Shirley. He say you had stroke."

"Helen say it's not stroke."

"Helen is crazy!" I said.

"She used to be nurse, say I need neurologist. Stroke don't get worse for two months." Advice from Raggedy Ann!

"She told Mom and me that Bette Davis and Clint Eastwood had intercepted some UFOs."

"Maybe just needed medication. She seem fine this morning. I make appointment."

"Father right!" My mother glared like a Tiger Mom.

* * *

Dr. Korht gave him the referral to a neurologist, and three days after the emergency room visit, I took him to the outpatient center at his HMO. As we made our way down the hallway, a woman waiting for an elevator waved hello. I didn't recognize her, but Dad waved back. I was about to ask who it was when I realized it was Helen. With clean clothes and her hair neatly combed, she looked like an ordinary patient headed to see her doctor.

The neurologist's waiting room had soothing nature photos on the walls and lavender upholstered chairs. It seemed strange to be there on Helen's advice, but I had no better ideas.

A nurse called us in. Walking the short distance from the waiting room to the doctor's office, Dad was very stooped. He couldn't hold his head up, and I towered over him, although I'm several inches shorter when he stands straight.

We faced Dr. Goldson across his large desk. He was slender and fit, about fifty years old, with thinning blond hair. Behind him, the wall was covered with degrees and certificates. "I see you spend long time in school," Dad observed. His face was sagging, his right eye sunken, the left one shut.

Goldson said, "I don't have your chart. They pulled the wrong one for me." Before I could explode, he added, "But that's okay. I don't need it. You two can tell me what's been going on. How did the symptoms first begin? Was it sudden?"

"Yes. Two months ago, when I walk to car after leaving friend's house, I feel off-balance, have double vision. Have nothing to drink."

"That's like a stroke," I said. The doctor nodded.

As my dad described steadily worsening symptoms, culminating with trouble breathing, and by the end of February having to lift his jaw with his hand in order to chew, Dr. Goldson interrupted to say, "That's not like a stroke. I've got my work cut out for me." He scanned everything he'd written, frowned momentarily, then got up and said to Dad, "Come with me."

I could hear them speaking in the next room. "I'm going to give you an injection, and I want you to tell me whether your symptoms are better or worse."

It seemed only a minute before Dad said, "Better. No double vision now. Neck feel stronger already." I felt like laughing and weeping at the same time.

When they came back, the doctor's sharp features were animated. He looked concerned but excited as he said, "We have to do more tests, but I have a tentative diagnosis. I don't

believe it was a stroke.”

Dad looked surprised. “Then what?”

“I believe you have myasthenia gravis. It’s an autoimmune disease that interferes with the transmission of nerve impulses to your muscles. The Tensilon injection was a test for it.”

I’d never heard of myasthenia gravis. It could have been a species of mushroom, for all I knew. Dr. Goldson continued, “It’s uncommon for the first symptoms to appear in people over seventy, and we see it more often in women than men.”

No wonder the other doctors hadn’t figured it out. Still, should we have needed Helen? I could feel my face reddening as I recalled my rudeness to her.

Dr. Goldson was still speaking to Dad. “We need an MRI, more blood tests, and a CT scan of your neck and chest.” He smiled, adding, “It’s treatable.”

I wish I could send Helen a basket of peaches. They mean “longevity,” Mother and Dad always say.

