

The Ophthalmologist

Kristin LaFollette

People often ask me why I became a doctor and I always tell them it's because I wanted to help people. But that isn't really true, not entirely. I became a doctor because my father was one. He made a lot of money. He had a lot of friends. Everybody loved him. When he died, people I didn't even know spoke about him at his funeral. He was a neurosurgeon, and everyone always said he was "in the business of saving lives." People admired my father *because* he was a doctor, and I wanted that same respect.

During my third year of medical school, I decided on ophthalmology as a specialty. It felt safe to me; I wouldn't have to deal with the mess and chaos of emergencies or tell a patient's family that they had died. It was also during the third year of medical school that I met Teresa. She worked in admissions at my university and often went to the same coffee shop I did on her lunch breaks. I would see her sitting in the corner, sipping a cup of coffee, and skimming through an outdated copy of whatever magazine was left out. On one particular day, the shop was crowded and all the tables were taken up, so I took my coffee and breakfast over to her table in the corner.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" I asked. "There aren't any free tables."

She glanced up at me over the top of her magazine. Her fingernails were painted red. "No, go ahead."

As we were talking, Teresa told me I didn't look like a medical student, and when she asked what specialty I was going into, she just laughed.

"Ophthalmology? Now that's a good one."

"What's funny about it?" I asked, smiling.

"You seem more obstetrics," she said, resting her chin on her closed fist and leaning further across the table. "What's your sign?"

"Aquarius," I said.

"Oh, you're definitely an obstetrics kind of guy," she laughed again, her teeth bright behind lips that were coated in clear gloss.

Teresa and I dated for two-and-a-half years before we were married. She was a free spirit with a new-age approach to life; she looked for meaning in anything and everything and claimed that healing came from within. As a doctor, I knew that healing didn't come from (within) me. That's what medications and therapies and surgeries were for. When I think back on those early

years of our relationship, there wasn't much we saw eye-to-eye on. Teresa always said if you wanted something bad enough, you could "speak it into existence." I had spent years studying science and medicine and often found Teresa to be misguided, but I loved her anyway. I saw our relationship as a balancing act as we kept each other grounded in different ways.

Four years after Teresa and I were married, our son, Oliver, was born. Teresa had had regular checkups throughout the entire pregnancy, but no one knew Oliver was sick. When he was born, the doctor told us that he had a serious heart condition and probably wouldn't survive. Teresa cried. We opted for surgery and, as we waited, I felt like an imposter. *Really, what kind of doctor is an ophthalmologist?* I couldn't even help my own son. When Oliver died, some people at the hospital offered to pray with us, and we let them. I don't think I truly believed it would help, but I was tired of letting my wife down, of feeling guilty for not doing more.

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Two years after losing Oliver, we found out we were pregnant again and it was a complete surprise. We never planned to have more kids after Oliver.

"How do you feel about this baby?" Teresa asked me one afternoon when she was five months pregnant.

"I'm excited," I said.

"What if something bad happens again?"

"You can't think like that, Teresa. You just can't."

She was silent for a few moments.

"It's a boy. I feel like we're replacing *him*." She started to cry.

"We're not replacing Oliver. This is a different baby, completely different from Oliver."

"You want to replace him so you don't feel bad anymore," she said quietly. "You want to move on."

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When our son Blake was born that December, Teresa held him and I watched him move, curl his fingers, squint his eyes. He was beautiful and looked just like Oliver did when he was born.

"His heart is okay," Teresa whispered. "Thank God his heart is okay."

I thought about how different that day was from the day Oliver was born.

In the hours following Blake's birth, Teresa and I talked very little. Instead, we passed the baby between us, fed him, bathed him, brushed his black hair away from his face. On the day Oliver was born, Teresa sobbed hysterically, her eyes red and snot pouring down her face. She looked like someone I had never seen before and, as she cried, she begged me to do something, told me that I *was a doctor* and I should know how to save him.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "Teresa, there's nothing I can do for him."

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Years later when Blake was four years old, I came home from work and Teresa was nowhere to be found. Blake was swinging a foam sword around in the living room as a pirate show played on the TV.

"Blake, where's Mom?" I asked, dropping my coat and bag by the door.

"Upstairs."

I went upstairs to find our bedroom door closed. I opened it slowly and saw Teresa lying on her stomach on the bed, her face in her arms.

"Teresa? What are you doing in here?"

She looked up at me. Her eyes were puffy and her makeup was smeared.

"Peter," she said. "Do you think Oliver is in...a better place?"

I pulled my tie off and went to sit on the side of the bed. I wanted to touch her, to comfort her, but wasn't sure how.

"I don't know, Teresa. I can't really say for sure. I don't think anybody knows."

"Goddammit, Peter!" she cried. "What *do* you know?"

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In Teresa's mind, Oliver's death was my fault. And in some ways, I understood. She looked at me the same way I used to look at my father. To me, my father was God, or at least *a* god, and when he died, it felt almost unnatural. In Teresa's eyes, I had control. I had the answers. I was capable. But after Oliver died, she saw me differently. I wasn't the person she thought I

was, and in the weeks before our separation, I really started thinking about my father's humanity, about my *own* humanity. I had to come to terms with how little control I had over anything.

Three years after our divorce was finalized, Teresa remarried. A couple years later, they had a baby together. A girl. Blake spent every other week with Teresa and her new family and spent the off weeks with me. Her new husband had an ailing father who was going blind. One day at the office, a nurse came back to let me know I had a phone call. Before I even picked up, I knew it was Teresa. Blake had told me about the old man's vision problems, how he had seen several doctors who said there wasn't much they could do to help.

"Hello?"

"Peter?"

"Teresa? Is Blake okay?" I knew better.

"Yes, Blake is fine. I'm sorry to bother you. I really need your help with something."

She told me the same stories I had heard from Blake about her father-in-law's failing health and vision, asked me if I would be willing to see him on short notice. I told her yes, that I would see him the next day. Later, back at home, Blake and I ate dinner in front of the TV.

Between bites of spaghetti, he said, "I talked to Mom today and she said they are bringing Mike's dad into your office tomorrow for an appointment."

"Yes," I said. "It sounds like he really needs help."

Blake was quiet for a moment.

"He does," Blake said. "He's a nice man."

"Yeah, I'm sure he is."

I was certain there wasn't going to be much I could do since he had been turned away from so many other doctors, but I wanted to try anyway. Maybe I could help him. Maybe I could actually give Teresa what she needed this time.

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