

Inheritance in the Exam Room

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I wear my grandmother's ring to work, though it is not practical. Thick gold, heavier than anything meant for the hand. It catches on gloves and taps softly against sinks and doorframes.

Patients notice it sometimes, saying "That's a beautiful ring."

I smile and thank them. Most will never know what they are seeing. The ring belonged to my grandmother, Naniji.

She was a teenager when the rumblings of Partition began, and British India was divided into what is now India and Pakistan. As violence spread and families fled homes they had occupied for generations, her father died suddenly of what was likely a coronary event. Grief arrived at the same moment the world around her was being rearranged.

It was during that uncertainty that she married my grandfather.

When I think about the ring, I do not think first about Partition. I think about them: two young people choosing each other despite circumstances that offered little reassurance. The ring was a wedding gift, but it was also a promise. It represented the belief that life would continue and that a future could still be built.

Together, my grandparents crossed into modern-day India from what is now Pakistan. Together, they rebuilt. Together, they raised eight children.

My mother was the eighth. More than a decade separated her from the sibling closest to her in age. By the time she was born, her eldest sister had already completed college. She arrived in a family whose story seemed nearly complete. History, however, was not finished with them.

When anti-Sikh violence spread in 1984, my grandparents feared for their youngest daughter. As an adolescent, my mother was sent to Fiji. She left home not because she wanted to, but because the people who loved her believed her future depended on it. My grandmother sent the ring with her.

I often think about that moment. Years earlier, the ring had symbolized the future my grandparents hoped to build together despite grief and upheaval. Now my grandmother was placing it in her daughter's hands and sending her across an ocean to a place she had never seen. The ring was still a promise that a future existed beyond the circumstances of the present moment.

Fiji was not the home my family imagined. Years later, political instability and a military coup disrupted life there as well. Once again, my mother left. She arrived in the United States with little certainty about what would come next, but with the same faith and the same heirloom that had carried my grandmother through Partition: the belief that a future could be larger than the circumstances of the present.

When she arrived, she worked nights at Dunkin' Donuts and attended school during the day. One winter morning, while waiting for a bus outside Washington, D.C., a passing car splashed freezing water across her pants. She stood there soaked, watching the bus arrive and thinking about how nice it would be to have a car someday. Years later, she did.

As a child, I thought the story was about the car. As an adult, I understand that the car was incidental. What stayed with me was my mother's ability to imagine a future larger than the circumstances immediately surrounding her.

I grew up watching her hands. They carried me before I could walk. They prepared meals from places I had never seen. They worked constantly. Long before medicine taught me to take a history, I had learned that lives cannot be understood from a single moment in time.

Now I stand in hospitals and clinics wearing a white coat. Patients notice the ring, but they cannot see the young woman grieving her father during Partition. They cannot see the adolescent girl sent away from home because her parents feared violence more than separation. They cannot see a woman standing at a bus stop in soaked clothes, imagining a future she could not yet afford.

Then again, I rarely know such things about my patients when I first meet them. Medicine introduces us to people at particular moments—a diagnosis, a hospitalization, a symptom that finally became impossible to ignore. Those moments are never the whole story. Every person sitting across from me is carrying histories I cannot immediately see, sacrifices made on their behalf, and acts that altered the course of their lives before they were old enough to understand them.

The ring reminds me not only of where I come from, but also what became possible because the women who wore it refused to let present circumstances define the future. My grandmother could not have imagined me. She could not have imagined a granddaughter training to become a physician while wearing the ring she once wore as a young bride. What she imagined instead was possibility. That was enough.

When my mother left for Fiji, she could not have imagined the shape her life would eventually take, either. Yet someone believed in a future larger than the circumstances surrounding her. That was enough too.

I am living in a future other people hoped for. Most days, the people I meet are as well.

The ring taps softly against the doorframe before I enter.

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