

Room for a view

## Papa stories

In a city the size of Toronto people can get lost. My ten-year-old self knew this because I once spent a frantic twenty minutes in Eaton's searching for my mother. My papa has been lost for six years: an accident of history, geography and iatrogenesis. His story is full of hiding. He vanished from the sight of Cossacks, wandered at night along mountain passes to safer lands and disguised himself by day when the politics of his country deemed him criminal. My mother tells me he has died



Art Explosion

— a missed diagnosis, preventable — and that no child should lose such a loving father. But I know the truth. He has not died; his hiding has gone awry. Somehow he is lost and cannot find us.

I am not without solutions to this problem. The Toronto telephone book, whose purpose until now has been to boost my chin above the edge of the kitchen table, offers four possible fathers. His name is there in black and white, but which one should I call? If I had a phone listed in my name, then he would be able to find me instead. But revealing that my father is still alive would upset my mother, and she does not believe that children need telephone lines.

One day I notice a company logo bearing my father's name. A businessman in a suit gets added to the images I conjure up from old photos and overheard whispers. We are walking down the street hand in hand. My father laughs as the autumn leaves we are tossing about lodge in his collar and pant cuffs. To me he is a giant tree, moving with the wind but never shaken by it.

I remember a Papa who comes whenever I wake, frightened, from sleep. I call on him to protect me from harm and loneliness, and even from the

dreaded annual "What does your father do?" question from teachers. Whether to be polite and truthful, or to hide the fact that I am different by keeping silent about my apparent half-orphaned state, is an irresolvable dilemma. Why others speak so sadly of my loss I do not understand. My papa is hidden, but he is with me at all times, in the pocket in which I carry the little pair of blunt scissors that he gave me, in the blue eyes the family say are his, and in the name I bear.

Over the years the immediacy fades. I can no longer feel my small hand in his or remember his accented English. I continue to search for Papa stories but give up the phone book. I take readily to my preceptor's teaching that the medical history we glean from a patient is only one chapter in a life history. Chance encounters add detail to the biography I know only in summary. One day, as a medical resident, I meet a doctor who cared for my father as he died. Another day a patient looks at my name tag, my eyes, and says he thinks he has something for me. Two weeks later he returns with the only photograph I have of my father as a young man, taken shortly after he and my father arrived in Canada together. Medicine has enriched my life in unexpected ways.

Throughout, I dream all the dreams of a young person who thinks the impossible is not an insurmountable obstacle but an opportunity. I have done what medicine cannot do: I have kept someone alive after death. Therefore anything is possible. The absoluteness and absolution of death allow me to recreate this man about whom I know so little. When I want to offer roots and religion to my children, my father picks up a prayer book and walks with them

to a religious service. I cast him as an intellectual upon whose thinking I must build, and so convince myself to read history and philosophy.

Should death have been made as real to me as was the presence of my father after his life? Is the magical thinking of a child who remedies loss with illusion a sign of resilience, or of resistance to reality? I was not taken to the funeral. Had I attended, I could have lost my father in this finality. Instead he is with me wherever I go, as a guide, a protector, a papa.

I have chosen not to identify myself, because a part of me still fears that by allowing others to see my father he will be lost forever to me.

### Anonymous

This article is one of the runners-up in the student/resident category for the 2000 CMAJ Essay Prize. The contest winners appear on pages 1860 and 1862. The contest is described on page 1859.

## Creative convalescence

I enjoy convalescence. It is the part that makes the illness worth while.

— George Bernard Shaw

Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, was converted to the religious life while recovering from a battle wound. Convalescence has been put to interesting use by many thinkers, artists and writers. Some, like Robert Louis Stevenson, became famous for it.

Tell us about recovery times — yours, or your patients' — in The Left Atrium. We welcome prose submissions of up to 1000 words (annemarie.todkill@cma.ca).