



Oh The Places You will Go

By Taalibah Ahmed MD

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When I graduated from Florida A&M University in May 2004, my sister, the first grade teacher, gave me a copy of Dr. Seuss' *Oh the Places You'll Go!* to signify my new journey into medical school. I would later read the book for the first time to my third grade class not realizing the significance of my sister's small gesture.

Oh the Places You'll Go! And the places I have been. But I always believed somewhere in that book Seuss should have added "and the people you'll meet." With the stress of medical school, it is easy to get discouraged. But often it

is the one patient out of the hundreds you see that lets you remember the reason you decided this path.

Oh the people I have met!

I stood outside exam room number seven and read the chart of my next patient, Mrs. P.

Ok she is 89 years old and she is here for a follow-up.

I focused my attention to the summary page where there is conveniently placed a brief past medical history. She is a patient with hypertension, hyperlipidemia and diabetes.

What questions to ask? What exam do I need to perform?
Ok I'm ready.

I walked into the room and did my initial five second survey of my patient. I see my patient. She is an elderly Caucasian woman. She appears to be frail. Her hair of blue-gray curls is neatly groomed. She is wearing a long-sleeved blouse with elastic waist pants and what look like Velcro nursing shoes. I think to myself, Oh please let shoe designs be a little more fashionable when I am old. Her eyes are bright and there is the hint of a smile on her face. And there is someone with her. Perhaps her daughter or caregiver? Oh well here I go.

“Good morning Ms. P. My name is Taalibah Ahmed. I am a third year medical student at Florida State University working with your doctor this year. I am going to take a brief history and perform a quick exam and then the doctor will come in and join us.” Ok Taalibah breathe and slow down.

Mrs. P looks at me, smiles and says. “Hello.”

I smile and turn to her companion. I find out that this is her eldest daughter. She accompanies her mom to all of her doctor visits.

“You are a girl,” Mrs. P chimes in.

“Yes I am. Is that a problem? If you prefer to see the doctor, I completely understand.”

My patient explains. “No it's fine. It's just nice to see a woman doctor. When I was young, women were not doctors.”

I smile and attempt to redirect the encounter. “So you are here for follow-up of high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes.”

“Yes I have that. I take pills for those.”

“Are you taking your medication as prescribed?”

She looks at me strangely and her daughter interjects. “The nursing home manages her meds. So she is taking everything. They have not called me with any concerns so I am certain everything is going well with her.”

I turn to my patient and realize that she continues to look at me strangely. Before I can speak, she asks, “Are you the doctor?”

“No ma'am I am the medical student. My name is Taalibah.”

“Oh you are studying to be a doctor. That is nice. When I was young there were not too many women doctors.”

I smile and realize that something is not right. I look at the summary page of her chart in search of a reason for this déjà vu I am having but there is nothing. While I frantically look through the chart, I simultaneously attempt to elicit information concerning orientation. “Mrs. P, do you know where you are.”

“Why yes, the doctors office.”

“And do you know the month.”

“Why it is January. It's 1954. My husband and I are going dancing.”

Unh ok. There is definitely something not right about my patient. I hate when this happens. You walk into an encounter thinking you are dealing with one problem and then oh there is something else wrong with the patient. Ok what to do? I can just ...

Her daughter interrupts my thoughts. She must have recognized the look of confusion on my face. She tells me her mother has Alzheimer's. The family noticed a change in her about 8 years prior to this visit. She would forget things like her grandkids names, or that she had a dog. She was becoming dangerous to herself and they were concerned about her grandchildren when they visited her. She has been in a nursing home for the past 5-6 years. She remembers other things though. “Oh the stories my mother can tell you,” her daughter says.

My patient looks at us and it is apparent she does not like being spoken about in this way. But her expression suddenly changes to one of wonder and once again she asks me.

“Are you the doctor?” I smile and remind her again that I am the student but it is not like reminding her at all. To her, it is like the first time she has met me. Our previous conversation is lost. She once again tells me how nice it is to see a woman doctor and all the great things women have done. Her daughter asks her to tell me about the great things she did as a woman. Her eyes are become bright. I look notice that they have popped open. I now see her young self.

“I was a pilot during World War II.”

No way.

She tells me about what it was like growing up as a woman in the 1940s. Men often did not recognize their talent. As women pilots and the only pilots not participating in combat, they were often asked to test new planes. She tells me of one of the planes she flew. The men heard of it and could not believe it. Men had a difficult time recognizing their achievements. She reports that even now after all these years sometimes it feels like she still isn't recognized for her achievements. This is understandable when I think of a news story 2006, the Air Force proudly showcased their first woman pilot in the Thunderbirds.

But, she, my patient was one of the first female pilots in the military. She was a member of the Women Air Force Service Pilots. She flew in several missions which were considered non-combat. Her job was very important. She flew in many of the supplies the military men needed. Many of the women were injured and they had 38 deaths among a little over 1000 women. She states that even after all the sacrifices the women made, it took years for them to be recognized by Congress. She began to fly in 1943 and was not recognized as a female pilot in the military until 1979.

She grew up in the South on a farm in Texas. She came from a large family and she always knew she would fly. Her father had a small plane; she loved to go up with him. When it was reported that they needed women to take a part in the war she was excited. She later discovered that they also needed pilots. She was very young and like many women at that time, her beau was off fighting in the war. There was nothing to keep her from joining up, so she went to school and became trained as a pilot. She discusses every detail like she is still there.

I was amazed. This woman who is having difficulty remembering who I am is telling this amazing story of when she was young. All of a sudden this frail woman became strong in my eyes. I continued the encounter and attempted to illicit more information from her. I now understood the reason for her daughter's presence. Much of the information I obtain from her daughter. Her daughter states that despite her having hypertension, high cholesterol and diabetes, she was still very active. Those conditions were manageable. It is the Alzheimer's that has limited her.

Her Alzheimer's took away her adult children, grandchildren and great grandchildren and replaced them with her young adult sisters and brothers and school aged children. It took away her independence. She was coping well with her other medical conditions, but as her memory began to fail her she was unable to care for herself and she became a danger to not only herself but to her family. For a moment I felt sorry for her and I empathized with her daughter. I could not imagine what I would do if my mother did not recognize me. But then I began to understand that Alzheimer's took away many of her memories but left the wonderful ones that made her the woman she is. I smile as she wants to continue to tell me different stories of her missions. I see the expression on her daughter's face and realize that it is difficult for her to cope with a mother that often does not recognize her adult child but simultaneously she is very proud of the person her mother is. Her daughter boasts of her mother's ongoing achievements. She is resident of the month. She suggests I visit the nursing home to see all the pictures of when she was a young woman, when she was a WASP.

Later in the week, I make a trip to the nursing home. Although Mrs. P does not recognize me, she is happy to share more stories about when she was young. She shows me a picture of her in front of one of the planes she has flown and tells me the story of how she met her husband, that handsome gentleman in the wedding photo in her bedroom. She tells me of her children. Of her wonderful career later as a school teacher.

I complete my history and exam. And prepare to leave the room. I think of the amazing woman I have just met. The woman who paved a way for all the female pilots in the military today. And smile as I think of how happy she was to see me in my position, the female medical student. I prepare to leave the room but as I place my hand on the doorknob Mrs. P asks,

“Are you the doctor?”

I smile at her and say. “No I am not the doctor. My name is Taalibah Ahmed. I am the medical student. The doctor will be with you in just a moment.”

She smiles at me and says, “It's nice to see a woman doctor. I am proud of you.”