**House Calls (Lewis Thomas)**

My father took me along on house calls whenever I was around the house, all through my childhood. He liked company, and I liked watching him and listening to him. This must have started when I was five years old, for I remember riding in the front seat from one house to another, and back and forth from the hospital, when my father and many of the people on the streets were wearing gauze masks; it was the 1918 influenza epidemic.

One of the frequent calls which I found fascinating was at a big house on Sanford Avenue; he never parked the car in front of this house, but usually left it, and me, a block away around the corner. Later, he explained that the patient was a prominent Christian Scientist, a pillar of that church. He could perfectly well have parked in front if there had been a clearer understanding all around of what he was up to, for it was, in its way, faith healing.

I took the greatest interest in his doctor’s bag, a miniature black suit- case, fitted inside to hold his stethoscope and various glass bottles and ampules, syringes and needles, and a small metal case for instruments. It smelled of Lysol and ether. All he had in the bag was a handful of things. Morphine was the most important, and the only really indispensable drug in the whole pharmacopoeia. Digitalis was next in value. Insulin had arrived by the time he had been practicing for twenty years, and he had it. Adrenalin was there, in small glass ampules, in case he ran into a case of anaphylactic shock; he never did. As he drove his rounds, he talked about the patients he was seeing.

I’m quite sure my father always hoped I would want to become a doctor, and that must have been part of the reason for taking me along on his visits. But the general drift of his conversation was intended to make clear to me, early on, the aspect of medicine that troubled him most all through his professional life; there were so many people needing help, and so little that he could do for any of them. It was necessary for him to be available, and to make all these calls at their homes, but I was not to have the idea that he could do anything much to change the course of their illnesses. It was important to my father that I understand this; it was a central feature of the profession, and a doctor should not only be prepared for it but be even more prepared to be honest with himself about it.

It was not always easy to be honest, he said. One of his first patients, who had come to see him in his new office when he was an unknown in town, was a man complaining of grossly bloody urine. My father examined him at length, took a sample of the flawed urine, did a few other tests, and found himself without a diagnosis. To buy time enough to read up on the matter, he gave the patient a bottle of Blaud’s pills, a popular iron remedy for anemia at the time, and told him to come back to the office in four days. The patient returned on the appointed day jubilant, carrying a flask of crystal-clear urine, totally cured. In the following months my father discovered that his reputation had been made by this therapeutic triumph. The word was out, all over town, that that new doctor, Thomas, had gifts beyond his own knowledge- this last because my father’s outraged protests that his Blaud’s pills could have had nothing whatever to do with recovery from bloody urine. The man had probably passed a silent kidney stone and that was all there was to it, said my father. But he had already gained the reputation of a healer, and it grew through all the years of his practice, and there was nothing he could do about it. Even now, twenty-five years after his death, I meet people from time to time who lived once in Flushing, or whose parents lived there, and I hear the same anecdotes about his abilities: children with meningitis or rheumatic fever whose lives had been saved by him, patients with pneumonia who had recovered under his care, even people with incurable endocarditis, overwhelming typhoid fever, peritonitis, what-all.

But the same stories are told about any good, hardworking general practitioner of that day. Patients do get better, some of them anyway, from even the worst diseases; there are very few illnesses, like rabies, that kill all comers. Most of them tend to kill some patients and spare others, and if you are one of the lucky ones and have also had at hand a steady, knowledgeable doctor, you become convinced that the doctor saved you. My father’s early instructions to me, sitting in the front of his car on his rounds, were that I should be careful not to believe this of myself if I became a doctor.