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The bedspread hospital: stuffed animals and dollies aligned in rows. A little girl and her mother peer at them, decide who's sickest. The little girl is the doctor, her mom the nurse. They work together, administer the medication necessary to cure each of the afflicted. The little girl is in thrall to the idea of cure: that a pill can enter a person and right what's wrong. All the little animals are able to amble out of the hospital, all the dollies get dolled up again. No one dies.

The mother was born in Poland during the Second World War. Her father was a member of the Polish Resistance. He was caught and sent to Mauthausen, where he died. The family was informed, by letter, that the cause was cholera. The mother never met her own father; her own mother remarried a monster, and the hardship of being born in Eastern Europe under communist rule was made more difficult by the parallel narrowing possibility of domestic hell. The grandmother fled the monster, who periodically reappeared, as monsters tend to do. The mother grew up, became a beautiful young architect, and fell rashly in love with a Dutch architect on government business in Warsaw. The Dutchman conspired to get the mother a job posting in Paris, where love is ever rash, and Canada is one of those unbombed, though not decamped, places. A land of very far way. And happily ever after.

The mother smoked. Two to three packs a day. The little girl wondered why; ashtrays dotted the house. The nurse smoked during the little girl's bedroom rounds; the nurse smoked, in fact, in every picture the little girl would ever come to possess or see of her mother. There were ashtrays about the house, and often multiple cigarettes could be found in various states of consumption. This wasn't just chain smoking; it was smoking in series. The little girl became a physician, and the mother became ill, though the illness had its own sort of monstrous magic: it couldn't be named for quite some time, so of course there couldn't be a cure. One day the mother's heart was laid siege by blood, her pericarditis was tapped, and the resultant cytology showed a primitive adenocarcinoma of unknown origin. Reprieve for two: the little girl, long ago, had admonished her mother to stop smoking. The mother received her medicines and lived without the certainty that smoking was the reason she would die. And she did die without the knowledge that it was indeed lung cancer that was her monster. At her wake, all the pictures the little girl had ever seen of her mother were displayed. And in every one, the requisite cigarettes were removed by Photoshop: the trick of cure. ❁

Cover photo: Andy Hamilton, Moose Jaw, Sask

Story: Shane Neilson MD CCFP, Erin, Ont

Additional photos and the French translation of the story appear on page 1088.

D'autres photos et la traduction en français du récit se trouvent à la page 1088.

THE COVER PROJECT

Canadian Family Physician has embarked on a project to assemble the portrait of family medicine in Canada. Each cover of the journal will feature a family physician chosen at random from our membership list, along with a short essay—a brief glimpse of the person and the practice. Over time, the randomness will become representative and the differences, taken together, will define what it is that all family physicians have in common.

Inside half-cover (IHC)