

THE DOCTOR NAMED CHARLEY

nonfiction

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It was a strange name, but the lady who lived in the stately Italianate house at the end of our block was called Charley. To us little girls, she was unlike any of the neighborhood women. She made marinara from raw tomatoes, garlic, peppers, and wine, while our mothers warmed up spaghetti sauce from Chef Boyardee cans. She made beautiful sweaters with wool from Scotland while our mothers knit with dime-store yarn. She constructed an elaborate rock garden with a waterfall in her backyard, while our mothers grew beans, kohlrabi, carrots, and sweet peas. Although a sorority alumna and married to a wealthy surgeon, she was overweight and dressed like a bag lady, her hair a tangle of black and gray wires. She was harsh with her kids and scratched herself in inappropriate places. Extremely opinionated, she spoke the truth as she saw it — frequently, loudly, and passionately. But, most notably, she was a physician — very unusual among women during the 1950s, particularly in North Dakota.

The fact that Charley was a doctor was rarely discussed among the neighbors, but it hovered around her like a loose, ill-fitted shawl. She didn't practice medicine while I was growing up, but rather, like all the other wives on the block, she stayed home to raise her children. As one of the lead coffee-klatchers on I2th Street, she spent considerable time in our kitchen, sewing hems on the dresses she made for her daughters, playing solitaire, picking potting soil from under her fingernails, and gabbing.

Her friendship with my mother was a strange one. Mom, an agreeable, quiet listener to Charley's frequent diatribes, seemed proud to have her as a friend. She was also afraid of Charley, scared that the world would notice the two women's glaring educational and financial differences and make harsh judgments. This fear fed like rainwater into Mom's cistern of scholarly inadequacy and eternal poverty.

Her real name was Charleen Rose Berg, daughter of a German professor at the local university. She grew up in my hometown and, after graduating from college, attended medical school in Chicago, then married her classmate Raymond Berg during their senior year. On the way home from their wedding, her parents and only sister were killed in a car accident. The marriage got off to a bad start.

Charley and Ray raised three kids, and her child-rearing principles were singular; maybe she learned them in her pediatric training, or, more likely, she invented them for her own purposes. On a particularly lovely fall day, as my friend and I walked past the Berg house, we spotted Charley's daughter Melanie — her chin cupped in her hands, her knees folded against her chest, a forlorn expression on her face — crouched on the front steps.

We didn't look at her. She didn't look at us. We knew what was going on. Melanie was waiting for Beulah Schutz.

When the Berg kids were naughty, Charley told them the witchy Beulah Schutz — she pronounced it “shoots” — must have stolen the nice Diana or Melanie or Corwin and left one of those nasty Schutz children. She would then trot the misbehaving youngster to the front door and make him or her sit outside until Mrs. Schutz took the evil Schutz kid away and brought back the nice Diana or Melanie or Corwin.

Charley's children were expected to excel academically, and if they received a C in any class, they were grounded for the next term. Diana, the scholar, was never grounded, but Melanie, the cheerleader, occasionally was. By the time Corwin came along, Charley must have relaxed the rules, or maybe she was distracted by other things, because Corwin, who marched to the proverbial different drum, wouldn't have left the house the entire three years of high school under the old, you're-grounded-for-a-C system.

Besides forcing scholastic success and literary proficiency on her own children, she also insisted that the neighbor kids read good books. She told us literature was a window to the world and introduced me to Jack London and *The Last Days of Pompeii* and a book about Mt. Fujiyama.

Charley could be fun, too, and taught us silly sayings, such as the tie-breaking rhyme:

Eeny meeny hippity dick,
Dea, dia, dominic,
Oachy, poachy, dominoachy,
Om, pom, puss.
Ugily, bugily, boo,
And out goes YOU.

She led the incantation from her seat at our kitchen table, her loud voice bouncing off the wallpaper, her hands waving a staccato rhythm, her eyes shining like obsidian, and a broad smile warming her face.

Every summer she invited various neighbor families to her lake home. On the drive to her cabin, the paved highway turned into a dirt road that turned into a muddy two-track that meandered through the neighbor Lena's pasture. We kids were given the "gate job," which involved stepping over fly-covered cow pies to slide the loop of baling wire over the fence post to first open, and then close, the gate. If the wire wasn't secure, Lena's Guernseys might escape.

Lena, a scrawny, wily little lady, was a character in her own right. Her parents had farmed the land beside Charley's cabin since the 1930s. Lena had lived at home her entire life and helped her father with the farm work, along with Henry, the hired hand who lived in a shack beside the barn. First, Lena's father died, leaving Lena and Henry to do all the work. Several years later, Lena's mother died, and the night of the funeral, Henry moved into the farmhouse with Lena.

The public version of Lena and Henry's story was one of scandal, but Charley accepted them as they were and respected their mutual adoration or devotion or duty that had survived several decades, separated by the width of the farmyard. For me, it was a love song as sweet as the calls of the finches caged in Lena's living room.

The floor-to-ceiling windows in Charley's cabin offered a spectacular view of Lake Cormorant. On rainy days, we entertained ourselves with the player piano and the closet full of games and jigsaw puzzles; on sunny days, we worked the sailboat, speedboat, and canoes. The lake bottom was weedy, but we galloped through the hydrilla and milfoil until the water was thigh-deep and then paddled like seals toward the diving platform anchored off the dock. From Charley, I learned to twist wood ticks off my arms and pick bloodsuckers from between my toes.

The breakup of Charley's marriage, when I was in high school, was rumored to be "very difficult." She spoke to no one about it. Ray just disappeared. Through the local grapevine, we learned he had moved into an apartment near the hospital and several years later married a nurse. During their lives together, Charley and Ray walked completely divergent paths in everything. I think he longed for a loving, gentle woman who would be a caring companion. Maybe he found her in his new wife.

After Ray left, Charley reportedly refused to accept alimony and thus needed to support herself. She participated in a Harvard program to retrain women physicians who had taken a break from medical practice, then spent an additional two years in a pediatric fellowship. Returning to medicine must have been a terrific challenge for her, as she had been away for over two decades. When she'd left, penicillin had just become available. When she returned, most bacteria were resistant to penicillin, and a host of newer antibiotics were commonly used.

What I remember about her Boston years was the hollow feeling of her house when Mom and I went over to check that the furnace was running during the winter and the basement hadn't flooded in the spring rains; that her freezer still worked after electrical outages and the roof over the sunroom didn't leak. We walked through the dark, damp garage where her dogs — she had a series of water spaniels, all named Sheba — used to live, unlocked the door into the back hallway, and climbed the three steps to the kitchen. The heavy scent of dusty wool coats, moldering food, and ancient leather lingered in the eerie quiet. Mixing bowls and cookbooks, canning jars, hot pads, and packages of exotic nuts still cluttered the countertops, but the drippy, smelly washrag, the leftover roast chicken, and last week's rice — the standard mess in her kitchen — were gone. It was still Charley's house, but different. Empty. Diminished in spirit.

Charley, unwittingly and in an odd way, guided me toward my career in medicine. She didn't encourage me to think about medical school. I don't remember ever talking to her about it. But she was living proof it was possible. She must have known I wanted to be a doctor; I can't imagine my mother not telling her. Maybe Charley thought it was a bad idea for me. For any woman. Her eldest daughter, Diana, however, went to medical school several years before I did, and Charley, initially, seemed proud of her.

She was very upset, though, when Diana married a medical school classmate — she was too young and he was the wrong man, in Charley's view. Perhaps she worried that Diana's marriage would be a rerun of her own, as Ray and Charley had married during medical school. Diana finished her clinical training but eventually divorced the husband. For years, Charley nagged Diana for gaining too much weight — Charley fought her own weight problem her entire life — and for raising two tremendously obese children whom she found lazy, spoiled, and defiant. She was unable to enjoy anything about her grandchildren and dreamed up all sorts of schemes to “fix them.” Diana, obviously,

didn't appreciate her mother's ill-guided efforts.

One afternoon, late in the summer before I started medical school, Charley drove me to my job at the nursing home. As we rode east on 14th Avenue, she turned to me and abruptly, unexpectedly, said, "You'll need to get some new clothes before starting classes."

I was stunned, found it hard to believe that those words had come from Charley, the antithesis of fashion, the person who wore only faded cotton housedresses or flannel shirts and gardening pants.

"You don't want to end up looking like me," she said.

In the silence of the car, I stared at her rugged face, at her determined eyes focused squarely on the street ahead. Her hair stuck out from her head at odd angles; her dirt-roughened fingers gripped the steering wheel. The hem of her housedress was hiked up over her knees, and her scruffy shoes played the gas, clutch, and brake pedals. No, I didn't want to look like her. And yet she was beautiful, in her own way.

Although Charley was a flawed role model, she remained a powerful one. I likely assimilated my mom's admiration of such a smart woman and somehow overlooked her strangeness. In fact, her oddity was interesting, and I revered her quick mind and ability to think broadly and very differently than the other women in my life. From Charley, I learned it was okay to speak my mind, a gift I value even though it has sometimes landed me in trouble. Among all the women I knew, only Charley had the fortitude to live what she believed and to assert her individuality. While she was kind, honest, generous, and, for the most part, polite to other people, she wasn't a slave to pleasing anyone but herself.

During the years after I completed my medical training, I visited Charley every time I traveled home to see my family. By then, she had returned to practicing medicine and had shed the faded cotton housedresses for more professional attire. She took me to her clinic office once, and her medical colleagues, all men, seemed to avoid her. Later, after I had established something of a reputation as an infectious diseases physician and was invited to lecture at many hospitals and medical schools around the country, I noted that Charley never arranged for me to speak to the doctors and students at her clinic. I suspect she wasn't a favorite among her professional colleagues; she likely was — as in all other areas of her life, the only way she knew how to be — the out-person.

I last saw Charley when my first baby was six weeks old. We lived on an

Indian reservation spanning the Idaho-Nevada border, and I longed for my family and the old neighbors in North Dakota to meet little Danny. I tied my son into his cradle board, which had been made by a local Shoshone woman, wedged it between the floor and the passenger seat — this was before car carriers for infants — and drove the Land Cruiser through the sagebrush-laced hills to the Boise airport.

Mom invited all the neighbor ladies to meet her grandson. He was pretty cranky, which I ascribed to the long trip, the many strangers, the unfamiliar place, and an exhausted mother. When Charley arrived, she picked him up, danced around the living room trying to settle him, stuck her finger in his mouth, and announced, “This baby is hungry. You need to feed him more.”

Instantly, defensive juices bubbled inside me and joined forces with maternal insecurity. I sheepishly, snarkily, said, “I’m nursing him every four hours” — the recommended feeding schedule at that time.

“Nonsense,” Charley said. “You need to feed him when he’s hungry, not by the clock. He’s famished.”

Of course she was right. I banished the every-four-hours schedule, learned to read my baby’s signals, and let him nurse when he wanted to eat.

The night Mom called to tell me that Charley had died, I was packing my suitcase to fly to a medical research meeting early the next day. By then, Charley rarely crossed my mind; my life had moved forward, my days were filled with research, patients, teaching, kids, husband, dog, house. But Mom’s message kicked up long-dormant, but treasured, thoughts: Charley’s high points and low, her kindness and oddness, her likely tortured inner self, her role in my life and the lives of the neighbor kids.

Charley is buried in Riverside Cemetery. Yet, she lives. Her unique spirit still resides in the little girls she inspired on 12th Street. She still speaks through the values she rammed into us, through her high expectations of us, through her steadfast belief in us. In ethereal ways, she continues to monitor our comings and goings and to send her heartfelt opinions back to anyone willing to listen.

Good night, Charley. I hope you have found the peace you so richly deserve.