



Perspective/Opinion

Coming Home

by Allison McLellan, MD

The fact that I was sobbing as the plane landed in Anchorage didn't make sense. I was a fourth-year medical student about to interview for a residency spot; the crying would have made sense if it was due to nerves but that wasn't the reason for my tears. I was treated to a monochrome view from my window– ice, sky, trees and snow, all grey. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I was struck by the feeling that I was going home again, which is odd, since I'd never been there before.

Like most scientists, I trust the things I can see and hear; the things I can quantify and catalogue. The fact that I was trying to sob quietly into the sleeve of my hoodie so the man sitting next to me didn't assume I was insane solely because of a "feeling" seemed odd.

My childhood involved moving from place to place often enough that most people assume one or both of my parents are in the military. In reality, my father's engineering degree and mining background allowed us to make the move from the northern Ontario mining town where I was born to the US. We went back to Canada constantly while I was growing up because we were the only members of our family in the US. We made trips once or twice a year to ice fish, camp, and see our relatives.

I loved everything about it, until I didn't. I thought things changed too quickly– people moved, houses were torn down, trees were cut and childhood memories vanished. In reality, I was the one who had changed but the end result was the same– Canada had stopped being my home.

This was fine; after all, I was now an adult. I didn't need a home base– I inherited an adventurer's spirit from my parents. The home I had I would make and carry with me. I had dreams and plans– go to medical school, become a doctor. I planned on being the doctor my grandfather had deserved as a child, rather than the one he had. He'd grown up in a remote area of Canada where medical care was sparse even for white children. For Native children like him, it was almost non-existent.

I still retained a fondness for the north, much to the chagrin of my Florida medical school, who assured me it would be much easier to match to a residency in Florida. "Why even try to leave the state for residency? It is so difficult, and you could risk not matching," they told me. I did everything they told me not to. I did multiple away rotations as far north as I could get. I applied for residency in every state that wasn't Florida, and I applied for programs that were considered to be out of my league by my medical school. I didn't care. I wrote my personal statement about my grandfather and my desire to care for people that needed it the most– those living in places others didn't want to live; or those people that are often deemed "lesser than" due to the color of their skin or their genetic makeup. I wanted to be the pediatrician that my grandfather never had, and I wanted to find a town where I could do that and also find my home.

I did not match into a residency program that granted me an all-access pass to Alaska, but that didn't stop me. I had called my husband from the bathroom of Ted Stevens International Airport in Anchorage and asked if I could just not come home. We'd settled on a pact– I would do everything I could to get back to Alaska, and he was up for the challenge. I was absolutely relentless– I had seen the light and found my home after only spending 3 days there. I talked about it incessantly, researched where I could work and where my husband and I could live. I structured my whole residency around the plan that I was going to get to Alaska, come hell or high water, come earthquakes or global pandemics.

The next time the plane landed in Anchorage, it was after midnight. No view of the water or snow or sky, just lights in the darkness. Thomas Wolfe said "you

can't go home again" and I honestly believed him. What if I didn't have that feeling again?

My husband knew that I had started crying before I did. I don't know when it happened; probably when the plane turned in the same spot it had 3 years ago and I was treated to the lights reflecting off the snow of the city below me. My heart pounded, my mouth went dry, and I squeezed my husband's hand until the plane landed.

Allison McLellan, MD is a PGY3 resident in the Department of Pediatrics at MCW.