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*The Day My Daughter Smelled  
Like Someone Else*

I decided to quit the day I realized my daughter smelled like someone else. It was my first day back after maternity leave from the Boston University School of Medicine, where I had finished two years of medical school and two years of graduate research. I expected to spend four more years in the MD/PhD program - two in the lab and two in clinical rotations.

I smiled that morning when I handed her to a stranger at daycare, determined not to make a scene, and then I cried in the car on my way to the medical campus. I spent the day catching up with colleagues and making research plans with my advisor while I counted the minutes until I could leave. I smiled again when I picked my daughter up that evening, and then I kissed her head and the way she smelled nearly broke me in half. She smelled like someone else.

I stayed up that night to wait for my husband to come home after a long shift. He was an internal medicine intern, a glimpse of my future, and I needed his advice. I thought about what I would say, how I would ease him into the conversation. I would tell him how my interest in my dissertation project had faded long before I even knew I was pregnant, and how the students and postdocs who sealed my decision to join my advisor's lab were leaving or already gone. I would explain that I couldn't leave a daughter I loved to do something I barely liked. I would remind him how little clinical experience I had and how removed I felt, two years into my graduate research, from a future as a practicing physician. I would remind him how, as an intern, he often left the house before our daughter woke up and got home after she had fallen asleep. How much harder would that be when she was old enough to really know him, want him,

ask for him? How much harder would it be when I traded the flexibility of research training for the rigidity of clinical rotations and residency- when I was the one missing everything? And I would tell him how she smelled like someone else when I picked her up from daycare. I wanted her to smell like me.

We sat down. I took a breath, thought about where to begin. “I want to quit.”

Our conversation stretched out over days. It grew to include not only me and my husband but also our support system- our families, our friends and peers, our mentors and role models. More reasons to quit surfaced. There was the daycare tuition check that eclipsed my monthly stipend. The nagging fear that an MD/PhD program cannot be completed during daycare hours. The possibility that I would miss out on four years of snuggles only to find out that I didn’t want to be a doctor, after all.

But there were reasons to keep going, too. There was the obvious affection the daycare teachers had for our daughter. The payback obligation I had incurred over four years of tuition and stipend paid out by our privately funded program. The fear that our daughter would look at my decision as evidence that she has to choose between a career and a family. The values I held

that had driven me to pursue medicine in the first place.

After several weeks, we made a plan. I would give it my best effort for two months, to make sure that my decision wasn’t made rashly during a transition that is difficult for mothers in any career path. If I still wanted to quit after two months, I would change labs, to make sure that my decision wasn’t based simply on a poor fit. If I still wanted to quit after changing labs, I would drop out of the graduate program and return to the clinical rotations in an MD-only track. If I still wanted quit then, I would.

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Two months later, I had a difficult conversation with my advisor. He understood immediately and made a call to a professor whose research field and lab environment were a far better fit, and I switched into his lab the next day. In the following weeks, I found a project I was passionate about. I was genuinely excited to drop my daughter off each morning and head into the lab. I found myself talking about my research with my family and friends, something I had never done in my original lab. I began to draw connections between my research and the clinical work I wanted to do when I graduated.

That was two years ago. As the months passed, my commitment to the program and to a career in medicine strengthened. My daughter began walking, talking, running, and singing, and every day she reaffirmed that a demanding career and a happy family are not mutually exclusive goals. She came home from daycare with songs I didn't recognize and games I didn't know, and I was thankful that she was learning more than I could teach her. She told me that she loved her teachers and friends and I was happy she had a community beyond our family. She formed an intense and adorable bond with my husband despite his challenging schedule and I realized that my return to medical school and

residency wouldn't destroy my relationship with her.

I recently returned to the lab after another maternity leave. I smiled as I handed my second daughter to the woman who had cared for my first, and then I cried in the car on my way to the medical campus. I spent the day catching up with colleagues and making research plans with my advisor while I counted the minutes until I could leave. I smiled again when I picked my daughter up that evening, and then I kissed her head. She smelled like someone else, but I didn't mind.