A young woman with a symptomatic patent foramen ovale: Natasha's fascinating story

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ABSTRACT

A young Amerasian woman developed transient ischemic attacks related to a patent foramen ovale. Her background personal story, involving being willed from her dying grandmother to a US photographer and attempting to find her serviceman father, has led to a book and a TED talk.

KEYWORDS Children of Korean War; patent foramen ovale; patient story

About 10 years ago, I was consulted by Natasha, then age 40 and living in the San Francisco area, about a recent cardiovascular issue. She had presented to the emergency room with the sudden onset of right-sided weakness, limping, unable to walk or to grasp objects with her right hand. She had previously noted a brief episode of difficulty picking up an object with that hand. She was admitted for evaluation of a probable transient ischemic attack.

Her workup included laboratory studies to rule out immune or hematologic disorders, a computed tomographic angiogram of the head and neck, magnetic resonance imaging of the brain with diffusion-weighted imaging, and an echocardiogram with bubble contrast. All studies were unremarkable except for the echocardiogram, which revealed a positive bubble contrast study consistent with a patent foramen ovale (PFO) without an associated atrial septal aneurysm.

Although at that time there was some debate as to the best therapeutic approach, it was decided to close the PFO with an Amplatzer device. Recent reports suggest that this was the right decision,^{1,2} further supported by the lack of any recurrent events in the past 10 years.

NATASHA'S STORY

I had first encountered Natasha one autumn afternoon, nearly 37 years ago. The sun was setting to the west of a high school football stadium, silhouetted by the mini-skyscrapers of midtown Atlanta. Natasha was cheerleading for the North Fulton High School, where two of our children attended. She looked like a typical American from a Norman Rockwell painting, with blond hair and dark brown eyes. So much for first impressions. She became a good friend and tennis doubles

partner of our daughter, Kelly (*Figure 1*), through whom I learned about Natasha's fascinating background.

Natasha had been born in Korea; her mother was Korean and her father was said to be an American soldier, who seemingly had abandoned the mother and child, one of over 40,000 Asian children to be so treated. Because of great prejudice against Amerasian children in Korea, her mother asked her grandmother to rear her. The latter, a nurse and midwife, did her best, sharing a two-room farmhouse until she became ill with cancer.

At that point in Natasha's life, she encountered Rick Smolan, a 28-year-old freelance American photographer who was doing a story on Amerasian children. Drawn by the child's striking good looks and playful personality, he began to take photographs of her and to inquire about her background.

After several days, the grandmother, who was ill and could no longer care for Natasha, asked Smolan if he would adopt her and take her to America. Somewhat shaken, Smolan stated that he could not possibly do that because he was single, immature, irresponsible, and lived in hotels for months at a time pursuing his photographic assignments. He did offer to take the grandmother to a hospital, but she refused. He left his business card and gave the translator some money, suggesting that she try to "persuade the grandmother to see a doctor." He also contacted an Atlanta couple he knew to see whether they were interested in adopting the child.

A few weeks later, while in Bangkok finishing an assignment for *Time* magazine, Rick received a telegram: "Someone in Korea has died and left you an 11-year-old girl in their will." Rick contacted his friend in Atlanta, who agreed to the adoption and flew to Korea with his son (who was Natasha's age), where they shared a hotel room with Rick and Natasha while working out the details of the adoption. That evening a fire broke out in the hotel. The

Figure 1. Natasha (left), with our daughter, Kelly.

hallway and their 11th floor room soon filled with dense, black smoke. The adults soaked washcloths and towels to put over the children's faces and used duct tape and room service menus to seal the heater vents. They wisely chose not to jump out of the window as some had contemplated. After a frightening half-hour, firemen finally arrived, chopped through their door, and led them to safety.

After the adoption, the girl changed her given name from Eun Sook to Natasha, choosing the name of a character she had liked in a television show, *Rocky and Bullwinkle*. It did not take Natasha long to adjust to living in Atlanta. Within just a few years, she became fluent in English, became captain of the varsity cheerleaders, and was elected homecoming queen.

After graduating from North Fulton High School, Natasha attended Oglethorpe University. She left after 2 years, choosing to become a Delta flight attendant, assigned initially to the Portland–Korea route in 1987, and later obtained her college degree online.

Smolan, in the meantime, had become well known as the project director for photojournal books entitled *A Day in the Life of*. . . . Natasha and my daughter, Kelly, actually helped work on one of these projects one summer in Madrid.

Curious about her father, Natasha began to inquire about the possibility of finding him. A passenger on one of her flights, a serviceman, agreed to help. Within weeks, Natasha managed to locate her biological father. She wrote him a letter, indicating an interest in meeting him. Her father responded promptly. He was astounded to get her letter, because he did not even know that she existed. Of course, he would love to meet her. How soon could it be arranged?

The meeting was to be in Texas. Natasha made her travel plans and pondered about what she would say upon meeting

Figure 2. Natasha and her grandmother pictured on the book cover of *Natasha's Story*.

her father for the first time in 26 years. Two weeks before the reunion, Natasha received a brief note. Her father had died. It was something sudden, apparently a heart attack in his 40s. Everyone was so sorry.

I later watched Natasha at my daughter's wedding. She was one of the bridesmaids, married now to a photographer and living in the California wine district. Her hair was darker, because she no longer dyed it blond. She was still a strikingly attractive young woman, who eventually had two children of her own.

As she strolled down the aisle, I thought about her background and wondered whether more than a handful of spectators knew about it. I also thought of a grandmother's devoted love, a photographer's good fortune, and a father's bad luck. It also reminded me of the wonderful musical, *Miss Saigon*, wherein an Asian woman is seemingly abandoned by her American lover. I subsequently also thought about how sad it would be if a harried physician took a quick medical history from a young woman with a symptomatic patent foramen ovale and missed the incredible background story. Her story has led to a book³ (Figure 2) and a TED talk⁴ and, who knows, possibly a future *Miss Saigon* type of musical.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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