

The Man in the Bow Tie



BY ARASH RADPARVAR, MD '07

In every person's life, there are those pivotal moments that determine individual destiny. December 19, 2001, was one such day in my life; the day when a childhood dream became a reality. That was the day I met the man in the bow tie.

The days preceding are also ingrained in my memory, when I traveled from Manhattan to Syracuse. I had never been to Syracuse and did not know what to expect. I had heard Upstate New York was beautiful and was excited to see what New York looked like outside the chaotic Big Apple.

To be honest, I was as excited about my trip as I was about the purpose of it. Our family's summer road trips to the Caspian Sea were by far my happiest childhood memories growing up in Iran. I was also especially excited about this trip because I was traveling on Amtrak. It was my first time ever riding on a train.

I would be spending one night in Syracuse and returning the next evening. I packed a small suitcase with some personal items I needed for my stay. But the most important were my suit, my dress shirt, and my tie. After all, I wasn't just going to visit and



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explore Upstate New York. I was going to interview at SUNY Upstate Medical University.

My suit looked so elegant, dark charcoal with thin white stripes. I had fallen in love with it the moment I saw it at the big Macy's on Herald Square a week earlier. I closed my eyes and imagined myself in it. I looked so handsome and happy. I felt my heart flutter with joy. "Will this be my lucky suit?" I wondered to myself.

Would my refined appearance make up for my less than perfect score? Or would it all prove a waste of time, a big letdown?

The dark clouds of reality began to take over again, my thoughts racing. "I don't know of anyone who was ever accepted into medical school with a 4 on his MCAT."

"I tried this path a year ago. This is all going to be one short-lived false hope, a fleeting fantasy."

As my excitement turned into despair, I decided to have no expectations. Because I loved road trips, I reasoned I would just go for the experience. I would make an adventure out of this.

My train departed from Penn Station on the evening of December 18. The train was not crowded and I had an entire row to myself. I took a seat by the window and placed my small backpack on the seat next to me. I had packed some sandwiches and snacks for the road. I had also brought my CD player with a collection of CDs from my favorite Persian singers. I was determined to make the best of the trip regardless of the outcome of my interview.

It was beginning to grow dusk outside. I caught a glimpse of a faint reflection of myself on the window as I stared out. I still could not believe I was on my way to my first and, as of then, my only interview invitation. I knew my future depended on this only interview. This would probably be the only chance and the closest I would get to realizing my lifelong dream of becoming a physician.

My thoughts drifted back to childhood, living through the daily bombardments of eight years of the Iran-Iraq war, when I was constantly preoccupied with my family's safety and what I could do to help in case of an emergency. The

shattered windows, bloody ambulances, and unannounced missile attacks had become a daily routine. I could not help but observe the frailty of life and the pain war inflicts upon its victims. I wanted to be able to do something, anything that could help those in need. I remembered the selfless doctors who worked around the clock to treat and attempt to instill hope in the wounded. Those painful years were the initial sparks that inspired me to pursue a career in medicine.

In Iran, students enter medical university at the age of 18 after graduating from high school. Despite becoming the valedictorian of an elite high school in Shiraz, I was denied admission from every medical school in Iran due to my ethnic background. As a Jew, I did not possess the detailed knowledge of Islamic liturgy and jurisprudence deemed necessary for entrance.

Devastated by the realization that I could not achieve my goal at home, I chose to leave the country. Since I was not allowed to get a passport, I decided it was worth risking my life and fleeing, following my younger brothers, who had left the country for America six months earlier. Using a counterfeit passport, I escaped Iran in order to pursue my dream of becoming a physician in the United States.

I set off to this far away country I had grown up hearing described as the “Great Satan” with little more than \$1,000 in my pocket and a knowledge of broken English. Aware that I may never see my parents again, I had only the thoughts of becoming a physician and life in a free country to console me.

“Ticket please.” The conductor’s voice halted my rambling memories. We were now well outside the city limits and the train was going at full speed, tall buildings now replaced by trees and green spaces. The farther we moved away from the city, the faster the trees went past the train. It reminded me of how life seems to go by faster the older I get.

I arrived in the United States in July 1997, where I met up with my younger brothers and my uncle, who had a small apartment in Brooklyn. My cousin, who worked on Wall Street, told me not to waste my time with college. After all, at 22, I would be older than my classmates and besides, how would I be able to support myself? I refused to listen.

I got a job working as a busboy to earn money and apply to college. Thankfully, Yeshiva University granted me a scholarship, affording me the opportunity to pave the path towards my dreams.

I was determined to prove to the university administration that I would not let them down. I worked hard to excel in my studies and become a strong applicant for medical school and was very proud to be one of the three finalists nominated to be valedictorian.

But the challenges of entering medical school were far from over. Despite my outstanding performance in college, I was rejected from every single medical school I applied to. I watched my friends and classmates—some of whom I had helped with their science courses—celebrate their acceptances as I opened one letter of rejection after another.

My nemesis was the verbal section of the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), which consisted of reading 8 or 9 passages and answering questions that followed each passage in a short amount of time. This required rapid reading and comprehension skills well beyond those of an immigrant of less than three years.

The MCAT consisted of three sections, each with a maximum of 15 points for a total of 45 points. A total score of 28–30 was deemed a minimum requirement for consideration. However, the breakdown of the score was just as important. A score of less than 8 on any individual section was generally unacceptable. Despite scoring above the 98 percentile on the science sections, and despite being a top student in my college, my score of 4 on the verbal section had guaranteed my rejection from every medical school I applied to.

I decided to dedicate another year to prepare and take the MCAT again, focusing on the dreaded verbal section. For an entire year I denied myself any social occasion. Other than going to work, I confined myself to my room and the library. I read the *Wall Street Journal* and the Op-Ed section of *New York Times* on a daily basis to improve my reading skills.

The process was wearing me down. I was 16 when I initially started to study for the medical school admission test. Ten years had passed and I was still trying to pass the test. Now, however, I was preparing to take the test in a foreign language, on a different continent, and with no family or financial support.

I had migrated to America with the dream of a better future, leaving my family with the hope that someday we would be reunited. Those hopes and dreams had turned into a reality of a lonely life and

an uncertain future. I had given up the comfort of home to live in a dirty old apartment. I longed for my mom's warm foods while I defrosted my packaged meals in the microwave. The thought of not succeeding and not seeing my parents again inflicted me with anxiety and frequent nightmares.

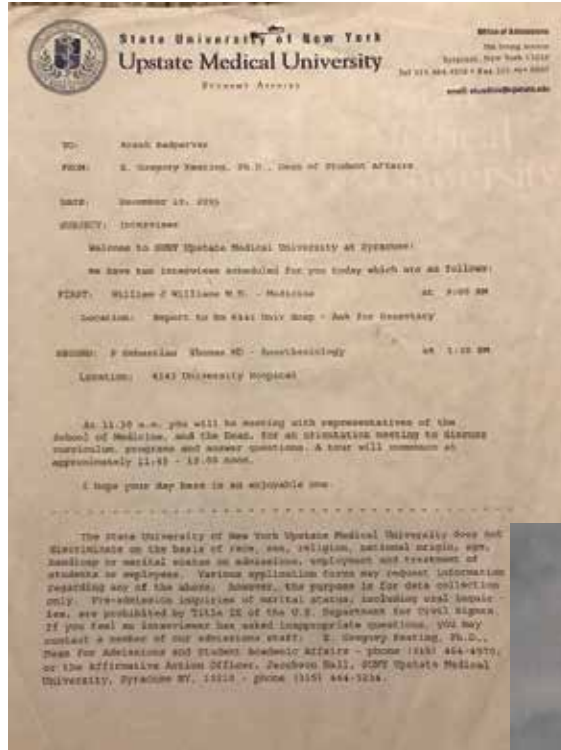
Unlike learning sciences, the skills of rapid reading and comprehension take years of practice to develop. Despite my efforts, my score on my second MCAT was identical to my previous year's score. Again, I scored 4 on the verbal section.

I was devastated, feeling I had wasted another year of my life. I felt all my efforts and sacrifices were futile. Just as in Iran, I was being denied from medical school based on a disadvantage I could not control.

I had seen immigrant friends give up their aspirations of medical school after repeated poor performance on the MCAT verbal section. Despite my low score, I was determined not to give up.

That's what put me on this train. While studying a few days earlier, my phone had rung. The lady on the other end told me she was calling from Upstate Medical University. She said that the committee had reviewed my application and had decided to grant me an interview. I could not believe what I was hearing! She asked me if I had a preferred date. I said I would take the first available date. December 19.

Outside, darkness of the night blended with the snow-covered ground like a black curtain over a white plush carpet. The incredibly ornate displays of illuminated Christmas decorations had transformed the town passing us into a glittering winter wonderland. The houses were outlined with decorative holiday lights. It was my first time seeing Christmas decorations outside of Manhattan and it looked magical.



The schedule from Dr. Radparva's Interview Day at Upstate, and his interviewer, William J. Williams, MD.



I arrived at the College of Medicine well in time the next morning. The sight of medical students and

residents walking on campus wearing white coats and stethoscopes was both inspiring and aspiring. This time, I decided to allow myself to dream, even if for a brief moment.

I walked into the admissions office and introduced myself to the secretary. A few other applicants were already there. Everyone was dressed very professionally. I looked as sharp as anyone else, with a crisp white shirt and silk grey tie under my exquisite suit.

After all the interviewees had arrived, we met with Dr. Keating, the dean of admissions. Following some introductions and greetings, each applicant was handed a file that contained the itinerary for the day and the names of his or her two interviewers.

My first interviewer was Dr. Williams. His name, William J. Williams, reminded me of my close childhood friend in Iran. Just like Dr. Williams, my friend's last name was identical to his first name with an added letter. I thought that was an interesting coincidence.

As I walked over to the building where the interview was scheduled, I wondered what type of person Dr. Williams was. I wondered if he would be kind and friendly to me.

As I sat in the waiting area, my heart started to beat faster with anticipation and my thoughts began to race again. I kept thinking how just a few minutes spent with another person, whom I had never met, could change my destiny. One man, one interview, one impression would determine if I realized my lifelong dream or buried it.

“Hi Dr. Williams.” The secretary’s voice brought me back to myself. I looked up.

I estimated Dr. Williams was in his mid seventies. He had fair skin with rosy cheeks and a full head of mostly grey and white hair parted to the side. He was dressed in a crisp white shirt, black dress pants, shiny black dress shoes and red bow tie that gave him a distinguished look. His warm and friendly smile put me to ease and made it very natural for me to smile back. There was a sense of kindness about him. I felt an instantaneous connection as if I had known him all my life. I felt he was there not just to interview me, but to help me. To advocate for me.

As we stepped into his office, once again, I thought to myself how that interview was my one and only admission ticket. I had to shine over the next few minutes if I ever wanted any chance of becoming a physician.

Dr. Williams engaged me in some casual talk. He asked about my past and my interest in medicine. He was genuinely eager to get to know me as a person. We discussed a variety of topics from science to religion to art, travel, and other hobbies. It was a light and engaging conversation.

Towards the end of our talk, Dr. Williams got up from his chair and took out a textbook from the shelf and handed it to me. It was a medical text in hematology named *Williams Hematology* in honor of its editor-in-chief. It came to be known as “the book” in the field of hematology.

“He must like me if he is showing his book to me,” I thought. It was then that I realized our 20-minute scheduled interview had turned into a one hour, 15-minute conversation. As we concluded I thanked him for his time. He walked me back to the conference room where other candidates were meeting for lunch. I had missed out on some touring of the medical school but that didn’t compare to my additional time with Dr. Williams.

On January 8th, 2002, my phone rang one more unforgettable time. My dream was no longer just a dream—I was offered a spot at the Upstate College of Medicine.

Sometimes there is only so much we are able to accomplish by ourselves. I needed someone to believe in me and see the potential that my college professors had seen. That person was Dr. Williams, who saw in me something that transcended the conventional standards of medical school admission based on perfect standardized credentials.

Today, because of him, I am a healer and a teacher. And because of him, I am again a dreamer.

I realized another dream in 2008, during my intern year in Albany, New York, when I saw my parents again for the first time in more than 10 years. My brother drove them up to Albany from Baltimore and I remember seeing them waiting outside my apartment building when I came home from the hospital one evening.

In writing this memoir, I conducted a brief search on the life of Dr. Williams. I was surprised to learn that he attended medical school at the University of Pennsylvania, where I have served as a clinical associate in radiology since 2014. That shared connection makes my services here even more special and meaningful to me.

I wish my hero were still around so he could read this and know how he impacted the life of a young dreamer. I also know that he would be too humble to accept credit, instead telling me to “pay it forward.”

And that’s what I try to do. While working with the residents and trainees here at UPenn, I like to think that I am imparting the wisdom of Dr. Williams on to the future generation of doctors. I take great pride thinking that I may be working with someone who will someday give a young dreamer a chance. That I may be working with a future William J. Williams. ■

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