

---

Matthew B. Stern, MD

## A Young Northerner Ventures South to Medical School: Letters Home from Duke, 1974-1976

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matt B Stern". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

**September 1974**

Dear Mom and Dad,

I arrived safely in Durham and am definitely in the South. It is hot, the Southern drawl reminds me I'm not in Boston anymore, and the smell of tobacco is pervasive. I'm told it's from the numerous tobacco factories that are just about all there is in this town. The Duke campus is an oasis in the midst of Durham, and I found a furnished apartment for \$150 per month on Elba Street, just off the campus. The vinyl furniture is a bit sticky on these hot days, and I need to get used to the coal train passing within 20 feet of the apartment on its daily run to supply Duke with its main source of energy.

---

---

I thought I had made a big mistake coming here after my first anatomy lecture. I could not understand the professor because his Southern accent was so thick, and frankly, it made him sound pretty stupid. Maybe Grandma was right about not going to a doctor without a Harvard diploma on the wall. Some of my classmates sound just like him, but you'd be really surprised how smart they are. One of the teachers in the course is great and has a horse named Piriformis. That's a muscle somewhere near your groin that's pretty useless unless you pull it. My cadaver is a woman who looks a little bit like Aunt Lynn. That picture I sent is my classmate Byron and me with the cadaver between us. We have really bonded with her. By the way, I still don't see the relevance of organic chemistry so far.

### January 1975

Dear Mom and Dad,  
It was great being with you in Florida over Christmas vacation. I'm really sorry I had no idea what to do when Coby smashed her finger in the chaise lounge, but I'm still just a first-year medical student. Did I really talk with a Southern accent? I know I wasn't terrific company, but it was the only time we had to learn neuroanatomy. The nervous system is amazingly complex, but they seem to think you can learn enough about it over a two-week vacation to be a doctor.

I appreciate your concern that I was somewhat tanned when I arrived, and that made you wonder whether I was actually in medical school. Remember, I'm not in the North anymore, and daily tennis matches with my classmate Rob keep me looking good. I have gradually adjusted to the lifestyle here and actually went to my first basketball game. I have never seen anything like it. You could scream as loud as you can and not hear yourself because of the crowd frenzy. I'm becoming a real Duke fan and feeling the Red Sox and Patriots fading into the background as my animosity towards the Tar Heels of Chapel Hill grows stronger every day.

Chapel Hill is a cool place to go as long as you don't wear a Duke shirt. My classmate Kurt has turned us on to bluegrass music at a place

called Cat's Cradle. We tend to migrate there on Friday and Saturday nights. Yes, I'm working hard despite what you think, and the \$2,400 you spent on tuition will be worth it, I promise!

### August 1975

Dear Mom and Dad,  
Well, it finally happened. I made it to the wards for my first clinical rotation, obstetrics and gynecology. We heard a lecture from the chairman the first day. He told us that pregnancy is a disease, so congratulations, Mom, for conquering that disease four times. He also told us that there isn't much for a uterus to do after childbearing years other than bleed and get cancer. I'm not sure the women's liberation movement has made it here yet, but you might consider getting checked out, just the same.

My very first ward experience was on the obstetrics service. The moans and groans and hollering unnerved me and, when the chief resident told me to put scrubs on, I realized I didn't know how to wear them. I put the scrub pants on over my regular pants and in the labor room she noticed my cuff sticking out and sent me back to do it the right way. When I came back in to the delivery room, the patient was about to give birth. I was at the head so couldn't see what was happening but my classmate Jerry was right there. He looked like he had seen a ghost as the baby came out, and I really thought he was going to pass out. A few days later, a woman came in pregnant with her ninth baby, and the resident said that I could deliver the baby and it wouldn't take very long. You have no idea how slippery a newborn is, and that thing popped right through my hands and into my lap before the resident grabbed it. The baby was fine, but I don't think I'll be an obstetrician.

### November 1975

Dear Mom and Dad,  
Psychiatry is really strange. We have to have some kind of group therapy as part of the rotation, and a psychiatrist named Hawkins has us doing all kinds of weird things. Yesterday, some of us held one of our classmates down while he supposedly

---

connected with his “primal” self and screamed bloody murder. I thought he was a pretty stable guy before that, and I’m not sure I want to know the things about my classmates coming out in these sessions. Have you ever met someone with paranoid schizophrenia? I talked to a woman who suddenly saw an apparition above my head and started screaming. I swear there was something above my head and I ran out of there. I also interviewed some woman in front of the chairman and staff. I had no idea what I was doing but managed to get her to open up a bit and they think that I could be a good psychiatrist. I’m still thinking about being the Patriots’ team physician, and I guess it will be useful to know if the players have any emotional problems. Surgery and medicine are next. Here we go!

### February 1976

Dear Mom and Dad,  
Good news and bad news. Surgery was amazing. The chairman of the department is named Sabiston. I know you’ve never heard of him, but around here, he’s pretty much the king. He talked to us the first day of the rotation and knew all of our names. He looked right at me and said, “What do you think, Mr. Stern?” I couldn’t even remember the question but will never forget that he took the time to memorize students’ names from their pictures before the rotation.

I saw my first open heart case at the VA hospital with one of Dr. Sabiston’s protégés. I was really excited. I had to wash my hands for what seemed like an hour, put on gowns on top of my scrubs and a cap and mask. I felt really confined, and my nose began to run because I think I’m allergic to the material in the mask. When I inadvertently scratched my nose while staring in awe at a beating heart, the surgeon told the head nurse to take some sutures and tie my hands behind my back. I guess I’ll have to find another specialty.

As luck would have it, my final oral examination was with the king himself, Dr. Sabiston. You can imagine how nervous I was. I was sweating so much that I actually stuck to the big leather chair in his office. He was gentle on

me, though, and even asked questions about my experience as a Duke medical student. We had a nice conversation, but I was still relieved to get out of there.

### May 1976

Dear Mom and Dad,  
I finished my last rotation, medicine. This was the toughest, but I learned the most. The interns here have to be on call five out of seven nights. I even saw one of the interns having lunch in the cafeteria on Sunday with his family. Each morning we present patients to the teaching attending at the patient’s bedside. The patient is readied by the nursing staff before rounds and must be prepared for the examination by the attending. There’s a legend that one of the giants of medicine here, Dr. Stead (I know, you’ve never heard of him, either), actually poured a bedpan on the floor when one of the cleaning staff refused to take it. I got to wear a beeper a few times. It looks like a walkie-talkie and makes a series of loud beeps when they want you. I felt pretty cool wearing it and have begun to feel a bit more like a doctor. Maybe I could even help the next time we’re with someone who smashes their finger in a chaise lounge.

I’m writing this letter from the Duke Gardens. It’s a beautiful day and there are flowers all around me. Janet is with me and has been an incredible source of support through this year, even though she’s been so busy with law school. Who could have imagined that my girlfriend would join me here and end up in law school at UNC? We are trying to keep the rivalry out of our relationship, but I was pretty annoyed when she got tickets to the Duke-UNC game and I didn’t.

I’m amazed at what I have learned these last two years. While I no longer want to be the orthopaedic surgeon for the Patriots, I’m sure I will figure it out eventually. I have come to appreciate how dedicated this place is to teaching medical students and am excited about next year, when I will spend most of it in a hematology lab doing basic research. No other school that I know of gives its students this kind of opportunity

---

during medical school. Tell Grandma that while she may still value that Harvard diploma on her doctor's wall, she is missing the boat and that if I were her, I'd be much more comforted to see a Duke diploma!

Your loving son,  
Matt



Matthew B. Stern is the director of the Parkinson's Disease and Movement Disorders Center at the University of Pennsylvania. He also co-directs the Parkinson's Disease Research, Education, and Clinical Center at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center. Stern has authored or co-authored numerous papers on Parkinson's disease and edited or co-edited eight books. He has held several leadership positions and is currently secretary of the International Movement Disorder Society. He serves on numerous consulting boards and has lectured throughout the world on Parkinson's disease and related disorders.

Stern received his medical degree from Duke University and completed his neurology training at the University of Pennsylvania. He remains connected to Duke through his support of medical student aid and his membership on the Duke Medical Alumni Council.