

Haunting Diagnosis

Category: Getting the News

written by Ronna L. Edelstein | January 2, 2017

The day began like every other summer day. My eight-year-old son and six-year-old daughter ate their cereal, watched Sesame Street, and played—him with his Star Wars figures and her with her Barbies. After lunch, they gathered a few favorite books and toys to entertain them while they waited in the pediatrician's office for their annual physicals.

Normalcy ended when the physician announced: "Your daughter has a severe curvature of the spine. She needs to see a doctor who specializes in scoliosis."

The specialist presented two treatment choices: wearing a brace or using a Scolitron, an experimental device that sent electric currents through the back muscles to, hopefully, straighten the spine. We opted for the Scolitron.

Every night, my Princess Pumpkin clutched her "Smurfette" with her right hand and her brother's hand with her left, while I attached electrodes to her back. Then, in a voice struggling to remain calm, she told me I could turn on the machine—a machine she named Adolf for the heinous Hitler who delighted in hurting innocent people. When the Scolitron failed, she wore both a Boston and Milwaukee brace. At age thirteen, my daughter underwent intensive spinal surgery.

Throughout this medical journey, she took each new bit of information with an adult-like strength that awed me. She accepted the rashes that covered her back, the holes in her oversized shirts, the ongoing treatments.

I, however, was not so mature. When I received the news, I initially reacted like a robot. I took my children from the doctor's office to the bakery for their favorite pastry, made them their special macaroni and cheese dinner, bathed them, and read to them. Only after I heard the evenness of their breathing did I sit outside on the porch and let loose—with sobs that came from deep inside me, shook my body, and caused my throat, ears, eyes, and head to throb. My mind reminded me that scoliosis was not cancer, but my heart told me that my sweet little girl with the smiling eyes now had to deal with a long-term physical challenge. The unfairness of the situation embittered me.

Thirty years later, the doctor's diagnosis still haunts me. I ache for my daughter who had to grow up so quickly—and I torment myself for not being a maternal tower of strength for her. I lacked backbone when she most needed it.

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