

Christmas Story

Category: Stories

written by Ned Towle | December 22, 2017

Ned Towle ~

Christmas Day 2012

This Christmas is different. My wife and I are spending the day alone, as our two children and four grandchildren came over yesterday for the big celebration.

It's 10:00 in the morning. I have just completed a nine-mile run and am sitting on the living-room floor. My wife, Linda, is on the sofa with her computer.

I feel unusually tired; rather than take a shower, I want to climb into bed.

After all, I did just run nine miles, I tell myself.

My lungs are sore, but running for an hour and twenty-five minutes in thirty-six-degree weather seems a good reason for that. My right arm is numb and my right hand cold, but I reflect that, on my run, I wore a new Christmas gift jacket. *That must have pinched the blood flow...*

Nevertheless, rather than go straight to bed, I sit near my wife, sensing that something is wrong.

"Sweet Pea," I say, "would you mind googling 'mild heart-attack symptoms'?"

"Sure." She reads aloud the parts about chest discomfort and upper-body numbness, then she rereads three times the part about how heart-attack victims frequently deny their condition, with dire results.

I am a sixty-seven-year-old man who tends to ignore his age and deny any physical vulnerability. Yet there's something about what's happening that makes me want to be flat-out honest and realistic.

No denial, I tell myself.

To Linda I say, "I think we should go to the hospital."

Linda drives us. Five minutes later, I'm lying on a bed, getting an electrocardiogram. The nurse seems overwhelmed by all the wires on the EKG machine.

"*Oh, no!*" she exclaims. She rips a sheet of paper from the machine, rushes out and shouts a doctor's name.

Shouting at the doctor? I frown at her lack of courtesy. Fifteen seconds later, the doctor strides in.

"You're having a heart attack," he tells me. "You need to be operated on immediately."

The operation must take place at another hospital, he says. As luck would have it, the heart surgeon is already there.

Feeling some discomfort, but no pain, I keep up a positive banter. I thank the nurses for being here on Christmas and tell Linda, "Isn't it lucky that we celebrated Christmas yesterday?"

I don't *feel* like I'm dying, but the thought crosses my mind. Linda and I don't look at each other; I'm in denial, and she doesn't want to share her fears.

They wheel me out past the central emergency-room counter. This being New York, staff members of every race and creed are working there. I feel like shouting out, "God bless you Jews, Muslims and Hindus for covering the work on Christmas morning—and for being here for me!"

The ambulance is waiting. Twenty minutes later, the crew wheels me into the new hospital—then they get lost. We enter an operating area that's deserted: There's absolutely no one there. We're on the wrong floor. I feel dumbfounded and frustrated; I can't believe that this is happening.

We go to the right floor and enter the correct operating room. The heart surgeon is there. On one side of the room, two monitor screens face the operating table; on the other, there's a large one-way picture window.

I'm immediately lifted onto the operating table. The surgeon sits on a stool on one side; the nurse stands on the other, next to the monitors. Linda stands close by. We're quiet, keeping our fears and uncertainties to ourselves. This matter-of-fact, business-as-usual atmosphere lasts until the surgeon turns to Linda and says gently, "You'll have to go now."

Linda moves toward me, and suddenly we are saying goodbye. Our world comes crashing down; our tears tumble uncontrollably; our faces melt together as we kiss for what we fear will be the last time.

Alone with the doctor and nurse, I regain my composure. I'm given mild sedation and a local anesthetic, but remain conscious. I watch the monitor as the wire inserted into my groin travels up and enters my heart. Although I feel no pain, the sight of the wire in my heart unnerves me. I turn my gaze away and focus on the surgeon as he watches the screen and manipulates the instruments.

After about a quarter of an hour, he finally withdraws the wire.

"The procedure went well," he says calmly, to my relief. "I've inserted a stent, and there's every reason to expect that your heart will be fine."

I'm rolled into a hospital room, where Linda is waiting. We learn that I had a total occlusion of the right coronary artery, which was cleared with angioplasty and kept open with the aforementioned stent. There's minor

damage, with some number of dead heart cells in my right ventricle.

My children and daughter-in-law arrive that afternoon, their Christmas festivities interrupted by Linda's text alerting them about my heart attack.

I'm upbeat and assure them that I'm okay, in spite of where I am and how I look. Inside, though, a nagging fear arises: *Will my heart be permanently weakened? Can I regain my full physical strength?*

Throughout my rehabilitation—thirty-six visits to a first-rate local institution—these fears never quite subside.

Only twelve months later do they finally vanish, when my cardiologist tells me, "As long as you stay hydrated, you can run as hard and as long as you want."

I take him at his word. Last year, 2016, I ran my first New York City Marathon; this year, I ran my second.

And, most important, Linda and I are looking forward to many more Christmases and kisses.

About the author:

Ned Towle's varied career began with the Maryknoll Fathers & Brothers in Peru; he then worked with a Quaker organization for the homeless, and later with New York City's Office of Management and Budget. He subsequently managed a number of bus depots and served as budget director and chief financial officer of the NYC Transit Authority. More recently, he's completed his divinity degree at Union Theological Seminary, and in 2004 he founded the Westchester Wine School, which he directed until earlier this year. "I'm now on 'sabbatical.' I aspire to write on subjects of social and spiritual importance, and I only hope that my future pieces will not require the five-year gestation period that this story took! I would like to dedicate this piece, with love and appreciation, to my wife, Linda; my surgeon, Dr. Shih; and my cardiologist, Dr. Chaudhry."

Story editor:

Diane Guernsey