

Steep Sledding

Category: Stories

written by Jonathan Han | October 2, 2009

Jonathan Han

“Don’t worry,” my doctor said.

I barely heard what he was saying; lying there in the hospital bed, I was caught up in contemplating the diagnostic procedure I was scheduled to have the next morning.

“With these anesthetics,” he continued, “you won’t feel or remember a thing after it’s over.”

“Okay,” I answered weakly, signing the consent form with unaccustomed legibility. But could I really forget the emotional trauma of these past twelve hours?

I’m a physician, and blessedly accustomed to standing on the other side of the health-and-illness divide. But after four days of crampy abdominal pain, my self-diagnosed “gastroenteritis” had horribly morphed into a “rule out carcinoma” directive. Now I faced another twelve hours of waiting—reviewing the possibilities, expecting the worst—until my procedure could be performed. Could I stop silently reviewing my CAT scan findings (that suspicious abdominal mass) and numb my feelings of anguish and anticipatory grief?

“Do you want a sleeping pill for tonight?” asked my doctor.

“I don’t know,” I stammered.

“It may help you sleep,” he pressed.

“Okay,” I said, grasping at the chance to escape this nightmare. Inwardly, though, I craved normal sleep, complete with dreams, not anesthesia’s timeless, dreamless fugue state.

A brief visit from my wife and two young children helped me feel almost normal again. My wife Marilyn, as supportive and hopeful as usual, told me that she still thought my symptoms could be the result of an infection. “Let’s see what the test shows first, and we’ll move on from there.”

However, it wasn’t long before I returned to worrying that our future together might be cut terribly short.

Fortunately, my children distracted themselves, and me, by pointing out the vagaries of hospital-bed controls.

“Dad, wouldn’t it be great to have a bed that moved like this at home?” asked my son Davey as the foot of the hospital bed whirred slowly up and down.

The highlight, for me, was watching my seven-year-old daughter Grace skipping down the hospital hallway as she headed for the elevators to leave. Her carefree skipping was a precious invitation to forget my anxiety and enjoy the moment, and I did.

After they left, I endured two hours of cable TV cooking shows until the nurse finally brought in my benzodiazepine nightcap.

"This will never work," I thought, closing my eyes and tugging my stiff white sheets out of their hospital corners.

But I was wrong.

Half an hour later, it seemed, I found myself standing in my front yard in midwinter, staring down the small slope that led to the street. Grace, clad in snowsuit and red-striped stocking ski cap, smiled broadly at me as she mounted a sled.

"Don't worry," she told me. "It'll be all right."

Then she was off, squealing with delight as the snow swirled behind her, and picking up speed as the hill somehow grew steeper and longer. She was heading for the street—and straight for our neighbor's house.

"Wait, stop!" I screamed. I ran down the hill, trying to keep her from getting hit by a car or plowing head-first into our neighbor's front porch.

Instead, Grace accelerated, laughing all the way to the bottom. She hit a bump and started flying through the air.

I stood staring in disbelief and horror as she gained altitude, climbing impossibly high up over my neighbor's house and ancient hemlock tree, then dropping down and disappearing into their backyard, her striped ski cap a tiny flame flickering goodbye.

In a panic, I dashed behind the neighbor's house and found Grace.

She was making a snow angel. Snowflakes glistening on her nose, she cheerfully greeted me.

"That was fun! Let's do it again!"

"Okay," I said with relief.

Just then, the nurse tugged at my hospital gown.

"Wake up, it's time for your morning medications. They'll be taking you down for your procedure in a few minutes."

I looked around the hospital room. My IV was still running, the nurses' call button was still at my side, and the institutional green walls still needed a fresh coat of paint; but everything looked different somehow.

The same was true for me. I was still facing the same uncertainties and

fears, but they didn't feel so terrible now. Something had shifted inside.

"All right," I replied. "I'm ready."

About the author:

Family physician Jonathan Han is medical director of New Kensington Family Health Center at University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC) and a faculty member at UPMC St. Margaret Family Practice Residency Program. "I started writing about medicine after attending an inspiring Society of Teachers of Family Medicine workshop led by Paul Gross. Writing is a wonderful way to focus my attention on the things I care about, and to slow down and try to enjoy the moment. The diagnostic procedure described in my story, a colonoscopy, revealed that I had Crohn's disease—a difficult diagnosis, but one that I welcomed, given the alternative. Being a parent and a physician, I am constantly learning lessons about humility. Had my diagnosis indeed been cancer, I hope I would have had the strength and grace to have written this story, because the lesson that Grace taught me in the dream—that I would get through the challenge ahead, no matter what—still remains."

Story editor:

Diane Guernsey