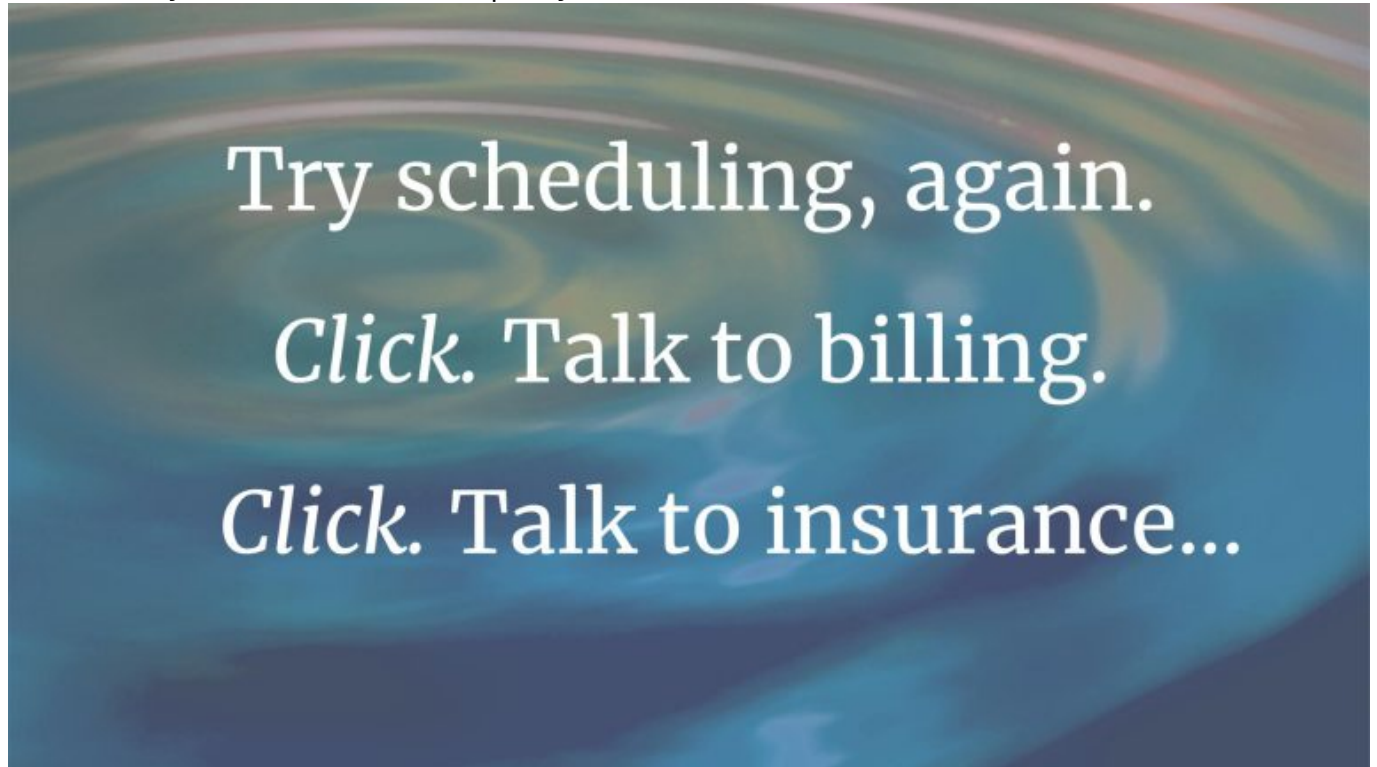


Things I Did While Waiting for My Husband's MRI to Happen

Category: Stories

written by Alina Zollfrank | May 17, 2024



1. Reread the stern words, hammered into a sterile printout. The scope results: a scythe. Images of an alien inhabiting his inner world.
2. Notice the footprints on our living-room floor. Briefly consider cleaning.
3. Three breaths later. Hug him. Hug the kids. Hug myself. Hug the dogs. Tilt my head when he says that he doesn't want to hug right now.
4. Three days later. Four days? Five? Not sleep. Think about sleeping. Not sleeping. Cry myself to sleep. Not sleeping. Grin sheepishly at my doctor on the screen—*remote consult to the rescue!*—when she says that I need to get more sleep. Funny, ha ha.
5. Take a walk together, Eeyore-style, and will the phone to ring, but not while our firstborn sits on a front lawn with a friend and talks about anything but.
6. Sit next to my husband in the car when they call with biopsy results. Know the words before they are uttered. Squeeze his hand. For my sake. For our sake. Shake my head. Nope. Not true. Not real. Not here. Not now.
7. Ignore the vice gripping my head, gripping my chest. Forget how to breathe. But still go on living. Odd.
8. Pay bills. Don't remember paying bills. Do dishes. Don't remember doing

dishes. Stare off into the horizon; clouds artfully camouflaging Mount Baker in the distance, like a medical sheet. Urgently lose sense of time.

9. Three weeks later. 1:00 pm. Sit next to him when he answers a call from the imaging center. "What do you mean you have to cancel Monday's MRI? What do you mean the insurance paperwork didn't go through? What do you mean you can reschedule at a later time? What...?"

10. Three fist-shakes later. Take notes while he's on hold with the insurance company while I'm on the phone with imaging while the kids ask what's wrong while the dogs bark to go potty. Mount Baker on my brain. Lofty. Promising. Images of a pristine snowcap gracing the backdrop while I press my nails so hard into my hand, they leave half moons. Little mountains on my hands. "What do you mean the contrast is expensive? What do you mean we can't just keep him on the schedule when we've waited this long? What do you mean it's procedure to cancel by 2:00 pm the business day before, if the approval isn't through?" *Why is this facility named after a stunning mountain when it lacks all beauty and grace?* Incongruity.

11. Realize that it's a four-day weekend. They all want to go home now. Eat turkey. Stuffing. Cranberry whats-it. Not work. Drink bubbly stuff that is not imaging contrast. They can eat. They can drink. They can swallow. Lucky.

12. Try scheduling, again. *Click*. Talk to billing. *Click*. Talk to insurance processing. *Click*. Try to talk to the imaging supervisor—double *click*, voicemail. Try to explain to anyone and anything that treatment can't be planned and approved until the scan is in. Ask if we can put down a credit card. Calculate how much is in the bank versus the cost of one MRI. Our clocks are ticking.

It's 1:30. His clock is ticking. His clock goes: *tick.tick.tick.tick.tick*.

13. Stare out the window with blurry eyes. Realize that I'm seeing, but I'm also not.

14. Watch him shrug when insurance says that the problem is with the imaging center. Watch his shoulders sag when the customer service representative's affected, chipper voice in my ear says that it's not an imaging problem; it's because of the doctor's office.

15. Stumble into the garage and sink to my knees so the kids won't hear me. Cold concrete. Sink. And beg. Beg the imaging bitch to leave him on the schedule. Implore her to have a heart. It's stage 3. Maybe 4. It's been three weeks. Days count. Minutes count. *Tick. Tick. Tick*. She says, "Sorry." Sob. Can't breathe when she just hangs up.

16. Hang up. Pace through the house. Listen to my tight heart reverberate, penetrate the clicking, ticking clocks. Tell the kids not to worry. Tell the kids to have a snack. Tell the kids to pet the dogs. Tell the kids to take the dogs to pee.

17. Go pee. Realize that I'm dehydrated. Get some tea; stare at the worn mug. Realize that I have a friend. The doctor's wife. Recognize the irony.

18. Throw overboard all scruples. Text my friend. One minute later, call my friend. Stammer about injustice in between hiccups, in between trying not to throw up. She says that her doctor spouse can't be reached right now. She will call back. It's 1:45. *Click*.

19. Try to talk to him through his closed door. He's hiding. A wounded animal that's now also being kicked. Muttered that he doesn't want to talk to anyone anymore. He just wants to have Thanksgiving with us. Try to eat something—maybe. Play computer games. Not think about it. After? "Whatever," he mumbles.

20. Answer my ringing phone. My friend says that her husband is on it. Thank her, profusely, humbly. Feel her struggle with my feelings over the phone. It's 1:55. Resist the urge to climb through the invisible line and hug her. Hug anyone. Where's the dog?

21. Observe how he comes out of the room, on the phone. Nods. Says that he understands. Says, "Thank you." Says, "Sure." Says, "Uh-uh." Hangs up. Hits the wall, flat hand. Shouts, "I told you, it isn't worth it! The doctor tried. Insurance expedited, got rejected. Closed now. The doctor is sorry and will try again after the holiday." Listen to how he goes silent.

22. Sit next to him on the bed. Hold hands. 2:30. Stare at a painting I bought for his birthday. Woodsy trail in watercolor. Sunset hues. Distressed, wrinkled paper. Diffuse light. Three people bounding on the trail. An adult. Two kids. A shape follows them, intangible, immaterial. A blur in muted brown.

23. Try to taste and digest my tumble of emotions while he tells me that what he needs is a good Thanksgiving. Just tomorrow. No calls. No paperwork headaches. No insurance fiascos. No scheduling calls. No medical words. No unfeeling cogs who say "Sorry." Just us. Just Thanksgiving. "Can we do that?"

24. I breathe. I nod. I cry. I blow my snot. I wash my face. I tell my heart to keep beating. I shove away the notes, the papers, the pens, the phone. I stop the clocks. I take the dogs out. I tell the kids, "We're all going for a walk on the nearby trail."

25. Collect the sharp knives, the old cutting board, the alien-brain Brussel sprouts, the mountainous potato dumplings, the sunset-hue purple cabbage. Stare off into the distance. Start cooking.