

8 Livers

by:

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3.5

You are in Trouble



50 / 100

Oh, Crap!

Another droplet of blood splattered onto my top, ruining more clothes. I wore a nice knit blue top because I always wanted to look better than I felt. My wardrobe choice was a little cool for November, but then hospitals were always chilly places. *I should have brought a shawl.*

I thought I had a couple of napkins in my bag. Rummaging around in a dishevelled mess of pill bottles, sticky notes and one earbud, I wondered what news I would receive about my liver. Every time I came to the local hospital, the news seemed to get grimmer and grimmer.

Well, the damage to my outfit was irreparable, but at least I had entertained some curious onlookers in the waiting room.

Success!

I found an old paper mask and started blotting up blood.

The funny thing was, this all started simply enough with a nosebleed.

In the summer of 2022, I was sitting watching some YouTube videos when my nose started bleeding. I didn't think much of it as I have always had trouble with spontaneous nosebleeds, and if I just sat and relaxed, it would soon stop. *This time it didn't.* After a few hours, I went to emergency and there; they put a clamp on my nose and told me to wait. Five hours later, I was taken into a room and seen by the doctor, where he took off the clamp. The bleeding had stopped, though I felt a bit woozy. He said I had lost some of blood but not enough to warrant an IV and took some blood for the lab. A few hours later, a different doctor came in and told me I had ITP (Immune Thrombocytopenia) which is a bleeding disorder that keeps your blood from clotting. It could be caused by a lot of things, and I was told to avoid contact sports and sharp objects and thus ended my dream of becoming a knife juggler.

There was no follow up to the ITP diagnosis, and since I didn't have a family doctor, the entire episode ended at that point.

It was December 24th, and I was feeling festive. I had always liked Christmas, and though I lived alone, I had a good time. I was a music teacher and could play most instruments, so I was having a grand time playing all my favourite Christmas carols and drinking ginger-ale. When I was a child, I had been so obnoxious that I usually got sent to bed Christmas Eve with no ginger-ale, so much so that, THAT became a tradition. Now that I was all grown up, I could imbibe my ginger-ale with great abandon.

The raging snowstorm rattled the windows, while I sang "Let it Snow, Let it Snow, Let it Snow."

Some time later I started feeling a little under the weather, so I went to bed early.

I felt sick around midnight, rushed to the bathroom, but didn't reach the toilet and threw up in the shower. Much to my horror, a thick, pitch black substance sprayed out of me and all over the wall.

It was like something out of a horror movie.

I got in the shower to rinse off when I had another bout of purging my alien presence. I rinsed again and stood wondering what to do. It being Christmas and a snowstorm to boot; I didn't want to call an ambulance and go to the hospital, *but surely this couldn't be normal?* I decided to grab a mason jar, and if I threw up again, I would throw up in the jar and go to the hospital, and if I didn't throw up, I would decide what to do in the light of day. It didn't take long before I was again in the bathroom throwing up into my jar, all over the wall and all over myself.

The ambulance, it was.

I called 911, and they said that because of the storm it may be awhile, and was this a dire emergency? "I'm not sure," I said, then described the black stuff I was throwing up.

“The ambulance will be right there.”

Oh, dear, I guess it *is* kind of serious. My wait was only a few minutes because the ambulance service had pulled all the rural ambulances into the town because the country roads were impassible.

When the ambulance arrived, I presented my jar of black goo, but they were not at all interested in taking it because they knew what it was, 'coffee grounds' and that was a sign of internal bleeding and is serious.

I stayed in the hospital over Christmas. I had an endoscopy, but the doctor found no varices and no other reasons for my internal bleeding.

I was declared cured and sent home.

“Penny?” the receptionist called, extending an arm with a handful of tissues, being careful to avoid contact. I took them gratefully, fished my cane from behind the bush where it had become stuck, and made my way into the doctor's office.

“You are in serious trouble!” *Not exactly the words you like to hear from the hepatologist.*

“What? Why?” wobbling on my cane with blood still oozing into the wad of tissues stuffed to my nose. *I mean seriously, do I not look like a woman totally in control of her life?*

As Dr. B. motioned me to sit, I looked despondently at the ruin of my blue top.

“The results of the FibroScan you had last week, shows your liver cirrhosis is level four, decompensated, and your MELD score is 30, and you have sepsis.”

“So, other than that, I'm fine?”

Ignoring my quip, Dr. B. continued, “Your MELD score is a calculation from your blood-work to determine the state of your liver cirrhosis. A score of 5 being normal and 40 being complete shutdown of your liver and coma.” *I knew all this, but I let him explain it to me again; that seemed to make him happy.*

“As you know, the FibroScan is like an ultrasound, that sends a sound pulse into a liver and then measures the time it takes to bounce back through the liver. A healthy liver is quick, a decompensated liver is slow.”

Continuing on with the good news, Dr. B. said, “The sepsis is a bacterial infection, and I'm going to put you on powerful antibiotics, and hopefully we can get that under control. Also, your gallbladder has to be removed, and I have contacted a surgeon at the regional hospital to do that soon.” I nodded at the appropriate points in the information dump. “His office will probably call tomorrow.”

“Questions?”

“Do I have to stay in the hospital?”

“I can arrange that, or you can go home and come back in a few days to see how you are doing. Which would you prefer?”

“Definitely, go home. My mother died recently, and we are having a memorial service for her tomorrow.”

“My condolences. Don't push yourself too hard; sepsis can be very serious. I see the nose bleeds are still a problem.” *Yes, my constant nosebleeds were taking quite a toll on my wardrobe.*

“I'm going to set you up with an ENT specialist to see if he can fix your nose.”

“A what?”

“Ear, Nose, and Throat Specialist.”

“Oh, sure, that sounds good.”

“Mary will give you the prescription for the antibiotics. Do you need anything else?”

“Yes, I'm almost out of Lactulose” *Man, I hate the taste of that stuff; it's so sickly sweet and gives me horrible diarrhea, but it clears the ammonia out of my system and keeps my brain healthy. With that, I was dismissed. I dislodged my cane from under my chair, stuffed more tissues to my face and,*

made my way out to see Mary about those scrips.

Memorial



48 / 100

I groaned.

My swollen belly and atrophied joints complained, but at least there was no blood on my pillow. I heard Dad mucking about in the kitchen. I had been staying at his house these days because he needed some help since Mom died, and I needed someone to keep an eye on me in case I fell or slipped into a coma. Unfortunately, Dad is a horror in the kitchen. He tries so hard, but occasionally I had to put his creations out of their misery before they had time to breed.

I really should get up, I thought, but my body didn't agree, I do, however, take a lot of 'water pills' to pee out the ammonia, so it's up and off to the washroom I go.

Refreshed, I made my way to the kitchen. "Hey Dad"

"Good morning, honey, how are you doin'?"

"Pretty good" — I always lie.

"I'm making porridge; do you want any?"

"No thanks, I'm just going to have a coffee, no hurry though."

Dad's kitchen was too small for two people, so I just sat at the table while Dad finished with his porridge.

Today was Mom's memorial, and three of my sisters and their families were coming. My brothers were angry about some mystery issue, so they were not expected to show.

"Ready for today?"

"Yes, Bec has booked the room at the restaurant, and I've got a nice framed picture of 'Mom' to put at her place."

My eyes well up a bit, so I just nod.

"There, I'm done," Dad said, sitting at the table with his porridge.

As I rose to make my coffee, I realized I needed another pit stop in the washroom. As I sat, I quietly sobbed with my head in my hands. *Just one year ago everything was so happy*, but there is nothing more grating than someone feeling sorry for themselves, so I tried to shake my sorrow off.

I missed Mom.

I missed going to Costco.

I missed playing the flute.

I missed going for walks in the forest.

When COVID-19 was at its height, I had been out walking in the forest, and I saw a mother deer out with her three young ones. One of the little ones started to come to me, but the mother herded it off in another direction. It was so quiet, almost like one of those end-of-the-world movies where nature was re-asserting itself. I was the only person around and with the sun dappling through the leaves; I felt so at peace.

"Blah," I threw up in the sink.

"You okay, Hon?"

"Yup, just a bit nauseous, I'll take a pill. Be in in a sec."

I had great anti-nausea pills, which they normally gave to people on chemo, and they worked wonders for me.

I called back into the kitchen, "I'm feeling kind of crappy Dad, I think I'll just go back to bed. Sorry to be such a drag."

"It's okay."

I felt so bad leaving him to eat his breakfast in silence, especially on such an emotional day. I hoped someone would arrive soon, but I was just not up to being vertical for much longer.

Some time later, I don't know when; I heard some talking in the living room. *Oh good, both Bec, and Jane had arrived and they are... arguing? No, just something has gone wrong with today's plans, and now my interest was*

peaked.

I love a good catastrophe when I didn't create it.

After a quick washroom stop, then, leaning on my cane and still in my PJ's I made my grand entrance.

"Hi,"

"Hi Penny. Did we wake you... sorry?"

"No, not at all." I said, waving my free hand and falling into a soft chair.

"What's going on?"

"The restaurant called, and they have had a power outage in the area, and they can't open right now, and so we may have to change all the plans."

My prayers had been answered. I had been worrying about being driven somewhere half an hour or so away from my bed. The sepsis was making it hard to think clearly, partially from pain but mostly just sucking the energy out of my body. Also, I was very hot and sweaty, and that usually brought on a nosebleed, and I was running out of clothes, oh, that reminded me, I hadn't picked up my antibiotics.

I just sat with my head swooning, listening for a while, until I said, "I'm sorry, I have to go lie down for a bit."

"Of course, we will let you know what's going on later."

"Thanks. Oh, I have antibiotics to pick up. Can someone get them for me? The doctor said I have sepsis and need to clear that up." I didn't really want to get into too many details about yesterday's upsetting visit with the doctor. Not today.

"Yes, of course," said Bec and her husband Greg, nodded in agreement.

With that, I hobbled off to bed with a brief washroom stop on the way. I was sleeping about 20 hours a day, so it's little wonder I had no concept of time and the world seemed to float by like a dream.

I felt a gentle pat on my shoulder as Bec was there with some water and the antibiotics. "Sorry to wake you, but the pharmacist said you need to get on these right away. He said they may make you nauseous and sleepy, so you can't drive any heavy machinery." I snorted and downed the meds.

"Thanks for getting those."

"No problem."

"So, what's the deal with the restaurant?"

"We have decided to get takeout and have the memorial here. Vick is pissed off because we all got dressed up to sit around the house. Everyone does look nice though."

"Yes, I am in my sartorial finest," looking down at my blood stained PJ's.

"Actually, I am relieved as I didn't think I could handle going to the restaurant."

"I can imagine." she said, taking the cups with her as she left. I decided it was time to get up properly and put on something reasonably nice. But first, a trip to the washroom. *This could be a problem with so many people and only one washroom*, but thankfully, it was free.

I put on a shift rather than a bra, because elastics and tight clothing really cut into my skin. As my liver continued to fail, water built up, and now my ascites was so extreme, I looked like I was nine months pregnant.

Shift on, I chose a loose fitting dress I made with little white flowers on a black and dark grey background.

I used to knit big socks that fit loosely, then stitched a grippy sole on them. I'm glad I made all my socks and clothes before I got sick, because my hands shake a lot and I can't do much sewing or knitting anymore. Getting the socks on my feet took several minutes because my feet resembled giant puffballs from all the pitting edema.

I showed my hair a brush, but not much more because it was falling out from malnutrition, and I was afraid to brush too vigorously. I didn't bother with makeup as I think it's rather a hopeless at this point.

Grabbing my cane, I made my way into the maelstrom of activity.

It was nice to see everyone, and made for a lovely tableau.

Vick and her daughter Molly, asking person after person if they would like a tea. Bec's daughter, Elizabeth, in the corner staring at her phone, as was Vick's other daughter Bonnie. Alice, Bonnie's three-year-old daughter, demonstrating her gymnastic skills as Bec and Greg organized food orders around the twirling gymnast. And finally, Jane sat with Dad, talking quietly.

I plopped myself down heavily in the vacant comfy chair.

A discussion soon broke out about food, and what type we would like.

"I would really like an 'Orange Julius'" Everyone collectively rolled their eyes at me. I *always* want an 'Orange Julius'".

"Okay, what else do we want other than Penny's 'Orange Julius'?"

Having made my request clear, I took the opportunity to go to the washroom.

When I returned, it had been decided we would order online from Boston Pizza because they have a big and varied menu and are pretty close by.

Greg called up the menu on his phone and circulated around the room, adding people's choices to the long list. "What about my 'Orange Julius'?"

"Molly, is going to go to Dairy Queen to get deserts and your 'Orange Julius'." "

"I want ice cream!" declared Alice.

A difficult discussion broke out about what kind of topping would be appropriate and if sprinkles were an integral part of that choice?"

Once decided, Greg turned to me and asked, "Do you want anything else?"

"Does anyone want to share something?" I ask. "I can't eat a lot."

Jane chimed in. "Yes, I will split something, do you like Beef Dip?"

"Yes, that sounds great."

The hubbub continued for a bit until logistics were sorted and it was time for the Memorial to begin in earnest.

I hadn't written anything down, but thought I would sing a lullaby that Mom sang to all her children, and we all sang to our children.

Dad started speaking. "Thank you all for being here. Mom would have been very proud to see you..." By this point I had already started drifting off. Dad held a framed picture of Mom, looking so frail.

It's strange seeing your father as an old man.

I worry about Dad.

Since being told I may die soon, I wondered how his life might change. He and Mom moved to the same town as me so I could help take care of them in their declining years, and now Mom had died and I was hot on her heels.

"I remember when we first moved to the farm and how much your mother hated it." Everyone laughed. *She did hate it. I loved it because whenever a disaster struck, which on a farm is frequently, I would rush into the house and say "Guess what Mom?" Then I would regale her with stories like "Dad just tore the hydro line to the barn down because he was moving the grain auger and forgot to put it down." Then Mom would burst into tears and freak out. It's the small things in life. Mom used to say she cringed every time she saw me rushing for the house. "Guess what, Mom?" Nightmare fuel.*

Dad started in on remembering Mom's pottery. She was quite a well-known and respected potter, but I knew all that, so I chose that as an opportunity to excuse myself to the washroom.

On my way back to the living-room I passed my bedroom, and my bed called to me. *Okay, just for a minute*, and I fell onto the bed and drifted off... *just for a minute*.

"Do you want some food?"

"Your 'Orange Julius' is here," said Vick with a smile. "Oh, and here are some more meds you are supposed to take," handing me a glass of water and a teacup with some pills.

Slowly sitting, I thanked her, took the pills and downed the water. I'm super lucky, I can take great handfuls of pills with no gagging or hesitation. *Mom used to make a big production for each pill, it was...* Oh, did I miss the memorial?"

"Mostly, but people are still telling little stories about Mom."

"Sorry, I just could sit anymore."

"We all understand. Dad wasn't hurt or anything."

"I appreciate that... did you see my cane?" looking around my tangle of blankets.

"Yes, it's here under the bed. You need to put a leash on that thing."

"Indeed." *A favourite expression of mine from watching the 'Stargate SGI' series with my son.*

Okay, back into the fray, I thought as I hobbled into the living-room.

Vick had already resumed passing everyone the food they had ordered. I took my place in my chair and received my coveted 'Orange Julius'. *Mmm, that's so good.*

"Sorry I bailed on you, Dad."

"Oh, that's okay, hon. Just the ramblings of an old man."

"No, not at all. I miss Mom a lot too."

He nodded, too choked up to say more.

"Here is your Beef Dip, Penny. I also got you some salad."

"Thanks a lot." I took another sip of my 'Orange Julius' and put it on the floor, taking the plate from Bec. I picked away a bit, feeling guilty knowing I was going to make a poor attempt at eating much.

I re-arranged the food a few more times, took another sip of my 'Orange Julius' and declared, "That's sufficiently sufficient," to nobody in particular.

Not only did the fluid buildup suppress my appetite, but the sepsis made eating painful. Three sips of 'Orange Julius', a small leaf of lettuce and a bite of shaved beef was a full dinner for me. I sat making small talk for a while, but then I started to sweat profusely and was feeling dizzy. I wobbled my way to the washroom, thankfully vacant, then went back to bed and instantly fell asleep, grateful to escape the pain.

When next I woke, it was Bec standing over me with more meds in a teacup and a glass of water.

"How are you feeling" she said, handing me the teacup.

"Hmmm," I said with a mouth full of pills. She handed me the water and sipped just enough to clear the pills.

"Yah, okay. Sorry, I was feeling kind of woozy there."

"Sure, you know everyone understands." She said, taking the water back.

"So, Elizabeth, Greg, and I are going to head home. Elizabeth has school tomorrow, and you know what a serious student she is... also, Greg has work, and I'm doing something at the hospital."

"Oh, what?"

"I pretend to be a patient with certain symptoms, and the medical students have to diagnose me based on the symptoms. The hospital gives us a list of symptoms to memorize and a kind of backstory to play a patient."

"That's cool."

"Yes, it can be interesting. Some of the students are really good, and sometimes you have to wonder what on earth they were thinking of going into medicine."

"LOL," I snorted.

"Anyway, we are heading out, but I just wanted to check in on you before we left."

"Thanks," I said, giving her an awkward hug from my bed.

"Keep me informed," she said as she shut the door.

"Bye,"

I lay for a while looking at the ceiling fan spin. I knew after Bec left, others would follow, and soon enough Jane popped her head in and said she was going. I got up to see her off. Molly had already gone home, and Vick, Bonnie, and Alice were just saying their goodbyes to Dad. Alice was adding many twirls and jumps to emphasize her grief. Everyone left in a swirl of hugs, well wishes, and handfuls of Styrofoam containers full of leftovers.

Then quiet.

"Well," said Dad, "I, think that went well. It was so nice to see everyone. I'm kinda mad at Mike and Bruce for not showing up, but you know..." That hung in the air for a moment. Nobody had a clue what their problem was, but I, for one, had grown tired of thinking about it. When Dad was grieving his wife of 70 years dying, and I was fighting for my life, petty shenanigans of selfish whiners hardly register in the general consciousness.

"Indeed," I mumbled. *Thank the Lord everyone had washed all the dishes, moved the furniture back and even vacuumed, because I didn't think either Dad nor I would have the energy to do a cleanup.*

I thought I should sit with Dad for a bit for a 'debrief' rather than just returning to bed. Besides, I was feeling a bit better, maybe the meds were kicking in, or perhaps it was just hope, but either way, I sat down in my chair, and Dad sat in his.

"That Alice is quite a whirligig!" Dad smiled at that and nodded. "Too bad the restaurant hadn't worked out, but I thought everything was pretty good."

"Yes," though I was actually relieved to have just stayed home. "Sorry, I missed so much, how did you feel about the Memorial?"

"I droned on too long." I snickered at that. Dad always droned on too long.

“Everyone had a story?”

“Vick remembered Christmas with Mom when Molly was about Alice's age. They made gingerbread houses and liked to 'clap on' and 'clap off' the Christmas tree lights.” I remembered that. *The smell of gingerbread, twinkling lights, and Mom always baked cinnamon buns and loved to sing Christmas carols. She would always tell the story of when she was a little girl being in a school Christmas concert and singing 'Bring a Torch, Jeanette Isabella'. To this day I get misty thinking of Mom as a little girl, all excited to show off at a concert for her parents.*

Dad and I sat in our own thoughts until I said, “Would you like some tea?”

“Yes, I'll make it.”

“No, no, I'm not completely useless yet, I'll make it. I'm actually feeling a bit better.” I got up to put the kettle on and fished the teapot out of the dishwasher. *A ridiculous and unnecessary habit of Dad's.*

“Do you want biscuits or anything?”

“Yes, there are some arrowroot cookies in the cupboard.”

“Yup, I see them.”

Putting the teapot on the coffee table, I retrieved our mugs and the cookies. There we sat munching on cookies while the tea steeped.

My shaking had lessened, so I poured the tea.

We sat in silence.

“I think I'll go lie down,” said Dad.

“Sounds, good, I'm gonna lie down too.”

It had been a hard day,

and we were both glad it was over.

First Contact



40 / 100

“Hello, Penny Speaking.”

“Is this Penelope?”

“Yes.”

“Hi Penelope, or do you prefer Penny?”

“Yes, Penny is good.”

“Hi Penny, my name is Carolyn, and I'm the coordinator for the regional transplant-unit.

Dr. B., your hepatologist, called Dr. T., the surgeon here at the unit, and requested surgery for you. Dr. B. reported that your gallbladder isn't doing very well and you have sepsis right now.”

“Yes, that's what he told me.”

“Thing is, Penny, your numbers are not great. Did Dr. B. discuss this with you?”

“Kind of, I think. To be honest, it's kind of blur and overwhelming.”

“Absolutely. Well, Dr. T. suggested we assess you for a liver transplant, rather than doing the gallbladder removal right now. Your gallbladder is probably being upset by the sepsis, and if you have a liver transplant, the gallbladder is removed at the same time. We want to avoid as much surgery as possible, and also I see you are on antibiotics. Those will make you feel much better in a few days.”

“Okay,”

“Do you have a few minutes to answer some questions?”

“Yes.”

“Great! What is your full name and mailing address?...” and so it went as Carolyn from the transplant-unit created my file.

“Almost done, Penny. I've looked at my calendar, and I think we can work you in for some tests in February. The tests take about a week, and you will need someone with you, and you may want to stay in town because the tests are quite draining and often start early, so you may not be up for commuting. I know you live alone, but you will need someone with you and you also need a support system after surgery. Do you think you can find someone?”

“Yes absolutely. My three sisters have all volunteered to help, and they can spell each other off, and they all drive, so that should not be a problem.”

“Great! It's *very* important to have support from family because you can't do this alone.”

“Yes, I'm finding that out.”

Carolyn laughed and said, “I'm going to mail some information and resources to your mailing address. Please call the number on the informational packet when you receive it. This is all very time sensitive, so you need to adhere to the timeline carefully.”

“Not a problem. I'm very good at following directions and schedules.”

I found out later that both following strict schedules and having a good support system are criteria for getting a transplant.

“That's about it from my end Penny, do you have any questions?”

“Not that I can think of at the moment. Thank you for calling.”

“Okay then. Bye for now.”

“Bye,”

Well, that is worrisome. I was still hoping in my heart that I could somehow reverse the cirrhosis with a special diet or some sort of medication. People in my life had been flooding me with ‘fix your liver’ books. Most seemed to be based upon herbal medicine along with the phases of the moon and magic crystals, which I think is about as logical as buying lottery tickets as your personal financial plan. Lazy manifestation stuff because reality is sometimes hard and unfair.

I need to get a journal and keep track of this information. Phones and digital calendars are great, but I like to

doodle and jot down thoughts, so yes, I need a journal.

I ordered one.

My antibiotics were definitely helping a lot... why, I almost felt human again. Most of the pain and sweating had subsided, though my appetite was still elusive. Dad and I decided to take a trip to the grocery store and also check my mailbox for that information packet from the hospital.

"You ready, Dad?"

"Yes, Hon, I'm just looking for my hat."

"It's in your hand," I laughed. Dad smiled and plopped it on his head.

Dad with his hat and me with my cane, we made our way to the car. Dad can still 'legally' drive, but it's too traumatic for me, so I took the wheel. We checked my mail first. Though I have been staying with Dad of late, my place is only a few blocks away, and I like to check in every other day or so. *No mail.*

At the grocery store, we both trundled about getting our favourite treats. We rarely have 'real' meals anymore because we both have such tiny appetites it makes more sense to subsist on porridge, biscuits, coffee, and tea.

Finally home, we put the meagre selection of groceries away and both went to lie down for a few hours. It had been a busy day.

"Hello? Penny speaking."

"Hi Penny, it's Carolyn from the transplant-unit."

"Oh, hi."

"Penny, I spoke with the surgeon, Dr. T., when your lab results came in. He said we need to schedule your transplant tests right away, and it can't wait until February."

"Oh, that doesn't sound good."

"No, it's very serious. I've got the scheduling coordinator trying to make it happen, and he's moving heaven and earth to make it work. I'm hoping to express mail the schedule to you by the end of the day and you should get it tomorrow. You will have to get right on this because we are hoping to get this ready within a few weeks. Can you get someone to come to the hospital for you for that week on such short notice?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"Great! How are you feeling, by the way?"

"Good, the antibiotics have really done their thing, and I'm feeling way better."

"Very good. You will need your strength, the week of testing is very demanding. We need to make sure you can survive the surgery and don't have any other underlying problems."

"Okay, I will let you know when I get that package."

"Great!"

"Thank you for all your help."

"You are welcome."

Dad was sitting at the table eating his porridge.

"So?"

"It was Carolyn from the transplant-unit. They are going to see if they can work me in sooner."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

I love my dad, but he is in his 90s and almost as frail as me. I can't see us going to all these appointments, waiting, keeping track of things, and commuting, when going for a small grocery shop exhausts us both. I really don't want to hurt his feelings, and I know he hates to see his daughter struggle so, but that is the reality of the situation.

So, I took the coward's way out.

"I'm going to call Bec and see what she thinks." Bec is a lawyer and has created a fund for my expenses not covered by health care. She is the most organized person I know, and I'm sure she will have some good suggestions.

"Sure, good idea." said Dad, a bit crestfallen. That's one of the most difficult parts of getting older or having a serious illness, you still see yourself doing normal things and forget you have limitations. I once went for a walk in

the forest when I was first diagnosed, to clear my head. I went on my walk, forgetting that my energy would just disappear like a phone with a bad battery. All of a sudden, I had trouble making my feet move, and I was sort of stranded. I couldn't sit on the ground to rest because I absolutely was unable to get back up, so I just stood there, panicking. It was a very scary sensation. Ever so slowly, I made my way to a friend's house that was close by, and sat for an hour or so to regain my strength. It was a terrifying lesson for me and Dad as well, forgets he has limitations because of his age.

My journal arrived, and I perused the pristine pages, wondering what lay in store for me, and almost like magic, the phone rang. It was Bec.

"Hi Bec,"

"Hi Penny, sorry I missed your call earlier. I was taking Elizabeth to school."

"Sure ya, no worries. As I said in my message, the regional transplant-unit coordinator called and is going to set up my week of tests. I don't have the specific date yet, but I'm going to stop in at the post office later today. I will email you the details when I get them, but theoretically they should be in December sometime."

"Yes, I already talked with both Vick and Jane. Vick can't help, but Jane said she thought she could. If she can't, I will find a way to fly over and be with you, but it's not a great time, so I'm hoping Jane can."

"Dad really wants to come, but I don't think that sends the right message if my caregiver is in his 90s. It doesn't scream stability."

"Totally agree. I think it will be enough for him just being on his own for a week. I think you and whoever is with you should stay near the hospital. I have found a few places that specialize in having guests who are going through it at the hospital. Like Ronald McDonald house type of deal. They are not expensive, quiet, but without amenities like a pool or anything much really, just a quiet place to recover."

"That sounds perfect."

"Okay, great. Gotta go, but let me know when you get a specific time."

"Will do. Bye,"

"Bye,"

"Hi Penny. There is an express post package for you."

"Oh Great. Thanks, Roxanne, I've been waiting on that. I will pop into the post office in a few minutes."

"See you then."

"Dad? I'm just going to go to the post office for a minute, that package is in."

"Okay, hon. Do you need me to come with you?"

"No thanks, I'm just going to go in and get it and come back."

"Okay, I'll make some tea, and we can have that when you get home."

"Okay."

The drive to the post office takes about five minutes, and in my better days I would have walked, but those were better days.

"How are you doing, Penny? You don't look so hot."

"Livin' the Dream." I said, leaning on the counter. "Seriously, I'm not very good and may need a liver transplant. That's what this package is, information and a schedule for testing up at the hospital."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Penny. You are in my prayers."

"Thank you, Roxanne. Well, I should go before I fall asleep on your floor." That elicited a small laugh from both Roxanne and Susan, but I was kind of tired of seeing the pity in people's eyes. Many of my friends told me how yellow I looked, and it was funny because I couldn't see it at all.

"Well, good luck, Penny, and let us know how it all goes, here at the Post Office, we care about you."

"Thanks. I will."

I decided to make a detour to my place because my computer and printer are there, and I wanted to scan the information and make copies. I gave Dad a quick call, so he wouldn't worry.

So, the testing was set to begin on December 18th through the 22nd. I taped one copy into my journal. I also found an old briefcase and made that my portable file for receipts, paperwork, and sundry items like throw up bags, wet wipes and tissues. As a teacher, I knew that if you started out with an organizational plan, you would thank yourself later. Also, I found that the medical community really appreciated dealing with an organized patient.

I called the transplant-unit to let them know I had received the packet.

“Great, Penny, see you on the 18th.”

I called Bec

“Hi Penny.”

“Oh, hi, it's me.” I am still not really used to call display. Stupid, I know.

“What's up.”

“I got the packet today for the testing. It starts on Monday, December 18th, and goes to Friday, the 22nd.”

“Great, I'll talk to Jane and Vick and look at places to stay and all that, then I'll let you know.”

“Great, thanks so much. I can't tell you what a relief it is to have you take care of all that. I'm already feeling overwhelmed and couldn't do this alone. Dad is kind of useless, sadly. He really wants to help but in this he really can't.”

“Yah, well, anyway, I gotta go. I'm picking Greg up at the airport in a bit.”

“Sure, yah, thanks again.”

Having sorted that out, I decided to pick up a sub for lunch before I headed back over to Dad's place to begin my nerve wracking

wait for testing week.

The Week of Hell



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Testing week was finally here.

It had been two weeks of speculation, punctuated with bouts of pain and nausea, resulting in more visits to the hospital. At one point I thought I might need paracentesis (draining of fluid from my tummy). When a liver failed, the body couldn't process all the liquids that built up naturally, creating ascites. It turned out my ascites wasn't bad enough to warrant paracentesis because the risks outweighed the reward. It was incredibly uncomfortable but not as life-threatening as encephalopathy, that is, ammonia built up in the brain causing memory loss, mood changes, blackouts, coma and possibly death. I took two medications for that, Lactulose, which was a sickly sweet liquid that I took 3 times a day. It was a powerful laxative and helped flush the ammonia from the body, that was equally revolting going in *and* coming out. The other was Rifaximin, which was an antibiotic that acted like a shield for the brain against the ammonia.

The name of the game at the moment was trying to eat enough protein, keep ammonia levels in check, take medications and get some exercise, while I waited to see if I got on the transplant list and ultimately got a working liver. If not, well, I was trying to come to terms with knowing I might not see next year.

Jane was scheduled to arrive by taxi on Sunday, December 17th, to collect Dad's car and transport us to the hotel near the Region hospital. The week of tests was to begin tomorrow, and I wanted to be well rested.

Dad was sulking.

I had been all packed, sitting and waiting when Dad decided he needed some tea. "I'll make it," I said, starting to move, but Dad was already halfway out of his chair. He promptly crashed to the ground, and fell against some chairs. Quickly, I tried to help him up, but it was a bit more of a struggle than I had expected. After, wresting him into a chair, I did a quick check and saw his hand was already puffing up. I went into the kitchen to get a cold compress, when I heard another crash. Apparently, he was still trying to get up and make tea. At this point, I thought perhaps he had suddenly lost his mind. There he was, on the floor, blood coming from his head and all tangled up in his chair. After another struggle, I got him to the soft chair and called 911. He complained and said he was just fine, but he was clearly disoriented and bleeding, so I ignored his objections.

Fifteen minutes or so later, the paramedics arrived, and they seemed rather disinterested. They quickly checked Dad out and said they thought he was fine and didn't need to go to the hospital. I explained I was waiting for my sister to pick me up and we were going to the regional hospital for a week of testing for a possible liver transplant. "Mmm," one of them mumbled, clearly more concerned with where they would stop for coffee after this call. I guessed they weren't really interested in being helpful that day, it being Sunday and all. Dad wasn't helping much, by insisting he was perfectly okay and didn't even want to go to the hospital. Finally, having lost that argument, they had Dad sign a letter, absolving them of their sins. They quickly packed up and left, having achieved nothing.

Great! Something else to worry about. I thought as if on cue Jane arrived. I explained the situation, to Jane, and ever the realist, she said, "well after we get checked in and if there is time over the week, I will check on Dad."

There was nothing for it, because I couldn't miss my testing week to take care of Dad, so I put the phone beside him, with tea, of course, and a bottle of water and the TV remote. I hoped that was enough, but with my worries about my health, his falls, and feeling so tired and ill, it was all I could do to get down to the car.

Jane had carried my bag down to the car, and with one last "Are you sure you're okay?" Dad nodded, and I left.

It was a good 45 minutes to the Hotel and as I watched the cold, empty fields, brushed with snow, my fears reasserted themselves.

I was really worried that I wouldn't be eligible for a transplant. Perhaps they would find that I have an underlying condition, making a transplant it too risky, or, I'm too frail to survive surgery, or that I won't meet some criteria that I haven't considered. I'm not a drinker, or a smoker or anything, so at least I don't have to worry about a drug test or anything. I also don't have to worry about the added challenge of quitting a drinking habit or some added difficulty post-surgery. If I do get rejected from the transplant program, what will I do? We do have Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID), so I suppose I would have to apply for that because a painful death isn't very appealing to me.

“How was the train?”

“Good. I love the train. You can move around and be on your computer, and also the scenery is nice.”

“Nobody jumped in front of the train?”

“No, not this time.”

People seemed to jump in front of the train with alarming frequency. Yikes, I really do have death on my mind a lot lately.

“So, Bec said this place we are staying at used to be an Armoury?”

“Yes, it was a military barracks or something at one time, but now it's a non-profit for people to stay when a loved one is in the hospital.”

“Are we in the same room?”

“No. Your room is on the main floor and has a little kitchenette, and mine is on the second floor and is a little smaller. We thought it would be good for you to be on the first floor.”

“Great, thanks.” I had borrowed Mom's walker from Dad, because I thought it might be good to carry our coats and bags on it, plus I might do a lot of walking, and I get tired using the cane.

“Can you believe Dad?”

“I know, what a pain.”

“I hope he's okay.”

“Whatever. This week is about you and your tests. You need to focus on that. I will check in on Dad when I can, but I think you should worry about yourself.”

“Sure, ya. I'm super worried I won't be eligible for a transplant. I mean *super* worried.”

“Well, we will have to take it one step at a time. How are you feeling physically?”

“Absolutely horrible. The Edema in my feet is so horrible I can't even get my shoes on anymore. I had to struggle for ten minutes to get my boots on, and they are the loosest footwear I own after I took all the insulation out. One of the tests is a frailty test with the physiotherapist, and I'm supposed to wear track pants and running shoes. I am so puffed up from the ascites that I can only wear loose dresses and as far as running shoes go, don't make me laugh. I'm worried about Dad, I'm beyond tired all the time, I throw up constantly, I have to wear adult diapers because I live in fear of having an explosive diarrhea event, and my nose keeps bleeding. Who knew the liver was so important?”

Oh, oh, the feels are starting, and I say with tears welling up in my eyes, “It all seems so unfair. I don't drink or smoke, I exercise a lot, I am overweight but not horribly so, and I always thought I lived a pretty healthy life. I see all these other people abusing their bodies and also being horrible human beings and they just skate by with nary a problem.” I try not to express that feeling very often, because I know everyone feels that sometimes. Life is not fair, or as a favourite saying in my family goes, “Life is hard, then you die.”

Jane nods but says nothing. I feel bad for having said that because she lost her son to cancer at a young age, and if anyone knows about the unfairness of life, it's Jane. She is making an enormous sacrifice being with me this week because it can't help but stir up memories of her and her son, Fraser, going for tests and treatment.

I don't really have much to say, so I look out at the fields some more.

Soon enough, the fields gave way to sporadic buildings, then more buildings. The road widened out to 4 lanes, and strip malls lined the path to their destination. Jane was lost without GPS. I was lost with or without GPS. The women in our family all seemed to be devoid of a navigation gene, and as a result I had become, I thought, a pretty good passenger. I tended to just look out the window. The hospital was on the furthest end of the city, and even though it was a Sunday, it was slow going. I was feeling pretty uncomfortable and was getting eager to lie down for a bit.

Finally, we arrived at the hotel, and Jane turned and said, “You just sit here, I am going to go and check in, and then I'll come out and get you.” I nodded appreciatively. I hated standing and waiting, it made me sweat and throw up. “I'll leave the car on for heat.” and then Jane stepped out into the cold December day to sort out our accommodations.

I was dreadfully worried about all this because my life was basically hanging in the balance over the next week. My lifespan was now calculated in three-week increments.

Jane appeared a few minutes later and said we were all set. She would get the walker out of the trunk, and then we would go to my room, and she would bring the bags in after. *It was good having a big sister.*

The Armoury was a weird place. Completely devoid of people, furniture, artwork, or anything interesting except an old flickering Coke machine that seemed to only accept coins. I was definitely getting a '*Welcome to the Zombie Apocalypse*' vibe.

Door Key cards? Don't make me laugh. It's only old school keys attached to big plastic diamonds with a number for this place. *It's kind of quaint. I feel like I'm in the 1950s.*

My room was pleasant. Simple, with a little round dining table and small kitchen area. The washroom had a shower with grab bars and a broken towel holder. *Perfect.*

The bed was nice and big and very comfortable, so I decided to just fall into it, for practice. Stretching out, I watched uselessly as Jane left to get my bag and walker. Not fancy but very homey and those Zombies in the rest of the Hotel, seemed unnaturally quiet.

"Phew! Sorry I took so long. I took my bags up to my room, and now I need a cup of tea." Jane *always* needed a cup of tea. "Would you like some tea?"

"No, I'm happy just laying on this bed, I'm kind of worn out."

"Do you want me to leave you alone?"

"No, it's nice to have some company."

"Okay then." and Jane busied herself making some tea and putting out some biscuits.

Sipping her tea while I lay on the bed, we made some small talk for a while. Jane answered a few texts from her family and, while looking at her phone, said, "So, your first appointment is with the social worker at 10:30. I think we should go early so we can find parking and figure out the layout of the hospital."

Jane had put all my tests and appointments in 'Calendar' on her phone, but I prefer paper, so I had a folded version in my journal.

"Sounds good."

"So, I'm thinking we leave here around 9:30?"

"Sure,"

"I brought some food, but I can go out and get something."

"I'm good just laying here. I'm not hungry."

"Okay, I brought some bottled water," she said, putting it in the fridge along with some apple juice and lemonade.

"Perfect, thanks."

"I guess I'll go. I'm going to drive around the city a bit and get oriented. Are you sure you don't want anything?"

"Yah, no, I'm just fine."

I think Jane had some nervous energy to work off. I know she didn't really want to be the one to accompany me at the hospital, but as luck would have it, she was the only one available right now.

"I'll check in on you later then."

"Sounds good. Thanks, see you later."

Jane put her dishes in the little dishwasher and then left, quietly closing the door as I fell fast asleep.

"Penny?"

"Hmm, what?"

"I'm back and brought a little food and some more drinks."

"Oh, yah... great... thanks."

"Do want to sit at the table and have something? I brought a chicken Caesar salad."

"Oh, sure," I said, still a little wobbly. "What time is it? Is it time to go to the hospital?"

"No, it's about 8 pm, but I thought you needed to eat something."

As I made my way to the table, I said, "So, did you find anything interesting?"

"Yes, I found a couple Thrift Shops." *Of course, she did.*

"I also found a *fish and chip* shop run by a woman who is a liver researcher at the hospital by day and also runs the *fish and chip* shop. It was her parents' place, and she keeps it going in their memory. I told her about you, and she was very interested and suggested some healthy foods for you, like that salad and some soup that we may try another day."

“Oh, that's really cool.”

I nibbled my salad for a bit, and Jane and I made small talk until I needed to go to bed.

Jane cleaned up our dishes and reminded me, “I'll pick you up at 9:30 tomorrow morning.”

“Great, I've set my alarm.”

“Night.”

“Thanks, night.”

Jane arrived in the morning with me struggling to get my boots on. Even with bare feet, this was an exercise of fitting a round peg into a square hole. I had already had a shower, put on a bit of makeup, shown my hair my brush again, and dressed in my very loose clothing. Finally, I got one boot on. “Do you need help?”

“No, I think I can...” and with a whoosh, I succeeded. Hat and coat on, we made our way to the car. Jane put the walker in the trunk while I was engaged in a wrestling match with the seat belt.

“Ready?”

“Yup” and I instantly threw up. I carry *'barf'* bags with me at all time and spent a few minutes using one, then turned to Jane and said, “Sorry, okay, *now* I'm ready.”

Jane snickered as we immediately set off in the wrong direction.

Once at the hospital, Jane let me out at the front door. She got the walker and my backpack out of the trunk and off I went to wait inside. Hospitals are awesome places to watch people, and I was enjoying myself when Jane appeared. “We're a bit early, do you want a coffee or tea or something?”

“No thanks, I'm not supposed to eat anything, but you go ahead.”

“Okay, I'll get a tea.” She said, motioning her head towards the Tim Hortons in the hospital lobby.

When Jane came back with her tea and a cranberry muffin, we sat at a table for a bit, before Jane looked at her phone and said, “Well, we should go up to the 4th floor to meet with the Social worker.”

Jane wrapped the remains of her muffin in a paper napkin, threw out her cup, and so “*The Week of Hell*” began.

We made our way to the “transplant-unit” through a confusing set of corridors and into a nice big waiting area. I checked in with the programme coordinator, Grahame, then we took a seat. Kelly soon appeared, and she escorted us to her office, where she would explain the whole transplant evaluation process. I was given a 'patient' binder and for about an hour Kelly told us what to expect and answered our many questions.

At one point I told her about my fear of not getting a transplant and if MAID would be an option at that point.

Clearly.

Extremely clearly.

With the clearest clarity one could imagine, Kelly told us that at the transplant-unit they *never* want to hear any talk of suicide.

Neither Jane nor I had understood, prior to this meeting, that a transplant is a total team effort by everyone, especially the transplant recipient. You can't sign a DNR, and you must have a ‘Power of Attorney’ that realizes that switching *off* the machines is *not* an option. Jane and I both realized why *this* meeting was the first encounter with the transplant-unit. It's going to take monumental strength and determination to make it through a transplant, and no-one wants to dedicate so much effort and finances to this procedure if the recipient, isn't prepared to fight to the bitter end.

This ethos had a big effect on us as we realized this whole week had nothing to do with 'proving' I was sick, but rather for them to gauge my 'fitness' both physically *and* mentally to survive such a major operation and a lifetime of aftercare.

I assured them I was ready for this fight and was encouraged by the obvious dedication of the unit to save lives.

Kelly filled out a lot of forms, including medical history, personal history, various financial aid programs and finished with a form for designating a ‘Power of Attorney’. We went over some of the binder contents and were then sent out into the wild to find the cafeteria for some food and to digest all the information.

We sat in the cafeteria, Jane with her tea and a salad and me with my water. I couldn't eat prior to my next test and could only drink clear fluids. We had a bit of a debrief, and I added a few items into my journal. Jane had taken a copious amount of notes, but I had a few things to add. She called Dad.

Well, he had fallen again and was now in the hospital. Tomorrow there were no tests, so Jane decided to go home while I slept. *I think I got the good end of that deal.*

My next appointment was a CT Abdo/Pelvis. My loose-fitting clothes didn't have any metal clasps or anything, so I didn't have to change into a hospital gown. I'm lucky because I'm not claustrophobic at all, so I wasn't uncomfortable. The test lasted about half an hour. *Easy Peasy.* After that, it was off to Radiology for a chest X-ray.

Finally, at about 3:30, I was finished with Day 1, and it was time to go back to the hotel.

Jane got me settled into my room and back to bed, and then she was going to go out for a few hours to get a few things for my day off tomorrow.

Back in a nightgown, I climbed in bed and fell asleep.

Jane patted my arm, "Penny?"

"Hmm, oh hi. What time is it?"

"It's about 7:00 pm. Do you want some food?"

"Sure." *Not really, but I was trying to be polite.*

I made my way to the table, and Jane had got me a Styrofoam bowl of chicken soup. It was fantastic. "This is really good."

"I got it from that liver specialist doctor's place. She said this would be good for you."

"Mmm." I actually ate it all.

Jane had a salad of some type. "Do you want anything else? I got some cookies."

"No, but that was delicious, thanks."

"So, one day down. What did you think?"

"That meeting with Kelly really opened my eyes. That was very serious and clear that there is to be no half-assed effort tolerated. I feel like I have just been through an episode of 'Scared Straight', but it's really good to know the expectations."

"I know. I thought we were going to have to 'prove' you were sick enough to warrant a transplant, but that's not it at all. There was no question of your need, it was more, can you survive, and do you want it bad enough. Are you willing to fight for your life? It was very intimidating but powerful. How about the other tests? How did you feel about those?"

"They were easy and painless. Though," I laughed, "When I lay on my back, all the liquid in my guts presses down on my innards and it's a bit uncomfortable."

"Sure, ya. That's good, but we haven't got to the poky stuff yet."

"I'm more worried about the 'stress test' on Wednesday. Mainly because I forgot my track pants and I don't have running shoes. I hope I can do it in my socks."

"I can pick up your track pants when I go to see Dad tomorrow. Where are they?"

"I have a pair of black ones at my house in the closet, probably hanging on the left side, but if you can't find them it's okay, I'm not even sure they will fit."

"I'll try to find them. Speaking of Dad, I picked up some drinks and food for you, while I visit him. Is there anything else you need?"

"No, I'm good."

"I'm mad at Dad being a pain in the middle of all this."

"Yah, I'm not super thrilled. If he had just let me make the tea, none of this would have happened. He is so stubborn."

"I'll pop in tomorrow before I go. Are you sure you'll be alright?"

"Oh, sure, all I do these days is sleep, so I'm sure I'll be fine."

"Okay then, I'm just going to put this stuff away and then I'll leave you alone."

"Thanks again, Jane, I really appreciate all your help."

"No problem, I have to watch out for my little sister." She smiled. I smiled. Then went back to bed as Jane tidied for a few minutes, then left. She checked in once more in the morning, then I had all day to just lay in bed.

Tuesday evening, Jane appeared with some food, and I was actually awake for a change.

"Oh, Hi, how was your visit with Dad?"

Jane rolled her eyes and set the food down on the table.

"That good, eh?"

"Yes, quite the pain. I got some *fish and chips*. Everyone knew *fish and chips* were my absolute favourite, and I was kind of hungry since I hadn't eaten anything all day.

"Ooh, Yum." I sat and had some fish. "Man, that's good! Is it from the 'liver lady'?"

"Yes, we are getting to be good friends."

As we ate, Jane regaled me with the story of Dad's condition. Apparently, he sat for a long time after we left, and when he got up to go to bed, he fell again. Luckily, we had left the portable phone headset on a little table beside his chair, so he could call 911 from the floor. Also, we hadn't locked the door on our way out, so the paramedics could get in easily. This time they took him to the hospital, and dumped him in a four person ward, and the hospital staff were very unhappy about it.

The local hospital was fine for an Emergency and the wings with Specialists and Diagnostics were very good, but the overnight wards were closer to a snake pit than anything else. Everyone in town would do almost anything to avoid staying at the hospital. Although the nurses were lovely, they were overworked; additionally, the old ward was in disrepair and lacked basic supplies. The hospital was currently having a fundraiser for an MRI, but I thought they should fix the crumbling patient area and pay the nurses more before buying another big, expensive machine that went ping.

"I hope they keep him for a bit, because he is not safe at home on his own and I, well, am kinda busy this week, but also I'm not really able to take care of him much any more and he can't take care of me." After Mom died, having me spend most of my time over at Dad's place was a good solution, but I think that had run its course.

"I explained the situation to the hospital staff, but they seemed less than enthusiastic about keeping him. I gave them Bec's number because they had you down as the contact."

"Great thanks. I really don't want to have to deal with that."

"No, of course not, and woe be to them if they cross Bec."

We both laughed at that thought.

"So, for right now he is staying in the hospital?"

"Yes."

"Are they doing any treatment or anything?"

"No, they seem rather useless."

"Yes, they are *very* useless, but at least Dad is safe and will get some food."

We ate in silence for a bit, lost in our own thoughts.

"What else did you do today?" I said, breaking the silence.

"I went to a couple Thrift Stores." *Yes, of course she did. Tea and thrift stores are Jane's real passions.*

"Did you find anything?"

"Some small things, but I'm taking the train home so I can't carry a bookshelf or something big, though I was tempted."

I snickered with a mouth full of chips.

"Oh, I brought your track pants."

"Great, thanks." That reminded me of how much I am dreading the stress test.

Jane looked at the schedule on her phone and said, "So, tomorrow, besides the stress test, you have a visit with the transplant coordinator and then after that, a meeting with the hepatologist and fellow on the transplant team. Then some blood-work.

Tomorrow, you also have to stop all caffeine. That will be hard for you since you are a coffee fiend."

"Indeed."

Well, I was stuffed. I ate a lot of my *fish and chips*. Took a last sip of my Coke and called it quits on caffeine for a few days.

Jane and I sat for a while chatting about nothing because we both needed a break from the intensity of everything going on. After that, we went upstairs because I wanted to see her room. The elevator seemed odd because it required a code. I guess that was left over from Armoury days. Either upstairs was where they kept all the bombs, or it was where the Officers stayed, and they didn't want the privates on their floor.

Jane's room was pleasant, though quite a bit smaller than mine. I liked her shower area, but overall I preferred

my room. After-all, I had a fridge and microwave.

“Hey, where do you boil water for your tea?”

“There is a communal kitchen and dining area. Here I will show you.”

I guess family's could make a meal and sit together, sort of home away from home.

"It feels eerie with no one else around."

“I met the person at the front desk and one other person, and that's it.”

“I think anyone staying here is very sick or holding vigil at the hospital. Not much of an entertainment spot, that's for sure.”

“Yah, I guess this is actually the first time I have been out of my room other than going down the back hall to the parking lot. It's just weird.”

Once back in my room, Jane went out to the car and brought in a few things, including my track pants.

Again, we sat and chatted for a bit, then Jane yawned and said she was going to go back to her room, have a bath and call her husband.

“That sounds like a plan. Thanks again for the *fish and chips*, that was a real treat.”

“No problem. You going back to bed?”

“Yes, but first I'm going to have a shower and make my bed.” There was no room service, and they didn't come and make beds and such, but that was fine, I was happy to be left alone.

“Okay then. Your first appointment is at 10 am, so I'll pick you up around 9:30 am.”

“Excellent, thanks, Jane.”

“Sure, no problem.”

We had tidied the dishes while we talked, so there was nothing to do, but call it a night.

In the morning after a shower, I wanted to try on my track pants. I couldn't even get one leg over my giant liquid filled thighs, so Plan B it was. *What was Plan B? Nothing, just go as normal and explain the situation because I figured they had heard this story many times before.*

I sat for a while doodling in my journal. *Most of my drawings seemed to be of various types of needles. I didn't think I was really afraid of needles, in fact, I had always been stoic in getting vaccines, and I had donated lots of blood over the years. Although donating blood had to stop after developing thrombocytopenia, I had a nice little collection of achievement pins. However, this whole liver experience had been a whole new level of poking, and I was getting a little gun-shy.*

Jane arrived, and we trundled our way out to the car, buckled ourselves in and drove off in the wrong direction, of course.

Once at the hospital, Jane got a tea, and we made our way to the 4th floor, to the transplant-unit area, where we met the physiotherapist, Kristen, who would administer my stress test.

Before sitting, I blurted out my whole problem with finding appropriate clothing, and that my feet were really puffy and I couldn't put shoes on my feet, and were socks okay... she smiled and explained that this was very common. Relieved, I filled out a questionnaire on my usual fitness activities, and then the test began.

She had me do unaided walking up and down the hall past different markers at as quick of a pace I could maintain safely. I did well, I thought, but later she mentioned time was part of the equation, and I wanted to do it again, because I was sure I could go faster. Kristen said that it wasn't necessary, and that I had done fine.

Next were a lot of resistance strength tests, like holding a light weight in a hand and lifting my arm into the air, 10 or 15 times.

A hand grip test that was, surprisingly, a very good indicator of your frailty. I was *awesome*, at least I thought so. I also had a balance test, and I did surprisingly well. I even surprised Jane.

All in all, my frailty level was moderate. Of course it was way below someone with a healthy liver, but I was worried I would be in the lowest category.

Buoyed by my test results; I was in a good mood for the rest of the day.

The next appointment was with the transplant coordinator, Carolyn. *This was a biggie.* Carolyn went over everything with Jane and me for over an hour. There were dozens of forms to fill out. She explained the whole

transplant procedure and what to expect. It was so much information that Jane was writing furiously in my journal and I was following along in the transplant binder. We didn't want to miss anything.

We had some time to kill before the next appointment, so we went to the cafeteria for lunch. I had no eating restrictions other than no caffeine, so I had a slice of pizza and a carton of milk. Jane had her tea and a Caesar salad.

While eating my pizza, I got a call on my cell from the other hospital about Dad.

"Is this Penelope?"

"Yes."

"This is Megan, a social worker from the hospital. We have you down as the contact for Bruce. Is this correct?"

"No, my sister Bec is now the contact. I'm very sick and up at the regional hospital being assessed for a possible liver transplant."

"Well, I want to talk to you about your Dad's condition."

"No, I'm not the contact person, you should call my sister Bec, she is now the contact."

"Your Dad seems to be fine, and we want to send him home. Can you come and pick him up?"

"No, I am up at the regional hospital being tested for a liver transplant, and also, my sister Bec is the contact person."

"We really need to clear out his bed because we are at capacity. Can you come and take him home?"

"Are you really this stupid? I have explained clearly multiple times I am up at the regional hospital being tested for a liver transplant and my sister Bec is now the contact person."

"Well, we really need to send him home."

I hung up.

Well, my lunch and good mood had been ruined. I tried to shake off the mind numbing stupidity I had just experienced with a gulp of milk.

"What an idiot," Jane said.

"Some people." I replied, rolling my eyes.

We gathered our things and made our way back to the transplant-unit for an appointment with the hepatologist. The transplant-unit waiting area was very calming, which I needed after that stupid social worker's call.

The chairs were comfortable, and there was even a puzzle area if you really had an urge to torture yourself a little more. It was interesting to see the stages of liver failure and recovery all in one room. Some, like me, were very sick and clearly hoping for a transplant, but there were others who had had a transplant and were on the road to recovery. One person had had a transplant several years earlier and was in for an annual checkup. I couldn't help but be a little jealous.

After a brief wait, it was my turn, and into the warren of little treatment rooms, Jane and I made our way to room 3. A nurse came in and checked my vitals, asked a series of questions and took my list of medications. I started carrying around my medications list printed out because every single medical person I saw wanted that list and calling it up on my phone was a hassle. Also, sometimes they needed to put my medications list in a computer somewhere, and it was easier to give the nurse a piece of paper, rather than my phone.

After a few more minutes, the hepatologist arrived, along with a hepatologist Fellow. They did a physical exam, looked at my previous tests, took another medications list from my pile and then left to confer on my situation. Jane and I sat nervously looking around the little room. Upon their return, the hepatologists had settled on my blood tests; I believe the overall decision was 'all'.

The blood lab was down the hall, but on the same floor. They were expecting me, and I didn't have to wait. After taking 10 vials of blood, I was free to go home and rest.

Jane greeted me in the waiting room, and we headed out.

I was feeling a little invigorated when we got home. I think I was so worried that when it turned out to be a good day, except for that stupid social worker's call about Dad, I felt a lot of relief. *I wished I could have a coffee.*

Jane and I had a good debrief, and she was impressed very by my balance in the fitness test. I was pleased with my grip strength and how positive and competent everyone was at the transplant-unit. Originally, I was feeling like it was me against them and I would have to keep advocating for myself, as is pretty common when dealing with the medical community.

I rarely had much interaction with the medical community in the past because I always felt like I was trying to prove something was wrong, and they dismissed me for being fat or a hypochondriac or hysterical. I guess for many Doctors they see the same thing over and over and get jaded to the point where they become disinterested in patients. However, at the transplant-unit everyone was very kind and non-judgmental while being serious and professional. Many of my fears were allayed by today's tests and meetings.

Back at the hotel, Jane left to do some more Thrift shop hunting and pick up some food while I caught a few hours sleep. Later we had dinner, a large sub sandwich and a salad we shared, a short chat session, then it was back to bed. Tomorrow started early with part one of a MIBI exam at Nuclear Medicine around 8 am. We would have to leave by 7:30 am.

It was less stressful now that I had a diagnosis and things were being done to address my liver failure. Even though the possibility of death was disconcertingly high, the actual knowing was a comfort.

My phone rang and startled me out of my reverie. I was sitting on the toilet, and reflexively answered without looking at the caller id. Much to my horror, it was the social worker from the local hospital again.

"Is this Penny?"

"Yes, but this is a bad time."

"We really need to clear your Dad's bed and send him home."

"Look, I'm sitting on a toilet about to go to the hospital for a test to see if I qualify for a liver transplant. I'm not Dad's contact anymore, and you were told to call my sister Bec."

"I couldn't get in touch with her, and we really need to send your father home. I will be out of the office later but you can be reached at this number," she rattled off a bunch of numbers that I had no intention of remembering.

"I don't have a pen."

"I'll wait."

"I'm on the toilet, and don't have a pen with me."

"I'll wait."

I hung up and blocked her number. She seemed to keep calling from different numbers to avoid my blocks. *Yes, this may indeed be the stupidest person I have ever encountered!* I finished getting ready, and when Jane arrived, I told her about the insane social worker calling me, as I struggled to squeeze my feet into my boots.

"Wait 'til Bec hears about this!"

"Oh, I know. I guess that's why the idiot keeps calling me, she has already encountered the wrath of Bec!"

We both laughed as I finally was ready to go. Once in the car, we sat for a moment, letting it warm up, then set off in the wrong direction.

Jane, tea in hand, and me craving coffee, made our way to the Nuclear Medicine department, I was given a hospital gown, and an IV was put in my hand. The nurse doing the IV was very complimentary of my bulging veins, and the needle was inserted easily.

I lay on a gurney waiting for my turn in the scanning room, when my phone rang.

"Yes?"

"Is this Penny?"

"Is this the social worker again?"

"Yes, we really need..."

I hung up and blocked yet another number.

I had left my belongings in a little cubby and was escorted into the room with the enormous machines. Some actual nuclear material was put in my IV, and I asked if this would give me superpowers, which I was sure every patient asked, but sadly no, I would not be able to stretch a lot or fly.

Bummer.

I was told, however, that I would be given a card because if I was to cross the border, I would set off nuclear detectors. I wasn't really planning on any holiday travel, so I never got to the chance to see all that excitement in action. The test was the first of two, and I would have the second part tomorrow. It was quite a long test, but all I did was lie down, taking breaths and holding them at various times.

The real difficulty was having no coffee for so long.

After the test, with some spare time on our hands, Jane and I made our way to the cafeteria for her tea and my water. Jane had a chat with her husband, and I called Bec to rant about the social worker. Bec was *furious* at the social worker. She had already spoken to her supervisor, and action was being taken. That was, apparently, why she kept calling me; she was hoping I would step in and defend her so she wouldn't lose her job. *Fat chance of that happening.* Bec had called the supervisor again, threatened them with a lawsuit if they didn't keep Dad and do some tests.

Snack and phone calls completed, we made our way down to the pre-admission clinic to meet with an anesthesiologist. We met with two, and they went over the whole surgical process and how important it was to follow NPO when I was called in for a transplant. NPO stands for "nil per os" or 'nothing by mouth', no food, no liquid, no nothin'. They have to put a breathing tube down your throat, and there is a risk of throwing up into your lungs (aspiration). Since surgery may last over 10 hours, the anaesthetist maintains all bodily functions as the drugs might suppress them. It sounded very involved, but the anesthesiologists seemed very professional and confident, so our fears were allayed.

Jane and I had another snack in the cafeteria. It seemed there wasn't very much to do other than wait and eat between appointments.

Our final destination today was the 8th floor for a meeting with the surgeon. This was the one I was quite interested in, but I'm afraid I didn't make a good first impression.

The surgeon pointed to the walker and said he never wanted to see that again. It turned out that my stress-test results were his number one concern. He explained that this surgery was very stressful on a body and he didn't want to end up *murdering* me on the table.

My grip strength was around 30, and the surgeon said his was some fantastical number like 200 or something, and mine was kind of pathetic. Feeling a little deflated, he emphasized the importance to keeping my strength numbers high by doing lots of resistance exercises and eating a lot of protein. He explained the protein grew muscles and was used for all kinds of processes. Also, unlike the other nutrients, about half of protein was accessed without the liver, so you got most of your energy from protein when your liver had failed or was failing. He also explained that the gallbladder was removed along with the liver, so my defective gallbladder could wait for a transplant. He talked as if a transplant was a *done deal*, and I found that very encouraging. Despite some of his comments about my walker and my grip strength, I found him quite engaging. His demeanour was rather like Dr. House, and that gave me confidence.

I really wanted to make a good impression on everyone. Carolyn, the transplant coordinator, explained that once every two weeks the transplant committee met to go through the files of possible transplant recipients and the decision hinged on aspects like robustness, surgical viability, family care, substance habits, MELD score, decline rate, age, and existing diseases. The committee approach mitigates bias as much as possible, but being nice never hurts either.

After meeting with the surgeon, we were done for the day, and there was only one day left, mostly looking into my heart health.

That night, I enjoyed another serving of *fish and chips* and a carton of milk for dinner. Jane offered me some chocolate brownie type thing, but I thought chocolate contained caffeine and I didn't want to risk it, besides, I was pretty full.

The next day began and finished early, and Jane wondered if we should head home the tomorrow or the Saturday. I opted for the Saturday because though my test week had been better than I feared, it still wore me to a frazzle, and I didn't want to rush back to the hotel, then rush home all in one day.

As usual, we sat around discussing the day, and we both laughed at the Surgeon. *Those surgeons are definitely a different breed. I think the surgeons must also be superhuman, doing a 10 hour operation. I know they take breaks, at least I hope so, but even at my most fit I could never play music for over 6 hours straight.*

The last day started out auspiciously, because we didn't get lost on the drive to the hospital. I had a 7 am echocardiogram followed by an ECG. I was given several injections to make my heart rate increase and decrease. Sort of like doing a workout without the effort. They did have a stationary bike contraption, that let you lie down and pedal to increase your heart rate, but my legs were just too puffy from the edema to raise, and my feet couldn't fit in the stirrups. So, the injections were used instead.

We had a quick break before the last part of the Nuclear Medicine test, but we decided to go directly to the

imaging department and wait. I think we were both eager to be finished with this week.

The second part of the test took longer than yesterday, because I had to drink something and wait an hour for it to make its way to my liver. After that test, however, I was given a ginger-ale and could have coffee again. I picked up a coffee at Tim Hortons, relieved to be finished the *week from hell*.

After arriving back at the hotel, Jane rested briefly before going to check out some more Thrift stores. I lay down and fell asleep.

Jane returned in the evening with sub sandwiches and drinks, including a coffee for me. *I love my sister.*

As we ate, Jane told me the recent updates in the *adventure of Dad*. Vick and Bec had found a room in a town near Vick, and were moving him there directly from the hospital. Apparently, it had taken herculean effort to make this all happen so fast.

As a result, Jane would take me to my place to wait and recover. She asked if I thought I would be okay on my own. I assured her I would, because I'm very low maintenance these days. I mostly sleep and eat a little, drink Lactulose, and sleep some more.

We left the hotel around 9 am because Jane had to catch a train in the late afternoon and that would give her plenty of time as she was leaving the car at Dad's place and taking a cab up to the train station, along with her booty of Thrifting treasures.

It was strange, so much had changed in the course of a week. Dad had been hospitalized and moved to a retirement home, I had been assessed for a liver transplant and was now going to stay at my place, by myself.

Saturday, afternoon, as Jane's taxi drove away, leaving me alone, I had a momentary bout of loneliness, but it did feel good to be home without the responsibility of taking care of Dad and knowing I had completed all those tests and now my only job was to keep alive

and wait to get a liver.

Tick Tock Goes the Clock



36 / 100

Christmas 2023

I tried to cheer myself up over the holidays by playing a bit of music, but by this point I was too sick to play for more than a couple of minutes. I didn't feel like decorating, and though there was a bit of snow, it was hardly a winter wonderland. Mostly, I slept.

As the holidays began and the fear of simply not waking up one day grew, I instigated a 'daily check-in' by email to my sisters. I would just let them know I was doing okay, and if I did die, my corpse wouldn't be really decayed and smelly when EMS came to sweep my remains up into a plastic bag. *Clearly, I was developing quite a dark humour.* My daily check-ins became one of the highlights of my day because they made me feel less alone as I could find out what everyone was doing. The waiting was becoming tiresome already, and I began to feel like I was playing a slot machine that never paid out. It was all so discouraging.

I had half expected the transplant-unit to call with a new liver in a few days, but my phone remained silent. If I left my phone somewhere, I would begin to panic and call it to find the slippery thing. Often it was bundled under some blankets or in a coat pocket. Once found, I would eagerly see if anyone had called, but the result was always the same, nothing. And so went my days. Hoping, waiting, panicking, hoping some more and sleeping.

Carolyn had emailed me with a schedule for all the vaccinations I had to receive before surgery. They were divided into 3 tranches with about 3 months between each group. After the transplant, I would be on anti-rejection drugs for the rest of my life, and they suppressed my immune system, requiring I wear a mask in social settings and avoid anyone who was sick. The vaccines would protect me and some of them, like the MMR vaccine, could only be taken prior to surgery.

The first set of vaccinations was to begin on Tuesday, January 2nd, with a TB test. I was given an injection that created a tiny bubble and depending on what it did, they would know if I had been exposed to TB in my life, as it can remain dormant for decades. Once my immune system was suppressed, there was a chance of a resurgence of the TB, and that would be bad. They would check the injection site when I came in on Thursday for Prevnar, Tdap, Hepatitis B (1st Dose)

New Years

January 2nd, I headed off to the local healthcare facility. I had never been there before, and it was at the other end of town. *I was going to have to do something about my 'ever growing' taxi bills, perhaps there is a programme available to help with those 'extra' medical bills.*

As we pulled into the entrance, I dug out the cash for my taxi, with a generous tip, collected my cane, backpack, and thanked the driver. The facility was huge and beautiful. One of those buildings that seemed destined for greater things, but in the end had limited purpose. I was the only visitor, and after I gave my name and health card to the receptionist, I sat alone in a sea of chairs. Ten minutes or so passed when a nice young man approached and escorted me into one of the many clinic rooms. Today was only the TB test, so I asked him about it, and he told me that TB could come back if you ever had it, so they were checking. There were two TB tests a month or so apart, just to make doubly sure, I guessed. It was a quick and simple injection, and so I was done. I returned to the chairs where I called for another taxi and sat waiting for 15 minutes, got in the cab and returned home.

Phew! What a day of activity! I had to go to bed.

On Thursday, I took the taxi to the big, beautiful, and empty, healthcare facility. This time, however, there was a few other people, including a baby who seemed less than impressed. They went into one of the clinic rooms, and the screaming started almost immediately. When my turn came, and I had my TB test checked, then I got a few injections in each arm. *I didn't scream.*

When I got home, there was a message on my answering machine from the local hospital with an ultrasound appointment booked for Monday, the 15th. I wrote the time in my journal and also in my calendar on my phone. As my Dad liked to say, "Two is One, One is None."

I went to bed.

January 5th, I got an email from the coordinator with a referral for an angiogram. This test was requested by the anesthesiologist to make sure that my heart was in good shape for surgery. I was scheduled for 8 am on Monday, January 8th. The hospital required someone to accompany me for the angiogram because I would be somewhat sedated.

I called my sister Vick, but she wasn't available, however, her daughter, Molly, said she could accompany me. That was quite a relief, because Molly works in the medical field,

so her company would be perfect.

Gom Jabbar



33 / 100

Monday morning, Molly arrived right on time.

That was impressive, because she lived three hours away and she arrived at 7 am. We stopped at Tim Hortons on the way up, though I was on NPO, Molly needed a coffee desperately. The drive up to the regional hospital was pleasant as Molly filled me in on the goings on in her life.

It was a snowy day, but not blowing, so that was a blessing. When we got to the hospital, Molly got herself another coffee from the Tim Hortons in the lobby.

On the second floor, we went straight to the day surgery unit for check-in and were greeted by a misery of a human who seemed to hate her life. Before a word was spoken, she shot a grim look to Molly and barked, "You can't bring that in!" waving a pen at Molly's coffee. "Yes, I know." There were two waiting rooms. The first one was where caregivers waited and patients were taken to the next waiting room and prepped for surgery. Drinks *were* allowed in the first waiting room, but perhaps the gargoyle on the desk was angry because she didn't have a coffee. Molly and the desk troll argued about the coffee for a while until I had had enough and shoved my healthcare card against her plexiglass enclosure. She snorted and took my card and told me to proceed to the next room, but declared loudly, "No drinks are allowed in that area."

"Okay," I said as I rolled my eyes at Molly. She found a seat and sat down *with* her coffee, and I made my way through the hallowed doors into the second waiting room.

Everyone was very nice beyond that first guardian of the waiting room. I was handed a plastic bag and a gown and told to remove all my clothes, except underwear. I was told to put my clothes and any valuables in the bag, except my phone. I was told I would be returning to this cubical, so there was no need to lock everything in a cubby, and the bag was just to keep everything clean.

Once changed, I opened my curtain and lay on the gurney. The layout of this area was like a big wheel, with the nursing station at the hub. After a few minutes, a nurse came and introduced herself, took my weight and vitals and went through the pre-op questionnaire. I gave her my medications list paper, and she was delighted I was so organized. An IV was put in my left hand because for the angiogram they needed my right hand. This procedure made me nervous because I had *foolishly* watched a few YouTube videos, and they had all only increased my fear. *It looked painful. I don't like pain. I have a high threshold for pain, but I still don't enjoy it very much.*

The surgeon stopped by and explained the procedure and asked if I had any questions. "Yes" am I going to get something to help me relax? I'm quite nervous."

"You don't really need anything."

That was disappointing.

"That is disappointing."

He smiled and said, "We'll see what we can do."

"Thank you."

A few minutes later, I was rolled into the operating room, and my fears increased. This seemed a bit intense for a test. Everything was wrapped in clear plastic, and there was a huge monitor hanging over the operating table. I shifted onto the table myself, which was probably a relief for the nurse, who was half my size.

The surgeon came in and we began.

An impressive needle was put in my wrist, and the surgeon told me he was going to inject something that would burn for 10 seconds. This chemical made the vein dilate a lot so that a large-bore needle could be inserted.

"Ready?"

I nodded.

MOTHER FUCKER! THAT HURT!

I felt like Paul Atreides with his hand in the Gom Jabbar.

"10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3," and the pain completely stopped "2,1"

"Okay, I'm going to do that injection again. Ready?"

I didn't really respond before the burning pain literally, coursed through my vein once more.

“Good, that's the difficult part. You did well.”

I breathed a sigh of relief, and then the surgeon started describing what was on the big screen. He injected the dye, and I could see my heart in all its glory, pumping like a trooper.

It took about half an hour for him to complete the test, describing everything all the way. It was sort of interesting, but I was happy when it was over.

My heart was great. He said there was a little bit of plaque buildup, but very little, and certainly not a concern. *Yah!* I was cleared by the cardiothoracic surgeon for a transplant.

The giant needle was removed, and a big cuff was cinched up over the wound. Over the next hour, the cuff would be loosened a few notches every few minutes.

I was wheeled into another room, and after an hour the cuff was removed and my wrist was tightly bandaged with instructions to keep it on and dry for three days. I was given a clear plastic wrap with elastics at both ends, like a shower cap, to put over my wrist when I had a shower.

Then I was taken back to my cubical in the pre-op area and given a ginger-ale and told to wait an hour for the anaesthetic to wear off. Molly was escorted into my area and sat in a chair, quietly talking as my head cleared. Eventually, I was released, and we headed home.

Once home, I was drained, so Molly went to get some fast food. I wasn't up for cooking, or sitting in a restaurant or anything, and when she came back with Burger King food, I was asleep. The smell of food woke me up, and we had our lunch, then she quickly tidied up a bit and left. Molly had work the next day, and I was content to go to bed and nurse my sore hand. I fell asleep within a few seconds and resumed my waiting and holding on, hoping I could get a new liver.

Before it was all too late.

Ultrasound



32 / 100

I took a taxi to the local hospital.

I was starting to know my way around and went straight to the Imaging department, checked in and prepared to wait. As always, I had my essentials in my backpack.

- A shawl since hospitals are always cold and the medical staff often need access to your arms, so a sweater or hoodie is a hassle.
- A bottle of water, because it costs \$2.50 from the vending machine at the hospital.
- My journal
- A couple print outs of my medications list.
- Bluetooth headphones. I like headphones rather than earbuds because people can see you have them on your head, so they won't bug you... as much. Though, as on a plane, I seem to attract people who have nothing better to do than sit in my personal space and tell me their life's story.
- Bluetooth headband-headphones. If I have to stay over night I can put these on a play rain sounds to drown out all the noises. Plus, they can cover my eyes, like a sleeping mask.
- A small battery charger.
- One day worth Medications.
- Phone with lots of downloaded music because I'm too cheap to have a big data plan and the Wi-Fi at the hospital can be iffy. I usually just listen to my personal playlist or play Baltaro.

The Ultrasound waiting room is usually dominated by pregnant women and nervous partners, and today was no exception. I wormed my way into the only empty seat with a few disproving glances. I always wear a mask when I'm in public because I live in fear of a liver becoming available, only to miss out because I've caught a cold or something. I think it's well worth the occasional scowls I may receive to possibly save my life.

It was rather a long wait, but I had my headphones, so I just listened to music, dozing a bit and willing my nose to abstain from bleeding. *Come to think of it, that was another benefit of wearing a mask, nobody could see blood dribbling down my face, and it was having a very positive effect on my clothes.*

"Number 84922?"

Oops, that's me.

I quickly gathered my backpack and put my headphones around my neck as I fished around for my cane.

"Penny?" The technician said as she escorted me to room 2.

"Yes."

"Great. Just have a lie down on the table for me and lift up your shirt a bit. I'm going to scope your tummy area." She then spread a towel below my tummy to catch any stray gel. "This will be a bit cold as I put the gel on."

"Mmm, yup."

She scanned me for 20 minutes or so, mostly focusing on my liver area, but a few other areas as well.

"All done."

She handed me a towel to wipe myself and said. "I will send the results off to your hepatologist, and he will let you know what's going on with your liver. Any questions?"

"No, thank you very much."

"You're welcome. You can throw that towel in the bin when you are done and then you go out and turn right to get back to the waiting room. Have a great day."

And with that, she was gone, and a moment later, so was I.

I was a bit thirsty, so I grabbed a double/double from Tim Hortons, then sat at a table and finished my coffee before calling for a taxi. It's hard to use a cane, carry a backpack and wrangle a coffee all at the same time. Finished, I called for a taxi, made my way home and went to bed.

Another busy day.

The Hepatologist



30 / 100

I took a taxi to the local hospital.

Dr. B., the hepatologist, said my ultrasound wasn't great. Apparently, my gallbladder was still acting up.

"How are you feeling?"

"Super tired, and I get dizzy a lot."

"Are you taking your Lactulose?"

"Yes, and I hate it."

"Everyone hates it."

"Can I take too much?"

"No, you should take it as much as you need. It will help with the dizziness because the ammonia buildup is a concern."

"Okay,"

"Just keep on taking your meds and try to eat as much protein as you can. Any word from the transplant-unit?"

"No, not yet."

"Are you on the list?"

"I don't know for sure, but I don't think so. I'm getting my vaccinations at the moment, and I have to have some more tests, on my heart, I think."

"Yes, that sounds right. You are meeting with the dietitian next?"

"Yup."

"Okay. I will send your labs off to the transplant-unit and let you go to your next meeting."

Standing, I thanked Dr. B. and made my way to the dietitian's office.

These dietitians do love their charts and print-outs. I was handed a workbook of papers with a collection of foods clustered in various coloured geometric shapes.

"Eat protein" That summed up the whole meeting. 50% of protein bypasses the liver and is used for energy directly by the body. Carbs, Sugars, Fats, and the remaining protein get processed in the liver, and when the liver is not working, well, they do nothing, and that's why liver patients become so malnourished. Additionally, the fluid buildup in the abdomen made eating unpleasant and even painful, so if I was going to eat something, protein was the best bet.

I had 5 hours to wait before the CT scan and was trying to decide whether I should go home and have a nap or stay at the hospital and save the taxi fare. My barfy stomach decided for me, and I needed to go home to get to my own toilet. I really hate using public restrooms because even in hospitals they are not up to my cleanliness standards.

I called a taxi and waited impatiently to get home. Happily, the taxi arrived in just a few minutes, and the trip home was only a few minutes more. I hurried inside, threw my stuff on the floor and made a beeline for the toilet. I made it, but only just. It's very restrictive having so much waste coming out of both ends all the time. Either I have nausea or diarrhea and on very unfortunate occasions, both at the same time. I started wearing adult diapers, more for safety than anything else, and I carry a throw up bag in my purse at all times. The throw up bags I get at the hospital, and they have absorbent material inside, much better than the milk bags I had been using.

After my 'purge', I tried to find something 'Proteiny' I felt like eating. I finally settled on a small cup of raspberry Greek yogurt. The dietitian had badgered me about flavoured yogurt, saying I should have plain, but that is simply a non-starter. I think dietitians think their clients are not human and don't have likes and dislikes and will always be logical in their choices. Well, not this *sicky*, I can tell you.

I set my alarm and lay down for a rest.

The alarm went off, and I got up, washed my face, had a purge, a drink of water, and called a taxi.

Back at the hospital, it was CT time, and as I made my way to the Diagnostics department, I waved to a few other regulars at the hospital. *Oh, dear, this place is becoming my second home.*

The CT machine looked like an MRI machine, but a bit smaller, and there was a calming video of nature playing

on a big screen on the ceiling. I had taken off some bulkier items, such as my boots and coat, but didn't have to be in a hospital gown. As I lay down, the machine behind the cowling started to spin. Once up to speed, the table started moving in and out, and I was instructed to breathe in, hold, breathe out, resume breathing. So it went for a surprisingly long time, perhaps 20 minutes.

I was helped up into a sitting position, which was difficult with the ascites that made me puff up, but I eventually managed the maneuver. With my hectic day complete, it was time to head home.

I took a taxi and once home; I threw up.

The Fall



29 / 100

My yogurt reserves were running low.

Without leaving my bed, I ordered some groceries, mostly strawberry-flavored high protein drink and yogurt, then I drank some Lactulose and went back to bed. Generally, I was up and down to the bathroom every hour or so, and life had become rather like a very disappointing Matrix. Unsure of the day or time, I had become a slave to my endless phone alerts and calendar reminders.

Later in the day, my pathetic grocery order was delivered, and after tipping the delivery man, I went back to bed.

On Wednesday, I had an appointment to get my COVID-19 and flu shots at the local pharmacy. It was a very brisk day, and the snow was hard and crunchy, so extra caution was required to avoid falling on the moon-like surface. The trip took over twenty minutes, even though it was a mere two blocks distant. After arriving safely, I sat down on a chair just inside the door to rest and regain my energy. After half an hour of leaning on my cane and puffing like a steam engine, I declared myself rested.

The shots were quick, and I generally have little reaction, so there were still some small mercies in this 'dystopian hellscape' that was my life.

The walk home was with the wind, so it was a little quicker, and I rewarded myself with a hot chocolate once I got home and changed into warm PJs and a sweater.

Sipping my hot chocolate, I sat for a while looking out the window at the frigid January day, wondering if I was destined to see next year's Winter. I tried to push my darker thoughts away and keep positive. *At least I was warm with a hot chocolate.* I dozed in my chair and woke some time later with a sore neck and drool running down my face. *Another picture perfect moment.*

I wiped my mouth, hobbled into the kitchen and put my cup in the sink. At least by being so sick, I created virtually no dirty dishes.

A short bathroom visit including a nice hot face wipe and it was back to bed for me.

Being stuck in the doldrums for two straight weeks, with nothing to do but watch snow pile up, was driving me nuts, though we got a major snowstorm on Saturday. That was mildly interesting, although I slept so much that I was barely cognizant of the 'real' world anymore, and I may have dreamt the whole thing.

What I needed was a shower. Perhaps the hot water would wash away some of my moroseness along with my constant stink of ammonia.

I turned on the water, to let it warm up a bit. The edema in my legs and feet made it difficult to step over the rim of the tub and as I reached for the grab bar, my fingers found only air and suddenly I was lying in the tub, my legs, and arms akimbo, my head throbbing, and my ears ringing. There were three grab bars in my shower, but I had missed them all.

I lay there in a heap with water spraying in my face, head spinning. It was very uncomfortable. I tried to move, but couldn't, so I lay for a long while trying to figure out what to do next. Eventually, the water ran cold, and I had to do something or I would have a very high water bill. With effort, I managed to move my right arm out from under me and used it as leverage to sit up. I sat for a minute with cold water spraying in my face.

This was becoming intolerable.

I felt the top of my head and though there wasn't any blood; I had put a sizable dent in my skull. Getting my left hand free was an effort, but eventually, I rolled my top half onto the tub ledge, then fell on the floor... *Phew! At least I wasn't being pelted with freezing water.* I slithered around to the vanity and somehow pushed against that and got on my feet. I stood catching my breath as I started shaking from the cold, exertion, and fear.

I turned off the water, towelled off and fell into bed, naked. Having likely suffered a concussion, I had spent a week's worth of energy and couldn't get dressed or call for an ambulance. I just lay there, damp, with my head spinning.

Hours later, I woke up. I had thrown some blankets over myself and was buried in pillows, with a throbbing headache. *I really had to go to the washroom.* Grabbing one of my canes, I wobbled to the bathroom. It still looked

like a crime scene with towels all over and pools of water on the floor.

Avoiding the carnage, I made my way to the toilet, sat,

and sobbed.

The Thoracic Surgeon



27 / 100

Time for another ultrasound of my thyroid.

Hi Ho, Hi Ho, it's off to the local hospital Diagnostic Imaging I go.

I really had to bundle up today because of the icy wind. The taxi driver let me off and said, “Good luck, Penny!” I know all the taxi drivers now, and they always wish me well.

I hadn't eaten yet today and thought briefly of grabbing a doughnut but thought better of it when I saw the line. In the ultrasound waiting room, there seemed to be less pregnant people today, so the wait was very short.

“Number 49923?”

That's my random privacy number.

“Penelope?”

“Yup, Penny.”

“Okay, Penny, we are in room 3.”

“This should be quick as we are just looking at your thyroid, which is in your neck.”

“Okay.”

She put a little cold gel on my neck and did her scan in just a couple of minutes, handed me a towel and said I could wipe the gel off, and we were done.

“Thank you,” and I left, turning right down the hall as last time.

I didn't feel like a doughnut or coffee now and just wanted to get home and lay down, so I called a taxi, braved the cold, got home and fell into bed.

On February 4th, Vick came to drive me to my appointments and also to have a visit. My CT scan had shown a small lump in my left lung, and they wanted to make sure it wasn't cancer. I asked Carolyn if I was on the transplant list yet, and she said no, there are still some tests I need to pass and also they need to make sure I don't have cancer because once I'm on anti-rejection medication any cancer would grow like wildfire with my immune system disabled, hence, the meeting on Thursday with the Thoracic surgeon, Dr. I. This first appointment was a consultation only, so there was no preparation required.

I called a taxi and was off for my second TB test at the vaccinations clinic. Vick couldn't make it until later that day, which was fine because it gave me something to do while waiting for company. A different technician did the injection, and she was nice, but very quiet. Sometimes I blather on, and I can see it in people's eyes that they would rather I just shut up. *So I did.*

The roads were a little icy, and I thought the taxi driver was a little aggressive, but ever the good passenger, I shut up for the second time today. Relieved, I made it home safe, struggled up the unshoveled steps and flopped into my chair. *I fell asleep.*

When I woke, I was all wet from sweating in my winter coat and hat, and thought a shower would be good. I was still traumatized by that fall in the tub, and all subsequent showers I had put my phone and cane within easy reach and had bought a rubber anti-slip pad for the tub, but still, it made me afraid. I briefly thought of waiting until Vick arrived, but she was still a few hours away, and I was so wet I decided to brave a shower.

All went well. I had part of a protein drink and a drink of water, put on a clean and dry nightgown and went to bed.

My sister, Bec, had bought me quite a few nightgowns, pyjama sets, and bath towels, and when Vick came for a visit, she would often wash everything, so I had a vast supply of clean bedding to wear. It's amazing how something like that can make you feel so much better about things. A hot shower, when you don't fall, a fresh towel and fresh clothes makes one feel almost human.

Vick texted me that she had arrived, and I got up as I heard her rustling around. I had an extra door key made and had a hiding place that family and neighbours knew about, so if I ever had a problem, emergency services

could get in without kicking down my door.

“Hi Vick.”

“Hi Penny, how you doin’”

“Yah, good. Was your drive okay? It's a bit icy on the roads.”

“Yup, it was fine. I stopped and got some groceries. Do you like corn on the cob?”

“Mmm, Yes, I love it.” *The marvels of the world*, I thought. *Here we are in the clutches of Winter and have corn on the cob. I also think that about my medical situation. If this had happened a few decades ago, the prognosis would have been very grim. I love progress.*

“What have you been up to?” asked Vick, as she filled the fridge and cupboards with food.

Picking at a package of cookies, I said, “Oh, I went for my TB test this morning and had a shower.”

“Wow! Action packed.”

“Indeed. I'm whipped.”

“Do you want to lie down?”

“No. I'm good for a while yet.”

“How about some Tea and those cookies you are opening?”

“Sounds great. Was I too obvious?” *I love shortbread cookies.*

“Yes. Yes, you were. You go sit down and I'll finish with these groceries and make some tea for us.”

“Okay, thanks.”

I wandered into my front room and plopped down in front of the computer. When Vick came in, I would help her twirl the chair around, and by help I meant point and get in the way.

A moment later, Vick entered with a teapot and two mugs. “You're facing the wrong way.”

“Yes, I need help to swivel around.”

Putting the pot and mugs down, she shooed me out of the chair, and I promptly stood in her way.

“Move!”

I moved a bit, and Vick swung the chair into 'visitor position'.

Back in my chair, I accepted my tea and 3 cookies.

Vick sat, and we chatted about our kids and the general goings on in the family. I asked how Dad was doing in his new digs? “Surprisingly well,” said Vick, munching on a cookie.

That was a big relief to us all. Dad seemed to be doing well and was in a safe place and liked it well enough. He was playing scrabble and going to musical concerts and seemed pretty good, given all the turmoil of late.

It turned out that for all the noise at the local hospital to get him out, and their insistence that he was fine, he had had a brain bleed. The ‘*practitioners*’ at the hospital, hadn't bothered doing anything with him other than complain that he was taking up a bed. Once Vick and Bec had moved him to the new home, the staff discovered Dad was in serious condition and they had to send him, by ambulance, back to the regional hospital for an operation. The neurosurgeon cut open his skull to relieve the pressure and fix the bleed. So, after all their caterwauling at the local hospital about how fine he was, they almost killed him.

This was all kept from me at the time because everyone thought I might be overwhelmed with even more bad news. I appreciated that. Sometimes, it's best to be out of the loop for your own sanity.

Happily, Dad recovered amazingly well, and was transported back to the home. To this day he is still full of stories of ‘the crazies’ in the home and what food is on offer. Vick takes him out shopping, and they like to go to a cafe near the water and have tea. I know Dad misses Mom terribly, but he is carrying on in his usual stoic, Presbyterian way.

“... ya think?” That brought me out of my thoughtful reverie.

“What? Sorry, I missed that.”

“I said, do you think I should set your inflatable bed up here or in the bedroom?”

“I think the bedroom would be best”

“I can do that now if you want?”

“Whatever you like, but I can sleep through anything. All the lights could be on and a brass band playing in my ear and would fall asleep...it's a gift.”

Eventually we ran out of things to say, and I headed off to bed, stopping of course at the washroom. I was still taking water pills and Lactulose, so besides bed; the toilet was my new favourite spot. Sadly, the ammonia and other unprocessed waste chemicals made my urine similar to the blood of a Xenomorph in Alien.

Pure acid.

I bought a portable bidet to rinse off the caustic substance from my undercarriage. I also noticed that, since noxious chemicals were oozing from my pours, dogs were very aggressive towards me. They would bare their teeth and threaten me to stay away. I guess dogs, being pack animals, are protecting their pack from danger, and they smell my illness as a threat.

“Look out, here comes a zombie or perhaps a terminator pretending to be human. *Stay Back!*”

To battle my noxious, rotting smell, I had begun taking many showers a day and also brushed my teeth constantly to deal with stinky breath. While waiting for a transplant, I had to keep my teeth in good shape, because it was not recommended to go to a Dentist, except in an emergency.

A few hours after I had gone to bed, Vick turned on the pump to blow-up the mattress, and that woke me up enough to realize I had to go to the bathroom.

“Sorry, did I wake you?”

“No, I have to go to the bathroom.” I said flatly.

When I came back, Vick was still struggling. Apparently, the mattress was about two inches too wide and was caught on something. Suddenly it popped free and seemed okay, though we both wondered if the mattress had been punctured..

“I think it's okay.” Vick declared.

“Good. I'm going back to sleep.”

“I'm going to watch Netflix on my phone, if that's okay.”

“Sure, ya, it honestly doesn't bother me. I generally sleep with the lights on because I'm afraid of the dark.” And with that, I was off to slumber-land.

We mostly just kinda bummed around on Wednesday. Vick went for a walk because she's a nature girl and finds staying inside oppressive. I just did my usual semi-conscious thing.

On Thursday, we had to get up and on our way early. I had a 9:00 am appointment with the thoracic surgeon at the regional hospital, which is at least an hour away. Allowing for problems, we left home around 7:30 am. I tried to spruce myself up with some makeup and put my hair in a ponytail. I chose a nice warm brown dress and vest, a few bangles on my wrists, and some silver earrings. Even though I was horribly sick, I found that if I looked as well as I could manage, the medical establishment treated me better than if I looked near death. I think if you look too sick, everyone internalizes a feeling that you're just not trying hard enough to be well. Everyone roots for the fighter and gives up on the whiner feeling sorry for themselves. Put on a happy face.

We had been really lucky with the weather this winter. Though it was cold, the roads were clear, and it was a crisp sunny day. The ride up was uneventful, and of us all, Vick has the best sense of direction. For some reason I don't trust GPS, and worst of all, I change my mind in the middle of travelling. I often say, “Well, maybe we should go this way or that.” Then the GPS says, “Make a U-turn”, so obviously, I am causing more grief than help. If the driver does listen to me, it isn't long before I have directed them into a construction zone, a dead end, or a lake.

However, despite my best efforts, we made it to the hospital in good time, and we both got a coffee as a reward. There was a sign on the door to the office of the thoracic surgeon saying, “No Food or Drink”, so we both quickly scalded our throats trying to down our coffees. The nurse took my information and directed us to the waiting chairs. There we sat for half an hour, regretting not having gone to the cafeteria to get our coffees and something to eat. Finally, we were shown into a little exam room and told to wait. As the minutes ticked by, I became more nervous. The lump in my lung could stop the possibility of the transplant, and I needed the thoracic surgeon to sign off before I could proceed on the recovery road.

Dr. I and an intern knocked and came into the room.

“Which of you is Penny?”

I raised my hand.

“Hi Penny, I'm Dr. I and this is Dr. O., and you are?” he said, turning to Vick.

“I'm Penny's sister, Victoria.”

“Excellent.”

“Well, Penny, I've looked at the CT scan and, as you know, there is a small lump in your left lung. It probably isn't cancer, but we have to make sure, because, I'm sure they told you, once you are on anti-rejection medication, cancer becomes a real risk.”

“Yes.”

“Excellent.”

“Usually this type of lump is caused by a fungus that your body can't expel and so it surrounds it in fat cells to stop it from spreading.”

“Like a pearl in an oyster?”

“In a way, yes. The fungus is naturally occurring, and in fact most people have some in their lungs. Do you garden?”

“No, not really.”

“Do you walk in nature often?”

“Yes, I used to go for a walk in the forest every day, **in the before time, in the long, long ago.**”

He smiled at my South Park reference and continued.

“That's probably where it would be from, but we have to rule out cancer, so I'm going to set you up with a PET scan.”

“I don't know what that is.”

“A PET scan is a CT scan to get a 3D scan of your lung, but first we inject a liquid high in sugar that is mildly radioactive. Cancer is very energy hungry, so it will feed off of the sugar and show up in the scan as a bright spot. If the lump lights up, it's an indication of cancer, and we will have to do a biopsy to see if it's a problem. However, if the PET scan doesn't make the lump light up, it means it isn't active. We should still keep an eye on it in the future, but for the moment it would allow a transplant operation to go ahead.”

“Excellent,” I smiled as I mimicked his favourite expression.

He smiled as well.

“Any more questions?”

Vick raised her hand.

“Yes, Victoria?”

“Will Penny need someone with her for the PET scan?” Good question. I hope not; it's such a hassle for someone to come and be with me for these tests.

“No, it's just like a CT scan, only we inject that sugar/radioactive material first.”

“Great. Any idea when the test would happen?”

“Soon, because I know this is holding up the transplant team, so as soon as we can make it happen. The radiologist and I will review the PET scan and make our recommendation to the transplant team.”

“Any more questions?”

Vick and I looked at each other and shook our heads.

“No, I think that is all very clear. Thank you.”

Dr. I and Dr. O. said their goodbyes and left.

We stopped at the nurses' desk and asked if she needed anything, like phone numbers or anything. She said she had all that and someone would call from the Radiology Department with the time for the PET scan.

We thanked her and left.

On the way out to the car, we picked up some coffees so that we could drink at a more leisurely pace and headed home. We thought about stopping in for some fast food, but it was about 11:00 am, and that is an awkward time. Too late for breakfast and too early for lunch. Besides, I would be hungry, order food, have one bite, and be unable to eat more, so it always felt like a waste.

Once we got home, Vick made some soup and sandwiches while I availed myself of the facilities. All that coffee. We had a couple of hours before I had to get my Thursday vaccinations and get my TB test read. Vick tidied up and off we went. This day was really wiping me out, but tomorrow I could just rest.

Vick sat in the beautiful lobby of the Vaccinations clinic, browsing health brochures, as again, I made my way to room 3. The TB reading was very involved and I was getting worried she was seeing something I wasn't, but in the end she said I was clear. That's one of the worst aspects of waiting for a transplant, knowing that anything can throw you off the track. If your TB test is positive, you are off the list. If the lump in your lung is cancer, you are

off the list. If you get the flu, any surgery is cancelled. Your life is hanging in the balance, and anything from an accident to a summer cold can end your chance at survival. I feel like I'm under the sword of Damocles every day.

I finished the visit with three injections in my right arm and two in my left, and was then free to go. No screaming children today as Vick and I seemed to be the only people in the building. Even the receptionist had disappeared. A short drive home and that rough day was complete. I went to bed.

Vick had to get back to her life the next day, and though it was horribly sad to see anyone go, it did mean I could sleep more. Vick had spent the morning doing laundry and organizing food for me, which was unbelievably helpful. After a lunch of chicken and rice, Vick loaded up the car, hugged me goodbye,

and was gone.

Black Hole



26 / 100

A black hole appeared outside my window.

At first, it was just a small black hole, but it grew in intensity, and to my horror, it started sucking things out of my room, through the window, and into the void. First my socks flew off the floor, followed by my cane. *Oh, that was my favourite cane.* Next, my air cleaner vanished into a sea of black, and then, things became really serious. My bed shook, and my blankets were violently ripped off my body and squeezed through my window into the awaiting maw of nothingness. A whistling wind made my ears quiver, and I clutched the bed for dear life. My bed moved towards the window, and my grip became tighter.

That swirling horror would not take me without a fight.

I screamed.

Minutes crawled by as the black hole and I battled for supremacy.

Finally, the black hole relented and began receding back into the night. My ears were still ringing, but I could loosen my death-grip on the bed. Things the black hole had stolen returned. My bed was back in its original position, and I was once again covered with blankets. I was soaked with sweat, but other than that, all was quiet and normal.

Ammonia had built up in my brain, which had sparked that hallucination. I was going to have to take even more Lactulose, unfortunately.

I fell asleep.

Liver Clinic



25 / 100

Wednesday, Feb 14th, Happy Valentine's Day!

The morning found me on the toilet, purging burning ammonia. The taxi was due to arrive in a few minutes, and I was desperate to finish, have a quick rinse and be ready to go. I had already packed my backpack and done my hair and makeup. Finally, after a rinse with my portable bidet, I quickly put on fresh clothes, worried my feet into my boots, donned my winter clothes and made it out the door just as the taxi arrived. *Good for me.*

My appointment at the liver-clinic wasn't until 10 am, but I had to have blood-work and they opened at 8 am. If I got to the regional hospital early, I didn't have to wait as long, and also it gave the lab a few hours to process my blood tests and get them to the liver-clinic.

It was a blowing snow today, which always made me nervous, but rarely seemed to bother the drivers. We chatted about the weather, construction, and motorcycles. You never know where a conversation will go, and I'm always relieved when it doesn't lead to politics. Everyone's opinions are so strong, and when they are driving and your life is in their hands, you are not really in a position to disagree. I find myself "Mmming" a lot.

We arrived at the hospital, I tipped the driver and gathered my growing collection of 'essentials', and threw my backpack over my shoulders, grabbed my cane, that the Black Hole had generously returned, and went into the familiar embrace of the hospital. After taking the elevator to the 4th floor, I made a beeline to the blood-lab. They took my health card in exchange for a number and directed me to have a seat in the waiting room.

My number came up quickly, and with my health card returned, I was motioned to a cubical. Dumping my purse, backpack, coat, hat, mitts, scarf, and cane in a heap on the floor, I sat in the chair and waited. The cheerful phlebotomist entered with a long sheet of stickers. She asked my name and birth date as she attached stickers to vials of various colours and a paper with the list of tests.

"Which arm do we want today?"

"Either/or — apparently it's difficult to get blood from me as my veins roll."

"Left it is then."

I smiled.

She was very good. She got a vein on the first try.

"All done. I'll shoot these samples to the lab, and they will be ready by the time you are at the liver-clinic."

"Super, thank you."

"Sure thing, take care, Penny." and she bubbled away with a tray of vials, like Glinda the Good Witch.

I got myself reassembled, though it being warmish in the hospital, I carried my coat in my free hand, and made my way to the cafeteria on the 3rd floor, but first a bathroom break.

I had put all my stuff on a table in the cafeteria before getting food because a few weeks before; I had dropped my croissant on the floor, and I definitely didn't have a 3-second rule in a hospital. Anything that touched the floor there was garbage. That day, I got a double double and an apple fritter. Not super nutritious, but I liked to treat myself to something when at the hospital. I sipped my coffee and watched the wind-blown snow swirl around the buildings as people hurried as best they could. Some in wheelchairs looked lost in the wind.

I still had some time to kill, so I went down to the family waiting room in the surgical wing. I had discovered they had nice soft lighting, big clean washrooms, and deep leather waiting chairs. Usually there was nobody there, and even if there was, people were always quiet and kept to themselves as if any movement would doom the operation of their loved one. That day, it was empty. I sat and dozed a bit until about 10 minutes before my appointment.

Up in the liver-clinic, I had waved to the keeper of the time, Grahame, and he had waved back. I didn't need to check in anymore, as with most at the clinic, I was a regular. There was an ongoing jigsaw puzzle on the table, and progress seemed slow. I ignored it and took out some knitting. I knitted a lot of socks because it was one of the few activities I still found possible.

A few minutes later, I was called to be weighed. I dumped every extra pound of clothing I could while retaining my dignity. Not my boots though, they were so hard to get on and off I left them as long as possible. My weight was up, but it was water weight.

Next, I made my way, carrying all my clothes with one arm and using my cane in the other. I really liked the general philosophy of the liver-clinic. I was expected to do as much for myself as possible. Though we were all terminally ill, we were still treated like independent people and not pitiful lepers.

I dumped myself in the chair, and the nurse took my vitals, which were good, and then I had to take off my right boot so she could check my Pitting Edema. They often did both feet, but the struggle to get my boot off was so arduous that just the right one was deemed sufficient. The nurse pressed her fingers into my swollen feet, to see how deep and long the indentations remained. We both got bored with waiting and just assumed it was level 4. My legs were about the same, although my left recovered a bit quicker. That was very normal because the liver was on the right side and so, generally, the worst things happened on that side. Satisfied, the nurse left, saying, "The doctor would be in to see you in just a minute."

"Thank you." I just leave my boot off, because the doctor will want to poke my puffy foot as well.

As the minutes ticked by, I took out my journal, entered the date and reviewed the questions I had, as well as the symptoms I had been experiencing.

The hepatologist intern arrived, and we began reviewing what had been going on with me. Usually an intern took all the information and filled out the forms, then went to have a consult with Dr. I, who later came in to review and discuss. It was a good way of proceeding because sometimes I might forget to ask something and this way I got two kicks at the can, so to speak, which was helpful for me because I always attended these appointments solo.

"Take more Lactulose." was pretty much the summary of our meeting. I was already taking Rifaximin to protect my brain from ammonia, and I couldn't take more of that, so Lactulose it is.

Vitals recorded, symptoms noted, and medication adjusted, I was given a card with the date and time for my next liver-clinic visit and sent on my way.

I went to the cafeteria, called for a taxi and bought a cup of coffee. The taxi had to be sent from my hometown to the big city, so I had about an hour to wait. I put my stopwatch on my phone and drank my coffee. With time left to wait, I went down to the surgical waiting room and rested while making a few additional notes in my journal. Once my stopwatch reached 45 minutes, I made my way to the main entrance. There were chairs in the main waiting area, but I think they were designed to be as uncomfortable as possible. Thankfully, my taxi came within a few minutes,

and home was only an hour away.

PET Scan



24 / 100

I woke up with vomit in my hair.

Considering I ate so little, I sure did produce an insane amount of barf. I hadn't really wanted to wash my hair that morning, but now I had no choice. My hair had become extremely thin, apparently due to malnutrition. The hepatologist had told me that the body saved its reserves for dumb things like keeping your heart beating, rather than growing rich, luxurious hair.

My hair did dry quickly and, as a result, was very easy to maintain. All cleaned up, I stripped the bed and threw my pillowcase, nightgown, and bottom sheet in my small washing machine. Since I couldn't manage the stairs to the laundry facilities anymore, I had bought a small portable washing machine for just this type of occasion. I could only do a tiny load at a time, and I didn't have a dryer, but I found I could just hang stuff around, and it dried... eventually. While the washing machine did its thing, I did my makeup and got dressed. I was on NPO, so no breakfast, which always made mornings seem long.

Clothes finished and hung about, I waited for my taxi. I had called the taxi company the night before because they appreciated a warning for a long trip as one of their drivers would be unavailable for other fares for a couple of hours.

The taxi came, and it wasn't as cold today, so that was a welcome surprise. We chitchatted up to the hospital, and I was right on time. I was processed in and this time I did don a hospital gown. There seemed to be a lot of waiting involved in a PET scan. I was scanned first, then the sugar/nuclear mixture was put in my IV, then I waited, then I was scanned again. Other than the original poke for the IV, it was all painless. Some people experience a bit of burning from the sugar/nuclear concoction, but I was fine. It all took a few hours and then it was my: *off to the cafeteria, surgical waiting room, main waiting area, taxi, home routine.*

Once home, I put on clean PJ's and made my bed. I thought briefly of a meal, but decided I was more tired than hungry. I sent a quick email to let everyone know all was well, went to the bathroom and then went to bed.

Vick came up for a visit a few days later and while we were sitting having tea and a chat, Dr. I called and said the PET Scan was negative. He and the Radiologist agreed that all was well and there was no cancer in my lung, so the transplant could go ahead. He said he was writing a report to the transplant Team with his recommendation.

Well, that is a super-giant relief!

Vick and I celebrated with a meal out for *fish and chips*, and throughout dinner I kept saying, "I'm SO relieved!"

Vick smiled and nodded,

"I think this calls for cheesecake!"

The List



23 / 100

I woke feeling grim to a grim world.

My illness was taking a toll not only on my physical self, but the roller-coaster of emotions was exhausting. I crawled out of bed and stood for a long while in the shower, preparing for another day. The hepatologist was still worried about my MELD score, so that meant an extra visit to the liver-clinic.

I put on my long brown dress today because I was feeling kind of down, and this outfit made me feel warm and snug. I had a quick breakfast of a protein drink and part of a yogurt cup. I didn't have coffee, because I decided I would get one at the hospital.

When the taxi came, I managed my front stairs with some difficulty. They never get shovelled. *I really like my landlord, he is a nice guy, but he doesn't seem to believe in shovelling snow.* Though I go out so rarely, it really isn't a big deal. Today, the stairs were a little slippery and tricky, but I managed. Another uneventful taxi ride and we were at the hospital. I think I may have dozed off a bit on the ride up, because it seemed surprisingly quick.

At the hospital, I went up to the blood-lab and went to take a number, but was ushered in right away because they were not busy today. At the cafeteria, I got a coffee and a bagel with cream cheese. I nibbled at the bagel a bit, but mostly wanted to take it home for lunch, so I wrapped it up and put it in my backpack, finished my coffee and decided to go up to the liver-clinic to wait.

I drifted away, listening to the soft discussions of the other patients.

“Penny?”

Slowly I rose from my chair, and wobbled unstably forward, thankful for the mask, as it hid my mouth, trembling from exertion. I nodded, dropped my gear and stood on the weigh scale. *Up a bit.* I collected my stuff and went to room 2 and slumped in the chair.

I was speaking less and less and mostly just sat with my own thoughts, partially from my illness but also because things were looking a little grim and putting on a sunny spin on my situation was exhausting.

The nurse took my vitals, checked my puffy feet, and I waited for the intern. This time the intern, *and* the hepatologist came in, so I perked up. *Yikes, this might be serious. Had they found cancer? Had my angiogram found a problem with my heart? Had an additional complication reared its ugly head?*

They checked me over, looked at my numbers and then Dr. H said, “The transplant Board had met on Monday, and you have been approved for transplant, and are now on the transplant list.”

OMG

OMG, I can't believe it.

“That's such a relief, I mean, Thank you.”

“That's just the first step, there is a long way to go, but you can do it, we all believe in you.”

“Thank you.” I said with tears of relief rolling down my cheeks.

“Carolyn will give you the details. Congratulations!”

“Thank you.”

They left, and I made a beeline for Carolyn's office, suddenly feeling significantly better.

Carolyn's office door was open, and she saw me lingering.

“Penny! Congratulations, I'm so proud of you!”

I rushed in and gave her a big hug, my eyes welling up with more happy tears.

“Thank you SO much!”

“You have worked very hard for this by going to all your appointments, getting all your vaccinations, doing all those tests and not giving up.”

“I'm so relieved, thank you.”

“Keep your phone with you because I or one of the other coordinators will call you if a donor liver comes in,

and you will be asked to come to the hospital.”

“Absolutely, Thank you!”

“Other than that, keep taking your medications, try to eat a lot of protein and get some exercise, while you wait.”

“Yes, I will. Thank you again!” I said for the umpteenth time, then left.

I went to the cafeteria, called for a taxi and emailed everyone with the good news.

Email:

“I AM ON THE transplant LIST!!!!!!”

send

The “OMG” and “Congrats!” poured in.

When I got home, I started calling people. I got a landline as well as my mobile, so I don't tie up my cell if a call comes in for a transplant. I'm not good with putting people on hold because I always seem to hang up by accident, and besides, the landline was only an extra \$5/month with discounts. I couldn't afford not to... *girl math*.

“Can you believe it?!”

“Yes, that's great!” said Bec. “Did they say how long you should expect to wait?”

“No, it's kind of random, though I do have some factors in my favour. One, I'm big. Apparently, that helps your chances. I guess it's like plumbing, you can adjust something to fit in a bigger space easier than you can a tiny one. Though it has to be close because the tubes have to fit together. I'm very technical.” Bec snickered. “On the downside, I'm A- which is a moderately rare blood type, but I think I can accept an A or O liver?”

“Did they say anything about the type of donor?”

“Well, gender doesn't matter, it's more the state of the liver and how the donor died. In Canada, there are three different categories for organ Donors. NDD (Neurological determination of death), that is a donor that is brain dead being kept alive by machines. The life support is turned off, and the organs harvested. Sort of the movie version.

The second type is a MAID (Medical Assistance in Dying) and those donor's organs can be harvested after brain death. I'm sure there are all kinds of ethical rules for that though, because otherwise rich people could jump the line by buying organs.

The third kind is DCD (donation after cardiac death). This happens when the person has injuries that are survivable, but there is still brain activity. Life support is withdrawn when all measures have failed and the person dies naturally, but in a hospital. Two doctors determine that brain death has occurred, and again, in Canada, the medical team has to wait 5 minutes before double checking their determination. So, if someone is dead on arrival, have an unsuccessful resuscitation or the patient is in ICU and has an unexpected death, those are all uncontrolled deaths and the organs are not used. The problem is a liver is only considered viable 20 minutes after cardiac death (Warm Ischemia Time), so the clock is running and often the liver is then considered unusable by the surgeon.

So, if a person dies outside of a hospital, their organs can't be transplanted. Also, if there is trauma to the liver, like in a car accident, it can't be transplanted. Unfortunately, the liver is the second largest organ in the body, and isn't protected by bones like the rib cage, so it is vulnerable to trauma. Carolyn advised me to prepare for possible transplant cancellation due to a less-than-perfect donor liver. They want to make sure the liver is viable before taking out your old one.” *That's probably a good idea.*

“Wow, that's so exciting. I'm so happy that you are on the list, now, *get some sleep!*”

We both hung up.

I called my son.

Spring Break

I lay there looking up at Mom.

“I...”

Mom looked blurry. I blink away the tears.

“I’m... Ss...”

Mom looks scared, with tears dripping down her face. I blink away more of my own tears.

“I...”

“Shshsh..., you’ll be okay”. *Dad’s voice whispers above my head. Mom sobs. I think she is holding my hand, but I’m not sure. I can’t really feel it. That’s weird. I can’t feel much of anything, and I’m freezing. I wish they would help me up. Some of Mom’s stew would be nice right now.*

“I’m...I...”

“Shshsh..., don’t try to talk. You’ve hit a big rock with your bike. We’ve called 911, and they said not to move you until they arrive.” *Mom is crying.*

“You have a cut on your head and are bleeding a lot, but you know how head wounds are, they bleed a lot and look bad, but with a few stitches you’ll be right as rain.”

“I...”

“Save your strength, Josh. After we get you patched up, I still expect you and Jack to finish fencing in that back 40. Don’t think you are going to get out of it because you fell off your bike.”

I tried laughing, but my chest was too heavy and sore to take a good breath.

I decided to rest a bit while we wait for the ambulance. *Man, it’s cold.*

It has been a shitty year. Second year University is not going much better than first. My Profs are all ass-holes. *What was I thinking going into business?* I am lousy with Math and hate networking and kissing ass. In fact, I hate people. I’d pick smoking weed in my room and playing ‘Paths of Exile’ or even ‘Balatro’ over another market forces lecture any day.

I think Dad was more enthusiastic in my choice of Major than I was, and I was stupid to let him talk me into it. What I really want is to ride in competition motocross and fix bikes. Not those stupid e-bikes, but real motorcycles and especially 2 stroke dirt bikes. *I can’t believe they are not street legal anymore, bunch of Jerks.*

I love the loud whine, like a giant wasp, and the power, oh, the power. It’s like riding a rocket. I even like the oily gas smell. Jen sure didn’t like that smell! She was always whining at me about smelling of gas. I don’t miss *that* about her. She fucked off with some ass-hole last semester, and at first it really broke my heart, but then fuck her and her weird artsy shit. I think her new boyfriend is in music or some gay shit like that, and I can see her future, broke and pregnant with her fifth kid. *Good luck.*

I can’t wait for summer. Jack and I built a nice track on some scrub-land at the farm. It has some challenging curves and two really awesome jumps. I’m also looking forward to getting back to the farm. There is lots of work for me either on the farm or in town at the Co-op. I would love to get a job working on motorcycles at ‘Bobby Green’s Garage’ a few towns over. He mostly does older cars and tractors, but really anything with ICE. He doesn’t do new stuff with computer diagnostics or electric engines. He doesn’t even work on newer farm equipment like John Deer with all its proprietary software. Maybe this year I can work part time or something; at least it would pay for some bike upgrades I’ve had my eye on.

I’m going to see how I feel at the end of summer, but I’m not sure I want to do another year of University. It’s such a drag these days trying to guess what jobs are going to be even around in a few years. AI is basically taking everything, and nobody is safe. Ha, I bet Jen’s new boyfriend will get replaced before he even finishes school. Music, what a stupid choice. They don’t even teach that in high school much anymore.

“Welcome to McDonald’s, can I take your order?”

This ‘Reading Week’ came at just the right time. Even though it’s at the end of March, it’s super warm, like 20, as has been warm enough to melt all the snow off the track. It’s still muddy, but it’s not bad, so I can take my bike out and burn off some of my frustrations, especially those about Jen. *Bitch!*

“Hey Dad, I'm going to take my bike out for a spin.”

“Not sure that's a great idea, Josh.”

Jeez, he thinks I'm 5.

“It's pretty slick with that mud, and those big rocks you and Jack shoved back are still too close to the track.”

“We are going to move those when Jack gets back from his trip with Beth, but that's not until Sunday, and I want to get out there while it's so warm. We are supposed to get snow in early April.”

“Aren't you supposed to be writing a paper on leveraged buyouts or something?”

I roll my eyes, “Jeez, come on, dad weren't you ever young? It's a fantastic day, I just made some improvements to my bike, and it's reading week. Also, my girlfriend dumped me, and I just want to have a bit of fun.”

“Sorry about Jen. I'm sure that hurts. Okay, take it easy, though. Oh, check with your Mom about what time lunch will be ready.”

“Will do. Thanks.”

I saluted, and with a smile, went to the kitchen.

Mom was humming softly while she stirred her stew.

“Hi Mom.”

“Dad said I could go drive my bike before lunch. What time do you want me back?”

She looked at me with a puzzled look for a sec, then said, “Cocoa. I need to add a bit more Cocoa.”

I just waited.

“Uhm, yes, probably an hour or so before lunch. I'm making rolls to go with our stew, and I already made a... Tada!” she smiled, presenting a lemon meringue pie, my favourite. *I got a little misty. This is the life I had envisioned for Jen and me, but no, she had to go off and self-actualize or some shit. Fuck, I hate all the woke bullshit in the world.*

“Thanks, Mom, I love lemon pie.”

“I know you do. It's really nice to have you around Josh, I miss you so much when you are away at school. I know that's selfish of me, but I can't help myself. I love you boys so much.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

I gave her a hug, then she pushed me away and said, “Now, skedaddle until Lunch.”

“Josh? Can you hear me, Josh?”

Who was that? I don't know that voice.

“Josh?” *That was Dad.*

I opened my eyes a crack, but everything was pretty blurry, and I wasn't sure what was going on.

Mom was sobbing. I hate it when I hear her sobbing.

Oh no, now Dad is sobbing, I've never heard him cry before.

Please stop, it's okay.

I'm sorry I missed school today.

Man, I'm cold.

Was I late for school?

Why did I feel SO heavy?

Oh, I'm floating.

Mom and Dad were hugging as I drifted by.

There was some banging, and now I'm floating into a dark area.

Wait, I'm scared.

Another voice.

“Dispatch, this is EMT Davis, at the McPherson farm. We've got one male stabilized on an IV drip, multiple fractures, and severe lacerations. ETA, 20 minutes. Will need a trauma team ready.”

“Ten-4” said a crackly voice.

Was that God?

Doors slammed, and I seemed to be in a truck or something bouncing down the lane, out to the highway,

maybe it's the school bus.

The Call



21 / 100

I couldn't sleep.

Ever since getting on the transplant list, I had been *too* hopeful to get a good night's sleep.

My phone rang at 10 pm, and it was 'Private Name, Private Number'.

I groggily answered, "Hello?"

"Hi, is this Penny?"

"Yes."

"Hi Penny. This is Amy. I'm one of the liver transplant coordinators who work with Carolyn."

"Oh, hi." I could feel a hopeful rush as we continued.

"Great news, Penny! We have an offer of a liver and would like you to come into the hospital."

"I'm on my way."

Amy laughed. "No, you don't have to get to the hospital until 11 am tomorrow. The surgery wouldn't happen until 9 or 10 at night, but you have to be prepped."

"Oh, okay," I said a little confused. "I thought the liver only lasted half an hour or so?"

"The donor liver hasn't been harvested yet, and when it is, you're right, it doesn't last long outside of a body, but they have a specialized container that keeps the liver protected, cool, and receiving oxygen and nutrients. It can last quite a while like that.

Also, we draw from the entire province, so while you are being prepped, the transplant team goes to the location of the donor, checks to make sure the liver is viable, and if it seems good, they transport it to our hospital and it's then tested more in depth. The operating room has to be set up for a liver transplant, and the anaesthetist and nursing staff have to do their thing, and finally the surgeon gives the okay before surgery can proceed.

If it's a go, you are taken to the OR for about a 10 hour operation. If the liver has some problems, like the donor body was down too long, or has a bruise or laceration, has cancer or other serious infection, the surgeon will call it a 'dry run'.

If it is a 'dry run', you are then released from the hospital and will have to go home and wait for another offer. It can take a time or two, so don't get discouraged, as we all want the very best donor liver that offers you the very best chance at a good and speedy recovery and outcome."

"Oh, okay."

"For this offer, you are the 'backup' recipient. We have two patients requiring a liver to come in for one offer because if the primary recipient is too ill, or has some other problem, we don't want to waste a donor organ. They are in short supply and very precious. This means you will probably not receive the transplant today, but I have seen the 'backup' get the liver several times, so it's well worth the effort of coming to the hospital and being prepped."

That was rather discouraging news. Bummer. I tried not to betray my disappointment in my voice. "Yes, I would like to come in for a chance at a new liver, no matter how slim the chance."

"Great, Carolyn said you were a trooper!"

I laughed. "I don't know about that. What do I need to do?"

"You need to be on NPO, though you can still take your meds with a small amount of water. Are you on blood thinners?"

"No."

"Okay, good. So yes, just don't eat or drink anything and come to the hospital between 8 and 9 am. Go to the Patient registration, and they will take it from there. You will have to stay a day in the hospital, so maybe bring a book or a tablet or something. It can get boring just waiting."

Don't I know it.

"The prep is a chest X-ray and lots of blood-work."

"Sounds fun."

Amy snickered. "Do you have someone coming with you?"

“Do I need someone?”

“No, not really, it's just nice.”

“I will just go myself, and if it turns into an operation, I will let my sister Bec know, and she can organize all that, but if it's a 'dry run' then no, I will be fine alone.”

“Sounds good. Carolyn will probably pop in to see you once you are settled into your room at the hospital.”

“Terrific. This is all very exciting. Thank you for calling.”

“We are all rooting for you, Penny! Goodbye.”

“Bye, thanks again.”

My gosh, this is exciting, even though I'm backup. I called Bec, and we planned and chatted for a long while. It was late, so I sent out a group email letting everyone know. I did, however, call my son, because he lives in B.C., on the West Coast, and so he is three hours earlier.

“Hi Stu.”

“Oh, hi, what time is it there?”

“Midnight.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Quite the opposite, I am going in for a possible transplant tomorrow. I got a call.”

“Oh, my God! That's FANTASTIC!”

“Yes, I'm pretty excited. I think sleep is going to be limited tonight.”

“I bet. So, how does this work?”

“I have to be at the hospital around 11 am tomorrow morning and then spend the day at the hospital not eating food or anything, just waiting.”

“I thought livers didn't last that long.”

“Apparently, they have a special container they transport them in, and it lasts a long time.”

“So, not like the jumping heart in 'Airplane'?”

“Not quite. Also, I hope nobody sings with their guitar around me and pulls the tubes out of my arm.”

“Indeed.”

The Wayward Earbud



20 / 100

I slept a few hours,

after talking to Stu well past two in the morning. Around 6 am I got up and thought about making a coffee, but then I remembered I wasn't supposed to eat anything, so I packed up my backpack instead. I would definitely need some toiletries, toothbrush, toothpaste, a pack of moist towelettes, hairbrush, the basics. Next, I needed some entertainment. I packed the knitting I was working on, a charger, tablet, and backup battery charger. I always kept earbuds in my purse, but decided a second set of headphones would be good. I packed my e-reader, which I had just loaded with 8 or so more books.

I sat and looked out the window for a while, hoping I would get a new liver today. *Gosh, it would be nice to be done with the Lactulose, swollen feet, pain, and fear.* Then, a new thought came to mind. *What about the person who died, and had signed their donor card, and whose liver I was hoping to get? Is it selfish to hope someone else dies, so you can live? Well, I thought, they would die regardless of my situation, and my need doesn't impact the universe in general.* Still, I couldn't help but feel like a bit of a ghoul. *Also, how am I going to feel if I do get a transplant, to have an organ from someone else inside of me? Am I still me? I've heard that all the atoms in your body are completely replaced every nine years or something. Are you still you?*

Then again, if someone dies who was going to die anyway, and their body was going to be buried or cremated, isn't that a waste? I mean the liver that could save my life would be ash, or rotting meat, no good to anyone. How is that better?

I looked at my watch, 9:30. I decided to burn off a bit of anxiety by going to the pharmacy and getting some travel size toiletries to add to my backpack. At this point, I was trying to think of tasks to keep my mind busy. At the drugstore, I announced to anyone who would listen that I was going for a transplant. *I would make the world's worst spy. I seem to be incapable of keeping a secret.* Everyone wished me well, and I got home just in time to call a taxi.

When the taxi arrived, I immediately blurted out to the taxi driver, "I got called for a liver transplant!"

"Oh, that's great, Good luck."

"Thanks." I think I expected a bit more fanfare, but that was sufficient, and I kind of bounced in my seat all the way to the hospital.

Once at the hospital, I donned my mask, and I went right to Patient Registration, and said, "I got called for a liver transplant!"

"Oh, that's exciting. Can I have your health card?"

"Yes," I said, poking in my purse for my wallet. Again, not as much fanfare as I was hoping for; *I was hoping for balloons or something.*

I passed my health card to the receptionist.

She typed for a bit, then looked on her computer screen and said, oh, here you are... "Penelope, right?"

"Yes." My proper name gets used when I'm in trouble or doing something official. *Since my hand wasn't in the cookie jar, this must be an official occasion.*

"You are a bit early."

"Oh, sorry, I guess I'm excited. Can I wait over there?" Waving my cane, indicating a small grouping of chairs.

"No need, I see the room is ready, so you can just go up to the eighth floor." She handed me a few sheets of paper and a wristband. "Give these papers to the nurses up there, and they will take you to your room. Do you know where the elevators are?"

"Yes, I've been here several times."

"Great. Do you need a porter to take you up in a wheelchair?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you very much."

"Good luck."

"Thanks."

The elevator was filled with people in various states of disrepair. Some looked positively grim, and I could see lots of sideways glances as we all tried to figure out who was the sickest. *It's crazy the way everything becomes a*

competition.

At least this wasn't as hostile as the ER triage. People become downright savage if they think someone less sick than themselves goes first. Though I've noticed lately I get more looks of pity than resentment.

People come right up to me and say, "Wow! Are you okay? You look terrible." I guess my sickly yellow hue and sunken eyes are not in vogue these days. I've even had staff at the local pharmacy ask if I needed a ride home, even though I live two blocks away. Liver failure isn't contagious; however, I'm given a wide berth, almost like gazing upon my countenance will bring about the next great plague.

Oh, here is the eighth floor. This is the floor for those waiting for lifesaving operations. There is no sickness competition on this floor; we all have a foot in the grave.

I hobbled to the reception and presented my paperwork.

"Welcome, Penelope, or do you prefer Penny?"

"Yes, Penny."

"Yes, I see that on your paperwork. You are here for a... liver transplant."

"Yes, I'm quite nervous."

"I can understand that, but the transplant team at this hospital is the best in Canada and one of the top in the world. You are in expert hands."

I smiled. That was quite comforting.

She put the wristband on while saying, "Now you are in room 8020. "

I apologized for my slow pace as we made our way through the corridor. "Not at all." Though the distance between us grew until we arrived at my room.

We who are about to die, get the best accommodations. My room was a large private room with real doors and walls and its own washroom with a shower. The large bright windows looked out onto the greenery below, punctuated by the odd road and building. *Beautiful.* If I wasn't so sick, I would really appreciate my stay. There were even two big comfortable chairs for visitors, which would remain unused, and a counter with a *welcome* basket containing a couple of bean shape containers for throwing up, tissues, wet wipes, a pencil, unscented hand lotion, and a small garbage bag. A gown lay on the bed along with some non-slip socks.

The nurse, Tabitha, took my vitals and then said she would leave me to get changed into the hospital gown and socks, then she would come back and put in an IV and have me fill out a few forms and take a COVID-19 and a respiratory virus test.

When Tabitha returned, it was time for my first bloodletting. She was a newer nurse and a little unsure of my rolling veins. To be fair, everyone has difficulty taking my blood, but she was struggling mightily. Finally, after the third failed attempt, she apologized and went off to find a proper phlebotomist before I was full of many more holes.

Even the phlebotomist had a bit of trouble, which made Tabitha feel a bit better, but in the end they took their 10 vials of blood and put in the IV.

Lying in bed, wishing I had a coffee, I looked out the window, sun streaming in. *Amy was right; this is very boring.* I was too nervous to sleep, and also people came in and out of my room to check various things and have me fill out more forms. I felt like I was doing some sort of office job.

I did like the bed, though. Not only did you have control of the head and foot levels, but it also weighed you and automatically adjusted every once in a while, I guess to keep patients that couldn't move, a bit more comfortable. There was a USB A for charging and happily I had brought some adapter cables so I could charge my phone and earbuds with USB C.

"Oh, heck!" one of my earbuds twitched out of my fingers and ear and dropped on the floor. I hobbled around, cane in hand, to see where it had bounced. *No luck.* Finally, I decided to get down on all fours and have a proper look. There I was in a hospital gown, bum exposed for all the world to see, stretching under the bed to get a better look.

"*There you are.*" I said to the earbud, hiding under the heater under the window. Crawling over, I stretched again and was just able to make it jump a bit, enough to grab it. Bec called. Tapping my right earbud, I answered, "Hello?"

"It's me, Bec."

"Oh, Hi" I grunted.

“Bad time?”

“Gotcha!” I said triumphantly. “No, it's fine, I just dropped an earbud and am on the floor, picking it up.”

“Why didn't you call a nurse?”

“I don't like to be a bother.” I said with effort as I tried to stand.

I fell over.

I'm like a turtle that is on its back, a flimsily dressed turtle at that.

“Good grief, you are stubborn.”

“Er, Hmm whoosh! There I made it to my feet.” Feeling kind of dizzy, I fell into my bed, panting.

“Are you back in bed?”

“Yes, thank God.” I said, carefully putting my left earbud in. “There, in. Phew! So, what's up?”

“Oh, I just figured we could chat because it's faster than texting.”

Bec and I yacked for a while until a nurse appeared with pointy objects needing more blood.

We said our goodbyes with one more admonishment from Bec about my stubbornness. It's really difficult for me because I have lived on my own for the bulk of my life and have been... disappointed by others to the point where I think I have some trust issues.

“Why can't you take more blood from the IV?” I asked.

“Oh, the blood can be contaminated and not give us a good reading. Also, there is a chance of infection, and we don't want that.”

“I think you just like poking people.”

“Well, yes, there is also that benefit.”

Oh fantastic, another droll individual. I feel embarrassed when someone takes me seriously and thinks I'm just *that* stupid.

She did a good job, and more vials of blood went off to the lab.

My arms were kind of sore, so I decided to skip the knitting and emailing for a bit and just listen to music.

At one point they brought me some food and there was a discussion with the surgical intern about whether or not I could eat since potential surgery was still a way off, but in the end we all decided it was better to not take a chance and so I enjoyed a cup of ice chips.

A surgical resident came in with papers to sign and no pen. I laughed and said; I hope you don't forget your scalpel when it comes time to cut. He looked at me curiously, like a raven might view a shiny object, then smiled. “Yes, I won't forget that. I like to cut.”

I smiled back, a bit unsure of someone with an even darker humour than me, then nodded. He handed me the first paper while I fished a pen out of my journal.

This form was to be filled out later.

- Have you had a heart attack?
- Are you diabetic?
- What medications are you on?
- Are you pregnant?
- Do you drink?
- Have you had the COVID-19 shot.

It made sense. What surgeon wants to suddenly find out something significant in the middle of an operation?

The next form was a more informational form, just to make me clear what I'm literally signing up for. Would I accept blood products? Yes, absolutely. If the donor liver has hepatitis, would you accept that? Yes, because you receive medication post surgery and that cures the hepatitis. It's just a hassle having something else to worry about and take medication for, but if it saves my life? Yes.

Near the end, in a serious tone, he said, “What kind of incision do you want?”

Okay, that one threw me.

“I don't know; what do you recommend?”

“My favourite is the Mercedes incision.”

“Like the car?”

“Yes.”

“That's like an upside down Y, isn't it?” I said, tracing the outline on my chest with a finger.

“Yes.”

“What are the others?”

“Audi?”

“But that's some circles isn't it? How does that work?”

And with that, he started to laugh. He got me.

“Oh, I see,” I said, embarrassed by my slow uptake.

He laughed again and said that most patients didn't even get the joke.

From that moment on, I felt I could trust him with my life.

And I was.

Someone from the transport department arrived and said they were taking me down to radiology for my chest X-rays. I started to get up, but they said, “No, I'm wheeling you and your bed down... prepare for the ride of your life!”

I smiled. “That sounds awesome.” I was handed a paper mask because we were leaving my room, and we were off. Down the elevator and through a warren of doors and corridors. Many rooms were locked, but my porter had his badge that let us into those secret areas. It was indeed quite fun. When we arrived at the radiology department, Tim, my porter, bid me adieu, and I was handed off, along with my chart, to the radiologist.

“Hi Penny, my name is Becky, and my colleague here is Beth.”

“Hello, my sister's name is Bec.” Becky didn't seem all that interested in my comment, saying, “Oh, nice. Can you stand on your own?”

“Yes.”

“Do you use a walking aid?”

“Yes, a cane, but I'm fine without it for short distances.”

“Great. So, I'll help you up. There, good. If you could stand against the white plate and hold onto the bars, yes, that's good, a little further forward, perfect. Hold that position.” She left to go around to the protected area and said, “Take a breath and hold.”

“Perfect.”

She reemerged and told me to turn to the right. “Okay, reach up to those bars and hold. Can you stand a bit taller? Yes, good.” Again she retreated and said, “Now breathe, and hold.”

“Great! All done.”

She helped me back to my bed and said a porter would be by in a minute to take me back upstairs.

“Thank you and Beth.”

“You're welcome; a porter will just be a moment.” And she was gone.

A few minutes later, a porter, Nicole, arrived with a curtsy and said, “Are you Penny?”

“Yup,”

“Okydoky, let's get you back to your room.” As we rolled through the halls, Nicole told me about the weather and the various goings on in her life. She was very talkative and pleasant.

“I thanked her and wished her well in her turbulent love life.” She laughed and left with a wave.

Around 4:00 pm, Carolyn stopped in to see how I was doing. She was very impressed with my private room. Apparently, not everyone got such special treatment. Carolyn reiterated to keep my hopes in check because being the backup recipient meant it was a bit unlikely I would get a new liver today.

“Sure, I understand, and I'm trying to remain calm. Also, I am thinking this is good practice for me to see how this whole transplant thing works, so when my time does come, I will be somewhat more prepared. However, it would still be awesome if today was the day.”

She smiled and said, “That's the spirit! Good luck.”

After Carolyn left, I settled back into my knitting.

My next visitor came because I was trapped and couldn't get away. The dreaded nutritionist. It's always the

same, a lecture about eating more protein. I know, I know, it's just so difficult to eat anything and the nutritionists don't even like my dependency on a protein drink to get me through.

"Those are not even high protein. You should be eating plain yogurt, eggs, and meat."

"I know, but I throw up almost everything I eat. I even got some powerful anti-nausea medication, but keeping much down is tricky."

"Try one poached egg and see how that goes."

At this point, I would agree to anything to be left alone, so I say "I'll do my best."

I fell asleep.

I woke with a start. I'm a very jumpy person and startle easily. The man standing over me apologized, and I took out my earbuds and said, "No, not at all, I'm very jumpy."

I am from the anesthesiology department, and we are running a clinical test on patients having a liver transplant. My ears perked up.

"We take some of your blood prior to surgery, clean, and store it, then put it back in after surgery. We do this with many surgeries, and it has many benefits, including faster recovery and fewer complications. It's a blind study, so half the participants get the blood transfusion and half don't. After surgery, while you are still in the hospital, we have you fill would a questionnaire about your recovery. Do you think you would be interested?"

"Absolutely, yes!"

"Great, I'll just have you sign this consent form."

"I'm the backup for this liver transplant; does that matter?"

"No, we will just keep this on file, and when you do have surgery, we will already know you are a participant. If you change your mind, just let the Anaesthetist know and we will take you out of the study. It doesn't affect your chances of getting a transplant or anything, so you shouldn't feel any pressure to participate."

"Sounds good. Thank you."

"Thank you. Any more questions?"

"No, It's very clear."

"Okay, good luck."

"Thank you."

"Oh, someone from the anesthesiology team will stop in to see how you are doing and ask a few questions."

"Great."

Off he went, probably glad to get back to his lab. He was clearly more comfortable around chemicals and gases than human beings. It was very cute.

A few hours and several delicious ice chips later, the fellow from the anesthesiology department did indeed arrive.

"This is a very long operation, but we will be monitoring you all the way."

"Glad to hear it." I said, smiling.

"Sometimes the operation gets done over two days, if we determine your body needs a break. We keep you sedated, and you are kept in ICU for a bit to 'catch your breath', as it were."

"I will be under for that, right?"

"Indeed, to you it will be as if no time passes and also some of the medications wipe your memory."

"Good, the more wiping the better."

"When you wake up, you will have a long tube down your throat. That's because the sedation we give you also causes your breathing to stop, so we have to 'breathe for you'. You will wake up in the ICU, and once you are stabilized, we will take the tube out. You don't need to be alarmed; this is all perfectly normal. After some more recovery time, probably 2 or 3 days, you will be moved up to the liver transplant-unit, where you will stay for a week or so."

"Sounds good."

"Do you have someone with you?"

"Not at the moment, but my sisters have arranged for someone to be with me should I have the surgery."

"Good. It's very important to have family support."

"I do."

“Your heart looks good and strong, as do your lungs. The angiogram you had a while back showed no problems with your heart, and I have looked at your chest x-rays from today, and your lungs look good.”

“That's always good to hear.”

“Do you have any further questions?”

“No, not really.”

“Excellent, you will do great.”

“Thank you. It's a relief to have so many people on my side.”

“Well, you do. Now, get some rest.”

He patted my arm and left.

The hours stretched on, and though I tried to stay awake, I finally gave in around 9 pm. I was hoping I would have heard something by now, but just nothing. I didn't know if the transplant had gone forward with the primary recipient or if the liver wasn't up to snuff? Taylor, the night nurse, was quite angry with the OR department. Finally, she could stand it no longer and called them to ask what was going on. Apparently, there was a delay of some kind, and we wouldn't hear anything until 10:30 or so. At around 11:00, Taylor had called the OR again, then woke me up to deliver the bad news. The donor liver had a laceration that hadn't shown up initially, and that made it non-viable for transplant. Both the primary recipient and I were out of luck;

it was a dry run.

10 Meters Down

Okay, you have practised this dive a thousand times,

Reyna thought to herself, trying to ignore her sore right foot. She had stupidly caught her toe on the stair banister, rushing to get ready this morning. She thought she may have broken her toe, and it throbbed, but she just didn't have time to attend to such a minor injury today. The diving semi-finals were something she had been working towards for the better part of a year, and there was nothing stopping her from making the diving team this year. Two years ago, she had been the brightest star, but COVID-19 had put an end to that, and last year was just a mess for everyone, from scheduling problems to residual closures because of the pandemic. This was the last year she could devote to her dream of going to the Olympics, so it wasn't all going to end from a stubbed toe.

As she and Anastasia approached the judges' table with her planned dive card, she struggled mightily to not hobble or wince. "Are you well?" Ana asked.

Wow, she didn't miss a thing. No wonder everyone wanted her as their trainer.

"Yes, I stubbed my toe this morning. It's nothing."

She looked down at my feet, but I had pool shoes on, so my blue toe wasn't visible.

"Let me see!"

Darn, I had hoped to avoid this, and though Ana wanted this for me, she was happy to reign in my 'wild ways' when there was safety involved. We went to a bench, and I sat while Ana pushed my toe this way and that. The pain made my eyes water a bit, but I said, "Oh, look, there is Dara!" another favourite of Ana's. When she turned her head, I whisked my foot out of her hands and said, "See, it's bruised, but not that painful. I will have the doc look at it after this dive."

She looked somewhat unconvinced, but finally acquiesced, and we handed in the card. Many young divers found this particular dive daunting because the diver is facing away from the pool. You stand on the very edge of the 10-meter platform and flex and jump, rotating forward, yet your body has to move backward towards the pool, to *not* conk your head on the platform. You then rotate and zip into the water with as little splash as possible. I had mastered this dive early on, and it never failed to impress. The trick was getting to the very edge of the platform and getting a superb springy jump.

I hate getting old. In my halcyon days, when I was younger, diving was all I really needed to focus on. Now there was work, relationships, bills, making rent and all while still devoting a lot of time to training. Here in Canada, there is virtually no help for amateur athletes, especially women, yet when the Olympics roll around, the government sends out endless platitudes about supporting athletes and national pride.

My work as a veterinary assistant is at least an enjoyable job. After I finish my diving career, I'm hoping to go to study veterinary science at university, then become a veterinarian and open my own clinic. I've always loved animals and did dog walking to earn extra money during high school. Between school, dog walking, swimming, and diving, I never had a ton of time to make a lot of friends and boys? Forget about it; they would have just been in the way, but now that I found Frederick, I'm planning on changing that. He is a swimmer, and we kind of fell for each other around the pool. He doesn't really have Olympic aspirations; I think he enjoys the camaraderie more than the competition. That, and maybe lithe young women wandering around in bathing suits. I tease him often about that, just to watch him stutter and turn red. He's a sweetie.

I see 'Freddy' and wave. He waves back, mouthing, "Good luck."

I throw back a coy smile and mouth "thanks" while making a little heart with my hands.

"Yak tvoya noha?"

"Fine," I say absently.

Ana still looked unconvinced, but Freddy's wave gave me some confidence, and I turned and smile "No, really, I'm fine, diysno!" After a brief hesitation, she gave a curt nod, and I wasted no time making my way to the platform stairs.

I waved to my mom, who was sitting in her usual spot, trying not to look too nervous. As I smiled and mouthed, "I love you," she smiled back with a wave. Dad couldn't make it today, and since I moved out on my own, their attendance has lessened somewhat, especially Dad. Just everyone getting on with their lives, I guess. I can't always

be the centre of their world, though secretly I wanted to be LOL.

My parents emigrated from Ukraine before I was born, so I have a soft spot for Ukrainian ways, and Mom and Dad always spoke Ukrainian around the house. Ana was born in Ukraine, and we talk in that weird mix of English and Ukrainian. That's another reason I feel lucky to have her as my trainer.

As I ascend to the 10-meter platform, I run over the dive in my head. Muscle memory kicks in of course, but it's always good to have your mind in the game and eliminate all distractions. I use each stair as almost a meditation, letting go of everything in my life but the focus on my dive.

Here at the top of my world, is focus. The only movement is of the rippling water below. I turn facing back the way I came. Move a titch further out and am balanced on my toes, arms out to keep my balance. *Breathe. Stillness. Breathe.*

Calm.

and.

Now, push off.

My toe screams.

My balance is off.

I can't

I am not back enough, but my muscle memory has taken over and I can't stop my momentum.

My head spins towards the platform.

“Anatoly! It's Reyna, vona vdarylasys holovoyu!”

“What?”

“Reyna, she was diving and hit her head on the platform! Her body went limp and fell into the water. The doctors pull her out, but she won't wake up, and there is blood. Anatoly!” Diana sobbed.

Anatoly's head was swimming when another call came in. It was Anastasia.

“Hello?”

“Anatoly, there has been an accident with Reyna,” the usually cool Ana said breathlessly.

“Diana told me. It is serious?”

“Yes, I think, but they took her to the hospital. A doctor will drive Diana and me there. Please come quick as you can.”

“I'm already going to my car. Goodbye.”

“Hi Diana, I just talked with Ana and will meet you at the hospital.”

There was just a lot of sobbing coming from the line...

and then it went dead.

Try Again



19 / 100

After Taylor told me after the bad news,
she told me the good news.

Another donor liver offer was coming tomorrow. Again, I would be backup, but since I was already in the hospital and prepped, the surgeon wanted me to just stay another day, and was I up for that?

“Yes, absolutely.”

“Good. The next surgery is scheduled for midnight tomorrow; therefore, you may eat until 3 pm tomorrow. Do you want something now?”

“Oh yes, a drink of something would be great.”

“Ginger-ale?”

“Perfect.”

“I'll see if there is some food in the spare fridge. We try to keep some sandwiches on hand. I'll see what I can do.”

“Thank you and thank you for talking with the surgery department on my behalf. I don't know why they are so secretive.”

“You know... surgeons!” She said, rolling her eyes.

We smiled knowingly, and Taylor left to get me something to eat.

It was a long night. Occasionally a nurse would pop in and ask how I was doing, but generally I was left alone. I tried to cheer myself up with some happy music, but it wasn't long before I would drift into a state of melancholia.

The shift change happened around 7 am, and at 6:30 Taylor stopped by to say goodbye. She was off tonight, and Stacey would be the night nurse. Taylor wished me well, and I thanked her for her care, as she left to pass on my information to the day nurse.

The day nurse blew into the room, threw open the curtains and announced her presence by sticking a thermometer in my mouth after wrapping a blood pressure cuff around my arm. I was exhausted just watching her.

“So, you are in for a liver transplant and are allowed to eat until noon.” I nodded. “Good. Here are your morning meds,” she said, producing a couple of medicine cups of Lactulose, water pills (diuretics),

Rifaximin, and Synthroid along with a paper cup of water with ice and a straw. I squinched my nose up at the Lactulose and started to complain, but she was having none of it and made sure I downed both cups. Satisfied, she said, “My name is 'Blessy' and I will be your nurse today. You are getting breakfast at 9:00.” I glanced at the big clock on the wall. 8:03. “Do you need anything until then?”

“Could I get a new hospital gown and a towel? I need a shower.”

“Yes, will you require help to shower?”

“No, I'm fine.”

“You have a cane?”

“Yes, but I don't need it for short distances.”

“Okay, I'll have those for you in a minute. We are understaffed today, and I am training a new nurse, but I'm sure she can handle that.” She rolled her eyes and shook her head a little as if in doubt. I guess the trainee wasn't all she had hoped. Blessy blew away in a flurry of motion.

There was a timid knock at the door, and a shy woman appeared at my door with a couple of towels, a washcloth, and a new gown. The trainee had arrived.

“Hi, I'm Aisha.” She handed me the bundle and left. Well, that was brief.

"Bashfulness, be gone," I told myself while stripping in the washroom without doors. There was also no door to the shower area, but I was so desperate to wash off the ammonia stink, I didn't care. I had nice-smelling toiletries and a shower puff, which I put on the floor because the shower was just a concrete cubby with no shelves or bars. I fiddled with the water for an ungodly amount of time until I finally figured out the unnecessarily complex mechanism. It never got warmer than tepid and made for a very disappointing shower. I give it 1 star.

Water had spilled, flowed out of the stall because there was no lip, just a gentle slope to a drain. After towelling off, I threw the towel on the floor to mop up some water and make it less of a slipping hazard. I put on my hospital gown, but didn't bother tying it up, ran a brush through my hair and noticed the increasing amount of hair left on my brush. The hepatologist said my hair-loss was due to malnutrition because my body was conserving energy for essentials.

Exhausted, I fell into bed just as some food arrived. The promised sandwich from last night had failed to arrive, so I was starving. However, my eagerness ended when I saw my breakfast. A lukewarm cup of water and a tea bag. A small box of Rice Krispies and one packet of sugar. A small carton of warm milk, a Vanilla Ensure, and a small dry cornmeal muffin, with no butter, and a little cup of apple juice.

I attempted to eat some food and found the cornmeal muffin the highlight of my repast. I didn't drink the Vanilla Ensure because I absolutely hate vanilla anything. I think it tastes like old fish, so it's only Strawberry or Chocolate meal replacement drinks for me.

Hours ticked by slowly. Grant, the third transplant coordinator, stopped in around 11 to introduce himself and update me on the status of the operation. The operation had been pushed to midnight, so I could eat a small lunch then it was back on NPO.

As I lay there, feeling a bit sorry for myself, I heard the nurses talking about this Easter weekend. Today was 'Good Friday' and everyone was talking about being with their families and what treats they had for the kids and relatives. Discussions of Turkey dinners, making pies, visiting relatives, and the funny antics of young ones, did little to improve my little pity party. My mom had always insisted that I put on a bright smile no matter what, and I generally agreed with that attitude. I found that if you are a 'Debbie Downer', people avoid you, and then you just spiral into despair. Of course, I was raised by Presbyterian parents, and if there is one thing Presbyterians love, it's suffering and not letting anyone know about their pain. Suffer in Silence was always on the menu at my house.

I resolved to not let my current 'sticky' situation bring me down.

I hobbled out of the bathroom. *The endless gallons of Lactulose were really doing their thing.* Aisha was standing there with some big white machine looking confused.

"Hi Aisha," I said, washing my hands.

"Oh, hi. I'm here to give you your meds."

"Okay,"

"I need your wristband."

As I presented my arm, poor Aisha fumbled with the scanner. After scanning my wristband, she scanned her badge, and the big white machine spit out a cup with the medications.

"That's a cool machine."

"Yes, here."

"Uhm, I'm out of water. Could I get some?"

Oh Oh, I short-circuited Aisha. She stood for a moment looking at me, then Blessy stormed in.

"Why are you standing there?"

"She wanted water, and I had just dispensed medications." As if that had cleared everything up.

"So? Roll the AMD out and go get some water."

On the verge of tears, Aisha left, making sure to bang the machine into several walls on her way.

Blessy rolled her eyes. *She should be careful,* I thought; *they may stick that way.*

"Do you need anything other than water?"

"No, I'm good, thanks."

Blessy, busy as she was, sat on the edge of my bed and asked, "How are you doing?" staring at me with great intensity. A "These are not the droids you are looking for" kind of look.

“Good,” my voice, a bit shaky. “I’m kind of nervous and kind of hopeful. Perhaps this will be my Easter miracle.” I smiled, with fuzzy eyes, willing the moisture away.

“Oh, Honey, we all hope that for you. How long have you been waiting?”

“I haven’t been on the transplant list long. My liver began failing more rapidly than usual, and I was on a bad downward trend, but have stabilized a bit.” I continued blathering, “My MELD score is in the high 20s. I guess that’s why I’m the backup and not the primary recipient this time. I’m trying to keep my expectations in check, but it’s hard to remain stoic when your life is the thing at risk. I guess you see a lot of that.”

“Yes, this floor is for the sickest of the sick waiting for transplants or other lifesaving operations. I have seen many happy endings as well as some sad. I think you will be one of the happy endings.”

“Thank you, Blessy. You are very comforting.”

She smiled as Aisha blundered into the room and put a paper cup of water on my table.

“Thank you, Aisha,” I said, downing my meds. I couldn’t help scrunching up my face when I drank the Lactulose, but a gulp of water washed away that horrible sweet taste.

They left with Blessy admonishing poor Aisha about something.

I was back on NPO and having dreams of even Vanilla flavoured food, well, maybe not that, but I was hungry. Bec called and asked how I was doing?

“Yah, I’m okay, bored and nervous and hungry.”

“Tell me about your Easter plans.”

Bec’s boys were back from University and she spoke at length about the vast number of activities they were cramming into 4 days. In the past, even when I was well, Bec’s family’s frenetic world exhausted me. I’m more of a ‘curl up with a book and a cup of tea on a rainy day’ type person. Bec is more of a visit every country on earth type person. In fact, they had travelled around the world and gone to more countries than I can remember. I went skiing in Vermont one time.

After talking with Bec, I drifted off until 6:30 or so, when Blessy came in and wished me well. “Stacey is on tonight, but we are understaffed, so she may not be able to stop by for a while. Are you doing okay?”

“Yes, thank you, Blessy, and Happy Easter.”

She smiled and left. Moments later, I heard her in the hall saying in an exasperated tone, “No, not that one!”

Poor Aisha, I thought as I smiled to myself and fell asleep.

A bit after 8 pm, Stacey came in and introduced herself and said sadly they need more blood for something. She took a couple of vials of blood with surprising alacrity, especially considering I was on NPO and therefore a bit dehydrated. I was given my night meds and my vitals were taken, then I was left on my own to sleep until possibly midnight’s operation. After my visit to the washroom and a good teeth brushing, I got back in bed and fell asleep until 11 pm.

Stacey came into my room and asked, “Have you heard anything?”

Sleepily, I inquired, “No, have you?”

“No, they don’t tell the nurses; they contact you on your phone.”

“Oh, dear!” I had to search around for my phone, tangled in the blankets. I checked. Nope, no calls.

“That sounded weird? Why would they contact me rather than the nursing staff?”

“Who knows?”

“Well, no, I haven’t heard anything, but will let you know if I do.”

Stacey nodded, but said, “I am going to call OR and see what’s going on.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said as Stacey nodded curtly and left.

About an hour later, I got a call from Grant.

“Hi Penny, the transplant time has been pushed to 3 am, and I thought I would let you know.”

“Okay, that’s kind of disappointing. Is there a reason?”

“No, it’s not unusual for the time to move around for various reasons.”

So, I lay in the semi-dark with lots of little blinking lights and a few monitors staring off into nothingness,

waiting. I just lay there for hours trying to will something good to happen tonight.

3 am came and went with no word.

5 am still no word.

Stacey came in shortly after 6 to ask if I had heard anything?

“Nope, nothing.”

She stormed out and called the OR.

She came back a few minutes later. “I'm sorry, Penny, the transplant went ahead with the primary recipient at 3 am. I don't know why they didn't let us know.”

I choked back the tears. At least this liver was going to save someone's life even if it wasn't mine, but that seemed like small comfort at the moment.

“Thank you, Stacey.”

“I'm sorry, Penny.”

“When can I go?”

“The surgeon has to fill out a couple of forms before you can be released, but it shouldn't be too long.”

I simply nodded.

I emailed my son and sisters with the bad news. Having let everyone down so much, I felt like such a failure. I had got everyone's hopes up, including mine, only to be back to square one. It was crushing. I'm not sure I had ever had such disappointment in my life. Sure there were disappointing relationships, gifts, trips, and jobs, but nothing like I was feeling at the moment.

Everyone emailed back condolences and messages to stay strong and such, and those were helpful, but what I really wanted at the moment was to lie on my bed at home and cry my eyes out.

Several hours passed. Stacey had been replaced by Blessy, and she had stopped in to tell me she was waiting for the surgeon to sign off on my release.

Another hour passed, and I was getting frantic. Just lying around in my misery was a special kind of torture. Had the surgeon gone home and forgotten to sign me out? I wondered if I would have to stay another night. I wanted to just say, “Screw it,” and walk out, but if I did, it might jeopardize future transplant opportunities.

I got up and dressed in my 'civilian' clothes and went off to find Blessy.

She shooed me back to my room and said she would find out what was taking too long with the release. It had now been over 5 hours of sheer torture to go home and deal with my grief.

Plus, after I was released, I would have to call a taxi and wait an hour for it to arrive, then take another hour ride home. I had a headache.

I was sitting on my bed sobbing when Blessy came in and sat beside me and put her arm around me and said it was okay to cry. That was the permission I needed, and I had a good cry for a few minutes. After I had released some of my grief, Blessy went off to get the form, and woe be to any that would stand in her way.

Minutes later with one signed piece of paper, I left to make my call for the taxi.

They were very busy because it was Easter Saturday, so the taxi could be a couple of hours. I went to the surgical waiting room for 45 minutes, but then went to the uncomfortable waiting area, afraid I would miss my taxi. After another 45 minutes, with a very sore bum, I got in the taxi.

Thankfully, the taxi driver was kind of surly, so we didn't talk much, and I just stared out the window, holding in my grief.

At home, all the lights were off, and it was stuffy and lifeless. I dropped my bag, went to the washroom,

then went to bed and fell asleep on my wet pillow.

Easter



18 / 100

After a fitful night,

I woke sad and defeated. I lay for a long while staring at the roof until my bladder finally forced me up and out of bed. A cup of 'real' coffee, along with a hot shower, helped a little. I had a yogurt and sat in my puffy chair looking out at a misty Easter Sunday.

I had become unmourned and didn't know what I was supposed to do next. I felt like I had practised for a performance that had been cancelled at the last moment and wasn't sure if it would be re-scheduled or just forgotten.

I noticed my neighbour had collected my mail while I was away. Among the volumes of junk mail was a thick envelope from my sister, Bec. Inside were a pair of glasses for viewing the upcoming solar eclipse. I had forgotten all about that, and fortunately, I lived in an area that would have a total solar eclipse. That was kind of something to look forward to, so I made another coffee in celebration. Anything to get me out of my funk would be great.

The rest of the week was just the usual waiting, throwing up, sleeping, capped off with more sleeping.

Vick called on Saturday and said she was coming for the solar eclipse.

"Oh, that's fantastic! I'm really glad to share such a rare event with someone, and since we get a total eclipse, it should be neat. Bec sent me some viewing glasses. Do you have any?"

"No, do you think I need some?"

"I'm sure we can share."

"Sounds good. I should get to your place tomorrow around lunchtime."

"Perfect."

Vick had indeed arrived around 1:00 on Sunday and had brought a lot of food, which was fun to look at, even if my appetite was gone. There was a time I would help unload the car and carry things, but those days had long since passed, and now I just sat and tried to keep out of the way. Vick brought me flowers, and anyone who knew me knew how I did love me a bunch of flowers. Sitting with the sun streaming in, holding my flowers while Vick fussed about made me feel at peace. Sometimes the darkness of my situation became a bit overwhelming, but moments like this gave me a glimmer of hope.

The day proceeded as all days that included me and my sisters proceeded, talking. We took short breaks to make more tea, then resumed our talking. My voice had really deteriorated due to my illness and was almost becoming painful to speak, so in a rare turn of events for me, I listened. Vick told me how her daughters were doing, what cute things Alice, her granddaughter, was up to, including photos. She complained about her sore knees, the neighbours, her garden and how Dad was doing in his new home.

The edema in my feet was particularly painful tonight, so I fidgeted, trying to ignore the throbbing, when Vick asked if I wanted her to massage my feet. My normal instant reaction is no. I hate being touched by anyone and generally require a 12 foot radius of space between me and any living creature, but tonight the pain got the better of me. "That would be nice," I said, "but don't feel you have to..." I trailed off.

"No, I don't mind at all. Do you have some lotion?"

"Yes," I said, making to stand, when Vick said, "No, just tell me where it is."

Vick moved the two chairs opposite each other, and I put my right leg on her lap. She warmed her hands, but I said that's not really necessary. I have no feeling in my feet, just constant throbbing pain of varying levels. My feet were mostly puffballs, kind of like big versions of baby feet.

Vick began. "Oh, she said, startled. Does that hurt?"*

"No, not at all, it feels nice, kind of a warm bit of pressure."

"Weird, your feet are like play-dough or something. I squeeze them, and they stay like that. Are you sure it doesn't hurt?"

"No, honestly, it doesn't at all."

Vick massaged my foot for a good while, then moved onto my ankle and calf. They were puffy as well, and the edema didn't really stop until after my knee.

"I feel bad for you having this puffiness."

"Edema,"

"Edema, yes, yikes, it looks like it would hurt."

"I think there is so much fluid, it's like my nerves are all wrapped in bubble wrap or something, so I don't feel much of anything. What's really annoying is I have to be barefoot, and even my slip-on shoes, that were too big for me a year ago, take me a lot of effort to squeeze into. That's one reason I mostly order food and stuff online and have it delivered."

"I didn't realize you were such a wreck."

"Look who's talking. I know you have rheumatoid arthritis, you need new knees, and your back is shot. I don't know how you are as active as you are."

"Yah, we are pretty decrepit. Here's to 'illness and old age'," Vick said, holding a cup of tea high into the air. I waved my cup around a bit and said, "Indeed."

"Thank you for the message; that was lovely."

"Not at all."

"This has all been very entertaining, but I'm awash with tea and exhausted, so I have to go to bed or you will have to carry me, which would be bad."

Vick once again inflated the blow-up mattress, then said, with a wry smile, "I'm going to stay up a while since it's only 7:30."

"Of course," I said dreamily.

"I can't believe that light or noise don't bother you."

"No, not at all... I can sleep through anything."

Vick said something else, but I was asleep.

I woke my usual half dozen times to go to the washroom and was comforted with Vick's presence.

It was nice to not be alone.

Solar Eclipse



23 / 100

What a perfect day for a solar eclipse.

Sunny. It's funny because a lot of the big viewing locations were overcast, but here in my little town we had a magnificent view. I wasn't sure if those solar eclipse glasses, Bec sent, would do anything. I looked through them and could only see blackness, but Bec had assured me they would be fine because she had bought them at an astronomy shop.

"Where do you want to view *'the Event'*?" Vick asked.

"There is a funeral home a couple of doors down, and their parking lot was empty at the moment. How about there?"

"Okay," Vick said, standing up. I got my cane, and we headed out the door. I was happy that we didn't have to travel anywhere to see the eclipse. Some people were booking rooms at Niagara Falls or Kingston to get a full eclipse, but I wouldn't be up for that kind of effort.

We stood in the parking lot and took turns looking at the sun through the glasses. It was quite amazing that you could still see the sun clearly, but it was just a cool whitish ball. With sunglasses off, we had to look at the moon. "It's still a ways away," said Vick, squinting.

Several people emerged from the funeral home and waved, and one of the men came over and asked us if we would like chairs. "Oh, how kind, yes, that would be great."

He nodded and went off to get a couple of folding chairs for us, while a few others set themselves up on the other side of the parking lot. When he arrived with the chairs, we chatted for a few minutes, and he said we could just leave the chairs and he would take them in later.

"Do you have glasses?" he asked.

"Yes, we have a pair between us, you?"

"Yes, we have a few that we are sharing as well. We are sure lucky with this weather. I hear Niagara is soaked in, and everyone is quite disappointed."

"Oh, that's too bad. Yes, we have a perfect day."

"Well, I'll leave you to it. Take care."

"You as well, and thanks again for the chairs."

"No problem."

He rejoined his group.

Vick was looking at the sun when the moon started taking a small bite out of the sun. "Oh, wow! It's starting. So cool!"

She handed me the glasses, and I watched the moon take a larger bite.

Amazed gasps came from the other party. "Wow, look."

I handed the glasses back to Vick, and back and forth went the glasses as more of the sun was digested by the moon. After a few minutes, we were in full eclipse. I looked without glasses briefly because I had read that it was okay when it was in full eclipse, but I was furtive with my glances, not really trusting information I had read on the web.

The birds stopped singing, and the world became late dusk. The streetlights came on, and I thought that was funny as a cool wind picked up, and it all was very surreal.

It was all so quiet I think nobody wanted to break the magic, so we all remained silent.

As the sliver of sunlight streamed past the dark of the moon, I felt there may be hope for me after all. Right now I'm in the eclipse phase of my life, but I have to believe the sun will break through.

I passed the glasses to Vick as more of the sun revealed its light and warmth; the birds started singing again, and the cool breeze faded. Life returned to this part of the earth, and with it came a new determination in my heart to cling to life as hard as I could.

I looked over at Vick, who had a big smile on her face. “Wow!”

Wow, indeed. I thought, feeling the warmth on my face.

“I’m going inside,” I said as the show ended, Vick, still in the moment and nodded, “I’m going to sit here for a while.”

“Sounds good.” I know Vick is a real outdoors-woman and will take any opportunity to be outside. Me? Not so much. I waved to the other party and made my way back home.

“Moments of laughter, and joy breaking through sorrow” would be how I would describe the rest of Vick’s visit. We would get laughing so hard it was difficult to breathe. Then, moments later, being melancholy about the smallest things. Vick performed another massage on my puffy feet, and I managed to stay up until almost 9 pm.

The next day, it was time to go.

We had a hug, and she left.

Suffocation



6 / 100

The monotony was broken on Sunday.

I woke, unable to breathe. I was seeing stars and thought maybe this was it; **time had run out**.

I sat up and got some of my breath back, and waited for a while until I felt strong enough to call a taxi to take me to Emergency.

The nurse in Emergency did a quick assessment but sent me directly into a treatment room because she could see I was in trouble. I couldn't lie down and breathe, so I sat on the edge of the bed waiting for the doctor, who arrived quickly.

“Can you lie on your back for me?”

“I can't breathe if I do?” I managed to whisper.

He raised the back of the bed as high as it would go and, after a few minutes of prodding; he said they would send me down for an X-ray, but it looked like pulmonary edema. Fluid had built up around my right lung, and it couldn't inflate.

I got a brief ride in my bed down to the diagnostic department, where I met my neighbour, who works in this department.

“Oh, Penny, you look bad.”

“Thanks, Trudy”, I huffed out.

“Are you okay to stand?”

“Yes.”

I got to my feet with a bit of a wobble, while Trudy helped me to the machine.

I stood against the white plate, arms raised. “Take a deep breath, and hold.” I'm afraid my 'deep breath' was rather feeble, but Trudy said, “Great, we need a few more from either side and one from the front.”

Finished with the X-ray, I got back in bed, bid Trudy farewell, and was rolled to my room.

The doctor explained that I did indeed have pulmonary edema in my right lung and that they would have to perform a thoracentesis. *That's when they take a long needle and stick it in your lung cavity and suck out the liquid.* Unfortunately, the local hospital was short staffed, so they couldn't do the thoracentesis until tomorrow, and I had to stay the night until a doctor was available the next day.

The night in the ward was something out of a horror movie. There were four of us in the room. A dilapidated space divided by endless ripped and crooked curtains. The curtains had obviously been repaired many times and hardly separated each patient area. One washroom served us all, but that was fine because I was the only mobile patient in the group. Conveniently, the washroom was at the far end of the room, through a warren of haphazard curtains, small medical devices on wheels, unemptied containers of garbage and various liquids, to say nothing of moaning patients.

I'm sure I felt the presence of Dante.

One patient in our sad little crew was an old man who lived in a retirement home who was so annoying they had sent him to the hospital for a break. He screamed constantly.

Our next member was an old lady who pressed her call button repeatedly, on a loop. “I'm thirsty!” “It's too cold!” “It's too hot!” “I have to go to the bathroom!” “My head hurts!” “My legs hurt!” and so it went. I think eventually the nurses had had enough and simply ignored her ‘needs’, though her light and bell never really stopped. It reminded me of waiting at a train crossing for a train that never arrived.

The winner, though, was the third woman in our menagerie. Her granddaughter sat with her all day, making sure she was comfortable. When any other relative of hers showed up, her granddaughter would go away, and the woman would tell everyone else in the family how awful the granddaughter was, and they would all concur. It was a reenactment of Cinderella for my viewing pleasure, though the constant screaming and railway crossing in the other beds did take away some of my enjoyment of the performance.

To get some sleep, I put on my sleeping headband-headphones and cranked the music, though if I were to fall too deeply into sleep the nurses would be sure to wake me up to check my blood pressure. It was also

uncomfortable because I could only breathe when laying on my right side, with my bed propped up almost like a chair.

Thankfully, morning came, and I had hoped the thoracentesis could happen soon. After a breakfast of Rice Krispies, warm milk, no sugar, instant coffee, no cream, and a dry bun with no butter, the sunny, day nurse came in and let me know the doctor couldn't do the thoracentesis that day, so I would have to stay another night. I wanted to scream, but the helpful man from the nursing home did it for me.

While I lay struggling to breathe, I thought maybe I would play on my phone, but there was no Wi-Fi or phone connection, so all I could do was play some music I had downloaded. Also, I was trying to conserve power for the night of terrors that awaited me, and I was down to 52%.

I would have to re-think my backpack so that I would be ready for any more unexpected hospital stays. I was pondering what essentials to add when lunch came. A hard-boiled egg with no salt, some cold broth, a warm apple juice, some rice, and mystery vegetables, finished with a raisin cookie. As if on cue, my friend in the next bed screamed. *My thoughts exactly!*

Later in the afternoon, we lost one of our troupe. Coming to take him away was the nephew of the screaming old man. The elderly man didn't recognize the young one, and despite the young man claiming to be his nephew, I doubt anyone, even the nurses, were concerned about whether they were related. That he was taking him away was fine with us.

Even the woman with the button pressing addiction seemed to settle down. All we heard from her was the odd moan to let us know she was still alive.

I watched a re-run of the Cinderella story and tried to sleep.

Dinner came, but I didn't even look because I couldn't take much more disappointment. The nice thing about liver failure is it really curbs your appetite. I could go days without eating and hardly notice.

I think struggling for breath exhausted me, because I managed to get some sleep.

In the morning, I looked at my breakfast tray and tried to drink a bit of my coffee just for the caffeine, then closed my eyes and wished I was home.

In the afternoon, there was a convention going on in Cinderella's room. The hospital had let 8 visitors in, and they had a little party. They kept pushing on my ripped curtains to get more room, and at one point I thought someone was going to sit on the end of my bed.

The doctor arrived to do the thoracentesis. He was with a student; I assumed they'd evaluate me and take me to surgery. Nope, there were going to do the thoracentesis right there at the party. To start, they asked a nurse for assistance and then crammed into my small space, buffeted by partiers in the adjacent bed.

The student went and got a portable ultrasound machine, but the batteries were dead, so he and the doctor went off in different directions to find a working machine. The nurse quickly lost interest and laid the package of syringes and tubes required for the operation on my legs, and left, never to return.

A few more people arrived at the party next door.

Eventually the doctor arrived with an ultrasound machine, and so did the student. To begin the procedure, after they put two of the three machines in the hall, they had me roll on my side. However, they had to be rather quick, because on my side I could barely breathe. Of course, they took their time as this was a teachable moment.

First, I was given some Lidocane to numb the area. The ultrasound allowed them to visualize the sac of liquid surrounding my lung, and the doctor warned the student to be very careful not to puncture an organ, as that would be bad. The student produced what looked like a jousting lance and began inserting it into various places on my back. Nope, he hit a rib. "Try again" Nope, hit another rib. One of the partygoers pushed the curtain and laughed at some joke. "Try again, a little lower" Nope, somehow he hit the same rib again. The partygoers were really enjoying themselves now and began jostling the doctor attempting to feed a long needle into my pleural cavity.

I'm so glad the administrator who runs this snake pit has their priorities straight. Of course, as many visitors should be welcomed to interfere with a delicate surgery, after all what is a hospital for but entertainment?

Eventually, the student punctured the pleural cavity, and there was momentary pain, but the inside plug of the needle was taken out and the liquid began to drain. A tube was attached and fed into a large collection vessel, and both doctors promptly left.

My breathing got better, but then I had a bit of pain. I was wondering what I should do when a nurse happened by and was horrified that the doctors had left and nobody was watching the fluid level. They had planned on draining 1.25 litres, but since nobody was watching, they had drained 2.5 litres, and for some reason, draining too

much can be dangerous. The nurse took out the tap and bandaged the hole, then I was sent for an X-ray to see if any damage was done to my lung because nobody bothered to monitor my progress.

Fortunately, the celebration next door was still going strong, and everyone was having fun.

An hour or so later I asked the nurse when I could go home, and she said anytime; I was all done. Quickly grabbing my street clothes, I dressed and left. I never did get any instructions on wound care, symptoms that could be a concern, or the results of the X-ray, but at least I was home and could breathe easier.

I resumed my waiting.

Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Enter

Michael turned 42 today.

His wife, Ashley, would be too busy with her *spirituality* to descend to his *lower plane of existence* and actually do anything special. Turning into the apartment building parking lot, he was assaulted by that damp cloud that hung over his failing marriage. Ashley became incredibly depressing the moment she finished reading that God damned Spiritual Awakening book, written by some loser chiropractor.

Jesus Christ, she had become insufferable. *Manifesting* this and *manifesting* that, or in other words, she was too God damned lazy to do anything other than watch YouTube videos and stare at fucking crystals all day. Arriving home, after a hard day of work, to a messy house, dishes all over the place and the stink of the cats' litter box, just made Michael want to turn around and leave.

After sitting in the car for several minutes, he grabbed his bag and took the elevator to their subpar apartment on the eighth floor.

There she is, her majesty, engulfed by incense and Tarot cards, chanting some manifestation to Lord Ginisha or whatever.

"What's for dinner?" *I know the answer.*

"I don't know; what do we have?"

Do you not have fucking eyed balls, you cow!? "It's my birthday today."

"I know."

Pretty fucking heartfelt celebration there. "How about I make some Blackened Chicken?"

"No, I saw a video that said paprika isn't good for your spirit."

Oh, my fucking God! Now, certain herbs are off limits. We already can't eat most meat, dairy, processed food, or anything with sugar.

"Well, how about fucking wheatgrass and water?"

"Don't dump your negative vibrations on me! I have cleansed and tuned my spirit and don't need your dark energy."

I roll my eyes and head into the kitchen. *Yup, dishes everywhere.* I looked in the fridge and saw nothing but a sea of greenery, oat milk, and a package of...is that? Is that squid?

"What's this squid thing in the fridge?"

"What it looks like, it's squid. I heard it's good for your eyes or is it your hair? Well, it's good for you."

"How do you cook it?"

"I don't know; that wasn't in the YouTube video. I'm sure you can figure it out; after all, you're the big stwong man who knows everything." She said in that exaggerated baby voice she knows makes my teeth hurt.

"I'm not cooking or eating that shit!"

The chanting resumed with a plume of weed for emphasis.

"Where did you get the money for weed?"

"This is a leftover joint, but I did get some new pre-rolls with some money I got for doing a spiritual reading today."

I cast my eyes on the suspicious baggie with a dozen or so pre-rolls. "Did you get those at the dispensary?"

"No, I bumped into Carl; you remember Carl? Well," she continued, not waiting for a response, "he sold me these for half the dispensary price."

"I thought he only sold loose stuff?"

"No, he said there is a market for pre-rolls."

Sure he did. All the degenerates down town had such shaky hands would want something after the heroine wore off.

"I wouldn't trust anything from Carl."

"Good, all the more for me."

Happy Birthday, Michael, this is your fucking life.

“You do realize rent is due next week and we are short.”

“Relax, don't be in such a scarcity mindset.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Is that Girl Math or something?”

The chanting resumed.

“I'm not asking my parents for rent money again.” I mumbled, making my way to the bathroom.

“Well, I'm not asking mine either. They are on holiday, and I don't want to ruin it for them.”

“Do you want to live on the street?”

“Don't base all your decisions on lack.”

“Jesus, what the fuck does that even mean?”

Not waiting for another insane response from the great spiritual guru, I stormed off into the bathroom for a shower. “Fuck! What a stink!”

“Didn't you empty the litter box?” I called out.

“It's your turn.”

“Jesus, you are home all day doing God knows what and you can't clean up after the cats?”

“I made a YouTube video today.”

“Did you look for a job?”

“No, I told you I did a video today.”

“Are you ever going to work?”

“I am following my dream, and just because you want to do a shit job doesn't mean I do.”

“I'm trying to keep us afloat. You know, I gave up my band for this.” I said, waving my hands around with a litter box scraper in my hand.

No response.

I shot a venomous look back into the living room as I started cleaning up the litter box. “Fuck!”

As the water and steam worked their magic, Michael tried to figure out the rent problem. No matter how he looked at it, he was indeed going to have to ask one of his parents for money. They had divorced when he was young, and Ashley had decided that was the source of all trauma in his life. For God's sake, that was more than 30 years ago, and now it was just an excuse for Ashley to pronounce him as damaged whenever they had a fight.

Ouch, his chest hurt a bit, and he was feeling a little lightheaded.

“You need to heal your childhood trauma. I have learned to live in the light and can show you how to attain peace.” Did she really believe this garbage?

Fuck, I hate spiritualism.

Man, am I having a heart attack? Michael thought, bracing himself against the wall.

Ashley used to be so awesome, he thought as the water splashed. *She was funny and full of adventure.*

When COVID-19 hit, and Ashley got CERB, and it was such a relief. Michael was working still, but she got laid off, so that money was a Godsend, *or so we thought*. A year of sitting around watching YouTube videos and smoking weed had poisoned her mind, and now she refused to work, because she said, “I'm not giving up my dream, to shovel shit.” She refused to do housework because that was just the patriarchy keeping her down and stopping her from reaching her potential. Basically, she had become a lazy bitch who thought of herself as some sort of being living on a higher plane.

She spent thousands of their dollars on a 'brand' website, but she didn't know what to do with it, so it lay dormant. She spent untold amounts on various spiritual courses on the internet, and the result was she put out the most boring YouTube videos on the platform, with like 5 or 6 views per video. Any time things don't work out, it was always Michael's fault for sending negative energy out in the world, and somehow that would defeat her *manifesting*.

It was all very confusing because she picks and chooses crazy shit from all over. She hugs trees and would say she speaks to them, puts out water during the full moon to create 'moon water', some magical elixir of some kind that heals something vague.

Oh, that's a relief; the pain is gone. Maybe it was a panic attack or something. Little wonder, my life is horrible. Money is a worry, and the constant fighting with this woman who had taken Ashley's place is demoralizing.

How can you go from loving someone so very much, to loathing the very sight of them?

Turning the water off, Michael could hear Ashley hacking and coughing in the other room. She refused to use a bong or any other method other than pre-rolls because pre-rolls were easy. Ashley liked anything easy.

Towelless, Michael went into the bedroom and put on some track pants and his favourite band shirt, 'Green Ocean'. He glanced at the pile of Ashley's clothes. *How could anyone produce so many clothes when they just sat around all day watching YouTube videos and smoking weed?*

Oh well, back into the fray. What to make for dinner? There is no fucking way I'm eating squid.

"How about KD? I know you..."

Ashley was lying sprawled on the couch in a weird position, with foam coming out of her mouth.

Michael rushed forward to support her head, but she seemed out of it. Still breathing, but just barely.

I called 911

"911, What is your emergency?"

"My wife is unconscious with foam coming out of her mouth."

"Did you check her airway?"

"No...I don't feel or see anything."

"Do you know CPR?"

"Yes." *We had a crash course at work. I had almost blown it off and being kind of stupid.*

"Is this the Turnbull residence?"

"Yes, I'm Michael," he yelled at the phone on speaker.

He blew more air into Ashley's mouth.

"Apartment 804?"

"Yes."

"Paramedics will be there soon. How does she look?"

"Kind of grey." Michael said a bit breathlessly.

"You're doing great, Michael, keep it up."

A loud knock at the door that made Michael jump, with Ashley's head on a cushion, he hurried to unlock the door. Two paramedics rushed in with a gurney piled with two black bags.

The paramedics got to work. First; put an oxygen mask over Ashley's nose and mouth.

"How long has she been down?" the man asked.

"I was having a shower and changed, and when I came out she was like this... maybe 10 minutes?"

"Hmm... was she smoking?"

"Yes."

"These don't look like they are from any dispensary I know of?" said the woman, holding up the baggy.

"No, she got them from some guy she knows."

"Recently, several cases have involved weed laced with Fentanyl," she said, as her partner uncapped several vials, gave her a few injections, and checked her pulse and vitals.

"Possible Fentanyl poisoning," the man said into his radio, and the woman put the baggy of weed into another bag for testing.

They then put Ashley on the gurney and whisked her away.

Michael looked around the apartment, which had discarded medical paraphernalia everywhere.

The cats appeared from nowhere and

began meowing loudly, demanding food.

Lay Down and Bleed a While



27 / 100

Dreaming of happier days,

I was startled awake.

“Hello?”

“Hi Penny, this is Amy.”

“Oh, hi?” I whispered, trying to shake the fuzzies out of my head.

“We have an offer, and this time you are the primary.”

“Oh, wonderful.” my heart began racing while I glanced at the clock. It was close to midnight.

“They need you at the hospital tomorrow around 6 am. The surgery would be around 1 pm, so you shouldn't eat or drink anything, but you can take your meds.”

“Okay,”

“You know the routine. Present yourself at Patient Registration, and they will take it from there. Questions?”

“No, not really. Thank you very much for calling.”

“Sure, absolutely. Good luck.”

I hung up.

Thank the Lord, something was happening. May had been such a long month with nothing much going on that I was beginning to wonder if I had been forgotten.

Today was June 4th, nope, I looked at the clock, 12:02; June 5th.

I was wide awake now, but it was too late to call anyone, so I used my nervous energy to double check my backpack. I thought briefly of calling Stu. Since he lived on the West Coast, it would only be 9 pm, but his wife and I didn't exactly get along. She was a 'spiritual' person who believed things happened for a reason, and if you got ill, for instance, it was your own fault. I had grown weary of arguing with her, and it left my son in the difficult position of having to take sides. Instead, I watched a few YouTube videos but didn't really find them interesting as my mind was restless. “This is ridiculous!” Admonishing myself, I went back to bed.

The morning eventually came, but it had been an endless night of fitful discomfort while my mind raced. I had a shower and was about to make a cup of coffee when I remembered I was on NPO. Bring on the caffeine headache and grumbly tummy, we're off to see the surgeon. I opted for a hot shower to soothe my nerves, and also I liked to be freshly scrubbed clean before going out.

I got dressed, but didn't put on any makeup, just in case I had surgery today. I called the taxi and sat looking out the window, backpack at the ready.

I had turned off everything in the house just in case I was away for an extended period and had let my neighbours know via text I would, possibly, be away for a while.

When the taxi came, I piled in with my backpack and cane and was off. The driver was new and didn't know all the secret ways experienced drivers did to any destination, but he had GPS. He was a very cheerful young man, and I enjoyed talking with him. We stayed off of controversial topics like politics, and that made the trip much more pleasant. All was going swimmingly until suddenly the GPS went out. Neither the cab navigation system nor his phone could connect to GPS.

I had downloaded the maps to my phone so I could roughly see where we were, but I am severely directionally challenged and ended up being more of a nuisance than a help. I led us down two dead ends before the driver completely gave up on me, and I didn't blame him. We drove around, lost, for a while, and I was surprisingly calm, because I knew I wasn't rushing to the hospital, where doctors stood around, scalpels in hand, waiting for their patient to arrive, as seen in movies. Though I was getting a little tired of U-turns.

As if a sign from the heavens, we both saw the big H on the building we had passed several times. Once again, I took over navigation and promptly directed us into another dead end. We had both had it by that point, and I tipped him generously and got out.

There, around a truck blocking the road, was the 'after hours' entrance and, as luck would have it, an abandoned wheelchair sat at the ready. “Well, that's lucky,” I thought as I entered, pushing my backpack and cane sitting

comfortably in the wheelchair.

The security guard didn't speak a word of English, so I kind of gestured a cutting motion and said slowly, "Operation." My skill at charades hadn't atrophied over the years, I guess, because finally he called someone and handed me the phone. I explained I was here for a liver transplant and, after a few brief instructions, I was told to hand the phone back to the security guard. He listened for a moment, then waved me and my wheelchair through the glass doors.

Without directions, I wandered the first floor of the hospital hoping to avoid a rogue Minotaur or something worse, but eventually I found an NPC in blue scrubs who directed me to my goal. "Thank goodness." I thought, entering 'Patient Registration'.

Sitting heavily in the chair, I whispered, "I'm here for a liver transplant".

The woman behind the glass said, "That's exciting."

"Yes."

"Are you okay? I mean, no, you're not okay, but do you need help now?"

"No, just out of breath." I said stoically.

I gave her my health card and all my information. She looked somewhat surprised and said, "Oh, they are all ready for you up on the 8th floor." I wondered if that was unusual as she handed me my paperwork and wristband. "Do you need a porter?"

"No, I'm okay, but can I use this wheelchair to carry my stuff.?"

"Yes, of course, they will send it back down later."

"Great, thanks."

"Good luck!"

"Thank you."

I looked at my watch, 6:10 am. Pretty darn good timing for having been lost for so long. The elevator was empty at this time of the morning, and up I went to the 8th floor.

Lance, who was ending his shift at 7:00 am, greeted me, settled me into my room, inserted an IV for the usual tests and blood-work, and scheduled a chest X-ray for later. Again, I lucked out with an awesome private room, and Lance quipped, "Well, who do you know?" I smiled and intoned, "The hospital gods have favoured me."

"Indeed, they have. I'll leave you here to don your hospital gown, and you can take off your mask while you are in this room."

"Thank you." I always forgot I had a mask on, as it had become a common piece of clothing and I felt a little naked without it.

After settling in with an IV in my arm and a sore nose from the COVID-19 test, *I think Lance scraped my brain*, I lay down and started my email chain.

I think the nurses liked me because I was such a low maintenance patient. Waiting for a transplant required a few tests, but mostly just a place to wait and for the anesthesiologist to be sure I had eaten nothing before surgery. I was always being reminded to be totally honest with the anesthesiology department about eating or taking any drugs or anything, because hiding it simply put my life at risk.

I didn't complain to the nurses about being hungry or being uncomfortable; everyone knew those things were true, and there was nothing to be done. Though I had plenty to entertain me, I mostly just dozed as the day slowly passed.

I was awakened from my slumber to get my little ride down for a chest X-ray. Mostly, the tests were just to make sure I didn't have an illness, like the flu or something, because that would have ended my eligibility for surgery and the donor liver would have gone to the back-up recipient. Happily, all my tests cleared me for surgery, so now I just waited for the **Go** or **No Go** from the surgeon.

Just as I drifted off, a new nurse, Carly, gently touched my shoulder. I jumped awake, as always, and promptly apologized for startling her. "Sorry, I'm a super jumpy person and everything startles me, sorry." She laughed, then became serious and said, "The surgery has been pushed to 3 pm, but they didn't say why. Sorry, I know waiting is difficult."

"Tell me about it." I tried to smile, but the endless stream of delays and bad news was taking a bit of a toll on my usual sunny disposition.

Since I was awake, I made my way to the washroom to freshen up. Sometimes, a hot face towel was just the

ticket. I always liked it on a plane trip when the hot towels were distributed; it was so refreshing. I hadn't been on an airplane for a decade or more, so I wasn't sure if they even still did that service. The world had definitely become a more "essentials only" place, except for the extremely rich, of course.

I dozed more.

"Penny?"

I jumped awake.

"Hi, yup?"

"Sorry to wake you. The surgery has been pushed again. Scheduled time is 11 pm."

"Oh, I kind of ran out of the energy to be cheerful."

"Sorry."

I shrugged and went back to sleep.

Around 8 pm, Lance came in and said, "Are you still here? We can't get rid of you!"

That made me smile. "Well, it's just so lovely."

Lance harrumphed and went about checking my vitals.

"I brought you some ice chips since you are still on NPO."

"Thank you. Any word on the surgery time?"

"No, still anticipated around 11 pm."

This is the part I really hate about waiting. A few hours before the scheduled start time, waiting for a phone call from the coordinator. It made me feel like I was on 'Death Row' waiting for a stay of execution phone call from the Governor.

After three agonizing hours, my cell phone rang. I looked at it, afraid to answer. The happy little jingle played while the phone jiggled merrily on my table.

Caller ID: regional hospital

"Hello, Penny speaking."

"Hi Penny, this is Grant."

"Hi."

"Penny, I'm so sorry; the donor liver has been rejected by the surgeon."

I fought back the tears.

"Oh, that's... disappointing."

"Penny, I'm so sorry, but the surgeon will only accept a liver with the highest probability of success."

"Sure."

"I'm sorry."

"Do I stay the rest of the night in the hospital?"

"Yes, the surgeon will sign off and you can go home in the morning. I will let the night nurse know."

"Lance."

"Yes, Lance, I will let him know."

"Again, I'm sorry, but stay strong."

"Thanks, Grant."

Closing my wet eyes, I hung up and drew a long, ragged breath. I kind of wished I had someone to give me a hug. I supposed I should email people and let them know this was another dud, but I used voice-to-text input, and I tried speaking, but I kept on crying and Google couldn't figure out what I was trying to say. "*Sorry, Gang, the leopard no lawn never sad you cry back dud.*" I cancelled that stupid draft and went back to weeping quietly.

Lance came in with a juice and a sandwich. "The coordinator called me, saying that the surgery had been cancelled. I'm so sorry; that is rough. I brought you something to eat since you are off NPO."

"Thanks, Lance." I managed in a husky voice.

"Can I do anything?"

I shook my head despondently, and tears flowed down my cheeks.

Lance, sensing I needed some time to process, left me alone.

After a while, I drank my juice and went to sleep.

It was another fitful night of sleep in the hospital, with Lance saying his shift was over and he wished me all the best. They would order me breakfast if I wanted, but the paperwork was done and I could leave at any time.

"I would like to just go home now, not that hospital food isn't delicious."

He smiled and took the IV out and again wished me well.

I was free to go, and go I did.

The taxi arrived at the hospital in about forty-five excruciating minutes, then another hour listening to the driver yack on about how immigrants are the problem with this country. Too tired to argue, I just looked out the window and watched the world flow by. Listening to the driver, I thought, *Maybe I wouldn't mind exiting this world that has become so heartless and cruel. Full of grifters making 'passive income' by selling courses on gifting to make 'passive income'. Old men who have no patience for the 'youth today'. Mean spirited officials who have been hurt in life somehow and are determined to infect the world with their pain.*

I don't know, but maybe I'm starting to feel overwhelmed. I have been very strong to this point, everyone tells so, but even the strongest have to "lay down and bleed awhile", as my mom used to say. Probably, I'm just hungry.

I dismissed the taxi driver, which seemed to disappoint him as I'm sure he had many more complaints on his bucket list of grievances to share with me. I made my way slowly up the five stairs, with my backpack and cane, with nary a thought from my the taxi driver who just sat watching my slow progress. Finally, I returned to my dark and still abode and collapsed in my chair. It is very bleak to get home to a dark and stuffy house after such a disappointment. Next time I think I will leave some lights on or something to make my homecoming less depressing.

After a stop in the washroom, I composed a brief email:

Email:

Hi Gang,

I'm so sorry, but transplant number 3 was a dud. I am very disappointed and am going to bed. I will call people later, but I can't talk right now.

Sorry,

Penny.

I went to bed and slept for a few hours, and when I got up, there were lots of emails saying how sorry everyone was, and that I should feel I'd let anyone down. Logically that's true, but emotionally I felt like a complete failure.

I made a coffee, had a cup of yogurt and started calling people. It was still a bit early for Stuart, and besides, I didn't want to talk to his dragon of a wife.

I called Bec:

"Hi Penny."

"Hi Bec."

"I'm so sorry Penny, that must be very upsetting."

"Yes, it's hard, but who knows, maybe the next one."

"Sure. I hope you don't have to wait as long for the next call."

"Absolutely! Waiting all of May without a phone call was very wearing, and also my health is declining, and I'm afraid I may soon be too sick to be strong enough for surgery."

"Like sand through the hourglass, so are the days of our lives." I intoned.

Bec laughed.

Her phone call cheered me up, just knowing that the rest of the world was proceeding as it should. She told me what her kids were up to and the naughty things 'Mila', their untrainable dog, was up to,

welcomed words of encouragement.

The Hour is Late



25 / 100

Once again in waiting mode,

I was struggling mightily with ammonia building up and only drinking meal supplements, and I feared the hour was late. It was a strange situation, gaining weight while suffering from malnutrition. My hair continued its daily exodus, and my skin and eyes had a sickly yellow hue. I was embarrassed to be seen in public, hunched over on my cane, with yellow skin, bulging eyes, and a constant stench of ammonia. Dogs barked at me as if they could smell the encroaching death, and children pointed at my disturbing countenance. People, however, did always hold doors open, even if they looked nervously at my passing.

Oh good! The grocery store has a sale on my favourite meal supplement. I thought to myself, looking at the 'specials' on the computer. Once, I wouldn't use delivery services; now they were vital. I ordered 12 cases of energy drinks and 2 packages of yogurt cups to be delivered. My order arrived later that day, and I spent most of my remaining energy dragging cases one by one to the fridge. Each case only contained 6 drinks, but even that was the limit of my strength at the moment.

I fell into bed exhausted and went fast asleep.

The rest of the week was the now a familiar scene of throwing up, sleeping, peeing burning ammonia, bleeding from my nose or any cut I might have, forcing down some yogurt or a gulp of meal supplement, then sleeping some more. I had an appointment at the liver transplant-unit on Wednesday, and they would update my MELD score, but I could tell my situation had deteriorated significantly.

It was a very uneventful trip up to the regional hospital on Wednesday, though I was getting to know the regular taxi drivers quite well. I got Bill, one of my favourites, because he had interesting things to say about the area, and it was like being on a sightseeing tour. He had driven me many times and knew all about my liver failure. His ex had died from it, and it was strange because as he told the story, I could see him being distressed as he knew the ending, but he was already into the story. *I smiled inwardly.* When he got to the death part, I said, "No worries" when he apologized for such a dark tale and said he was "sure I would make it through." I laughed bitterly and said, "Sure, yah, thanks."

I had moved in and out of many of the stages of grief. I was a little stuck on bargaining, but my hepatologist didn't really leave me many options in that department, so I had moved onto acceptance after a brief stay in anger. Although I hoped not to die, should it happen, I would be content knowing I tried my hardest.

We arrived at the hospital, and Bill wished me well, handed me my cane and backpack, and off I went for another round of poking.

I immediately took the elevator to the 4th floor. Smiled at everyone as they gave me pitying looks. Even those in wheelchairs with limbs missing seemed to feel sorry for me. *Yikes, I must really look grim.* The blood-lab was its usual bustling self, but soon enough I was seated in a chair, tourniquet on and the phlebotomist tapping my arm, searching for a vein. She found one, though I couldn't see it; she could, and tapped it beautifully. Soon, I was the proud provider of 10 coloured vials ready for the lab. I pressed as hard as I could on the gauze for a good minute as I had found that was the real trick to limiting the bruising. I was going to have an angry bruise no matter what, because of my thrombocytopenia, but I could really limit it with enough pressure.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, have a great day, Penny."

"You too."

I went to the cafeteria for my coffee and apple fritter. I didn't really eat very much of my apple fritter, but I liked to pretend I was normal and picked a little at the icing. *My God, these chairs are uncomfortable!* I thought, shifting madly on the hard wooden things.

Taking out my journal, I wrote, '*Get a squishy seat*'. I am becoming more and more reliant on my journal. With

so much information coming my way and not having a family doctor, it was up to me to keep on top of everything.

I made my way up to the transplant-unit early. I waved at Grahame; he acknowledged me back, and with knitting in hand, I sat and waited.

When my turn came, I was weighed and sent to room 2. After a check of my vitals and edema; the intern said I was doing okay and to keep up the good work and try to eat more protein.

A call for a taxi, a wait for the taxi, a ride in the taxi, and at last I was home in my puffy chair. After some time just sitting and thinking,

I went to the washroom and then bed.

Orange Crayon

“Yes, that's correct.

Also, we need six more KaBooms, and an assortment of cakes and something special for the end.

What do you suggest?”

“We have some really nice *Girandoas*, those are the screechy ones, and with a few big rockets are very exciting.”

“Yes, they sound good, so say, a nice mix of six or so of those?”

“Great, Thanks Tim. I'll send an invoice to the school and get those out to you right away.”

“Okay, sounds good, Phillip. You're sure they will be here before Canada Day?”

“Yes, we guarantee it. In fact, they will be there a few days early, and we send out a technician to go over everything, including safety precautions.”

“That's much appreciated! Thank you.”

“Thank you.”

This had been a rough year for his school, 'Maple Leaf Secondary', and he wanted to remember the two students who had tragically died over March Break, at this year's Canada Day. It was a difficult balance, being respectful and acknowledging the loss to the family and community, while also carrying on and hoping for a brighter tomorrow. The members of the town had suffered in this crazy economy, and the political upheaval here and around the world had really affected his staff, students, and parents. What a year!

The death of Nicole and Derek Carter had been the topper for a horrible year. Nicole was in her first year of high school and had a sparkly personality. She played clarinet in the Jr. Band, and the music teacher, Colin Hendricks, said she had some natural talent. Coming from Colin, that was high praise, especially from a clarinet player. *Good grief, beginning clarinet players are a horror.* He hoped his own daughter, Bethany, never took up the clarinet.

The Carter boy was only in grade 5, so he didn't attend Maple Leaf school yet, but was known to Tim as a shy and quiet lad. He had dyslexia and struggled a bit in school, but was willing to try. As someone who had dyslexia himself, Tim could understand the extra burden it placed on one's self, especially in reading. However, with proper care and attention, dyslexia can be managed so as not to become a limiting factor later in life.

It had been a warm March break day, and the Carter kids were up early and playing around in the front yard. Kicking a ball around or something, waiting for their parents to take them out for the day. Inside, Steve and Ellen were having a fight. Ellen wanted to go as planned to see her parents. Steve wanted to have a fun day and go bowling and then out for lunch.

“Money is tight,” Ellen shrilled

“I know,” said Steve, “but it's 'March Break' and the kids, and I, need a break from day-to-day worries. Going to your parents isn't fun for anyone but you. The kids are always bored out of their minds, and your dad just yarps at me about 'the good old days' and how I'm such a loser.”

“You are exaggerating!”

“You ask the kids, would they rather go to grandma and grandpa's or would they rather go bowling and out for lunch?”

“That's not fair.”

“No, because you damn well know the answer.”

“We are going to my parents, and that's all there is to it!”

As she stormed upstairs, Steve grabbed the keys and stormed the other way, out to the SUV.

He didn't even see the kids he was so angry and got in the truck and as it roared to life; he threw it in reverse and hit the gas. He wanted to show Ellen how furious he was and was just going to drive around the block or something to burn off some rage.

Honestly, he didn't even hear the screams or feel the bump as he tore out of the driveway.

Out on the street, he looked at the driveway, and there, with twisted limbs and splatters of blood, were his two

children.

“OH MY GOD!”

Steve stared in horror.

“OH MY FUCKING GOD!”

“NO!”

“No, no, no!”

Steve jumped out of the truck and ran to the carnage.

A blood spattered ball rolled past as he bent to hold his two beautiful children. Derek was not moving or breathing. Nicole was barely moving and looked up with confused eyes and said in a whisper, “Dad?”

Steve's mind snapped. Ellen came outside to see what all the noise was about and started screaming when she saw the horror that used to be her perfect little family.

The entire community was traumatized, and many kids needed counselling, and a lot of staff members were shattered as well. Colin Hendricks left the school for the rest of the year and may end up at another school when he does return to teaching music. The Carters split up, and both moved away after the funerals.

The rest of the year was very difficult for everyone, though, through it all, Tim had tried his best to be the steadfast pillar of strength others could rely upon. Tim's wife, Marla, worried he was holding too much in, but he assured her he was okay, as he popped another heartburn pill. He could never find the time to make an appointment with the doctor to see about all the heartburn he had been having, but there would be time enough in August. Today, he had the 'Canada Day Celebration' to organize, and he wanted to help the community find some closure to a tragic year.

As the principal of Maple Leaf School, he had become the de facto town coordinator of such events. He had deep roots in the community as well as amazing fundraising abilities. He had convinced the Board of Education to release some emergency funds to his school to “aid in the healing of a community in crisis,” and with that contribution, he had approached the local merchants to add to the fund. They had all stepped up, and he felt quite proud of his town and the compassion shown. Now, he really didn't want to drop the ball and make a hash of this event and let the town down. He also didn't want to burden Marla with his concerns; after all, she had her hands full with their daughter Bethany, who turned 2 a few days ago and was a whirlwind of mischief. Tim loved them both *so* much, and when his mind wandered to the Carter tragedy, his eyes misted. *I don't know how Steve could carry on?* He shook his head to get that thought out of his mind.

As Tim hung up the phone, he heard Marla gently admonishing Bethany for doing something rotten. As always, there was a tinge of humour and love in her voice.

“Everything okay in there?”

“Your daughter just scribbled on the floor with some crayons.”

“That's what you get for having such a creative urchin around.”

“Off with you,” she said to Bethany, who ran into Tim's office for protection.

“Where's the WD40?”

“Cupboard under the sink.”

Marla had watched a YouTube video about getting crayon off of a floor, and WD40 was the answer. We were both skeptical at first, but it worked really well, though you have to be careful to wipe up the oily bit after with detergent because it was really slippery.

“What did you do?”

“Drawing.”

“You know you are supposed to use paper, because then we can hang it on the fridge.”

She seemed delighted by that concept and hopped off my knee as I produced a clean piece of paper. She toddled off to get a crayon.

“Be careful near the sink. It's still a little slippery.” Marla called as Bethany came with a broken orange crayon. She shoved her way onto my chair and started scribbling on the paper before the idea for her drawing left her head.

I guess that's the end of my organizing anything before dinner. So, I sat and watched her determination to turn every bit of white paper orange. When Tim taught primary school as part of his principal training, he was amazed to discover that young children don't just draw a picture, but rather tell a story with their art. That's why sometimes the ‘picture’ doesn't look like anything but tons of lines and can be mistaken for random scribbling.

After Bethany finished her ‘story in orange’, I hung her masterpiece on the fridge in a prominent location, grabbed the little rascal and carried her out of Mommy's way and into the living room. She chose a book about a porcupine that needed a hug, and I read to her while Marla busied herself with dinner. “Mmm... *Psketti night*.” Bethany's favourite. Personally, I liked the red wine that went with *Psketti night*. Sometimes that led to more wine, and then that led to other things that were even more fun, once Bethany was asleep.

Yes indeed, I do love *Psketti night*!

In the morning I got up to go to the washroom. *Yikes, I was still a little wobbly from last night's wine, and things seemed kind of hazy and had a reddish hue. Oh, GOD! My Head!*

“What's wrong?” Marla said, coming awake quickly.

“Ma Haadt,”

“What?”

“Ma Haadt Hut” The room spun wildly.

I started falling...

Marla jumped up, taking Tim in her arms.

A phone had fallen on the floor, and Marla picked it up and called 911

“Hello, what is your emergency!”

“It's my husband! He stood and mumbled something and then fell to the floor. His face is all droopy.”

“Sounds like a possible stroke. Help is on the way; stay on the line.”

**The commotion woke Bethany, and Marla could hear her
toddling down the hall to see.**

Walkie Talkie



21 / 100

My comfy seat cushion came.

I practised sitting and waiting... trapped in my own 'Groundhog Day', hoping beyond hope this would be the day.

The phone rang at 9:30 pm; it was Amy.

“Well,” said Amy, “we have another liver offer for you. I have a feeling this might be the one.”

“Gosh, I hope so. I've always thought of myself as very calm and patient, but to be honest this is wearing me down a bit.”

“I'm sure. Well, if you can get to the hospital around 11 am, that would be great. The estimated surgery time is about midnight.”

“Okay, great. Thanks for calling Amy, I really enjoy these little talks.”

She laughed and said, “Good luck.”

My doesn't have email but likes to be kept in the loop, so I promised next liver offer, I would call him. It was pretty late for him, but I didn't think he would mind.

“Hello?”

“Hi Dad, it's Penny.”

“Oh, Hi hon.”

“I got another liver offer and go in tomorrow around 11 in the morning and the surgery would be at midnight.”

“Oh, that's wonderful!”

“Yes, I really hope this is the one. I'm getting tired of waiting.”

“I hope so too. I will keep my fingers and toes crossed.”

“That will be very helpful, thank you. Anyway, I didn't want to keep you long. I know it's late, but I thought you would like to know.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Vick will let you know what's going on, so I guess that's it.”

“Okay Honey. Thanks for calling and all the luck in the world to you.”

“Thanks, bye.”

“bye.”

Another semi-sleepless night worried about 'what if's' came and went, and then? it? was morning.

I repacked my backpack and included my new seat cushion along with a fresh bottle of water and lots of wet wipes. I found they really freshen you up when you are confined to a bed.

I began my email chain, responded to all the 'good lucks' and was off in my taxi. It was so boiling in the taxi, but the drivers pay for their own gas, so they are quite hesitant to put on the air-conditioning and eat into their profits. We had the windows open, and at one time I would have worried about it messing my hair, but with so little, I didn't really care anymore. The breeze felt wonderful.

Same check-in procedure as the other times, but with one hitch. There was no room for me, and I was told to wait in the lobby while they sorted out a place for me to stay. I wasn't on NPO yet, so I got myself a coffee and sat on my nice cushion and watched people come and go, hoping this would be the day I was saved.

Eventually, 'Patient Reception' texted me: We have a room.

Finishing my coffee, I headed back to the reception area.

“Unfortunately, the only available room is in the Intensive Care unit.”

“I don't know what that means. Is it a bad place to wait?”

“No, it's just that they are not really set up for 'awake' people.”

“Oh, well, it will be an experience. Where do I go?”

“It's on this floor, down that long corridor to the left, she said, pointing. There are signs.”

“Okay, thank you.”

Taking my paperwork, I made my way to the ICU.

Everyone I met seemed confused when I said, “I’m waiting for a transplant, and they sent me to the ICU.”

I gathered it usually worked the other way; you had a transplant, then went to the ICU.

Entering the ICU was like going into a library, so calm and quiet that you felt like you should stifle a cough. My room, though a single, was almost completely full of monitors, machines, and walls covered with tubes and taps. I had entered the Collective. Other than my 'uncomfortable bed', there was no washroom or window or welcome basket nor even Wi-Fi. Sitting on my bed awaiting further instructions, I realized why this was 'unusual' accommodation. A nurse came in and said, “Sorry, we are quite busy today and didn't really expect a 'Walkie Talkie'.”

“A what?”

“A 'Walkie Talkie' is what we call a patient that is conscious. Pretty much all patients in the ICU are unconscious”

“Oh.”

“I see you are here for a liver transplant, so after that surgery, this is where you will stay for a few days, but of course you won't be a 'Walkie talkie'.” She said with a smile.

“Oh, I'm Erin and am one of the day nurses today. I will get you a hospital gown, and someone will come and put in your IV and draw some blood. I see this is your 4th attempt at a transplant?”

“Yes.”

“Wow! That's a lot. I'm sorry; that must have been disappointing. Why were they 'dry runs'?”

“The first two, I was the backup, so they went to the primary recipients. They don't really tell us why the liver isn't viable, so I don't know, just that the surgeon didn't approve. They have the final say of course.”

“Well, we will make you as comfortable as possible. I see you are on NPO.”

“Yup. Uhm, is there a washroom I can use?”

“Oh right. Uhm, I'll bring a commode. Our patients don't normally need a washroom, sorry. This is a sterile environment, so we can't really have you wandering around.”

“Yes, of course. I have to warn you though, I am not going to give you a 5 star rating.”

Erin laughed and said, “Yes, I understand. I'll go fetch that gown for you.”

Changing into my gown was awkward since there was no privacy in the ICU, though Pam and Erin did try to give me as much privacy as possible. It was, however, almost impossible to maintain any dignity as you poo in a plastic commode, in a room with glass walls. Luckily, all the other patients were currently asleep.

Pam, the other nurse dealing with me, came and took some blood, did the COVID-19 test, and put in the IV. She barely spoke, and I think the nurses in the ICU never really spoke much to the patients, so any small talk was off the menu. That was fine with me. I had grown weary of trying to put on a brave face all the time and was just as happy to just lie around and think.

A man appeared at my door in scrubs. “Hi Penny.” I did not know this man. “I'm Grant, one of the other coordinators, and I wanted to stop by so you could put a face to the voice.”

“Oh yes, hi Grant, nice to see you.”

“I'm sorry you have had so many 'dry runs'; that's quite unusual.”

“Lucky me.”

“Sure, yes, it must be very disappointing. I'm sorry.”

“I know it's nobody's fault or anything; it's just the way it is.”

“Yes, but still, I'm sure it's hard.”

“Thank you.”

“Okay, then, I just wanted to stop in and show my face.”

“And a beautiful face it is.”

Grant smiled, bowed and left.

Since I couldn't email anybody, I just lay watching the minutes tick by, dreaming of better days.

In the afternoon, the ‘big expensive machine that went ping’ was rolled into my room, and they took a chest X-Rays. That's how they do it in ICU, I guess, and it made me feel like a stranger in a strange land.

At around 8 pm, I was treated to an episode of ER. An unconscious man was quickly wheeled into the room opposite. There were lots of people buzzing around, and I was trying not to gawk, but it looked like about eight. Several paramedics were in the mix, and it looked very serious. Everyone was passing tubes around, sticking things into the poor guy and hooking up monitors and bags of various juices. I found it frightening, but also very comforting. Everyone knew what they were doing and just did it. I hoped that when it came to be my time to be 'saved', I had such competence on my side.

Happily, the man was stabilized, and various team members drifted away until it left one nurse writing on a chart. After some time, she came to my room.

"Hi Penny, I'm Sabrina. I'm one of the night nurses."

"Hello. That was quite exciting."

"Yes." Clearly she wasn't planning on elaborating.

"So, you are our 'Walkie talkie', waiting for a..."

"liver transplant."

"Right. The scheduled time is midnight. Have you heard anything?"

"No."

"The coordinator on duty will probably let you know, rather than us, since pre-op patients could be waiting in different areas of the hospital, it's easier to let 'you' know, than search out where you are being housed."

"Yes, of course. I wondered why they did it that way, and that makes sense, except my phone doesn't work in ICU, so will they call you?"

"Hmm, not sure, I will call the transplant-unit and let them know they have to call us at ICU, rather than your phone."

"There you go. I broke the system again."

Sabrina just looked at me, then nodded.

Wow! My humour is a real fail in the ICU.

I lay there, using the commode occasionally, and trying my mightiest to contain my nerves. It was especially hard this time because I couldn't talk with anyone about my hopes and fears. Time had decelerated to a crawl.

I drifted off and woke around 1 am. They don't turn off the lights in the ICU, so I was particularly disoriented. Lying there, confused, well past the time of surgery, used the commode, hoping my activity would bring a nurse to let me know what was going on with the surgery. It didn't.

I lay watching the clock.

Around 2 am Tiffany, the other night nurse, came in and said, "Oh, you are awake. All the times we came before, you were asleep."

"Oh, really? I guess I keep drifting off. Time isn't my friend at the moment."

She frowned and said, "We haven't heard anything yet. Sorry, this must be very difficult for you."

With blurry eyes and a trembling bottom lip, I said, "Yes."

"This is my fourth try, and I'm feeling like a failure."

"It's not your fault. The surgeon just wants to give you the best chance."

"I know, but you know..." after a tremulous breath,

"It's hard." Tiffany waited.

"I'm starting to think I would be happy with an old boot rather than my crappy broken liver."

She smiled, saying, "I don't think an old boot would be really all that optimal."

I sniffed and smiled back.

An hour or so later, Tiffany woke me. She had an old style phone headset in her hand with a long spiral cord going out of the door. I guessed that since mobile phones don't work on this floor; they use corded ones, weird.

"It's Grant," she said, holding the phone out to me.

A kaleidoscope of butterflies swirled in my stomach as I took the phone. "Penny speaking."

"Hi Penny, this is Grant." a pause "I'm so sorry Penny, but the surgeon rejected the liver."

"Oh." Some of the butterflies were caught in my throat.

"I'm sorry, Penny, but you know the surgeon just wants the best liver for you."

"Yes."

“Okay, well I'll get that paperwork started so you can leave as early as you want in the morning. Again, I'm sorry. Hang in there.”

“Thanks, Grant.” I handed the phone back to Tiffany, who looked as crestfallen as I felt.

“Can I get you anything?”

“A ginger-ale?”

“Sure, yes.”

“I'm so sorry.”

After Tiffany left, I took a few jittery breaths and lay there, a bit stunned. *Was this normal in having so many 'duds'? I knew the transplant team called them 'dry runs', but I called them 'duds'.*

Sabrina came in a few minutes later with a ginger-ale.

“I'm so sorry, Penny. Tiffany told me the liver was rejected by the surgeon. I'm sure he wanted a good one for you.”

“Sure, ya.”

“Here's your ginger-ale. Sorry, we don't really have food in the ICU.”

“Sure, ya, that's fine.” I found talking really difficult when I was fighting back tears.

“Okay, well, okay.” and Sabrina left.

The rest of the night was much the same. Waking every few hours, using the commode, staring at the clock for a bit, then drifting off.

In the morning, Erin came in after shift change to find me just lying there staring at the ceiling.

“Penny, I'm so sorry this transplant didn't work out.”

The dam burst.

I had held it together for as long as possible, but the cracks had been forming all night, and I couldn't hold it back, and I started to cry.

“I just want to go home.” I sobbed.

My paperwork was still incomplete, so I was forced to wait, but Erin was having none of that! She told me to change into my 'civilian' clothes while she went and told the OR to fill out the paper NOW! Called a taxi for me and finally took out my IV.

“The hospital has an account with the taxi company, so they will cover that, and you don't have to wait for the paperwork; they will mail it to you. I've called a porter to take you to the taxi. All the best to you, Penny, and when you *do* finally get your transplant, perhaps you will be my patient again.”

Erin was a lifesaver.

“Thank you, thank you so much!”

“Take care, Penny, oh, and here is the porter.”

The porter wheeled me to the 'Checker' cab. Classy. I was driven home in comfort, and 45 minutes later I was sitting in my chair, face in hands, having an epic cry.

Email:

Fri, Jun 28th, 2024, 6:34 pm

Hi Penny,

I am sorry that you are having all these dry runs.

It must be exhausting to come spend a day/night in the hospital.

This is going to happen!

Happy Canada Day!!

-Carolyn

Green Ocean

Green Ocean's tour was ending.

Mathew Rogers was whipped. This was their longest tour yet, and some of the members had gotten way out of control, Jim in particular. Matt was tired of the constant parade of women throwing themselves at Jim and the endless drugs. Matt enjoyed some weed and some beer, now and again, but the constant use of heavy drugs and getting black out drunk was not appealing. They all got into this for the music, and Matt and maybe Barry seemed to be the only one who cared about the quality of their performances, not how many girls they could lay and speed-balls they could take in a night.

He was also sick of playing the same music over and over again. It had been such a thrill at first having people ask for his autograph, cheer when they came on stage, and the money had certainly been awesome. The others thought him crazy when he spent much of his income on acquiring guitars. He had, in fact, a lot more guitars that they didn't even know about, at home.

He had achieved his dream and now he wanted to spend the rest of his life really delving into music. He wanted to find a 'soul mate', not some bubble-headed piece of fluff. Matt sought a woman whose love of music would be a lifelong exploration, shared with him as they aged. His wild bandmates laughed at him and called his dreams 'gay' or worse, but Matthew had never cared much about his standing in the world. What he didn't tell his bandmates was that he planned on leaving the group after this tour. He had a place waiting for him at Julliard and planned on attending in the fall. It would probably be a drag at first, but after the other students realized he was just another dude, he hoped that 'fame' crap would fade. He was only 21, after all, and who knows? He may find this mythical soulmate he so wanted to share a life of music and love with at Julliard.

Pretty mushy for a hard rocker. He snorted to himself.

“Whatcha doin' Matty?”

“Fuck off.”

“Oh, Matty is on his period today,” Jim said, making a frowny face with his hands.

I wonder if Jim will be so glib when I tell him I'm quitting. He knows I'm the songwriter, and he's just the pretty boy that sings the lyrics written by Walter or Teddy'.

“Leave Matthew alone, Jim, you fuck!” Barry yelled while throwing his empty at Jim's head. It missed, of course; Barry was horrible at defending people.

“Fuck you! Go back to your book, you twat. “Whatcha reading anyway? ‘How to Find a Man in 10 Days?’ you fag.”

I think perhaps there may be some latent homosexuality going on with Jim. He seems rather per-occupied with calling everyone a fag or gay.

“I fucking hate the bus!”

There it is — the real reason Jim was pissy today. He wanted to take a plane to our next gig but Phil said it “wasn't necessary” Jim and Phil were always fighting about accommodations, whether we take a bus or a plane, what cities we played, how long the tour lasted, all that shit. I'm so sick of all this bullshit. Give me a guitar, a quiet sunny spot on the grass, and I'm in Heaven. Again, not really the 'Rocker' image I'm supposed to present. I must admit though, I love blazing through an epic guitar solo to the cheers of thousands of people. That was definitely my drug of choice.

Staring out the Window I look at unfamiliar skyline of Chicago, but at least we are ending the tour in my home Province. After this show, we are taking a plane 'home'. I'll leave the band and be finished with the life I thought I wanted. Boy, was I wrong. I am just not cut out for fame, and though it had paid well, every second spent cooped up with Jim was another reason I had to go, and soon.

Jim started swinging up and down, off the luggage racks, making a monkey sound.

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!”

“Ooh ooh, aaah, aaah!”

“Are you fucking 4? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Fuck off!” Jim sat in a huff and then snorted some coke.

“Jesus!”

Finally, we arrived at the hotel and before long, guitar in hand, I was off to my room. My clothes and stuff had been put in my room already, and there were some snacks and drinks laid out on a little table. “Nice room,” I thought, and a year ago I would have been very impressed, but now I just acknowledged it with a curt nod.

I needed a shower. Stripping down, I made a beeline to the palatial bathroom of marble and brass, turned on the shower and washed away the stress of the bus trip. The soaps and other toiletries smelled great, and the hot water and soft fluffy towels soon had me back on the bright side of life. I fell into bed, still naked, and lay for a good while until there was a soft knock at the door.

“Just a sec!”

Throwing on a white robe with a fancy-looking H emblazoned on the lapel, I opened the door. There stood Barry, looking fresh in jeans and a t-shirt.

“You are a faster showerer than me, my friend.”

Barry walked in, sat at the little table, taking an ice-tea, he popped it open and smiled at me.

“No, come on in, make yourself at home. I insist!” I said, still standing at the door.

“Is it true you are leaving the group?”

I shut the door and walked over to the bed and sat with my hands folded, nodding solemnly. “I honestly can't take Jim anymore.”

“We all hate Jim.”

“Not the girls.”

“Well, no, not them, but everyone else in the world.”

Barry smiled wanly and said, “You know if you leave, I have to as well.”

“Don't be dramatic.”

“I'm not. You know you are the talent, and without you there is no group.”

“No, really...”

“Fuck off! Don't be so God Damned humble! It's annoying.”

“Well...”

We both sat for a while, me looking at my hands, and Barry strangely captivated by the ingredients of his Iced Tea.

“Is your mind made up?”

“I'm sorry, Barry, it really is. I have a spot at Julliard and I want to pursue 'serious' music for a while.”

“It's a God Damned Shame you know? You are one of the best guitarists in the world, and you could become the very best, and you want to throw that away?”

“I'm not throwing anything away. I just want to study music for myself.”

“You Fag!”

“What?”

“I thought you might have forgotten about Jim for a sec!”

We both laughed as a loud thump came from the other room. We looked at each other and burst out laughing.

A lone spot hits me. I pluck a lone E that floats from my Gibson, hovers, then a deep whammy dive and a second spot cuts through the dark and Walter starts the deep thrumming on his bass.

WHAM! Another spot and Vincent starts his driving rhythm on drums as I begin my journey up and down the neck of my guitar, joined by Teddy on rhythm guitar and Barry on keyboards. The crowd goes wild for our number one hit, worldwide. Suddenly, Jim struts on stage with a follow spot and holds that same soaring high E.

I fucking hate Jim's fucking guts, but man, he can sing!

It's another thrilling night of playing to a sea of phone lights all swaying to the music. Call and responses with the crowd loving every minute of the show. Everyone was spot on tonight, and the fight from earlier had no effect on the performance. Jim did his usual antics of dancing around and was forever trying to figure out how to be more extreme. He had convinced Phil that he needed wires, so he could fly out over the audience. Watching him reminded me of a piñata; given a bat instead of a guitar, I might have hit him. I was glad the requisite encore was complete, and it was time to say goodnight. We made our way to the green room, and the crazy shit began. I left.

Back at the hotel, I had a luxurious bath, drank some champagne, and soaked. Did I really want to give this up? This is pretty awesome! Problem was, I always thought that after a show, then I would get on a bus or plane with Jim and I would want to jump out a window. It was the same in the studio. When it was just Walter, Barry, and me working, it was fun and productive. Then the degenerates would arrive and the fights would begin, and I was once again desperate to leave the band.

Well, one more show in Toronto, so that should be my focus right now.

Laying on the bed, I had a few good hours of sleep before my drugged and boozed up compatriots arrived to trash the hotel. Seriously, I think half of our profit goes to paying hotel damages.

In the morning, I wandered around Chicago to take in some sights. The others would probably be shaking off hangovers, and likely anyone that might recognize me would be asleep as well. I, of course, had to check out the 'Cloud Gate' and, yes indeed, it was very shiny. My other trips are mostly a blur; solo travel doesn't make for many lasting memories.

When I was a kid, I went to Niagara Falls with my dad, but because he had no sense of direction, we got totally lost. We stopped for gas and directions at this place that looked straight out of "Deliverance". I had to go to the washroom, but the door was locked, so Dad asked the wild-haired woman at the till for a key. After looking me up and down, she reluctantly handed Dad the key. I guess I looked sufficiently trustworthy enough for such a treasure. Upon entry into the hallowed washroom, I was assaulted by a huge 3D picture of Jesus. His eyes followed me with great interest while I had a pee. I described the holy relic to my dad, who had to see for himself.

He entered the shrine, only to emerge moments later with goggling eyes.

"That's the weirdest thing I've ever seen", he laughed, once on our way. I remember nothing about Niagara Falls, but I sure do remember the 3D Jesus.

I find something shared more meaningful when shared, so my trip to Chicago was rather forgettable.

Green Ocean's last show was in Toronto, but we were going to take a plane, primarily to shut Jim up. Jim always wanted the band to buy a jet, but Phil nixed that idea as stupid economics. The rest of the band agreed, so Jim was shit out of luck. Since this was the last trip of the tour, however, we had all agreed to take a plane, and Phil had organized a 'Gulf Stream'.

We drove right up to our nice little plane, sitting happily on the tarmac. Clambering out of the limo, Jim was beaming, like a kid on Christmas morning. The captain and co-pilot greeted us, and we were shown around a bit, given a drink of champagne, then it was off to the friendly skies. We had been on many planes over the past year, of course, but usually only for international trips.

I never really considered travel between Canada and the US as international, though lately that had become a bit more of a reality. This was our first time on a small private jet, and I certainly enjoyed the quiet comfort, though I really just looked out the window. Even Jim behaved himself, and I think Vincent had had way too many drugs, so he was borderline comatose for the trip.

When the familiar view of the CN Tower came into view, I breathed a sigh of relief to be home. The landing at Pearson was uneventful, as was the limo ride to the hotel, though everyone seemed a little melancholy, and I wondered if Barry had said something to the others about my leaving the group.

I hung out in my hotel room for a bit, then asked Barry if he felt like a walk. "No, not really, buddy, I'm just going to hang out at the pool." Nodding, I left. Yup, definitely melancholia had descended upon the shores of 'Green Ocean.'

When I was in high school, not all that long ago, I was a trombone player in the school band. I was rather crappy at brass instruments and put little effort into practising, but even so, I was good enough to be in the marching band. My mom really pushed for me to be in the band because we wore kilts and she, being Scottish, thought we looked very handsome. She even knitted me some knee socks. She was so proud. I marched up Yonge St. from Queen to Eglinton, the route of the Santa Claus Parade.

Thankfully, it's summer, and I'm not wearing a kilt. The high-rise buildings create a wind-tunnel and there is construction as far as the eye can see. The wind and dust made my sentimental journey much less pleasant than expected. I smiled to myself, however, when I remembered asking my mom to sew 'curtain weights' into the hem of my kilt, because, as a shy teenager, I was afraid of my kilt becoming airborne during the parade. I think she got carried away though, because as we marched, everyone's kilt flipped and fluttered, except mine. It remained

stovepipe straight in a kind of uncanny valley sort of way. Ah, good times, good times.

“What the...?”

Our top story today:

Lead guitarist Matthew Rogers was killed today by falling debris. The accident happened on Yonge St near Eglinton at around noon, when a gust of wind blew concrete materials off of some scaffolding in the area. Matthew was rushed to the hospital, where he later succumbed to his injuries.

**Fans of the band 'Green Ocean' are mourning the death
of their lead guitarist.**

Black Spiders



20 / 100

A wave of grapefruit juice hurtled towards me.

Crashing between the mountains, and taking the shape of a face, the tangy spray stung my eyes as I looked for an escape. I gasped for breath, awaking to a blood-soaked pillow. That's what you get for watching 'The Mummy' after reading the drug interactions label on a new medication. *Not to be taken with Grapefruit.*

I think my frustration at having so many 'dry runs' is causing my dreams to become more bizarre by the night. Going through this alone is also starting to take its toll. I have always preferred living on my own, and up until this medical 'difficulty', I found relationships quite cloying. However, having someone's shoulder to cry on after another crushing disappointment would be... nice. Today, however, I was seeing the ENT doctor, so even ending my constant nosebleeds would be helpful in improving my outlook on life.

"Do I need to change into a gown?" I asked, hanging my purse on a hook.

"No, you are fine. You can just sit on the exam table; the Doctor will be in in a minute."

I like these little outpatient pods at the local hospital. Minor procedures like suturing, cutting off casts, paracentesis, and, obviously, fixing annoying nosebleeds, are performed in these sterile little rooms. I sat examining my fingers and willing my nose to behave when the Doctor arrived.

"Penelope?"

"Yes, hi. Should I put on a gown?" I don't know why I keep thinking I should change out of my civilian clothes for this treatment. I have played in many orchestras, and this feels like a rehearsal rather than a performance... somehow I feel improperly attired.

"No, you are fine." Looking at my chart, the Doctor said, "I see it's your left nostril that is the fundamental problem, but we will do both. Have you had your nose looked at before?"

"Yes, I've had it cauterized a couple of times, but they didn't seem to work."

"How long ago?"

"Oh, gosh, maybe 25 years ago?"

"Well, we've made a few improvements since then. Head back, please..."

I tilted my head back, and he probed with gentle fingers and light, then said, "That's not too bad; I think we can fix that up."

He picked up various instruments and a bit of mesh.

"I'll do your right nostril first." Then fiddled a bit of mesh, placing it deep in my nose. It burned a bit, but not too much.

"Good, now I'll do that troublesome left side. I have to go deeper, and this may be... uncomfortable."

I kind of coughed-sneezed, but it wasn't unbearably painful.

"There, good."

Returning the implements to the small tray, the doctor said, "The mesh will remain in your nose for about a week. Try not to blow your nose forcefully. Eventually that mesh will come out, but it will be black and look like a spider. Don't be alarmed; that is perfect and to be expected."

"Got it! When the black spiders come out of my nose, I'm cured."

"Yes, exactly."

I must admit I had doubts, but the Doctor seemed very confident.

"Thank you for putting spiders in my nose."

"My pleasure." He smiled and left.

I guess I'm free to go, I thought, and left.

A week later, black spiders came out of my nose, and that was the end of my nosebleeds. The whole experience

reminded me of Stephen King's "Needful Things," where the woman with crippling arthritis gets a necklace with some sort of black spider like thing in it to absorb the pain. I hope it doesn't go as horribly wrong for me as it did for her in that story. Right now, however, I am enjoying waking up to blood-free linens.

Vick arrived for a visit a few days later and brought watermelon. Mmm, I love watermelon. While we ate, I whined about how I was so very tired of 'dry runs', when the phone rang. Grant was calling this time. With sticky fingers, I answered my phone and put it on 'speaker' while I cast about looking for something to wipe my hands...my shirt would do.

"Hi Penny?"

"Mmm," I mumbled, choking down the last of my watermelon. "Do you have good news for me?"

"I do indeed. Are you okay?"

"Yes, just eating watermelon with my sister."

"That sounds good. And now I'll make your day even better. It's sure nice to be the one calling with good news for a change."

"Yes, I can imagine. Carolyn was telling me all three of you are becoming nervous to call me with news of another 'dry run'." I said, licking my fingers.

"Yes, we are."

"I don't blame anyone; it's just the way it is."

"Absolutely, but it's still hard to give someone tough news time after time."

"Well, today is good news, right?"

"Yes, we have an offer."

I looked over at Vick, who was smiling and giving me two thumbs up. I nodded yes!

If you could get to the hospital tomorrow by 10 am, that would be great. Surgery is planned for sometime around 11 pm."

"Okay, great! It's also great timing because my sister Vick is here, so I will have company this time."

"Indeed. Enjoy your watermelon. I'll probably see you at the hospital tomorrow."

"I look forward to it."

"Okay, bye."

"Bye." As I hung up, Vick was beaming and kind of bouncing with excitement. "This is the one, I feel it!"

"I sure hope so."

After another foot message from Vick and a bit of excited chatting, I was ready for bed. Vick inflated the mattress while I fell fast asleep, hoping my long journey would pull into the station tomorrow.

I got up before Vick and had a shower and a coffee, because I liked to be clean and caffeinated before going to the hospital. After busying myself with a little office work on my website, pennywill.com, Vick popped her head into the front room. "Do I have time for a shower?"

"Oh, sure, no worries."

Vick disappeared, and I busied myself with some emailing to my amazing members, who have been sticking with me through this troublesome time. I haven't been able to do much updating or new music or anything, but hope after my transplant I can get back into my rhythm of making new content.

With my backpack ready, I sat waiting, looking out the window. Vick finished her shower, got dressed, grabbed her bag and we were off to the hospital. We made our way out to the car, and Vick helped me in and buckled my seat-belt. It felt ridiculous to be so helpless, but I just couldn't manage minor tasks like that anymore. It was very discouraging.

"Do we have time to stop for a coffee?"

"Oh, for sure we are early if anything, and we don't have to be there at a really strict time."

"Great. You want something?"

"No thanks, I'm good."

We stopped at Timmie's drive thru and then carried on our way while gossiping about various family members.

When we arrived at the hospital, Vick let me out and got my bag and walker out of the car. I made my way to sit

in the main lobby while she parked. We were early, so I didn't start the check-in process until Vick re-appeared.

We made our way to the Patient Registration, and I told them I was here for my fifth try at a transplant.

"Oh, my gosh! Well, good luck with this one." She said, handing me my forms and wristband.

This time they did have a room for me up on the 8th floor. I was grateful that I wasn't in ICU this time, because that would have made it difficult or impossible for Vick to stay with me.

We were shown to another 'single' room and after the nurse left, Vick said, "Whoa! Who do you know? I have been in the hospital many times, and never got a big single room like this!"

"Yes, I'm very lucky."

She made a face, and I quickly changed into my gown. It was handy having Vick there to tie the back. Usually, I get the nurses to do that. I always request two gowns. One to go each way because I don't like my bum hanging out when I'm walking somewhere.

Appropriately attired, I clambered into bed and lay in 'waiting' mode. The nurse came in a short time later to take some blood, hook up my IV, check my vitals and test me for COVID-19. She said I could take my mask off in my room, but Vick's was to remain in place. I took mine off and stuck my tongue out at Vick. She rolled her eyes.

Our sister Bec had given us a card game to play, "Battle Line Medieval," but neither of us really felt like reading instructions, so it lay dormant in my backpack.

"I'm going to get some lunch; do you mind?"

"No, not at all. There is a cafeteria on the 3rd floor."

"Yes, I may grab something and take it outside. I saw some picnic tables on my way in from the car. I like to be out in the fresh air."

"Well, have fun. I'll just lie here." I said, making a pouty face.

Vick left, and a short time later they wheeled me down for my lung X-ray. I always enjoyed being wheeled around on a gurney. It's kind of fun, and the porters are always friendly and warn you about every single bump. It's also a welcome break from the monotony of just lying in a bed, waiting. The X-ray is always the same — one shot of my lungs from the back, then turn, facing right, take a breath... and... hold... and... breathe. Then it was another ride through the hospital with a different porter and a different conversation, and then back to my room.

I soon drifted off to sleep after so much excitement, and when I woke a few hours later, Vick was sitting reading a book.

"Oh, you're back."

"Yup, you were asleep when I came in, so I just left you alone. It's been a few hours."

Noticing it was 5:15, I said, "I'm sorry your day has been so long."

"I don't mind. I am going to go for supper at 6 or so and maybe wander around the hospital grounds a bit. There are lots of little places to sit."

"Well, thank you; it's really nice to have company, even though I'm mindbogglingly boring."

"Sure, no problem."

A while later my phone rang unexpectedly. Caller ID said it was from the hospital.

"Yes?"

"Hi Penny. Penny, I am so sorry, but the donor liver is not viable. They discovered that when they went to harvest it, and there was too much damage."

"Oh,"

"I wanted to call so you could go home and not have to spend the night at the hospital."

"Okay, thanks, that's... disappointing."

"Yes, I'm back to being the bearer of bad news, I'm afraid. Hang in there; we'll get a liver for you soon."

Doubts were starting to creep in, but I kept them to myself.

"Sure, thanks for calling."

I looked at Vick, and both of us had tears welling up in our eyes. I buzzed the nurse to tell her the bad news. The long wait to get discharged began, but this time I had Vick to bug them, so it moved along quicker than usual. With my IV removed, paper in hand, backpack in a wheelchair, we left the 8th floor with numb expressions.

"I am so sad."

“Me too.”

“I need some *fish and chips*.” My comfort food.

“Me too; there is a *fish and chip* place on the way home.”

Sitting in the restaurant, sipping my ice tea and waiting for my fish (cod) and chips,

I was definitely getting a 'last supper' vibe.

Revenge of the Fish and Chips



17 / 100

I woke up at 3 am with a terrible pain through my back on my right side.

Like someone had shot an arrow in my direction. I looked suspiciously at Vick, asleep on the air mattress, but immediately ruled her out as my assailant. It was difficult to breathe, and I hobbled off to the washroom to throw up. I splashed cold water on my face, then returned to the bedroom.

“I’m sorry to wake you, Vick,” I said, shoving her arm.

“Hmm, what?”

“I need to go to Emergency. I’m in horrible pain.”

“Oh, sure, ya, okay.” Vick said, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

I was suddenly nauseous and went back into the bathroom, threw up, and again rinsed my face. I limped to my chair and tried to find a comfortable position while I waited for Vick to get ready. Moments later, Vick came into the front room, fully dressed, though still bleary-eyed, and said, “I’m just going to get the car and pull it out front.”

“Okay.”

When Vick returned, she helped me up out of the chair, down the steps and into the car. I sat slumped over in pain.

Luckily, the local hospital was only five minutes away by car, and when we arrived, Vick helped me into the hospital, then passed me off to the nurse.

“What seems to be the problem?”

Sweat beading down my face, I whispered my symptoms.

“From 1 to 10, how would you score your pain?”

I started to answer, but the pain was too much, and I broke down crying.

Because the emergency room wasn’t busy, they quickly took me to a room. Vick arrived back from parking the car just as the nurse in the ER was taking my vitals. Vick helped me change into a gown. I threw up. Vick helped me change into another gown.

“Where is the pain?”

I vaguely pointed to my back and side on the right. I was useless, so the nurse started asking Vick questions while I just lay stunned by pain.

Some time later, a disinterested doctor wandered in and asked the same questions as the nurse. It might have been near the end of his shift, so I threw up all over him to get his attention. It worked. He ordered Morphine and Vick helped me change into another gown.

The nurse gave me some morphine, and although I thought I should only have half a dose, Vick, and the nurse insisted, giving me a full shot. I could breathe again, and the world came back into focus.

They wheeled me down for an ultrasound, and when I returned to my room, I floated around for a while, until the doctor appeared, being careful to keep his distance. I had had a gallstone attack, probably brought on by my poor decision to have *fish and chips* after being on NPO. He told the nurse to give me some IV fluids and rest before being released. Since a liver transplant included removing both my gallbladder and liver, a separate gallbladder removal operation wasn’t necessary. So basically, I was to stop eating *fish and chips* and other foods high in fat.

An hour later, feeling much better, they released me, and as we drove home I said to Vick, “Sorry for all the drama.”

“No, not at all. I’m glad you are feeling better.”

“Way better!”

We picked up some coffees on the way home, but I stayed away from any chocolatey treats. It was almost noon when we got home, so Vick made some lunch, but I was content with my coffee, and then went and lay down for a few hours. Vick was originally going to go home today, but stuck around for another day because I had the last tranche of my vaccinations tomorrow, and also she wanted to make sure I had recovered from my punishment for indulging in *fish and chips*.

The rest of the visit was a pleasant respite from my usual just sitting and looking out the window, getting more morose by the minute. Eventually, reality re-asserted itself, and Vick had to return to her life,

while I waited to see if mine would continue.

Windmills

Marie Watson was a busy woman.

Ever since her husband left, she had been shouldering the responsibility of the household. Her son Dwight was a constant concern. As with so many Millennials, he was rudderless in this sea of economic depression. She didn't blame him for feeling hopeless, after all, his dating prospects were grim; he would own nothing more valuable than a PS5; and finding work was just a constant and degrading grind. Gone were the days of being proud of what you did for a living, coming home to a loving family and taking vacations. As a gen Xer, Marie knew the feeling of being disregarded by society. Having her deadbeat husband, Carl, go off with that slut from work was so... pedestrian. He had even moved to Florida, just to put a fine point on his infidelity. *I hope you and your slut get eaten by an alligator... slowly and painfully!*

"Hi Mom."

"Hi Hon, what's up?"

"I need some money for some nice clothes. Rich saw a post for an entry job as a gopher at a law firm and I want to apply, but I don't have anything nice to wear."

Of course, that's code for: I'm out of weed, and Rich and I are going to hang around gaming all day.

"How much do you need?"

"A couple of hundred should do it."

"Okay, use the black card."

Which is code for: Don't spend more than \$200, because I will be checking.

"Sure, thanks, Mom."

This can't continue, but it's so hard to say no. I'm just not a 'tough love' mom, but this is becoming expensive. It's not about the money; I'm more worried that my softness is doing long-term damage to Dwight. Carl tells me I'm a sucker, but then who wants to listen to that ass-hole?"

As a federally accredited lobbyist for 'Renewable Energy', Marie was proud to be on the 'right side of history.' Known to be ruthless in her pursuit of improving the world, Marie was spineless when it came to Dwight.

Today, Marie was off to unveil a new wind farm initiative with the Minister of Energy and Natural Resources along with many other beautiful people, eager to get their faces on social media. A guaranteed way of getting politicians on your side was to show them the upside in their polls if they were seen as being pro-environment, especially with young voters. "Election season is always right around the corner" was her favourite expression. If that didn't work, there were always 'less... scrupulous' methods. Marie was doing the work for the greater good and thus, almost anything short of murder was okay in her book. Today's event, though, had been an easy sell. Lots of people were making lots of money and looked good doing it — win, win, win. The third win was always Marie's.

It was a perfect windy day here in Chattam-Kent. The light breeze accentuated the message of a wind farm, with everyone's clothes blowing, and I had even asked a few attendees to wear hats hoping they would blow off. Happy accidents did happen, especially when helped along a little. Marie's assistant tied cheerful ribbons to all the silver glinting shovels to make them dance during the speeches and softball questions asked of smiling dignitaries.

Her phone rang. "Yes?"

"Hi Mom, when are you coming home today?"

"Late, I'm doing that ribbon cutting today."

"Oh, okay, thanks, bye."

YES! The minister's construction hat, which was 'accidentally' the wrong size, blew off as he stuck the shovel in the ground. PERFECT! Everyone is smiling and laughing about what a perfect place this is for a wind farm, as a pretty assistant hands the minister back his hat.

"Hi Andrew, fancy meeting you here."

"Hi M. Well, I am the MP for this area, of course I'm here."

"Hmm, didn't you vote against the government's 'green energy' initiative?"

“So?” *My God! He honestly didn't see the hypocrisy in that statement.*

“So...do you now approve?”

“Fuck off, M.”

I love my job.

“I think that went well,” said the self-congratulating Minister of Energy and Natural Resources. *Yes, of course it did, you pompous fool...give me a break!*

“Yes, I think...” said Marie.

The minister abruptly left the conversation mid-sentence to talk to someone more significant. Thankfully, Marie had finished her work here and could now have her driver, Jerry, take her back to her Toronto office. When she started her firm, the first requirement was a car and driver. She hated wasting time, and this 3 hour drive was an example of her need. Jerry held the door for her. “Did all go well, M?”

“Yup, thanks, Jerry.”

“Back to the office?”

“Yup, you know me too well,” Marie said, climbing into the back seat of the Hybrid Lexus. This was her true office, with no interruptions or obligations to comment on the weather or other inane topics, just work.

The nature of her job was quite sensitive and demanded privacy, so she had a glass partition between her and Jerry installed.

Once they had bounced their way out of the field, filled with carefully placed construction materials and media vans, Marie got to work.

“Hi Teddy, it's me, your favourite person!”

“Fuck off, M, what do you want to sell me now?”

“You've got me all wrong baby, I want to give you something; you know that.”

“Well, that would be a first.”

Theodore Pritchard (Teddy) was a Conservative Senator who held some sway with the Prime Minister, and was thus useful, was on her call sheet for an upcoming bill. Teddy liked the sexual innuendo even though he was old enough to be her grandfather, and Marie never minded using any tool in her toolbox to get what she wanted, and was rather good at flirting.

“You hurt me so, Teddy.”

“You've caught me at a bad time, Marie. Visiting family in England and it's late here.”

“Oh, sorry, hon, I didn't realize...”

Of course, she knew exactly where Teddy was, and the point was to catch him tired and thus more pliable.

“I won't be long, Teddy, but I need a teeny-weeny favour.”

“I'm listening, but make it quick.”

“There is this emergency injunction thing about tribal land or something, and I wondered if you could speak to the PM about it?”

“I thought that might be a bee in your bonnet. I already spoke to him at the lodge last week. You don't need to worry your pretty little head about it. I hear it's going to get bogged down in committee and then smothered in its sleep.”

“Thanks so much Teddy, you are a real friend of the people.”

“Speaking of 'real' friends, I have to get back to my guests. See you on the course next week?”

“You bet! Goodnight.”

Marie hung up with a big grin on her face when her phone rang again.

She pressed the answer button on her earbuds, thinking it was Teddy again, but it was Dwight.

“Hi Mom.”

The moment of satisfaction drained from Marie, and she was instantly ready for some tragic news or a request for money.

“Hi Dwight. How did the clothes shopping go?”

“Yah, uhm, okay., but ya, that job isn't ah, available, but I needed the clothes and stuff, anyway. So anyway, Rich and I were thinking of going over to Lisa's house.”

“Sure, yup?”

“Well, I need some money for an Uber and thought maybe I should take something like flowers or wine or something.”

“Can't you take that car?”

“Maybe, yah, uhm sure, but I still want to pick up something for Lisa, and maybe get some beer or something.”

“I thought there was a case of beer in the house.”

“That was like a week ago, Mom, but then you are never home, so you wouldn't know.”

“Can't Rich bring something?”

“No, he's broke.”

“How much of that \$200 did you spend on clothes?”

“Oh, I thought you said I could spend more than that. I spent, I don't know, four something. I'll take it back if you are going to be bitchy about it.”

Marie huffed into the phone.

“Well, okay, you can spend \$200 but use the green card. I think the black one must be in rough shape.”

“Yah, okay.”

Dwight hung up.

Marie could feel the bile churning in her stomach. It felt so horrible to know your kid felt nothing for you and was brutally selfish. *My God, I'm a failure as a mother!*

Marie had been looking forward to the ride home. Watching the pastoral scenery drift by as she made some phone calls and sent emails. She had hated remote work during COVID-19, but didn't like the return to the office either. Both felt... confining, but the motion of working in the car always made her feel extra productive. Today, however, that was all out the window as she fretted about Dwight. *Was he purposefully punishing her for bringing him into this world? Or maybe punishing her for not sticking with Carl, even after he cheated on her? Whatever the reason, it was simply cruel.*

By the time her company car pulled into the spot beside her personal car, she was fuming after stewing about Dwight for over three hours.

“Sorry, what?”

“I asked if you needed me anymore today?”

“Oh, sorry, No Jerry, thanks I'm good.”

“Are you okay? You seem... upset.”

“Oh, you know, Dwight problems.” Even though she normally kept her personal life well out of her professional world, Jerry had been privy to several breakdowns caused by 'Dwight Problems.'

“Oh, I'm really sorry, M. That must be frustrating.”

“Yes, but as they say, 'This too shall pass'.”

“I hope so.”

“Thanks Jerry. Say hi to CJ for me.”

“Will, do. Good night.”

It was getting later, and so the elevator going 'up' was empty. Marie waved at a few lingering people and made her way to her office. She shut the door, kicked off her heels, which were a terrible choice for a grassy field, and lay down on her white couch. Soon enough, the quiet hum of the air-conditioning and someone vacuuming in another office lulled her to sleep.

She woke with a start to her phone. “Unknown number, unknown name” Probably a scam. She swiped off. It rang again. “Unknown number, unknown name”, this time she answered.

“Look...”

“Is this Dwight's mom?”

Marie sat bolt upright and was suddenly very awake.

“Yes.”

“He's choking and I don't know what to do...this is Lisa...what should I do?”

Dwight had a birth defect called 'Esophageal Atresia' and can choke on his food if he doesn't chew properly. Marie learned the Heimlich maneuver and always reminded Dwight to slow down and chew his food.

“What did he choke on?” said Marie, rushing to the elevator.

“Pizza,”

“Do you know the Heimlich maneuver?”

“The what?”

“Have you called 911?”

“No. Should I?”

“Yes, and...” The phone went dead. Stupid girl. She hung up instead of grabbing another phone.

Marie called Dwight's phone.

They hung up.

She called again.

“Hello?”

“This is Dwight's mom.”

“Oh, hi. I'm Jack,” he drawled in a hazy voice.

“Is Dwight there?”

“Who?”

“Dwight!”

“Oh, yah. I think he's downstairs. Do you want me to get him?”

OH MY GOD!

“Yes.”

“Just a sec, I'm looking for my shirt.”

“Fuck your shirt! Get Dwight!”

“Sure, what the fuck...”

Marie started her car and threw it into reverse, roared backwards, missing the Lexus by inches, and then headed out on the main street. Her phone rang.

She switched from the useless Jack to the new caller.

“Yes?”

“This is Lisa. I called 911.”

“How is Dwight?”

“He's turning blue. I'm scared.”

“Where are you?”

“My house.”

“No, I mean the address. I'm driving over.”

“Oh.”

Marie told the GPS the address, and it was thankfully, only minutes away. She drove like a crazy woman.

“You have arrived at your destination.” Said a calm voice, though the scene was anything but calm. Cars all over the place and an ambulance with blinking lights were haphazardly blocking the road. Marie abandoned her car and ran up to the ambulance just in time to hear one paramedic say,

“He's been down a long time; it's probably too late.”

The Bat



11 / 100

I woke with a start.

Checked my phone and saw it was about three in the morning. *Weird, the screen is flickering strangely. Oh, there is a moth buzzing around the phone.* The moth got tangled in my hair, so I rolled over to turn on the light. It wasn't a moth; it was a bat!

Ahhhhh! I used a week's worth of energy slapping my head, then jumped out of bed and stumbled out of the bedroom.

What am I going to do? I can't go back in that room?

I hid in the bathroom, and when I came out, the bat flew past me into the front room. I scurried backed into my bedroom and stuffed clothes and blankets against the door, then got under the sheets and hid. Ever since a bat got stuck in my hair as a child, I've been terrified of them. After a few hours of paralyzing fear, I was desperate to go to the bathroom. So, even though it was summer, I zipped up my winter coat, donned the hood, then garbed myself in boots and mitts to protect myself from the bat. It was a little hard to see, but maybe that was a good thing, as I made my way to the bathroom, cane in hand, ready to wave in mad fashion at the flying horror.

I didn't see it.

I thought briefly of staying in the bathroom for the rest of the night, but the bathroom was too small, so I braved the hall, making a beeline to my bedroom once more.

Safe inside, I piled my blankets and winter gear against the door, climbed in bed and hid under my sheet and texted my landlord:

Help! It's me, Penny! Their is a BATT in my hose. Help!

My landlord later texted me:

Smiley face, I think you mean there is a bat in your house. My sons and I will be over this morning. Stay safe.

Me: Thanks. Just come in; I'm hiding under my blankets.

Landlord: Okay, will do. We will be over in a few hours.

That proved to be enough time to winterize myself and have another bathroom break.

I lay in bed, listening, when my landlord and his two sons arrived. He knocked on my bedroom door and said, "Just stay in bed until we're done."

There was a lot of banging and a bit of yelling until I finally heard, "Got it!"

Thank the lord.

There was another knock at my door, and I peered out from under my sheets. "Come in."

"Hi Penny, you are safe."

It was quite a sight. My landlord with a tennis racket, and his two sons each with a lacrosse stick. Happily, they hadn't found it necessary to show me the bat.

"Oh, thank you SO much."

"No problem. How are you feeling these days?"

"Kinda crappy, but I'm feeling better now that you have saved me from the Bat. Thank you again."

"Sure, well, we will go. I hope you get your new liver soon. How many tries is this now, four?"

"No, five."

"Well, hang in there."

The impromptu sports team left, and I got up to use the washroom,

without all the winter clothes.

Why Does This Always Happen to Me?



8 / 100

My bat free life continued for three weeks.

Even though the constant battle against ammonia poisoning left me weak, I made two visits up to the transplant-unit for more blood-work and words of encouragement. The ceaseless diarrhea, nausea, foot, and abdominal pain, and the struggle to maintain basic hygiene, made my life feel distant and hazy. Meals were nothing but sips of strawberry meal replacement and the odd coffee. During my few waking hours, I gazed blankly out the window or watched the ceiling fan whirl slowly, accomplishing nothing.

Finally, on August 4th, Amy called with another liver offer. "I'm hoping number six will be your lucky number."

"Yes, me too." Any excitement had long left my life, and this just seemed routine. I'll go, get rejected, come home and wait.

"Good luck Penny, I'm sure this will be the one."

"Thanks, Amy, I hope so." Hanging up the phone, I then called Bec and told her about 'Yet another try.' She asked if I was okay to be alone. My eyes filled with tears, and I barely whispered, "Sure." I guess that kind of said it all, so Bec later called Vick and asked her if she could make it up to the hospital. That was a lot to ask, we all knew, because Vick had a lot going on in her life and it was a three-hour drive. However, Vick agreed and said she would meet me at the hospital.

I felt guilty when Bec called later and relayed 'the plan'. However, I was getting desperate, and I wasn't sure how much more rejection I could handle, especially on my own.

The hospital assigned a shared room, which was extremely disappointing. I 'almost' would have preferred ICU again, and after a few hours of listening to my roommate, that 'almost' turned into a 'definitely'.

Vick arrived a few hours after me, and I had already changed into hospital garb and had blood-work completed. We talked softly, this being a communal room, and from Vick's vantage point she could see both me and my roommate. There was an enormous amount of eye rolling on Vick's part, and I was afraid it might cause permanent eye damage.

"Ohhhhhh... Why does this always happen to me?"

Vick and I looked at each other.

"Ohhhhhh, the pain, the pain. Ohhhhhh, Ahhhhhh."

The big eye roll.

"Why does this always happen to me?"

An even bigger eye roll, then both Vick and I started silently giggling.

This went on all day, and honestly cheered me up a bit, and at least there were no bats getting stuck in my hair.

Vick brought some lunch with her and left to sit outside again. A few minutes after she left, a sudden summer thunderstorm with torrential rain blew onto the hospital grounds. A while later, they took me down for my X-rays, and as we rolled through the corridors, the porter asked about my condition. I told her this was my sixth attempt at a liver transplant and I had broken the record at this hospital for most dry runs. My quivering smile turned into a frown as we entered the elevator. "Oh, Penny, that's really difficult. I'm sure this will be the one."

I nodded.

X-Rays complete, I lay in my bed when Vick returned from lunch. "Did you get soaked?"

"No, I was in a little gazebo, and it was quite exciting and refreshing. A cool wind blew the mist around while I ate."

That sounds nice. I'm glad. I worried you'd be soaked.

"Nope, all good."

"Why does this always happen to me?"

We laughed.

Some hours later my phone rang. I was seriously thinking of changing the ringtone to a death march dirge or

something equally grim.

I looked at the caller ID: regional hospital

My heart sank.

In a rush of words, Grant said, "I'm sorry, Penny, it's me, Grant. Amy was too afraid to call. Bad news again. It's a dry run."

Stunned, I stared at Vick. Once again facing my progression to death, with a husky voice, I thanked Grant before resuming my vacant stare.

"I'm so sorry."

As my neighbour lamented, "Why does this always happen to me?" I simply shrugged.

I wanted to leave there and then, but I was receiving Fibrogen via IV, and the nurse said it would be another thirty-five minutes. Another thirty-five minutes of my neighbour's moaning plus my crushing sadness felt unbearable, but I relented because Vick insisted.

There I lay, watching the slow drip of Fibrogen.

On the ride home, I asked Vick if we should stop for some *fish and chips*? She laughed and said, "Not on your life! You know what happened last time."

"Indeed."

"I brought some chicken and corn on the cob and will heat that up when we get home."

"Okay."

We sat in silence all the way home, and once home, I lay in bed while Vick got some food ready. Later, Vick gently woke me and told me I had been asleep for an hour, and asked if I was up for some food?

"Yes."

I picked at a bit of chicken and had a bite or two of corn, then excused myself and threw everything up in the toilet.

"Sorry, it's not your cooking or anything, I'm just going to go lie down."

In the morning, Vick left.

I sat in my chair and wept.

First Day of School

As with most first-year teachers,

Patricia Morgan had spent the dying days of summer in her new classroom, putting up posters and charts. Patricia had even found an old anatomical skeleton tucked away in a closet in her science class. She repaired what she could, put a fancy hat on his skull and christened him 'BoB' — The Palindrome Skeleton. Patricia's major was biology, but she had a minor in English Lit, so she was also teaching a grade 9 English, along with her other science classes.

'BoB' watched her teetering precariously on a wobbly chair, stretching, to pin up a Styrofoam molecule.

Poking his head into the room, Andy asked, "What are you doing?"

"Oh, you startled me," said Patricia, still stretching to put in the last pushpin.

"There!" she said with satisfaction. "I couldn't find the ladder, but I should have chosen a less...'fluctuant' chair."

"Don't sass me with your fancy college words, Missy. I wasn't referring to your dicey choice of Caquetoire."

Patricia, still standing on her chair, shot him a quizzical look.

Andy waved vaguely at the chair and said, "A 'gossip' chair of the 1600s." Though Andy was the Science Department Head, he also had a degree in History.

Patricia beamed at a fellow dropper of obscure words.

"I was, rather referring to you putting up that Styrofoam Molecule. You teach biology, not chemistry."

Patricia beamed even more as she clambered down from her perch.

"Have you met BoB, our Palindrome Skeleton?"

"Yes, I remember him being stuffed into a closet."

"I have freed him."

"I like his hat."

"Me too. What's up?"

"Just making sure you are ready for tomorrow."

"I am."

"From an old broken down teacher to a new sparkly one, I have a bit of advice."

"Shoot."

"I absolutely love your enthusiasm and energy."

"but?"

"... but most new teachers have trouble switching gears and being the 'boss' of the classroom. Remember, this isn't a democracy. You are fairly close in age to the oldest students and were, until recently, a student yourself. Now, as a teacher, you must set a tone of confidence and clarity with the kids. If you set that kind of dynamic from the outset, you will have a great year. If, on the other hand, you are too much of a pushover, your year will be long and hard."

"Sure."

"No, Pat, I'm being very serious here. You are whip smart and yet, I fear, a bit... naïve, and I really want you to thrive." Pat nodded as Andy continued, "Oh, and my final piece of advice for all teachers is: learn everyone's name as quickly as possible. Using a student's proper name earns their respect right away and is a useful skill in everyday life. Like any skill, you can acquire it through practice, although I think your habit of naming things is an innate ability."

"I will. I promise."

"Excellent! And thank you, 'BoB,' for listening so attentively."

With a big smile and a wink, Andy departed to go harass someone else with his sage advice.

Patricia spent a bit more time getting her room photo ready, took a few selfies, then collected her stuff and headed home to her parents' house. She was staying with them at the moment, as were most of her Gen Z friends, but she had plans to get out on her own ASAP. She loved her parents, but they made her feel like a kid, and it would be difficult to be a 'confident' adult at school and a child at home. Besides, Patricia had several side hustles

on the go, and with a steady job, she was sure she could make enough to at least afford rent.

Her 2013 Ford Focus coughed its way down the road with Pat's encouragement and prayers. *Someday I'm going to be able to afford a really nice car, but that some day, isn't today.* She had to park 'sparky', on the road because someone had rudely parked in the driveway. Probably one of Dad's golfing buddies, or more likely one of Mom's friends judging by the colour. Whatever, nothing could put Patricia in a bad mood today.

"Hi Mom, hi Dad, phew, I have officially set up my classroom!"

"That's nice, dear."

"Andy, the department head, stopped in and said I was 'whip smart'. Isn't that awesome?"

"Mmm," said Brad Morgan, captivated by something on his shoe.

"I had to park 'Sparky' on the road. Whose car is that in the driveway?"

"Why, that would be your new car."

"What?"

"Yes, Hon, your dad thought you needed a new car, and we are so proud of you we wanted to show it, so we bought you that car. Do you like it?"

Pat began crying, and through her tears, she rushed over and hugged her mom. "I LOVE it!"

Patricia's father seemed to have finished looking at his shoe and came over and hugged both mother and daughter at the same time.

"It's a hybrid," Brad proudly proclaimed. "We know you are very concerned with the environment and thought you would like that feature. It's not brand new, but it's only a few years old and in very good shape."

Patricia sobbed and hugged them both even more.

"Also," said her mom, "it's purple, your favourite colour."

"I'll call it... Barney. No, that's childish... I'll call it... Barnabas. Yes, Barnabas will do nicely after all; it's kind of a pinky—purple colour."

Patricia had always named everything since she was a little girl and thought it imbued them with special powers. She suddenly felt a twinge of sadness for 'Sparky'; after all, they had been to university together as well as through several relationships. "What should we do with Sparky?"

"I heard you and 'Sparky' coming down the road and I'm sorry to say, I think Sparky's days are at an end." *Yes, Dad's probably right. Sparky will fade into memory along with all the goldfish and gerbils buried in shoe-boxes in the backyard.* Patricia was alarmingly good at letting things go, though she was always fiercely loyal until the bitter end.

"Wanna go for a drive?"

The bubble of thoughtfulness burst...

"You bet!"

"Shotgun!" shouted her dad with a smile; her mom just rolled her eyes.

They sat in the driveway a good long time, her dad showing her all the neat things 'Barnabas' offered, including lots of cameras, cup holders, and a big display screen.

"Everything's computer!" Pat laughed when she had had enough description and just wanted to go for a jaunt around the neighbourhood.

Finally, Brad Morgan handed Patricia Morgan the key fob, and with the press of a button, Barnabas purred quietly, waiting for the command to drive, and off they went.

Later that evening, Patricia thanked her mom and dad for about the millionth time, kissed them both and went to bed early to be bright and fresh for the first day of school.

Some believed he was a disgruntled student; some said he was just crazy, or even a terrorist of some kind, but the first morning of Patricia Morgan's teaching career was cut short when Brian Todd,

burst into her classroom with a shotgun and started firing.

A New Hope



6 / 100

August had been very uneventful after Vick left.

Occasionally, I would decide to walk the two blocks to the pharmacy. Each step was becoming a struggle, and when I did eventually arrive, I just sat in a chair near the blood-pressure checking machine and waited. The staff were always kind and would ask if I was alright. "Sure," I said, "I'm just catching my breath." I had many offers to drive me home if I needed, but mostly I was just left to watch others living their lives. The fates have abandoned me, and the world was simply going to continue as I faded to nothingness.

As a former principal, September came with memories of the start of a new school year. I revelled in the positive spirit around a new year, from kids practising their new combination locks to teachers showing lost students and sometimes lost compatriots to their proper classroom. I loved it all — the smells, the sights, the tears, and the laughter, but most of all the promise of growth.

This year, however, was a different story. No inspirational speeches in the gym, no re-uniting with colleagues or encouraging lost and nervous students, just trying to force down a sip of protein drink while looking out the window.

My phone rang.

"Hi Penny, we've got another liver offer."

"Hi Amy."

"How are you doing?"

"Hanging in there."

"That's good to hear. If you could be at the hospital tonight around 8 pm, that would be great. We expect the surgery to begin around 3 pm on Friday, so you'll stay overnight at the hospital."

"Okay, thanks Amy."

"Good luck, Penny."

"Thanks."

My perfunctory interactions with the transplant team were quite emblematic of how unusual my situation was becoming. I had broken the record for 'dry runs' several attempts before and was now in unfamiliar territory for everyone.

I called Bec because I was sick of my morose thoughts and was hoping someone could be with me at the hospital, but I didn't want to be obvious.

"Hey Bec."

"Oh, hi Penny. I can't talk long."

"Sure, ya. I got another offer, lucky number seven I hope, and am off to the hospital in a few hours. The surgery is scheduled for Friday afternoon."

"Oh, that's great. This will be the one, I feel it."

"Sure, yup."

"I don't think Vick can come this time, some kind of family emergency."

"Oh, okay. Probably be a dry run anyway, so that's fine."

"I'll see if Jane can meet you at the hospital."

"Sure, but if she can't, it's no problem."

I think Bec sensed my unenthusiastic tone and said, "If Jane can't make it, I'll come. I think you need someone with you."

"But, you know... if you can't... it's... it's okay," I replied softly, my eyes watery and my voice shaky.

"No, you shouldn't be alone, so you get yourself to the hospital, and either Jane or I will join you there. Anyway, I gotta go. I'll call you later."

"Okay, thanks, Bec."

I sat for a time dozing and thinking, relieved Bec had recognized the hollowness of my words. Once, I was the

poster child for self-reliance, but this year had humbled me.

I booked a taxi and began gathering my things. Even though I was getting used to 'dry runs', I couldn't help but have a small spark of hope that this might be the transplant that saves my life. I began checking my increasingly heavy backpack like a Sherpa ascending the highest mountain. *Did I really need five USB C chargers, three headband headphones, several earbuds, a toothbrush, and a handful of hair elastics? Yah, probably.*

After a quick search for my mischievous cane, I lugged my load out to the waiting taxi. It was a sweltering day for September, and though I was tempted to ask the driver for some air-conditioning, he seemed grumpy, so I let it go. Actually, I was glad the driver didn't seem interested in talking, so I could just look at the beautiful crops ready for harvest and dream of better days.

When I arrived at the hospital, I commandeered an abandoned wheelchair and made my way to the Patient Registration.

"Didn't I see you before?"

"Yes, I'm trying to use up all my frequent flyer miles." The look on the receptionist's face told me it was too late in the day for jokes.

"Umm, yes, I am here for my 7th attempt at a liver transplant. The others didn't work out."

"I've never heard of that before."

"I know, weird, eh?"

"Well, Penelope, good luck! This will be the one."

"Let's hope so." I added a smile to my signature response and headed up to my room.

This time I was being housed in the liver transplant recovery wing. It hurt a little to be waiting for a transplant on a floor where everyone else had received a transplant. Like watching others with Christmas presents, but you didn't get one. It was rather embarrassing.

The nurses made up for my 'lack of a present' by being extremely positive and cheerful. I suppose working on a ward that was full of people waking up to a new chance at life would be nice, even though you still have to deal with difficult patients and situations.

Perhaps this very room would become my recovery room, and I could join the others in celebration. The night was long and fretful, however because I was in waiting mode, the nurses let me sleep with minimal interruptions. I had had the usual IV placed and COVID-19 test, but mostly they wanted to be sure I didn't eat or drink anything.

In the morning, around 10am, I had just returned from my chest X-rays when Jane arrived. Relief washed over me as she gave me a big hug. She had taken the train down and rented a car and was a little travel worn, so she plunked into a chair after helping me arrange pillows and blankets on my bed.

"Thank you so much for coming. I can't tell you how much I appreciate this."

"Oh, no problem. I enjoy taking the train. Any news?"

"Not yet, but my phone is scaring me. If it rings, the operation is off." It rang at that very moment.

"Hello?"

"Hi Penny, it's Bec."

"Hi Bec, Jane is here, so I'll put you on speaker."

"Hi Bec," Jane shouted into my phone.

"Hi, Jane." I'm glad you made it. How long have you been there?

"I just got here. There was a jumper in front of the train, and that delayed us by a couple of hours. They gave us points towards another train trip, so when I come and visit you next it will be free."

It's sad how casually we talk about people taking their own lives by jumping in front of a train. It's tragic for everyone. The thought of life becoming so hopeless that you'd throw yourself in front of a train is sad. The engineer's plight is sad, as there is nothing they can do, and the incident will probably haunt them; the delayed passengers, worried families, and the EMS cleanup crew all suffer.

"I said, how are you doing, Penny?"

"Oh, yah, good."

We all chatted for a while until Jane had to go to the cafeteria for some tea, and Bec had to go to pick her daughter up from school.

Left to my own devices, I explored my room while I was mobile. It was a private room on the 4th floor, so the vista out the window was lovely. There was a ravine with a winding road, tiny cars, and the occasional ambulance. The room had a toilet with a curtain and a washbasin. A crooked whiteboard with instructions and notes for the

nurses and a TV. The big clicker boasted regular TV along with several streaming services, including Netflix. I'm not a huge TV person, but it might be nice if reading is difficult after surgery. The bed was the focal point of interest for me, and it had a USB charging port, and you could also control the lights and raise and lower your head and feet and even lengthen and shorten the bed itself. The bed would check your weight, though I wasn't positive whether I liked that. Once you had the bed position you wanted, it would keep re-adjusting itself a little, sort of like a very slow message.

I was still wandering around when Jane returned with her tea.

"What are you doing?"

"Exploring. After surgery, I want to 'know' the room."

"Find anything?"

"Yah, watch this!" I made the bed longer. "Ta da!"

"It doesn't take much to entertain you, does it?"

"No, but now I'm afraid I have used up all my strength for the day and must now pass out in bed." With a flourish, I fell into bed, and Jane helped lift my giant swollen legs up, then I set the bed to raise my feet as high as they would go.

"Are you feeling crappy?"

"Honestly, I don't know how many more 'dry runs' I have in me. If this one doesn't work out, I seriously doubt I'll see the end of the month. With a MELD score of 36, I have a low probability of living another three weeks. Also, the longer my liver is garbage, the more other organs and systems will suffer irreparable damage, and I become more frail to where I wouldn't survive the operation. Not to be too dramatic, but I think this is probably my last kick at the can, and to be honest, I'm a little scared of dying."

My stupid eyeballs chose that very moment to fill up with water.

Jane nodded solemnly; then, the nurse popped her head in. "Is everything okay in here?"

"Yes," I croaked, "I was momentarily feeling sorry for myself."

"We get a lot of that, but we are the best transplant team in Canada, so you are in expert hands."

I nodded and received some ice chips as a reward.

And so, as six times before, I waited while keeping a wary eye on my phone, ready to dash my hopes for a transplant. Jane did her best to distract me with small talk and words of encouragement.

They scheduled the surgery for around 3pm, and as 2pm waned, my fears grew minute by minute.

Suddenly, there was a flurry of activity. The operation was on, and a pair of medical staff appeared in scrubs to take me to the OR. The floor nurse appeared and helped me onto a gurney and told Jane she had to take all my stuff with her, because on this floor there were no lockers. I was still in shock and was afraid to draw any attention to myself, just in case they looked at the chart and realized they had the wrong patient.

Jane had secured a wheelchair to carry my backpack, clothes, purses, and phone out to her rental car. "Are you okay with all that stuff?"

"Yes, don't worry about me; worry about yourself. Good luck!" Jane gave me a big hug, then trundled down the hall. They were still hooking me up to stuff when Jane disappeared around the corner. A few minutes later, and I was on my journey down to the OR.

As they wheeled me down the hall to the elevator, my kaleidoscope of butterflies returned. My anticipation and nervousness left me speechless, fearing a last-minute cancellation of the surgery.

Once down in the OR prep-room, the anaesthetist had me answer some questions and assured me all would go smoothly. "Fear not!" The anesthesiologist gave me a mild sedative to calm my nerves, and a short time later, they wheeled me into the operating room.

With the help of two nurses, I transferred over to the operating table and made myself comfortable. Sam, Bec's son, underwent heart surgery; the poor positioning of one leg restricted his blood flow. This resulted in permanent nerve damage, and with that story fresh in my mind, I was very careful to make sure all my extremities were free and comfortable. Also, worrying about my body position distracted me a bit from the overwhelming number of machines and various syringes filled with potions, all laid out in rows. The bright, cold operating room made me feel very exposed, even though I wore a gown.

Everyone told me I would do fine. Then, the anesthesiologist placed a mask over my nose and mouth, saying,

"Okay, Penny, take a few deep breaths."

I closed my eyes against the bright lights and took a deep breath.



Wake Up



25 / 100

“Penny?...”

“Penny?...”

Why is someone calling my name? Hey wait, why are these people in my bedroom?

“Penny?”

I opened my eyes, a crack. *Wow, is it ever bright?*

“Hi there, Penny. You are in the ICU. Your operation is over, and it went well. You have a breathing tube down your throat, and we are going to take it out now, understand?”

I nodded.

“Good, I will count to three, then I want you to blow out as hard as you can. Okay?”

I nodded again.

“One, two, three... blow...”

A long curved tube rushed from my throat, and then Nurse 1 placed a small oxygen tube under my nose.

“How you doin’?”

I gave them a weak thumbs up, then coughed, wincing in pain.

“Don't talk; the surgeon is going to check you out, then we can get you a drink of...apple juice?”

I gave another thumbs-up.

The surgeon arrived moments later and had me follow a light with my eyes, checked several readouts and looked at the various tubes sticking out of me, then nodded with satisfaction.

“You did really well, Penny. How do you feel?”

Another thumbs up and a small smile were all I could manage, but that seemed adequate. After talking with the nurses for a few minutes, the surgeon left, while I drifted in and out of consciousness. Some time later, Nurse 2 arrived with a cup of something and said, “Here is some apple juice, but your throat will be sore from the intubation tube, so take small sips.”

I nodded.

Holding a small paper cup of apple juice, Nurse 2 put the straw in my mouth, and I took a few tentative sips. It burned a little, but was quite a relief to have some moisture in my mouth and throat.

With a nod from me, she said, “Enough?”

I gave her a thumbs-up, and then floated around the ICU for a bit, thriving on morphine and apple juice. Time seemed elusive in the ICU as Nurse 1 and Nurse 2 took turns stopping in to check on various readouts and give me a few more sips of juice.

Perhaps hours or even days later, a small group gathered around my bed to transfer me to the transplant-unit. Nurse 1 and Nurse 2 directed the ballet of tubes and hands to slide me over to a transport bed. An octopus of wires and tubes accompanied me on my journey, and before long I was drifting down the hallway and away from my ICU home. We all squeezed into an elevator and elevated to the 4th floor, where more people escorted me to my room. I waved goodbye to Nurse 1 and Nurse 2 and whispered, “Thank you,”

before a hazy cloud descended over my eyeballs.

The Borg Queen



36 / 100

A rustling sound woke me.

I was in the same room I had prior to surgery. I knew this because the whiteboard was listing to the left. Willing it to straighten itself had proven fruitless, so after a few minutes of failure I whirled my eyes around the room. Jane was sitting, sipping tea and reading quietly.

“Hi Jane.” I croaked. Looking up from her book, Jane smiled and said, “Finally, you are awake. I was wondering if I should go find a prince to give you a kiss.”

“No need for that,” I whispered flatly.

Jane smiled and put her book down and came to my bed and gave me a gentle hug.

“How are you feeling?”

“Okay,” I coughed and then winced at the pain.

“I must say, you have looked better. What happened to your hair?”

“I don’t know.” I said, feeling my head.

“I do!” said a firm voice from the doorway. “The OR nurse told me you were... ‘uncooperative’ under sedation during the operation.” The nurse breezed into my room. “Apparently, the surgeon grew weary of your untamed hair and tied it up in a blob with an elastic tourniquet. However, then you started pushing his hands away, and they had to put you in restraints. You were most unhelpful.”

Jane laughed. “Typical.”

“Indeed,” agreed the nurse. “I am Beth, and I will be your day nurse today.”

“What day is it?” I began, but another painful cough interrupted my question. Handing me a pillow, Beth said, “Hold this tight against your tummy when you cough, because we don’t want those stitches to pull out now, do we?”

No, indeed, we do not want that!

“You will have a cough for a few days, perhaps a week, as the residue of the anaesthetic works its way out of your lungs. Now, to answer your question, it is Tuesday, September 10th,” she said, popping open a can of ginger-ale.

“Really?” *I came in on Thursday, and I’m no mathematician, but that doesn’t seem to add up.*

“Yes, your surgery lasted 14 hours; then, we sedated you in the ICU for two days, and you were awake in the ICU for one day.” I goggled at her in disbelief, absentmindedly sipping a bit of my drink. “It felt like just a few minutes.”

“Good, that’s what we want. During the operation, we administer a medication that erases your memory to prevent post-traumatic stress.” I was still processing this as the nurse continued, “Now, we want to get your system up and running, so we are going to push you a bit, but the more effort you put in, the faster you will recover.” I nodded hesitantly. “That’s the spirit!” I smiled.

“Penny looks like the Borg Queen; what are all those tubes and wires about?”

“I’m glad you asked, Jane. She has a urinary catheter, and that will come out in a few days. That’s that bag there.” Beth said, pointing. “Next, there are 4 tubes going into Penny’s tummy. These two big ones are draining the interstitial fluids into these bags, here and here.” Jane craned her neck to see, then nodded. “The other two thinner tubes are epidurals, delivering analgesics to help control pain. Speaking of pain, I have a present for you, Penny.” Beth handed me a button and said, “This is your morphine button. When the pain becomes rough, press this and it will deliver some morphine. There is a limit and a timer so you can’t overdose or anything.”

“Can I press it now?”

“Yes, if you feel you need it.”

I pressed the button and, after a beep, a warm rush of relief swept through my body, taking the edge off of the pain. “Jane, you’ll also notice Penny’s stylish blue leg coverings. These are intermittent pneumatic compression devices to keep blood flowing so no blood clots will form, and they also help in draining the liquid from Penny’s edema. There is a central venous catheter in Penny’s neck and a PICC line, or peripherally inserted central catheter line, in her left arm. Finally, we have the standard IV in her right arm, a pulse oximeter on her finger and a cuff

continually monitoring her blood pressure. Oh, and we can remove the cannula now; I think additional oxygen is unnecessary.” Beth took off the oxygen thing in my nose and stood back, hands on hips, and said, “Yes, she does indeed look like the Borg Queen.”

“Resistance is futile.” *The morphine was making me much more comfortable.*

“Thank you, Beth, that was very informative.”

“You are welcome, Jane. If you have any needs, Penny, here is the ‘call’ button on the bed, and also here is a big clunky one with a long wire that you will use as you get to moving around more.” Beth hooked the clunky clicker on the side of the bed and said with a little bow, “Now if you have no more questions, my Queen, I do have other patients.” I gave Beth a mocking, dismissive wave, and we all laughed.

Once Beth had gone, Jane said, “I brought a few things for you.” Jane put my backpack by my pulsating legs and put my phone on my over the bed, rolling table. “Do you want anything from your pack?”

“Yes, in the front top pocket — yes, that one — there is a phone charging cable and some earbuds.” Jane pulled those out and laid them beside my phone. “Also, in the pocket on the left is a headband with headphones, and on the right is my Kobo.”

“That’s it?”

“Yup, that should keep me entertained.”

Jane returned my backpack to the floor by the visitor’s chair and said, “I think I’m going to go find some tea and make a few phone calls. I’ll give everyone an update on your condition and maybe grab something to eat.”

“Sounds good. Thanks Jane. And thank you for being here; it’s really nice of you to make the trek up here.”

“Not a problem.” Jane waved as she left, and I pressed the morphine button to see if I was going to get lucky, then drifted off until awakened some time later by a new nurse. “Hi Penny, I’m Trudy, and I’m the night nurse. Sorry, I woke you; I just needed a blood sample.” I looked down at my arm. “No,” said Trudy, “I’ll take it from the central line in your neck. These can only stay in for a few days, but while it’s here, we can use it to take blood without the need to stick you. For the first few days, we take a lot of blood samples to make sure everything is going well.”

“So you are a vampire.”

“Indeed, I am, and that’s not all... I’m also going to check your urine output, your drainage, blood pressure, temperature, heart rate, oxygen levels, sugar levels, and weight.”

“Goodness, that’s a lot. Did you notice the crooked whiteboard?”

“Actually, I did. Tape attaches them to the glass, and it’s not holding properly, so sometime maintenance is going to stop in and fix them with new tape. You be sure to mention it being crooked; they like it when others criticize their work.” She smiled.

“Admonishment received.”

Trudy smiled, and after charting all my info on the crooked whiteboard, and just as she was about to leave, I asked, “Oh, Trudy, did you see my sister Jane?”

“Yes, she said to tell you she has gone home to your place for the night, but will be back tomorrow. You were asleep, and she didn’t want to wake you just to say goodbye.”

“Oh, sure, thanks.”

Trudy left, and a few minutes later another nurse entered, carrying a tray. She moved my phone and stuff to one side and said, “Hi Penny, I’m Linda, and I brought you another ginger-ale, cold water, and some clear broth.” My stomach gurgled. “Thank you, Linda.” She unwrapped the plastic spoon and took the lid off the lukewarm chicken broth, but for someone who hadn’t eaten for days, it smelled like ambrosia.

“Need anything else?”

“No, thank you, this is ‘sufficiently sufficient’, as me ol’ Mammy used to say.”

Linda looked a little bewildered. “I’m an acquired taste,” I assured her.

“Okay, call if you need anything.”

“Thank you.”

Linda left, and I sipped my broth,

relishing every salty drop.

A Crooked Whiteboard



40 / 100

I couldn't sleep. I slept 'funny' and had developed a sore neck.

Since I am usually a side sleeper, always lying on my back was getting a little uncomfortable. I determined the solution would be more pillows, which are always comforting to me, and comfort is exactly what I'm craving now.

Today was the first day of being a 'regular' patient by being put on a schedule, the first of which was my morning check-up by the night nurse an hour or so before the shift change at 7 am. My chart would be passed off to the day nurse along with concerns and orders from the doctor. Just after 6 am Trudy appeared, donned some gloves, and said, "Oh, you are awake. Good morning Penny I'm here to steal some blood and check your vitals."

"Terrific." I said, pressing the button to raise the head of the bed, as Trudy got some vials ready to draw some blood, still central line in my neck, this as quick and painless.

"Open?"

Trudy put the thermometer in my mouth, waited for the beep and said, "Perfect." After pressing a few buttons on the bed, she got my weight, then copied down the readouts from the monitor.

"Do you usually write on your glove?" I asked.

"Yes, it's good to take notes because I see a lot of numbers in a day, and these gloves are 'handy'."

"Clever."

Trudy smiled, then turned off my leg messaging wraps and checked my edema. "Looking good. These are draining."

"How can you tell?"

"I press them and see how long the indentation lasts. The shorter the better, and I can already see improvement from yesterday." Trudy then re-wrapped my legs, turned the machine back on, and then began looking at my two drainage containers. The containers, one on each side, looked somewhat like small squeeze boxes, with their vaguely accordion shape. Each tube ran from my belly to the top of the round container, which, because of its shape, created a very gentle syphon effect. They were half full of yellowish liquid and long red strands. "That's a bit gross looking", I said as Trudy turned one over in her hands. "The yellowish liquid is interstitial fluid that 'lubricates' your cells. It's basically plasma, and the long red strings are blood clots."

"Are they bad?"

"No, but they clog the tubes, and we occasionally have to rinse them out with saline. Not today, though; these look good." Trudy emptied both containers of liquid into a big plastic measuring receptacle and noted the amount on her glove. In the sink area, she put some of the liquid into a large vial for testing, then dumped the remaining liquid into the toilet. Next, Trudy emptied the urine from my catheter bag, noted the amount, took a sample, and dumped the rest into the toilet.

"I'm going off shift at seven, but I will be back tonight. You are healing up nicely, and your readings are top of the class." Trudy went to the crooked whiteboard and copied a few numbers from her glove to the board and asked before leaving, "Do you need anything?"

"Yes, some water and another pillow?"

"Sure, I'll let Gwen, your day nurse, know. She should be in to see you around 7:30."

"Thank you, Trudy, see you tonight."

"You bet."

After Trudy left, I thought briefly of going back to sleep, as was my habit, but I actually felt fairly awake. I enjoyed being awake more and more, so I took out my phone and started emailing family.

A tall nurse with long black hair stood at my doorway, speaking with someone in a conspiratorial tone and glancing my way. She smiled, then laughed as she entered, wagging a finger at me. "I hear you gave the surgeon a hard time, what, with your waving arms." My eyes widened as she laughed and said "Good for you! Those surgeons are too full of themselves. Oh dear, your hair IS a disaster... we will have to get someone to do something about that after you are a bit more stable."

Placing a paper cup full of ice water on my bed-tray, she said, "I'm Gwen, and I'll be your nurse today." She then marched over and erased Trudy's name, with some vigour, and wrote, in a beautiful hand, 'Gwen'. She then disappeared into the hall for a moment to retrieve a cup of medication from her cart. I gulped them all at once, and after a sip of water, I smiled up at Gwen. "Impressive." *Yes, I am rather proud of my ability to take a whole hand-full of medications all at once. I don't really even need water... it's a skill.*

"So, I see Trudy did all your blood-work and other vitals. I'm just going to check your urine output, drainage and, oh, I see a note for another pillow. You want two?"

"Yes, please."

"I'll also bring you some clear broth and jello. You are off regular food until you pass gas or better yet a bowel movement. Your digestive system has been off for quite a while and have to get that going again before it gets burdened with 'real' food. Also, it's one of the first markers of a successful operation. Tomorrow we will remove your catheter and help you up on your feet to go to the toilet. What kind of jello do you like?"

"Green."

"Decisive, I like it!" After a few more ministrations, Gwen left, just as the resident surgeon arrived.

"Hi Penny, I'm looking at your blood-work and everything looks good. Have you passed gas?"

"No."

"Okay, well, we will keep you on clear fluids at the moment."

He examined my drainage tubes, and nodded.

"How's the pain?"

"Not terrible."

"Good. We will take the catheter out tomorrow and probably the epidurals as well." I nodded, a bit worried because I didn't like the sound of having some pain meds removed. "I'll speak to the nurse about taking out the PICC line, and probably we will take out the central line in your neck tomorrow. They can get infected, and they lead directly to your heart, so we don't like to keep them for too long."

"Can the nurses take blood from my IV?"

"No, they will have to tap a new vein each time." I *really* didn't like the sound of that.

"My hands are shaking a lot, and I have a cough, is that normal?"

"Let's see? Hold your hands out." My hands danced about, and the surgeon said, "We'll keep an eye on that. It might be residual effects of the anaesthetic, and also the 'Prograf', the anti-rejection drug you are on might have to be adjusted."

I put my flailing hands under the blanket so they wouldn't be a distraction. "As far as the cough goes, hold a pillow against your tummy when you cough. It's just residue from the operation and should go away in a few days. *This wasn't new information, but I really like checking several times, with several people, just to make sure nothing gets missed.*

"We will want to get you up and standing a little tomorrow." He looked briefly at my legs and put one of my pillows under them. "These should be elevated more to help with the draining." Then he left to spread his good humour to other patients.

There was a tentative knock at the open door, and Jane came in with a bag of things she thought I might need.

"How you doing?"

"Ya, better. I still have this annoying cough, but apparently that's par for the course and it should clear up in a week or so. I still feel weak, but the nurses and surgeon tell me I'm doing well."

"Yes, I was told you are right on track."

Jane gave my arm a squeeze, then sat in the visitor's chair. She had acquired a tea on her way up from the car and sat sipping while she peppered me with questions. During my report, a young man appeared at the door with two pillows. "Hi, sorry to interrupt. I'm Ted, a nursing intern. Gwen said You wanted some pillows."

"Yes, thank you very much, Ted."

"Do you need anything else? I could open the blinds a bit and let in some sun?"

"That would be awesome, thanks."

Jane had to move out of the way so Ted could work the mechanism. It seemed rather unnecessarily complicated, but eventually, the sun streamed in, and I saw it was a lovely late summer day. We thanked Ted, who collected the bits of paper on my tray and empty cups and threw them in the garbage on the way out.

I'm uncomfortable. I began squirming and fluffing my pillows. "You need help with those?"

"Actually, yes, it's really hard to sit up, if you could jam one of these under my head and I'll cling the other one to my tummy... yes, that's perfect... thank you." *That was indeed much better. I, as the Borg Queen, could now survey my realm without neck strain.*

Jane and I resumed our conversation until lunch, when I received my broth, a ginger-ale, and green jello. "What a feast!" Jane remarked with a smirk.

"Yes, a meal fit for the Borg Queen."

"Well, since you are tucking into your meal, I think I'll head home. I'm working on fixing up your place a bit, so I may not come up tomorrow if that's okay?"

"Sure, yes, I'm very boring, I know, and I think Torquemada may visit me tomorrow and then the fun really begins."

"Yikes, I don't like the sound of that!"

"I was reading in my transplant handbook that the sooner you get up and are able to sit and walk, the better your recovery. Though today, the thought of walking is kind of frightening. What am I going to do with all my tubes?" I pressed my morphine button for emphasis.

"I have no doubt you will do your best. If you need me to bring something from home, text me and I'll bring it the day after tomorrow."

"Okay, thanks, Jane. Oh, just before you go, can you unwrap my spoon and open my pop? My hands are super shaky." I held up my hands for emphasis, and they wiggled frantically.

"Yup! Your hands? Will the shaking stop?"

"I hope so." *Being a flute player, the only music I could play right now would be very avant-garde music from the twenty-third century.* "I asked the doctor about it, and he said it's partially caused by the anaesthetic and partially my anti-rejection meds. They are going to keep an eye on it, but in the meantime I could thread a sewing machine while it's running."

"Hmm... maybe don't do that."

"Okay."

"Well, I'm off. Are you sure you don't mind my missing tomorrow?"

"Absolutely not, especially if it means renovations are being done at my house."

"Okay, well, bye." Jane bent and gave me a semi-hug and left.

I took a sip of my pop and then tried to use my spoon to propeller some broth into my mouth. It was messy, but the real challenge was the wobbling jello.

Some bounced off my bed onto the floor.

A Straight Whiteboard



48 / 100

BANG!

I woke with a start, and my eyes flew wildly around the room. Too much talk of a Borg Queen had resulted in a nightmare of being trapped on a Borg Cube. Suddenly waking up in a room filled with blinking lights and monitors was frightening, to say the least. My IV was beeping rhythmically, but that wasn't the cause of the startling sound. Trudy rushed into my room. "Are you okay, Penny? There was this crash, and I thought you had somehow fallen?"

"I'm okay, but that sound woke me up. I don't know what that bang was." Trudy turned off the IV alarm and hung another bag of something, as I scanned the room looking for a bat. No bats, but the whiteboard had fallen down. I guess the tape had finally given up.

"The Whiteboard, Trudy. It fell down. That must have been the 'bang'."

"Oh, you're right." Trudy marched over and leaned the wayward board behind the visitor's chair. She wrote a few notes on the glass door with the dry erase marker and said, "This will have to do until maintenance can figure out something that won't scare the bejesus out of us."

It was just after midnight, and though the whiteboard failure was startling, I was glad I was out of that horrible dream. I pressed the morphine button, and the resulting 'beep' gave me away.

"How's the pain?"

"Maybe a seven out of ten?"

"I can give you a couple of Tylenol if you think that might help."

"Sure, ya, I'm not too proud."

"Do you want some juice or ginger-ale?"

"Yes, some apple juice and maybe some water?"

"Of course, I will fetch those and be back in a moment."

After my drink, Tylenol, and morphine, my heart-rate had returned to normal, and I felt much better. The rest of the night was less eventful, though I was glad when the morning came because I always feel much better during daylight hours. I am definitely a morning person. I have disliked nighttime my whole life, and during my illness, I liked it even less, so I pressed the morphine button.

"Good morning sunshine,"

I was already awake when Trudy stopped in to take my morning vitals and check my fluid output. *Yuck, I was soaked. Did I pee or something?*

"Hi Trudy. I'm all wet."

"No worries, let me take a look. Oh, one of your drainage tubes fell out of the collection container. That happens sometimes. I will take your vitals and draw some blood, then we'll clean this all up."

"Sorry."

"No, it's not your fault. It must have popped out in the night, but we needed to change your bedding and gown, anyway."

When Trudy swapped out my gown, I had my first look at my tummy. It's a strange sensation to look at tubes going into your body. The drainage tubes looked like aquarium tubes, and the other two looked like flexible knitting needles. Miraculously, Trudy managed to strip the bed and make it with me lying there, usually rolling the wrong way and ending up more in the way. It felt really nice to be dry and clean, so I wasn't prepared for what came next.

Trudy betrayed me by saying, "Okay let's get you sitting on the edge of the bed." *What? Are you Mad Woman?* My expression betrayed my thoughts as she said, "No, really, it's good to get you up as soon as possible. My shift is nearing its end, and I want to be the first to see you sitting up."

Trudy had proved herself so far, so I figured I would trust her further. "Okay"

"Now, put your left hand there," pointing at the edge. "Okay, I am going to lift your legs over the left side, then I will help pull you up by your right hand. Got it?"

“Yes.” I should have suspected some ploy when Trudy took off my squishy leg things, but never put them back on.

“Okay, here we go.” After a false start of my putting my left hand in the wrong place, we tried again and with some effort, I managed to sit up. I sat there for a bit, then the trickster Trudy said, “Do you want to try to stand for a moment? ”

“Define a moment.”

Trudy took that as a yes, and rolled a walker that was conveniently hiding in the hall, set to just my height, in front of me.

Trudy locked the wheels, and as I gripped hard, she had one hand on my back and one on my right arm, she said, “Okay, push!”

My wobbly legs complained for a moment, then pushing hard, I made it. I was still hunched over, but at least I had made it to my feet.

“Excellent work, Penny.”

I stood proudly for a minute, then it was time to sit.

“Now, try to ease down, not just plop onto the bed.”

Going down was definitely easier, and I sat for a moment catching my breath, then Trudy lifted my legs, one by one, back onto the bed and put the blue compression sleeves on and turned on the message machine. I lay sweating profusely in my once dry clothes, but I was very proud of my progress.

“I think you deserve a ginger-ale and some pills for all your effort.”

I nodded as Trudy popped the top of my ginger-ale, and put in a straw, accompanied by the usual small cup of pills. After taking my morning meds, I needed some rest and was glad Gwen didn’t arrive for another while.

In fact, my next visitor was the effervescent surgical resident, who tapped me on my arm, and I jumped, surprising him. “Sorry!”

“No, no, sorry, I’m incredibly jumpy, and I had headphones on, so I was lost in listening to music.”

“Oh. Your blood tests are looking good, and your fluid outputs are fine. Have you passed gas?”

I bet he wins all the girl’s hearts with such talk.

“No.”

“No matter. I hear you stood today.”

“Yes.”

“That’s good progress. I think we will take the epidurals out today and the PICC line and the central line.”

Gwen was in the hall, so the doctor went out to the hall to tell her his orders.

“Good morning, Penny. I hear you went for a walk today.”

“Well, not really, I just stood up.”

“That’s good. The doctor wants me to take those epidurals out today, but I’m going to need help, so I’ll do it after lunch. Speaking of lunch, have you passed gas today?”

“Smooth segue, Gwen,” she snorted. “I’ll take that as a no.”

“No, but I wish I would. I’m tiring of broth and jello.”

“I’m sure you are. That’s another reason we want you up on your feet or at least sitting ASAP. It will get your entire system moving again, and then you can eat regular food. Your pain meds cause constipation, but we are giving you Lasix to help reduce your edema and a laxative to get that digestive system of yours working.”

“Won’t the Lasix make me pee a lot?”

“Sure, yup.”

“Well, if you take the catheter out, I’ll have to get up and go to the toilet a lot.”

“Your point?”

“Oh, I see your evil plot that will get me up and moving a lot.”

“Saw right through us, you did.”

I laughed.

“What’s up with that whiteboard on the floor?”

“It fell down and woke everyone on the ward up last night.”

“Well, I’m calling maintenance.”

Happy to have sent Gwen on another quest, I now could enjoy my broth and jello in peace. *Speaking of which,*

where are my broth and jello.

I spoke with Jane briefly, Bec, longly, chased my Jello around the bed and slept for some time.

In the early afternoon sometime, Gwen and another nurse I didn't know stood on either side of my bed, and there were scissors, gauze and a few other simple implements lying on a tray on my blue legs.

"Hi Penny, this is Nicole, and she is going to help me take out those epidurals."

"Sounds fun."

"I'm sure it will be."

"Okay, Nicole, you do the one on the left, and I'll do the right. Clean the area with disinfectant."

"Does she need numbing?"

"No. You don't, do you, Penny?"

"No, I don't have any feeling on my tummy."

"That will come back with time, but right we can use that to our advantage."

I watched in fascination as Gwen and Nicole each wrapped disinfecting wipes around each tube, where they entered my body, then pulled with the other hand. Like unsheathing a sword. The long tubes just kept coming, almost like a magician pulling handkerchiefs from their sleeve. With the tubes over a foot long finally removed, Gwen and Nicole applied pressure and then covered the holes with taped gauze.

"Do I need stitches?"

"Nah, these holes will close up in no time."

Nicole gathered the long tubes up into a bag and deposited into the hazardous materials bin, and then Gwen said, "That wasn't so bad, eh?"

"Not at all; it was quite fascinating."

"Indeed."

"Now let's take out that PICC line."

This procedure was not nearly as interesting, but actually more painful than removing the epidurals. It wasn't excruciating in a cutting sort of way, but left a dull, lingering throbbing that reminded me of the feeling in my wrist after my angiogram. It was most unpleasant.

"Are you taking out the central line in my neck?"

"No, we need to draw a lot of blood for a few days, and we don't want to poke you when we can take samples from the central line. It can safely stay in for a few more days."

"Well, that sounds good to me."

"Have you passed any gas?"

"No, not yet." I was seriously thinking of lying and saying I had, just so I could get some real food, but then I would just be hurting myself.

"When I do, you will be the first to know."

"Okay, good. Do you need anything?"

"No, I'm good, thanks."

Gwen nodded as she picked up the tray off my legs, and she and Nicole left.

A strange man came in, mumbling to himself as he picked up the whiteboard and nodded. Putting the board down, he left, only to return a moment later with a level and some tape.

"I'm Ben, and I hear you have been complaining about my work," he said sternly.

"I, uhm."

He laughed and said, "That tape we used was crappy, but I've got super sticky stuff, and this will hold. If it doesn't, I'll buy you a beer." *Strange bet to have with someone recovering from a liver transplant.*

"Uhm, okay."

"I also hear you are a stickler for things being straight, so I brought my trusty level." He held it aloft like Excalibur.

"Okay,"

He smiled and got to work putting up the whiteboard, straight this time, then pulled down on it a few times to prove its resilience.

"Thank you."

“No worries. Just don’t sick Gwen on me again... that woman is frightening,” he said, indicating the door with his eyes. There in the doorway stood Gwen.

I laughed.

She snorted, and Ben left with a wink.

A Difficult Night



40 / 100

It wasn't yet midnight, but already, sleep was elusive.

They had taken my morphine pump and replaced it with oral painkillers, opioids of some kind, but my allowance of them was meagre. I lay for a long time, sweating and itching, until I finally relented and rang the nurse.

"Hi Penny, do you need something?"

The pain and itching were driving the nurse's name from my head. "Uhm, yes, the pain is... challenging?"

"I hadn't heard it put that way. Do you need something?"

"Yes."

"Let me look and see what I can give you."

She disappeared into the hall to look at her computer. While she reviewed my chart, I looked at the whiteboard and saw her name, "Ellen."

"Sorry to bother you, Ellen, but the pain is becoming kind of alarming."

"Well, I can give you Tylenol and some gabapentin to take the edge off."

"Anything you can do would be great."

The pain and itching were still consuming my thoughts hours after the meds should have done something. I struggled to reposition myself in bed, managing only slight shifts to either side. Laying there on my back, lights blinking, things beeping, thinking I perhaps would go mad.

It was clear I would not get any more 'chemical' relief, so I put on my headband-headphones and played 'the sound of rain.' As I listened, I thought about sleepy nights of my childhood listening to rain, feeling safe, and snug. I thought about days being caught in the rain and laughing as my brother and I ran for cover. I thought of sitting watching the rain tap against the window as I read a story to my son. Eventually, I lost myself in comforting memories, and with moist eyes, I drifted off to sleep.

"Penny?"

I woke with a start, my headband-headphone twisted so one speaker was playing the sound of rain into my right eyeball and the left playing to the top of my head.

"Huh yup?"

"Sorry to startle you; it's time to take your morning vitals. Open?"

A thermometer was shoved in my mouth as I lay there in my wet bed, all akimbo, pillows and blanket intermingled with tubes.

"Looks good. How are you feeling?"

I just looked at Ellen, with my headband-headphones having slipped over one eye.

She nodded and said, "I see you are wet... Oh, your right drainage tube fell out." "How's the pain?"

"Bad."

"Well, after I finish with your vitals, I will get you some pain relief."

As promised, I got the painkillers a few minutes later, and the morning sunshine streaming in the window and along with the pain relief made my long and difficult night melt away like morning fog,

and then I farted.

Live Woman Walking



52 / 100

Finally, I had passed gas, and my reward would be ‘real’ food.

I had visions of a hamburger, or maybe pizza. *Oh, some fish and chips would be excellent!* Instead, I got yogurt and an energy drink. I was very disappointed, but the nurse told me I had to work up to a more substantial fare.

After I had stuffed myself with a drink and a yogurt, it was time for the daily festivities to begin. First on the agenda was a visit by two surgical residents, who discussed my progress sans my input.

“I think we should have the nurses take out the central line today.”

“Yes, I put it on the chart yesterday, but it didn’t get done. I will speak to them again. How about the catheter?”

“I see she can sit up and stand, so yes, that should come out today.”

“Okay, I’ll speak to the nurse about that as well.”

“Other than that, her enzyme levels are good and...” he bent over and looked at my tummy. “Yes, the incision is healing well. The right drainage tube needs to be cleaned.” The other doctor concurred, and that was added to my chart.

After congratulating each other, they left.

Next, Tanya, today’s day nurse, took my vitals again, and when she looked at my right drainage container, she shook her head, saying, “This is clogged and the tube has fallen out again. I’m going to find another container,” and after jerry-rigging the tube to the container with some surgical tape, she left in search of a replacement.

I took this opportunity to email a few people, including Jane.

Email:

Hi Jane, can you bring some adult diapers when you come? There is a box of them on the top shelf in my bedroom closet. They are taking my catheter out today, and my bed is already wet because of the drainage; I don’t want to add urine to the mix.

Thanks, penny

When Tanya returned, she had a new drainage container on a tray with a huge needle and some bottles of something.

“I have to drain the tube and rinse it out with saline because it’s full of blood clots. After I do that, I’ll replace the container, and you should be good to go. I’ll drain the left tube as well, though that container is fine.”

Relieved to find out that the huge needle was not meant for an injection, I sat up to watch. The procedure was pretty simple. Tanya would inject some saline into the tube, then let it run back out, bringing long blood clots and other detritus out with the liquid. Once the tube was sufficiently clean, the tube was re-inserted onto the container nipple. *That’s how I would attach the pump back when I had an aquarium. I hoped this process was more successful than I had been with my fish. Most times, I gave them too much food, which led to their premature demise and then floating to the surface.*

The left drainage tube was much less clogged, and I supposed that was because the liver is on the right side, but I forgot to ask.

After that, it was time to take out the catheter. Tanya did that in just a moment, and I hardly noticed. My blue leg ‘squeezers’ were removed, and Tanya helped me sit up. It was still an ordeal to do so, but much easier than yesterday. While I sat, Tanya stripped the bed and brought a walker in for me to stand, taking that opportunity to put fresh sheets on the bed. *My phone dinged, indicating a new email had arrived.* I sat again and put on a fresh gown, was helped into bed and the blue leg ‘squeezers’ were again activated.

“Now, when you have to use the washroom, use the buzzer and someone will help you over to the toilet. Don’t try to walk on your own because a fall right now could be extremely dangerous. You are on Lasix to help drain your edema, so you will have to use the toilet a lot, but again, call someone every time.”

I nodded, and Tanya gathered the remnants of my tube cleaning and threw them in the various receptacles. “Thank you,” she nodded left.

Picking up my phone, I saw the email was from Jane.

Email:

Hi Penny,

I hope your night was good. I'm in the midst of putting in a bidet and want to finish. Is it Okay if I don't come up to the hospital today? I really want to get this done.

Jane

Email:

Hi Jane, sure, no worries. It's pretty boring up here, I know. They took out my catheter today, and I'm starting to stand a bit. Who knows, the next time you see me, I may be dancing a jig.

Good luck with the plumbing and thanks.

penny

After a delicious lunch of a creamy soup, ginger-ale, pudding, and an energy drink, I was ready to try out my legs, so I buzzed a nurse.

Tanya appeared moments later. "Bathroom?"

"Yes."

"Okay then..." Tanya busied herself with my blue leg 'squeezers' "Let's get these off your legs, and I'll help you swing your legs over the edge. Tanya got the walker, which had now become a permanent addition to my room, locked the wheels and helped me stand. It took a moment for Tanya to move tubes around, and with a drainage container pinned to each hip and the IV pole in tow, we slowly shuffled to the toilet. *I think I look like a gunslinger from some dystopian future, using my various tubes as weapons to destroy any mutant in my path.*

There was a plastic cup in a holder in the toilet. "What's with the cup?"

"We still have to monitor your urine output, so after you go to the bathroom, don't flush. A nurse will record your output, then pour the contents into the toilet and flush."

Tanya helped me position myself on the toilet, then closed the curtain, giving me at least a brief illusion of privacy, and I relieved myself. The burning ammonia element of my pee was gone, and I almost wept with relief. It was a small thing, but it made me feel like my body was trying to be normal again.

After I finished, I washed my hands in the little sink, then Tanya led me, my rolling IV pole, and some errant tubes in a little parade back to my bed. I arranged my pillows; she arranged my tubes and blood-pressure cuff. Tanya recorded my urine output on a chart and flushed the toilet. She discarded her gloves in the door receptacle, then with a few squirts of hand sanitizer, disappeared.

That was quite an ordeal for something so simple, but I think I accomplished a lot today.

My guts were really waking up... I gurgled and percolated all day. Still only gas, but I definitely felt my system getting ready to do something... dramatic. At mealtimes, other patients were getting nice smelling things, I was still looking at my meagre assortment of jello, broth, yogurt, and drinks.

I could so go for a peppercorn steak, with that crunchy crust and juicy pink interior. Perhaps some fries with gravy? Crusty rolls, warm from the oven, with melting butter. Stuffed crust pizza with pepperoni, onions, and mushrooms. Crispy battered cod and crunchy coleslaw and for dessert? Chocolate or cherry cheesecake, or maybe a chocolate sundae with warm brownies and lots of whipped cream.

I looked at my green jello, and my stomach gurgled in protest.

"Time for an ultrasound," said the nurse, closely followed by a cheerful ultrasound technician walking his pet machine.

"Is there a problem?"

"No, not at all; we just need a quick look to make sure the surgeon didn't forget a wrench or something."

I must have looked startled. "Medical humour!"

"Oh... sure."

The technician rolled the machine over and said, "This will only take a moment, and I will be gentle."

"Okay"

He arranged my blankets for privacy, then lifted my gown up a bit to expose my tummy. He was very sparing

with the gel and avoided running over my stitches. After a few minutes of scanning this way and that, he wiped off the gel and said I looked okay. He then left. The nurse gave me a better cleaning, changed my gown, and left as well. *Something seemed fishy, but in my current state I couldn't investigate further.*

Later in the day, a surgeon stopped by to see if his orders had been followed. I felt like I had been inadvertently drawn into a conspiracy when he noticed the central line in my neck was still in place. He told me again why that needed to come out, and I nodded along with his reasoning, but also knew why the nurses were stalling. To be honest, I favoured the nurses' stance because I had never feared needles, but in the past few years of constant poking made me change my mind. The thought of having blood drawn several times a day was making me nervous. To add insult to injury, the meds I was taking wreaked havoc with my insulin production, so my levels were checked many times a day. My fingertips were becoming quite sore, and I didn't want my hands and arms to suffer the same fate.

Eventually, the doctor tired of explaining the need for the central line to be removed and moved on to the drainage tube. That seemed to please him, and he went away satisfied.

Tanya arrived with a lovely bouquet of flowers. She was very impressed and spent some time arranging them by the window. Handing me the card, she beamed as I read.

Dear Pen,

I can't tell you how happy and relieved I am that you finally got a new liver. Vick helped me pick out these flowers, and I hope they brighten your room and raise your spirits.

With all the love in the world,

Dad

I smiled at Tanya, and I think not only did it brighten my day, but I think she enjoyed bringing me something happy. The flowers made my room smell amazing, and with a smile on my face, I looked down at my tray of broth and yogurt.

"The flowers are lovely, but this meal is the very definition of the opposite of lovely."

"Sorry, Pen", she said, winking, having just heard my pet name. "Here's a question for you... Pen." *This is going to get old fast.* "Shoot."

"All the other patients have their TVs on, some all the time, day or night, yet you haven't once turned yours on. Why?"

"Oh, that's easy. I don't like TV."

"Why not?"

"I'm afraid the answer is boring."

Tanya laughed and said, "No, really why?"

"No, that is the answer... it's Boring, with a capital B. Also, I know a lot of people find a TV on in the background soothing, but I feel like its sort of poking me and bothering me or trying to convince me to believe this or that, or buy something. To me, it's like walking through an open market with people waving things and shouting. It simply bothers me."

"How do you keep up with the news?"

"I find the news generally upsetting, but I do watch YouTube and read Blue Sky. When I do, though, I watch or read with intent; it's not just background. I don't 'second screen' movies or TV. That being said, I do read a ton of books and listen to music, so I'm not 'unaware' of world events, just not that interested in the gossip of the day."

"Oh, and also I can't find the clicker."

Tanya laughed and said, "We have more at the desk; do you want one?"

"No, really, I'm good."

What Day is It?



54 / 100

Once, I had prided myself on my sense of day and time.

I had scoffed at people who needed alarms for simple tasks, like boiling eggs or going to an appointment. Excuses like “My alarm didn’t go off” were anathema to me, and those that couldn’t tell what day of the week it was without referencing a calendar were, in my view, suffering from a neurological impairment.

Then I had a 14 hour operation and was put in a coma for 2 days and, like shaking an ‘Etch A Sketch’, my day and time ability had been erased. Even if I looked at the date on my phone, it was like reading Sanskrit and just didn’t register. I was pondering this when my bowels suddenly woke up. Desperately, I pressed the button to call the nurse. *Hurry, hurry, hurry!*

“Hi Penny.”

“I have to go to the bathroom, DESPERATELY!”

“For a bowel movement?”

“YES!”

Brenda, today’s day nurse, put on some gloves and then went to the toilet to remove the cup insert, discarded her gloves, donned new ones and moved my walker beside the bed. In my desperation, this seemed to all happen in slow motion.

After unwrapping my leg “Squeezers” and helping me sit up, I braced myself against the walker and hoisted myself to a standing position. My two drainage containers were quite full and, pinned as they were, felt like weights just to make walking that much slower. Brenda arranged my tubes and IV pole, and finally we were off to the toilet. I wanted to sprint, but my legs had other ideas, so after a slow walk to the toilet, I was lowered; the curtain was drawn and I let go.

Dear God, what have I wrought!

“You okay?”

“Yup,” I said in a tiny voice as the carnage continued.

Eventually, I finished and said, “Uhm... should I flush?”

“No, I have to check the colour and consistency.” *So, the embarrassment continues.*

“I don’t envy you.”

“At least you made it to the toilet. Many don’t.” *I wanted to weep for poor Brenda, but I was too weak for that, in fact...* “Uhm... I can’t really wipe myself... uhm.”

“Yes, that’s normal. I’ll do it.”

“You really do get all the glamorous jobs, don’t you, Brenda?”

She laughed and drew back the curtain. I held on to the walker while Brenda checked my donation to the sewer system and wiped me down like a newborn. After a vigorous hand wash for both Brenda and me, we journeyed back to the bed. I felt much lighter, and after Brenda emptied my two drainage containers, I practically floated.

“Thank you **very** much Brenda, I can’t tell you how much better I feel.”

“I’m glad. I’ll note that on your chart, and you know what that means?”

“Real Food!”

“Real food, yes.” She left, and I lay there, letting my flowers battle the toilet for smell supremacy.

“Penny?... Hi Penny, I’m Kristen. I’m one of the physiotherapists.” I was really just dozing and had hoped she wouldn’t notice me.

“Hi,” I said, my ruse discovered.

“Hi. I read in your chart that you are progressing well, so today we are going to start having you walk a bit and sit in the chair.” She indicated the visitor’s chair and, with no comment from me, she rolled the walker beside my bed. Kristen removed my ‘blue leg squeezers’ and said, “Can you lift your legs onto the floor without help?” I held a pillow against my tummy and rolled so that my legs more ‘fell’ onto the floor.

“Good. Sit up?”

Again, I did that on my own.

With the walker locked, I stood, making sure the tubes were not a problem, when another person appeared at the door. This is Jen, a physio trainee, and I've asked her to help.

"Hello", I said, still holding onto my walker for dear life.

"Okay Jen, you bring the IV pole with us, and I'll hold the lines and go beside Penny to make sure she doesn't fall. Oh, first, Jen, take the blood pressure cuff off, and Penny, you can leave the pulse oximeter on your table. Great! I think we are ready to go. Ready Penny?" *I doubt very much whether my readiness has anything to do with it.* "Sure."

"Here is a mask for you, Penny. Whenever you are out of your room, you need a mask."

"Oh, sure, yes of course."

Kristen had to shorten the bed a little to let us past and out the door. The ward was set up like a figure eight with the nurses' station in the centre, at the top, patient rooms all on the left, physiotherapy in the centre, at the bottom and access hallways and a faux staircase to nowhere on the right. "Today, we are going to go in the lower circle, but if you get dizzy, Penny, let me know and we can cut through the physio area and get you back quickly."

Challenge accepted. There was no way on this planet I was only going halfway. So, I, with my IV pole and little entourage, walked around the circle. "Try standing up straighter." "Good, how do you feel." "Are you good for the entire circle?" "Stand up straighter." *Indeed, I will have to work on my posture because I felt protective of my wounded tummy.* "Good, that's better."

We wound up where we started, though I felt progress had been made, and now I had to pee.

"I have to pee."

"Sure, now's a good time."

Jen was dismissed, and Kristen helped me to the toilet. After relieving myself and washing my hands, I turned, expecting to return to bed, but Kristen had a surprise. "Now, we will have you sit in the chair for a bit." I looked quizzically.

"It really helps with your recovery to spend less and less time in bed, and our goal today is one walk and two times sitting in the chair. It's almost lunch, and perhaps you would enjoy sitting up to eat?"

"Sure, okay." So Jen put a pillow behind my back as I sat waiting for lunch.

"Are you okay for now?"

"Yes." *Though sitting was kind of uncomfortable because I felt a pressure on my stitches and worried that at any moment I would split wide open and spill my guts all over the floor.*

There was a place on the whiteboard for walking and sitting, so Jen marked my progress for today and left.

Luckily, my phone was on my rolling table, which was close at hand. Jen had also left me with the giant call button, which was as big as a shoe.

Email:

Hi Everybody,

I took my first walk today and am at this very moment sitting up in a chair. I'm hoping my guts don't fall out. I can now eat normal food. All is proceeding according to plan... can't talk now, the guards are coming, will update later.

Love,

penny

My lunch arrived. A veritable cornucopia of delights... vegetable lasagna, with creamy white sauce, a bun with butter, broccoli, carrot, cauliflower medley, apple slices, a chocolate chip cookie, chocolate milk, apple juice, a vanilla energy drink, and some tea with milk.

My appetite was still small, so I ate a bit of the lasagna, some veggies, a bite of the bun, the whole cookie, and chocolate milk. Unlike Jane, I've never been much of a tea drinker. I didn't touch the apple juice because I was just tired of it, but the energy drink was vanilla. I DESPISE VANILLA. *Everyone always says, "How can you hate vanilla? Everyone likes vanilla?" "It is the very definition of inoffensive."* When they came and took the tray, I said how much I hated vanilla. I think I got a little carried away, and the woman taking the tray laughed and said, "Message received loud and clear... you hate vanilla!"

"Other than that though, it was fantastic to eat again. Thank you."

“It’s a little gloomy in here; do you want me to open your blinds?”

“Oh, yes, that would be great. Thanks.”

As sunlight poured into the room, she said, “I’m Irene, and I float around the ward helping out. I don’t have a really structured role, but if you need something, I’m the one to ask.”

“Good to know.”

“For instance, would you like me to attack that hair of yours?”

“Oh yes, the surgeon, he did me wrong with this hairdo.”

“He did indeed. Are you ready to go back to bed, because it would be easier to fix your hair there?”

“Yes, my tummy is starting to hurt, so yes. First, I have to go to the washroom.”

“Yup, okay, I can help you with that.”

After relieving myself and washing my hands, back in bed, Irene said, “Would you like a bed bath to go with me fixing your hair?”

I almost cried at the offer. “Oh my God, yes.”

She smiled and said, let me just go get some stuff from supply, and I will be right back. *What a treasure! This is exactly what I need.*

When she returned, Irene had a basin, cloths, some towels, and soap. With the basin full of warm water, Irene wiped me down, avoiding my stitches, which were, curiously, covered with little butterfly like papers. “Those are part of the suturing process and will just dry up and fall off over time. Don’t pick them; they will fall off of their own accord.” *It was very relaxing to have someone talk quietly while being washed with warm water.*

“Okay, now the arduous task — your hair.”

She picked up a pair of scissors, and fear bloomed in my eyes. I had lost so much due to liver failure that the thought of losing my hair was the last straw.

“I don’t want my hair cut. A lot fell out already, and it’s thin and patchy, but I’m still not ready to be bald.”

Irene laughed and said, “I need scissors to cut the surgical tourniquet thing the surgeon used on your hair. He is a brilliant surgeon, but a lousy hairdresser.”

“Oh,” I said, casting my eyes down with embarrassment.

“I think we all know how important your hair is to you because even heavily sedated, you managed to defend your locks from the knife.”

I smiled. “Thank you for understanding.”

Irene nodded curtly and then cut the blue rubber obscenity from my hair.

“Oh Dear! I’m not even sure how to attack this? Hmm, let me see.”

My hair had matted into a solid ball, and the best approach would clearly be a sheering of my head, but with lots of hair creams and time, Irene finally got it loose enough for a thorough brushing. She couldn’t do a proper wash, but did her best with her little basin. She held up a mirror, and I beheld my countenance for the first time since the operation. “Oh my, I look... rough.” I turned this way and that, looking at my patchy hair and tube taped to my neck. “You did an excellent job with my hair, uhm... but what’s with all the balled spots?”

“I’ll answer that,” said Dr. T., from the doorway. “Your body fought a war and needed every resource to keep you alive. As your liver failed, more and more poisons built up, and you couldn’t process food, so your body had to take energy from anywhere it could. Hair is not a life and death need, so your body stopped sending precious energy to grow hair. Then the operation was another battle for your body, and again it couldn’t waste energy growing hair.”

“Will it grow back?”

“Yes, over time your body will return to normal and your hair will grow again. Sometimes it grows back differently.”

“Different?”

“Thinner, straighter, a different colour, but the patchiness should go away.”

“Sorry, I pushed your hands away in the operation.”

He laughed and said, “That’s not unheard of, especially with women and their hair.”

“Well, thank you for saving my life. It means a lot to me.”

He laughed again, and said, “That’s what I do.”

"Are you done with her?" he asked, turning to Irene.

"Yes, for now." Irene left, and the surgeon checked my vitals.

"You are doing very well, Penny, but..."

"But? I don't like that."

"Your ultrasound from the other day showed one of your bile ducts needs a stent."

"Oh."

"We go in endoscopically so we don't need to make an incision, but you need to be lightly sedated and then a stent is inserted into the duct of concern. If the bile were to leak out into your abdominal cavity, it would be bad, so this is more of a precaution. The stent is a small plastic tube that goes inside the bile duct connection, giving it strength and stability."

"Questions?"

"Nope," I said, writing furiously in my journal.

"You will be given a sheet with the procedure." He said, nodding at my journal.

"Hmm..." I said, still writing. *If I write things down, I process them better than just reading. It's the same with my theory on why reading is better than watching a movie. By reading, I take in the information at a slower speed, so it's processed better than a movie or even an audiobook. Writing is one level better than that, and especially in this day of quick, flashy videos and sensational headlines, I need to slow everything down through reading and writing.*

The surgeon continued skeptically, "The stent will have to be cleaned out of 'crud' in six months or so. It will be the same endoscopy procedure, and if the duct looks stronger, we may take the stent out at that time."

"Okay." I said quickly, reviewing my notes.

"So, when would I have this procedure done?"

"I have an OR booked for tomorrow at 8 am, so dinner for you will be clear fluids, then you will be NPO."

"Bummer."

"Here are some forms to fill out for the surgery." He produced the usual consent forms, mostly filled in, and I just had to initial and sign here and there.

"Promise me one thing," I said in a serious tone.

He nodded.

"Please don't do my hair again; you are a bad hairdresser."

He laughed and said, "No promises Penny, you do like to wave your arms about! But I'll do my best."

"That's all I ask."

Dr. T. left, however unbeknownst to me, he left a strict order for the central line in my neck to be removed. He feared infection, and it had been left in longer than he liked, so before the operation tomorrow, he wanted the nurses to remove it and remove it now.

After one more blood draw, Brenda removed the central line,

and my arms would soon pay the price.

The Stent



56 / 100

The morning brought the first blood draw of the day,

along with a prick of my finger to check my insulin levels. With no breakfast, my drainage containers were emptied, the IV was disconnected, and then my sore arms and I were wheeled down to the OR.

We whizzed down the corridors, a breeze blowing in my hair. *No, really. Take your time!* A quick trip in the elevator and there I was being presented to the surgical staff.

“Are you Penny?”

“Yes.” The surgical Resident, nodded, looking at my chart, then said, “Good, I am going to spray a numbing agent in your mouth. Open?” *The spray tasted like?.. Bananas?* Swallowing and talking immediately became more difficult, just like after a visit to the dentist.

“Okay, we will help you up and arrange you on the table.”

The OR was covered in plastic. *Was a murder was about to take place?* There was a big ultrasound machine looming over the operating table, along with several monitors. With help, I organized myself and my drainage tubes and containers onto the table. I was instructed to lie on my tummy, with my left arm down and my right arm up. I felt like I was performing “Walk Like an Egyptian” by ‘The Bangles’. “Tilt your head this way... yup... a bit more...”

“Good, okay, Penny, open? We are going to put a plastic mouth-guard in to protect your teeth.” I wasn’t sure of much after that, though I remember feeling like I was choking at one point and thought I was awake for the operation. However, I think I just needed a stronger dose of ‘forgetting’ meds.

“Penny”, I woke up some time later back in my bed in the transplant ward. A nurse was hovering around me, and Jane was sitting in the visitor's chair. My throat was sore and my mouth was still feeling numb, so a weak wave was all I could manage, though that seemed sufficient. I phased out of existence for a moment, and the nurse had reappeared, bringing a ginger-ale and ice water. Coming out of anaesthesia, I sipped my water a little. “Hi Jane,” I croaked.

“Hi Hon, I was told you were going in for a minor operation and thought you would like a friendly face when you woke up.”

“Yes, thanks.”

“I heard the operation went well, and I’ve only had time for two cups of tea before you woke up.”

“Gosh, mere moments then.”

Jane nodded and threw a brief look at the flowers. “The flowers from Dad are nice.”

“Yes.” Everyone knew my very favourite thing is fresh-cut flowers. I am afraid of dogs, allergic to cats, kill all plants, but I am good with cut flowers, because they are already dead. Perhaps I should have been a mortician.

“So what’s on the agenda for today?”

“Well,” said Jane, “I brought the stuff you asked for and a few other items, but I really want to get back to your house in a bit... I’m painting the bathroom.”

“Sure, yes, of course. I appreciate you making the trip here, but really, I’m just doing what they tell me and eating disappointing food.”

“Your hair looks better than the last time I saw you.”

“Oh, thanks; it’s a relief to have it loose again. See, they also took out my central line,” I said, turning my head so Jane could have a better look. “They tell me I’m doing well.”

“Great, can I get you anything?”

“Why yes, now that you ask. I have to pee, and you could take off the blue things on my legs and bring my walker over and help me to the toilet.”

“I can do that.”

“Apparently, if you hold the bottom button down, it will turn off my leg squeezers, then you can peel them open. They are held with Velcro.”

Free of my leg squeezers, I rolled so my legs fell off the bed as Jane readied the walker. After a pee and washing my hands, I said, “For my next trick, I want to sit in the chair to show off. You can sit on the bed or the walker,

dealer's choice." Jane chose a bed.

I sat in the chair, letting the last of my anaesthetic wear off, while Jane and I chatted. After some time, Jane said, "Well, I guess I'll go."

"Yes, of course. I think I've shown off enough for one day; can you help me back to bed?"

After making sure I was settled, and my leg squeezers were reattached, Jane collected her belongings and with a quick hug, headed home to paint the bathroom.

"Ready for a walk?" asked Kristen.

"Yup."

"We are going to go with just me. Jen is off today, and I think you don't need too much help anymore." Kristen disconnected my IV and blood pressure cuff and took off my leg squeezers. I sat up with some alacrity, the effects of the operation having worn off. Walker ready, I hoisted myself and walked with Kristen following just in case I needed help. I did the whole figure 8 and was sweating profusely as we returned to my room. I sat in my chair while Kristen reattached my IV, but my blood pressure cuff wouldn't reach and was much less necessary. Kristen left and congratulated me on my progress, while I sat like a queen, waiting for dinner to be served.

After my false start of 'normal' food from yesterday, I was looking forward to today's fare. I was glad to see the ever present cookie, *but what was this? Vanilla energy drink? This is intolerable!* The main meal was turkey with potatoes and veggies and a bun. I made a valiant attempt at eating most of my food, as my appetite was returning to some degree.

The rest of the evening was quiet and relaxing.

Today, I turned a corner and was feeling better than I had in years.

Blood and Vanilla



58 / 100

I awoke to the incessant beeping of my IV.

Laying in semi-darkness listening to the rhythmic beeping, I realized I was desperate to go to the bathroom, and also I was soaked. The call button intimidated me as I am loath to disturb others, but desperation won out and I pressed the button.

“Hi Penny, what do you need?”

“Well, the IV is beeping, and I’m all wet. I think my drainage tube came out and is leaking. Also, I have to go pee. Sorry to bug you. I can probably make it to the toilet myself, but...”

They cut me off. “Be right there!”

I ramble when I’m nervous, *but I had a lot more to say...*

Trudy appeared at the doorway. “You do go on, don’t you?”

“Sorry.”

She laughed and said, “Not at all, I’m glad you used the call button this time.”

Yesterday I tried to go to the bathroom by myself because I didn’t want to use the call button, and it ended... poorly.

She rolled the walker over and as she took off the blue leg squeezers she said, “The doctor said we are done with these.” Throwing them in the bin.

Trudy helped me over to the toilet, and while I sat there, curtain drawn, she stripped the bed and got fresh linens. When she returned, she helped me to the chair, then made the bed. Before having me change into a dry gown, Trudy checked the drainage, and the right one had indeed fallen out again. “This tube looks ready to come out. The left one should stay in, so I’m going to go get an absorbent pad and some gauze and tape. You just sit tight.”

When Trudy returned, she spread a large absorbent mat on the bed and helped me lie down. Then, Trudy pulled the plastic tube out; as with the epidurals, it looked like a magic trick. I had seen a YouTube video of someone pulling a long tapeworm out of someone, and this procedure gave me that vibe. The hole wept a few drops of liquid, but after Trudy wiped it with some gauze, it seemed pretty dry. She taped a two absorbent pads over the wound, saying, “This will have to be changed once in a while over the next few of days, but that should be more comfortable for you and you can sleep on your right side now without the fear of tangling tubes.”

“Will I need stitches?”

“No, the drainage holes will close up by themselves, though there may be a little scarring.” *What’s more scarring? I have my large Mercedes scar, so two little holes will hardly make a difference. I was never one for a bikini, anyway.*

Finally, Trudy helped me change into a dry gown, removed the large absorbent pad on my bed, tucked me in and hung a new IV of something.

“Thanks, I feel much ‘drier’”

“No problem.” With all my used parts, tubes, container, leg squeezers, and absorbent pads, stuffed into a bin, Trudy squirted some disinfectant on her hands and left.

I woke up damp. The absorbent pad covering my wound was soaked, and I had to go to the bathroom. I buzzed the nurse, but it was shift change, so I got help from a caregiver, who didn’t feel comfortable dealing with my wound. However, she did help me to the toilet and closed the curtain. Once relieved, she helped me to my chair where I could wait for the day nurse. While waiting, I created a sizable puddle beside my chair, and my stitches were throbbing a little, so I was happy to see Brenda, today’s day nurse. She changed the bedding and had me lay down on another absorbent pad, changed the dressing and gave me a new gown. *This is weird.*

“This is a weird gown. How does it work?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry, they are short staffed in the laundry, so we have to make do with what we have, and what we have are those ‘surgery’ gowns. They include snaps, which allow unsnapping while prone, reducing the need to

move the patient. Unfortunately, these are an old design that didn't work, and most of the snaps have fallen off."

"Look, I made a cape!" Holding up my creation.

"This one seems to have three armholes and a head hole... Curious."

"I don't know what to do with this one; it's like a misshapen sail with snaps in all the wrong places."

Dressed for the circus, Brenda asked, "Okay, Penny, time for the blood draw. Remind me, where was your last?"

"Here on my right forearm. I think I am running out of spots."

"Well then, your eyes are next!" *Nurse humour*. "I guess we will do your left hand."

I hate the hand ones; they hurt a lot more than the others. The blood-draws high up on my arms, opposite my elbows, are my favourite, as they hardly hurt at all. Unfortunately, my arm veins are really hard to find and like to hide from needles.

After tapping me for blood, Brenda pricked my finger for an insulin reading and left me dreaming of those halcyon days when I had a central line in my neck.

I took my pills at 8 am just as my breakfast arrived. Oh cool, I got a menu for tomorrow. I'm all grown up now. Today's fare was pretty okay, apple juice, Rice Krispies with sugar, a hard-boiled egg with salt, a bagel with cream cheese, horrible instant coffee with milk, and a *Good God, begone from my sight ye foul liquid!*.. Vanilla Energy drink? Needless to say, I ate most of my breakfast except for that offensive beverage.

I wrote on my menu, "For the love of God, stop with the vanilla drinks!" I then spent considerable time working on the perfect menu choices.

When the cleaner arrived, I apologized for the puddle. "No worries, it happens. I've seen worse." *The way he said that reminded me of the sound 'Sideshow Bob' made stepping on rakes.*

Later I sat in the chair and decided to do a walk, by myself, because my IV had been disconnected for the moment, and I was free to roam. I had been admonished once for going to the washroom without my walker and then having to call the nurse because I couldn't stand without my assistance.

Mask on, walker at the ready, I ventured forth into the hall. I did the big circle, and twice the small top circle. The staff at the nursing station all acknowledged my determination, and as I made my way back to my room, I passed the other transplant recipients, all in various stages of repair. As I passed the physio area, Kristen popped her head out and said, "Good to see you up, Penny. Do you think you would be ready to start some light exercise later today?"

"Sure, yes."

"Great, I'll stop by and pick you up around 4 pm."

"Okay... gotta run... figuratively."

Kristen smiled, which was rare, and I hurried to my room to pee. *How could a body possibly contain so much liquid?* The positive was that I was losing 'water' weight at a precipitous rate.

Good to her word, Kristen arrived at 4 pm and after a quick pee and hand wash, I was ready to work out. Kristen explained the importance of resistance exercises, especially after several years of declining physicality due to a failing liver. "Do you have weights at home?"

"No."

"You could maybe think about getting a set, but in the meantime you can also use cans of food as weights. Today, we will start you with no weights, but perhaps tomorrow, we will add a small amount, especially for arm curls."

"Okay."

We started with some arm extensions without weight and moved onto leg holds and bends, again without weight.

"The last exercise involves standing up and sitting down without help." I'll put the walker in front of you, but try not to use it unless you think you might fall. We will try 5 sit and stands. Go slowly; resistance exercises are about working your muscles, not increasing your heart-rate.

I did 6 because I'm a showoff.

"Very good. How many walks did you do today?"

"Three,"

"Good, and sitting in the chair?"

“Three.”

“Also, good, you are recovering very well. I heard you had a mishap on one of your earlier walks.”

“Oh, yeah. I was in the far hallway, near those ‘stairs to nowhere’, and my drainage tube popped out, and I trailed liquid all over the floor. I tried to stick it back into the collection container, but was having trouble. A nurse happened by and helped me get to my room and fixed my leaking pipe.”

“Well, I’m glad you got sorted out.”

“What are those stairs to nowhere for?”

“In a day or so, we will start working you on those stairs. We will show you the proper way to go up and down while you are healing, so as not to pull on your stitches.”

“Oh, okay.”

With that, I headed towards the door. “Are you alright alone?”

“Oh, sure, no problem.”

Naughty Puppy



60 / 100

“You are the scourge of the transplant-unit.”

“Nurses keep finding you wondering around, so getting your vitals and drawing blood is rather a challenge.”

“You don’t think that is on purpose? I’m hiding from you vampires.”

Tanya laughed. “Well, it’s too late to escape now,” and with an exaggerated Romanian accent said, “I want to take your blood.”

My right forearm was healed enough for another jab, and though that location wasn’t horribly painful, it would throb for days after. “Your vitals look good, and I think we will take out the other drainage tube today.” She checked the absorbent bandage on my right side, and it was just slightly damp and could wait to be changed. “How have the bowel movements been?”

“Loose and regular.”

“Good. The doctor will probably take you off Lasix today, because a lot of your edema has drained. I hear you have started an exercise program, so soon we can start thinking about discharge.”

“What day is it today?”

“Thursday, so maybe Monday or Tuesday of next week, we’ll see how you are doing?”

“I’ll let my sister know, so she can start making plans. My sister Bec is going to relieve my sister Jane and will have to know when to book a flight.”

“Will your sister, Jane, be coming up today?”

“I’m not sure, I can ask, why?”

“Both of you have to complete a ‘medication awareness’ programme before you are released.”

“A what?”

“There are worksheets in your binder and some online videos you have to watch about the medications you take and what they do along with possible side effects. We have you both here for that, so if you have questions or forget something, you are not on your own.”

“How long does it take?”

“An hour or so, but you can re-visit the online videos if you need a refresher.”

“Oh, okay, well I’ll send an email to Jane and let you know later.”

“Sure, yup. Oh, here is your breakfast.” Tanya left, and Irene brought in my tray. I looked in horror, pointed and said, “What did I do to deserve more Vanilla energy drink?” Irene laughed and took it off my tray and replaced it with a strawberry one. “The nutritionist told me to do that!”

I laughed. “Well, I’m glad she got the message.”

“She also said, You are not eating enough, so she is going to send extra food you can snack on between meals. Today, there is a turkey sandwich and an extra strawberry energy drink.”

“I’m glad we could come to some sort of accommodation.”

Irene nodded, opened my blinds and watered my flowers, while I inspected my food tray.

“Everything good?”

“Yup, sufficient sufficiency.”

“Okay, see you later.”

“Thanks, Irene.”

“Yup,” she said as she put disinfectant on her hands and left.

I ate most of my meal and put my sandwich and energy drink aside for later, then wrote...

Email:

Hi all,

I’m blowing this Popsicle stand, possibly on Monday. The doctor will let me know, but I thought a heads up would be good.

Also, Jane, I don’t know if you were planning on coming up today, but apparently we have to do a

worksheet and watch some videos about my medication before I get released. If you come up today or tomorrow, we can tick that off the to-do list.

Penny

A moment later, my phone rang. It was Bec.

“Hi, I got your email. That’s great!”

“That works?”

“Yes. Perhaps after the doctor confirms that discharge date, you can let me know and I will book a flight.”

“Sure. I see him every day, so I will be sure to ask.”

“That’s great. How are you feeling?”

“Yah, good. I had a few rough nights, but any pain is manageable, and I still get some painkillers, though they are stingy, but that’s probably good.”

“Yes.”

“I’m walking quite a bit and have started an exercise program and spend much of the day sitting rather than lying in bed.”

“That’s really good.”

“My drainage is still annoying. One tube was removed, but the wound oozes, so the absorbent pad is often wet and needs changing. The left tube is still in, but I think it may come out today.”

“That’s sounds uncomfortable.”

“Yah, the other day, the tube popped out, and I didn’t notice, and I trailed liquid all down the hall and made a puddle. I felt like a naughty puppy.”

Bec snickered, knowing all about a naughty puppy. Their family fostered a service dog puppy, but due to her... rambunctiousness, she wasn’t able to be a service dog. Bec’s family had fallen in love with Mila, so they adopted her and all her naughtiness.

“Well, speaking of naughty puppies, I have to go take Mila for a walk before she eats the couch. I’m glad to hear you are doing well, and let me know the doctor’s timeline.”

“Will do, take care, bye.”

“Hi Penny.” A familiar voice called from the doorway. I rolled over, and there was Carolyn. Raising the head of the bed, I sat up. “Hi Carolyn, it’s great to see you.”

“You too. I hear you are doing very well.”

“I am, thanks to you and the transplant team.”

“Well, you worked really hard for this, and I’m just so happy you finally got a donor liver.”

“Me too. Honestly, I was getting a little ‘dark’ there for a while.”

“I can understand that. Six dry runs is the most here at the unit. I’m glad you continually had the strength to give it your all.

“Well, thanks. Anyway, it all worked out in the end.”

“It did indeed. Well, I just wanted to stop by and see how you were doing.”

“Thanks, yes, I’m doing well.”

After Carolyn left, I started thinking about my new liver. In a strange way, I missed my old liver; we had been through so much life together. I wondered what life my new liver had been a part of before the donor died?

I hope they had had a good life and not died too young. It felt strange to think about having a replacement part that had been a part of a different person. I’m not sure how I feel about this. I’m incredibly grateful to be alive, and I’m grateful the donor and their family had been kind and generous enough to be a donor after their death, but I felt sad they had died.

Come to think of it, the six livers that were not viable each came from someone who died. I know they would have died regardless of my need. Like, it’s not like I killed them or anything. Also, if they hadn’t donated their organs, those very organs would have been needlessly destroyed after their death, and that wouldn’t have benefited anyone. This way, the people that had died, gave a last gift to the world and sort of live on, and certainly give the family some comfort in the death of their loved one.

I'm going to have to think about this some more.

Email:

Hi Penny,

I'm in the middle of something today, how 'bout tomorrow for that drug course thing?

Love,

Jane

Email:

Hi Jane,

Sure, that sounds good about tomorrow. I will let the nurse know.

Penny

"So, Doc, give it to me straight... am I ever going to leave the hospital?"

"Hmm... your numbers look good."

He looked at my drainage tube on the left and said to the nurse, "That can come out today."

"How's the pain?"

"Still annoying, especially at night, but not unbearable."

"I don't want to prescribe anything stronger, so we'll just leave that as is."

"I was told that maybe I would be getting out on Sunday or Monday?"

"Yes, probably."

"My sister has to book a flight as she is the one picking me up and taking care of me at home. So, should I tell her Sunday?"

"Yes, that sounds right."

Clear as mud.

After the doctor left, Tanya said, "Why don't we take that tube out now, before lunch?"

"Sure, sounds good. Oh, I talked to my sister Jane, and she can't come up today, but she will be here tomorrow to do that medication educational thing."

"Great. I'll let whoever your day nurse is tomorrow, I think it's Brenda, and she can bring you a laptop and the worksheets."

"Sounds good."

I moved to the chair so Tanya could put the large absorbent pad on the bed.

When she returned, after spreading out the pad, she turned to me and smiled. "That's quite an outfit you are sporting today."

"You like?" I said, standing. "It even has a cape."

"I brought you a normal gown to change into after we take out your last tube."

"No complaints from me." I said, lying on the bed.

Again, the long tube was gently pulled from my body and a few absorbent pads taped in place. Tanya also changed the pad on the other side and helped me dress in a new, clean gown. I then returned to the chair, while the bed was stripped and remade.

"It's amazing how much easier things are getting for me."

"Yes, that's really good. Are you having your lunch there in the chair?"

"I think so yes, I don't want to mess up the nice clean bed with bits of food. I'm afraid I'm still very shaky and food jumps off my spoon and fork, so it's better to be prone. Oh, heck, I meant to ask the doctor about my shakiness and if it will go away."

"It probably will. I've seen lots of people even shakier than you, and once their bodies acclimatize to the anti-rejection drugs, they are fine."

"That's comforting to hear, thanks."

When lunch came, I noted a vanilla energy drink and an extra sandwich. I added the sandwich to my other sandwich, and there was also some cheese and crackers for my snack pile. Lunch was good, though I didn't get a cookie, I got a muffin. *I was sure I ordered a cookie.* The entrée was correct however, chicken and rice with a side salad. I had given up on tea and coffee and just ordered a small carton on milk.

After lunch, I watered my flowers, went to the washroom, and then back to bed for a nap. Several hours later I was awakened for some blood-work and my bed was wet again, as the absorbent pads were not as absorbent and as hoped. Tanya changed my pads, bedding, and gown once again, then I decided to go for a walk. I did the loop three times, then went back to my room to sit and read for a bit. Kristen arrived some time later, and we went to the physio room to exercise.

The physio room was full today. There was my neighbour on the ward and a woman I had seen down in ICU, so I supposed we were all about the same stage of recovery. *Time to show off!* Okay, my neighbour was way better than me in all thing's leg. He even had weights on his legs to do the leg-lifts, *impressive*. I think we were about tied on arm exercises, though again he had weights, so I guess I had to give the win to him. But... I was way better at standing up unaided, and as everyone knows, that's the most important exercise. The woman mostly just sat and cried. Apparently, she was struggling with the psychological aspect of receiving a transplant. Coming close to death, going through so many tests, and rejections, coupled with the existentialist questions about life and having part of another person in you, does play on your mind.

“Look at me, I can sit and stand better than everyone!”

All About Drugs



60 / 100

Friday arrived with a visit from Brenda the Vampire.

After taking my blood and my vitals, she peeled off the blood-pressure cuff and said,
“Now, I have a challenge for you.”

Intriguing.

“As you know, you will be on the anti-rejection drug for the rest of your life. You will also be on a lot of others, at least for the foreseeable future.”

“Right.”

“You have to be able to recognize the drugs and stick to a very strict schedule, so your body doesn’t reject the new liver.”

“Right.”

“The challenge is, I’m going to mix the drugs you take with ones you don’t. You have your binder with the medications you need with pictures of them. What I want you to do is pick out the ones you take and put them in this dish and the ones you don’t take in this dish.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes to check, then you can take your meds.”

This sounded simple, but I actually got confused a bit and had to refer to the pictures more than once. Eventually, however, I got everything sorted, and when Brenda returned, she said, “Let’s see how you did?”

“Good, yup, you take those.”

I fumbled with them for a minute and finally relented, saying to Brenda, “I’m sorry, my hands are too shaky to unwrap these pills from their packaging.”

“Of course.” Brenda unwrapped the pills with a practised hand and handed me the little cup of pills.

“While I’m here, do you need your pads changed?”

I nodded with a mouth full of pills, took a sip of water and said, “Sadly, yes, they are both soaked.”

“I’ll change them, then get one of the caregivers to change your bedding and give you a new gown.”

“One of those crazy gowns?”

“Not yet, but laundry is down today because of staff shortages and so you may once again be left to create your own outfit.”

“I’ll make a cape again. I’m good at capes!”

“That’s the spirit! Now, let’s change those pads.”

Sitting in my damp gown, there was a timid knock at the open door and, looking up from my eReader, I saw a very nervous-looking guy, who, to my old eyes, looked to be 12.

“Hi?”

“Uhm, yah, hi., I’m Roger.”

Well, that clears that up then.

“Uhm, here is a gown, uhm, here is some bedding.”

He put both on my damp bed and left.

I put the gown on and sat back in my chair. *I don’t think I’m up for stripping a bed and making it up.* So, I resumed my reading.

“Hi, Penny”, said Irene a while later, carrying a tray of food. Setting it down, she said, “Do you need anything else?”

“Well, Roger stopped by and delivered that bedding, but didn’t make up the bed. Normally, I would do it myself, but I’m afraid of pulling stitches or falling or something.”

“Of course,” said Irene, and she began to strip the bed. “Roger is rather... shy, and between you and me, I’m not sure this is the right vocation for him.”

I smiled and picked at my breakfast while Irene made up the bed. I added the extra sandwich and peanut butter and crackers to my growing pile of ‘snacks’.

“All done.”

“Great, thanks, Irene.”

“Are you going back to bed after breakfast?”

“Nah, I think I’ll go for a walk, then sit and read some more.”

“Whatcha reading?”

“*The Old Kingdom* quadrilogy by *Garth Nix*. It’s a ‘YA’ fantasy series that my son liked when he was young. It reminds me of happier times, way back before I got sick.”

“Nice. Do you read a lot?”

“Yah, well, I used to. Maybe a book or two a week, back in the day, but since my liver failure, I read less and less. Practically nothing for a year or so. That’s why I’m starting off with some light reading. I think it’s too early for *War and Peace*.”

“I like reading, but never seem to find the time.”

“I find the time all right, but these days it makes me sleepy, so my progress is rather slow.”

Irene smiled and nodded, sanitized her hands and left.

After some food and a walk, I was ready to return to bed and listen to some music. Kristen from physio had other ideas. “Hey, Penny, do you want to do some stairs today?”

“Honestly, not really. I just came back from a walk, and I’m all tuckered out. Also, my sister is coming today, and we are going to do that medication course.”

“Okay, I’ll let you off today, but tomorrow for sure. I’m not on, but I know Jen is, and I will remind her to remind you to do the stairs.”

“Yah, okay.”

“I still expect you sometime today to pop in for some resistance work.”

“Sure, but I will do that after the drug thing.”

She nodded and left, so I dozed for a while and before I knew it, it was lunchtime.

I was in the middle of lunch when Jane arrived.

“You want a sandwich or some crackers with peanut butter? I have plenty.”

“Hi hon, no, aren’t you supposed to be eating them?”

“Well, yah, but my appetite isn’t really at full throttle yet.”

“Hmm...” said Jane distractedly, moving my various fashion attempts off the chair. “What are all these clothes?”

“I’m starting a new fashion trend... I actually, think my cape makes me look rather stylish. It’s also a very functional accessory for my walks because it covers my bum.”

“You are certainly something... though I’m not positive it’s stylish.”

I smiled as Jane continued. “It’s actually nice to see you getting your sense of humour back. You were becoming... dark, there for a bit. It’s nice to see my kooky little sister again.”

That brought a tear to my eye.

“Thanks. Now that I’m ‘repaired’ I’m thinking of opening a malt shop, where I can make the milkshakes simply by holding the cup.” I held up my shaking hands for emphasis.

“Yup, Kooky.”

Jane had her tea and didn’t really want any of my snacks. I ate some of my lunch, but lunch was a turkey sandwich, and I already had plenty of those. I did get my cookie, so lunch was a draw.”

Some time later, Irene rolled a cart into my room with a laptop. “Brenda asked me to bring this to you, so you guys can do the medication course. Brenda will be in in a few minutes to get you started.”

“Thanks, Irene.” Turning to Jane, I said, “This is Irene. She keeps my flowers fresh and my hair beautiful.”

“Nice to meet you, Irene. I’m Jane. I’m Penny’s sister.”

“Well, Jane, you have your hands full with this one.”

“Don’t I know it.”

Irene laughed, took my tray, and left after rolling her eyes in my general direction.

Brenda popped her head in and said, “I’ll be with you two in a minute. We are crazy busy for a few minutes as two new patients were just sent up from ICU, and we are understaffed today.”

“No worries,” I said to the back of a retreating Brenda.

“How are the ‘renovations’ going?”

“Good, I really hope you don’t mind my... aggressive redecorating.”

“No, go crazy.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. It’s actually, fun to have carte blanche, I feel like a designer in ‘This Old House’ or ‘Trading Spaces’. Since you may be getting out on Sunday, I probably will stay home tomorrow and finish the renovations.”

“Sure, yes, of course, though you will be missing my ascent up the ‘grand staircase’.” Jane laughed, “Is that what they call going up 5 steps around here.”

“Hey, don’t knock it, 5 steps sounds pretty ‘grand’ to me.”

When Brenda arrived, I had drifted off, and Jane was just back from getting a tea in the cafeteria. “Sorry, sorry, busy, busy.”

I sat up, and Jane put down her tea.

“Penny, why don’t you sit in the walker beside Jane there, so you can both see the screen.”

“Sure, I’ll just have a quick pee.”

“Do you need us to leave?”

“No, I’ll pull the curtain.”

Brenda and Jane readied the computer and work sheets and after a thorough hand washing, I joined the class.

“So, each of the videos is about 10 minutes long, and there are 5 of them. You can break them up over multiple days, or just go through them all now. On the worksheets, you can see there is the URL for this webpage, and you can view it anytime if you want to review it later.”

“Pretty clear,” said Jane, and after Brenda left, we started our course. All the videos started with the same introduction, and Jane and I would make fun of that, but once it got into the actual content, it was mildly interesting. I think Jane was more interested in the videos than I was, because laying in the hospital day after day had steeped me in so much medical information I was a bit overwhelmed. I had even taken a break from writing in my journal, which was kind of stupid, since now was the time for useful information.

I felt like a marathon runner, having crossed the finish line, forestalling cramping up by still moving around. I knew I still had a long way to go, but the journey had been so long and arduous, I wanted to think about anything but medical information.

After we finished our course, I noticed Jane had taken copious notes in my journal for me, and we had the worksheets. I felt ready to be released into the world, or at least recuperate at my newly renovated home. Once Jane left, I felt it was time to go do some resistance exercises. “Oh, good you’re here.” said Kristen, looking up from her desk. Rifling through papers, she came to mine and said, “Okay, I see you did 10 of everything, let’s see if you can push it a bit.”

I did 15 reps on everything, and even made 20 sit and stands. There was nobody else in physio at the time, so my competition was with myself... I won.

“Good work, Penny. I am off this weekend, so if you go before I see you again, take care. She then handed me some workout sheets. Do these resistance exercises for 10 minutes a day to build your muscles back up, and you will do fine.”

I gave Kristen a little hug and headed back to my room.

“I don’t know what to do with all these ‘snacks’ I said to the nutritionist.

“Eat them?”

“Believe it or not, I am trying.”

“Sure, but you really need protein. Your body has been through a lot, and protein is basically building material. It’s like building a house with no lumber.”

That metaphor didn’t really speak to me, so I re-framed it. “You mean like trying to sew a dress without material?”

“Yes, you absolutely need more protein. I don’t send the snacks for fun, you need the protein.”

“Hey, I have noticed my meal order sheets have sometimes been altered, is that you?”

“Yes, it is, Penny. You order too many things with carbs and sugar. Even the protein drinks are too high in sugar, you would be better off with ‘real’ protein. Meat, fish, eggs, yogurt, cheese, and some leafy greens for fibre.”

“Sure, but I’m not super rich, and all those things are more expensive than rice and bread and other carbohydrates. I will do my best, and I like protein-rich foods, but “Gimme some monaiy...”

The nutritionist looked at me quizzically, “Not a big ‘Spinal Tap’ fan, I see.”

“Well, do your best.”

The nutritionist gave up on me and left.

As Friday started, so it ended: Ellen, tonight’s vampire, took some blood, checked my vitals,
switched off the light, and left.

Stairs To Nowhere



63 / 100

The night was long,

partially due to being weened off of pain medication, my sore arms from all the blood-letting, and the constant wetness of my leaking tube holes. At midnight I could get another dose of Tramadol and a couple of Tylenols, so I lay there in my perpetual dampness willing the clock to speed up.

I buzzed the nurse.

“Hi Penny, what do you need.”

“Some pain meds and my pads are soaked again.”

“Okay, be there in a minute.”

I got up and went to the washroom.

Ellen appeared with a little bag and some tape and gauze.

“I’ll change those dressings, and I’m going to put this bag on the left drainage hole because it’s the prime offender for leaking.” The bag looked like a colonoscopy bag and had a sticky gasket that held it onto your skin.

Ellen cleaned my left side and attached the sticky bag, which had a plug at the bottom for drainage. My right side was mostly dry, but since she was cleaning me up, Ellen swapped out the absorbent pads and taped them in place. With a dry gown and dry bedding, I felt much better, but still wanted some pain meds.

After checking my chart, Ellen left, then returned with some pain medication and a cup of water.

“Thank you,” I said after downing the pills.

“No problem. I hope that bag keeps you dryer. G’ Night.”

“Good night and thanks again.”

I woke up around 2 am and wished for more pain meds, but I knew the response would be ‘no’, so I went to the washroom to distract myself from the pain. I looked at my new drainage bag, and it had filled about a third of the way with a yellowish liquid. Once back in my still dry bed, I put on the sound of rain, covered my eyes with my headband-headphones, buried myself under pillows and fell asleep.

At 4 am, I woke up with my headband-headphones having slipped off and fallen on the floor. I once again went to the washroom, checked my fluid level, *Hmm, over half full*. Once in bed, I started my rain-sound again, retrieved and adjusted my headband-headphones and went to sleep.

6 am rolled around, and I asked for drugs, but was told I had to wait until 8 am. However, Ellen did empty my drainage bag, noted the amount on her glove and dumped it down the toilet. After she left, I cast about, but eventually fell asleep until the morning blood-letting by Gwen.

“Hi Gwen, I hadn’t seen you for a bit.”

“My son was sick, and I had to stay home with him for a few days.”

“Oh, I thought maybe you had taken a trip to a beautiful tropical island.”

“I wish! You seem to be doing better.”

“Yes, I’m good in the day, but man, I find the nights rough.”

“Most patients find that. Your body produces less cortisol at night, so inflammation is worse. Also, immune cells become more active, and with patients on anti-rejection drugs, it’s a bit of an extra battle. Your body is trying to heal, but at the same time, we don’t want it to reject the new liver.”

“Just the thought of that makes me feel crappy... I would still like some pain meds though.” I said, batting my lashes.

“Yes, I’m going to do the pills after I finish with your vitals. Did anyone do the ‘pill game’ with you?”

“Yes, I started it yesterday.”

“Good, I’ll bring the pills for you to sort while I get your pain meds.”

“The pain meds aren’t kept in the cart?”

“No, the hospital is extremely careful with the opioids, for good reason.”

“Is the Gabapentin an opioid?”

“No, it was originally used for epilepsy and helps with pain and seizures.”

“So, for me, it’s helping my shaking and pain?”

“Yes, okay, enough jibber-jabber, let’s play a game.”

After my morning ablutions, the breakfast tray came with the usual disappointing coffee, followed by nothing I ordered. I guess the nutritionist was overriding my requests, either that, or the kitchen had accidentally ordered a shipping container of Rice Krispies. Both scenarios were just as likely. I poured some milk on my cereal just to hear it snap, crackle and pop cheerfully. Though as it became soggy and sunk to the bottom of the bowl, its sadness became apparent. While pondering the life cycle of a Rice Krispie, Jen appeared. “Do you want to do those stairs now?”

“Oh, Uhm sure.” This was a good excuse to abandon my meal and move around a bit. “This is Melody,” Jen said, indicating the little girl standing in the doorway. *What was she, 6?* “Melody is studying physio at the University and this is a part of her training, helping out at the hospital.”

“Hi Melody, nice to meet you.”

“Hi.”

“So, Melody, Penny here is almost ready to go home after a liver transplant. She has some stairs at the front of her house, so today, we are going to teach her the best way to go up and down stairs without tearing stitches or falling.”

Both Melody and I nodded. I noted how much more assertive Jen was when Kristen wasn’t around. *Interesting.*

“Okay, team, let’s go.”

Jen led the way with me following and Melody bringing up the rear. We were like a fearless expedition of adventurers off to scale a mountain or something. At the stairs, Jen told me to lock my walker, then take the left railing with both hands, and first put my right foot up and then bring up my left foot to the same step. I repeated this for all five steps, then reversed the procedure on the way down. Both Jen and Melody stayed with me, ready to catch me if I fell.

I didn’t.

I managed the stairs five times, then our merry crew retreated to my room.

“That was very good.” We congratulated each other several times, then Jen and Melody left and I sat in my chair, pulled out my eReader and lost myself in adventure.

At some point during the story, I had moved myself to the bed and was still reading when the hepatologist arrived for our daily meeting. After reviewing my chart and checking out my fluid level in the drainage bag, he said I was healing well. “The wound on your right side is dry, so we don’t need to bandage it anymore. Keeping it exposed to the air promotes complete healing.” While he was inspecting my incision, I asked when the stitches were to come out?

“No, these are invisible stitches. They dissolve on their own, and the little paper things will just dry up and fall off. Don’t pick them off.”

“Yes, the nurse told me that, but I didn’t realize the stitching was somehow done invisibly.”

“Hmhm.” *I guess the hepatologist wasn’t very interested in that topic because he just moved onto other more pressing matters, like my bowel movements.* “So, I think you will be ready to go home tomorrow.”

“Oh, I thought it was Monday.”

“Sunday is fine.”

“My sister is flying in on Sunday, and so we were told I could stay to Monday.”

“Oh, that’s fine.” He said, still reading my chart.

“Your numbers are good, and that stent is fine. Did they tell you that you have to get that removed in six months?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, I think that’s good, Sunday.”

“Monday?”

“Or Monday, yes.”

After another disappointing lunch, Bec called:

“Hi,”

“Hi Penny. So I have booked a flight for tomorrow, and get in around 2 pm. I will rent a car at the airport and go to your place and then come and get you from the hospital on Monday.”

“Remind me? Why wouldn’t you pick me up after you get the car and are already in town, instead of making the extra trip to my place?”

“Well, Jane’s train is leaving at 4 pm, and we were afraid of a scheduling problem, and that would mean you would have nobody in town.”

“I guess, but so what, I’m in the hospital. I’m not going anywhere.”

“What’s the hurry?”

“I just can’t stand being in the hospital. Everyone is nice, and all that, but I just have reached a point where I’m super anxious to sleep in my own bed.”

“Will they release you tomorrow?”

“Yes, the hepatologist said I could go and, in fact, thought I was going Sunday.”

“Are they trying to get you out early to free up a bed?”

“I really don’t get that impression. Everyone says Monday is fine, but I’m getting really antsy, and if there was anyway you could pick me up and we could just go home together, I would love that.”

“Jane said she is taking a taxi to the hospital tomorrow and then taking another taxi to the train station. We were afraid you would be sent home and she wouldn’t be there.”

“Well, they wouldn’t just kick me out if I had nobody to pick me up.”

“Hmm,” said Bec, still skeptical of my sudden need to leave the hospital.

“Well, how about we aim for Sunday, but if there is a problem with your flight or something else comes up, we switch to Plan B and you pick me up on Monday?”

“Okay, we’ll think about that. I have a layover in Toronto, so I’ll give you a call from there and we can update as needed.”

“Great, that sounds great. Sorry to whine, but I suddenly am desperate to get outta here.”

“Okay, I’ll call Jane and sort things out. I’ll call you tomorrow and see what’s up.”

“Good, thanks, bye.”

“Bye.”

Being pushy was never my thing, yet seeing the hope of home,

I became obsessed with release.

Farewell and Adieu



70 / 100

Hopefully, this would be my last night in this bed,
surrounded by beeping and blinking lights.

“Are you being discharged today?” asked Tanya as she drew some blood.

“Hopefully, yes, if not, I stay until Monday, but honestly, you all have been lovely, but I’m sick of you.”

She laughed and said, “The feeling is mutual.”

Tanya checked my drainage bag, “Hmm, I guess this will have to go with you because you are still leaking fluid.”

“Like an old car.”

“Yes, like an old car.”

“There is a lot to do upon discharge, and after I’m finished my morning rounds, I will come by and go over all that. Sound good?”

“Sounds great!”

I had moved myself to the chair and was eating breakfast when Grant stopped in. “I hear you are leaving us today.”

“Looks that way. I wanted to thank you for sticking with me through all those rejections. Your support was invaluable.”

“Well,” he said a little abashedly, “You’re welcome, Missy. We are all really pleased it all worked out for you.”

“Thank you.”

“Okay, then, Oh, Carolyn and Amy wanted me to wish you well, though you will be coming back to the liver-clinic in a couple days, so you can say a proper goodbye then.”

“I didn’t realize I had to come back so soon.”

“Sure, yah, you come a few times a week for a while, then we taper it off to once a week, then a few times a month, then once a month, then once every few months, then after the first year it’s down to a few times a year. After two years, you are transferred back to your local hepatologist, Dr. B. I believe, and he monitors your progress yearly.”

“Oh.”

“Do you have a family doctor?”

“No, they are hard to come by around these parts.”

“Yes, but you really need to find one eventually because they will proscribe your meds and, along with Dr. B., monitor your progress.”

“Well, the hunt continues.”

“Okay, good, well, I won’t add stress to your life, but keep it in mind for the future.”

“Will do, thanks Grant.”

“Yup, and good luck with the discharge. Did anyone go over the procedure?”

“Tanya is, after she finishes her rounds.”

“Okay, good. Well, take care, Penny.”

“Thanks.”

I finished my breakfast anxiously anticipating the taste of better coffee. *Do I have coffee at home?*

Tanya arrived around 10 am, handed me my transplant binder and a pen and said. “Is Jane coming?”

“Yes, both my sisters, Jane, and Bec, are coming today. Jane will be going back to her home, and Bec is taking over my care. She flies in around 2 pm, and Jane said she would be here, well about now.” Looking at the doorway, there stood Jane with a wheelchair piled high with her suitcase and bags of thrifted items.

Tanya turned and waved Jane into the room. “Perfect timing, I’m just going over the discharge procedure with

Penny.”

“Great!” said Jane as she parked her wheelchair of thrift store booty against the wall.

“I talked with Bec, and she said you were very anxious to go home, Penny.”

“Yes, I am.”

We both turned back to Tanya, who waited patiently for our attention.

“So, first, you have to meet with the pharmacist, and I have set that up at 11:00. He will go over the meds you need, and you can pick all those meds up from the pharmacy on the first floor, this afternoon. Most costs are covered, but you will probably have to pay for the Tramadol and perhaps some other ones, but I’m sure the pharmacist, Hank, will let you know.”

“Okay.” Jane and I said in unison.

“Do you have a walker?”

“No, I was using this one here.”

“Hmm, that stays with the hospital. I’ll speak with physio about a loaner.”

“Do I need one?”

“Yes, for a month or so, you will probably need to use a walker because we definitely don’t want you to fall, and your legs may not be strong enough yet. You had a cane before, didn’t you?”

“Yes, as my health failed, I found a cane helpful.”

“Well, the walker is better at first, perhaps later you can switch back to a cane.”

Tanya checked her list and continued, “Of course, the final say as to whether or not you get discharged today is the doctor’s, but he seemed confident you were okay to go home today.”

“Yes, I spoke with him yesterday, and my discharge appeared to be good to go.”

“Good. As far as wound care goes, you can have a shower, but just let the water drip down over your incision, don’t spray it directly. Those little paper things will dry up and fall off, but don’t pick them off.”

“Got it.”

“Just pat dry gently on your tummy and don’t apply any cream or anything.” As Tanya spoke, she moved her hands in a patting motion.

“Don’t lift anything over a pound or so for a while because we really don’t want your guts to spill out.”

I must have looked horrified, and Tanya laughed. *Nurse humour.*

“But seriously, don’t lift heavy things.”

Jane jotted reminders in my journal, and I was following along on the discharge information in the binder, as Tanya continued.

“Eat lots of protein, but you already know about that, and you will have some pain meds, but the pain should really ease up over the next few days. If you’re still having problems, you can mention that at your first check-in on... Tuesday at 11 am. I think that about covers it for right now... any questions?”

“No, not from me... Jane?”

“No,”

“Good, then, I’ll go and a reminder Hank will be here in a few minutes to review your medications.”

“Thanks, Tanya.”

She smiled as she made her way around Jane’s wheelchair of thrifted items.

Jane was showing me some of her treasures, a broken clock, a questionable looking top, and a small figurine of a hippopotamus, when Hank arrived. He shot me a questioning glance as Jane put her things away as I nodded back, discretely.

“Hi, I’m the pharmacist, and I’m going to go over your medications list.” I nodded, and Jane settled into the visitors’ chair, pen at the ready.

“First, there is your Prograf. The is the brand name of Tacrolimus, and that is the anti-rejection medication. It’s very important that you don’t miss a dose. You take it twice a day, 12 hours apart. So, if you take it at 8 am, you take your second dose at 8 pm. If you miss a dose, you can take it up to 3 hours late, but after that, just skip it.

Don't miss your next dose though, because if you miss too many doses, your body will reject your new liver. Also, only get Prograf, not Tacrolimus or some other brand. They are not interchangeable. I will give you 2 months' worth of 1 mg pills. Currently, you take 3 mg in the morning and 3 mg at night, so you stick to that, unless the hepatologist changes the dosage. I will also give you a bottle of .5 mg pills, so if the hepatologist does need to up your dosage by .5 mg, you have them already."

"Okay."

"The dosage will change, up or down, depending on your blood-work. Also, when you are having blood-work done, ***don't take*** the Prograf, before they have taken the blood. That would mess up the numbers, so after the blood is taken, then you take the Prograf. Clear?"

"Yes."

"You can get your prescriptions renewed here at the hospital or at your local pharmacy."

"I would prefer my local pharmacy."

"Yes, fine, but talk to the pharmacist and make sure he can get Prograf. If he can't, you will have to get it here, there can be no substitutions on this one."

"Other questions?"

"Yes, as you can see, I shake a crazy amount." I held up my hands, and they danced around madly.

"Is that the Prograf?"

"Possibly, it can also be residual anaesthetic. Your shaking should reduce over time. Your body will grow used to the Prograf, and eventually, your shaking should stop completely."

"That's a relief. How 'bout my hair. A lot has fallen out."

"That's not the medication. Your hair loss is from malnutrition and the stress the operation had on your body. Your hair should grow back over time."

"That's a relief as well."

"Okay, onto the other medications. The prednisone will be tapered off over time. It is used to reduce inflammation and to calm your immune system down and help your body adjust to the new liver. Again, you must not miss a dose."

"Yes, I see it on my list, I'm at 20 mg."

"Yes, good you have that list, I won't go into too much detail then, but make sure you follow that list carefully. If you need a new list, I can send one to you via email. Some people find a checklist useful, and you live alone, right?"

"Yes."

"So, a checklist would probably be helpful for you, at least to start with."

After going over the medications on the list, Hank said I could pick up my supply from the pharmacy on the first floor of the hospital any time between 3 pm - 5 pm. If the pharmacy was closed, I couldn't be discharged. *Ok, then, priority one: Pick up Meds.*

Jane was showing me a few more thrifted items, when the doctor arrived. "I have never seen a... dish? That colour."

"It's carnival glass, my grandmother had one just like it?"

"Hmm, So, Penny, I've taken a good look at your labs and yes, you are ready to go home."

"Wonderful."

"Did you talk to the pharmacist?"

"Yes, he will have my meds ready after 2 pm today."

"Good. You must never miss a dose."

"Yes, I've been told."

"Also, don't lift anything heavier than a couple of pounds for three months."

"Yes, I've also been told that."

"Good. The drainage on your left side will stay in place, and we may take it off on Tuesday, but we will see how it looks. Did anyone show you how to drain it?"

"Oh no, I forgot to ask."

"I'll remind the nurse to show you, and we will also give you a measuring cup to check the levels."

"Okay."

"You should drain it yourself because the fluid is kind of toxic, to anyone but you. The nurses know how to properly deal with it, but at home, you should have someone else do it."

"Oh, is it like, really toxic?"

"It's not melt your skin off toxic, but it could be a problem for someone."

"Okay."

"You can write the amounts down in your binder, and when you come to clinic, you should always bring your binder."

I nodded, and Jane wrote something in the journal.

"Clinic days are usually on Wednesdays, but for early on, we have you come a few times a week, often Tuesday and Thursdays. Before clinic, you always have blood-work and never take your meds before the blood-draw."

"The pharmacist said to not take the Prograf, should I not take any?"

"Yes, we prefer you take none, because we get a better reading of your blood chemistry and also sometimes people forget to take their Prograf if they have already taken their other meds. It's easier to just get your blood taken in the morning, then take your morning pills. The blood-lab opens at 8 am, so if you get here early, you can take your meds before 9 am. Also, that gives the liver-clinic time to get the results of your tests, at least some of them."

"Sounds good."

"If we look at your blood-work after you go, we may call to have you adjust your Prograf levels or add or discontinue other medications."

"Do I always have to come up to the regional hospital for blood-work or can I have it done in my hometown?"

"For the first few weeks or so, you should come here. In the future, we will let you know. As your blood chemistry stabilizes, you will require less frequent blood-tests and getting them done locally should be fine."

After the doctor left, I asked Tanya to show me how to empty my drainage bag. She gave me a plastic measuring container and showed me the little plug at the end. "Raise it a bit, undo the plug and then let it pour into the container. You should mark down the level in your binder, then dump the cup into the toilet."

Simple enough.

"You should do this, because the fluid is toxic to others."

"Yes, the doctor told me."

"Good, you don't need gloves, just wash your hands after, but if your sister is touching this liquid, she needs gloves."

"Okay, I'll let Bec know."

"I spoke with physio, and they said you can rent a walker, month by month and gave me a list of local places that sell medical devices."

"Oh, so I guess I should look into that if I want to get out today."

"Yes, you will need one and one set to your height. I've asked Jen to stop by and measure you and then you can get the right walker."

When Jen arrived with a tape measure and gave me the numbers I needed to get a walker set to the proper height, she also gave me a list of medical device suppliers in the area.

"Okay, looking at the list, and saw most were from here and there was only one from my hometown." I figured I should start with that one because when I have to return it, being local would be easier.

"I'm going to call a few places and see about the price and availability."

"Sounds good, I'm just going to go the Cafeteria and get a tea. Do you want anything?"

"No thanks, I'm good." I am not a multitasker and trying to do anything while I call on the phone always ends in disaster. Jane left, and I got to calling.

"So, how did you make out?" asked Jane when she returned.

"Not one single supplier, and I called them all, had a rental at my height. I asked Jen what I should do, and she

was useless. “She just shrugged and said, well you need one to be discharged.” *Quick, break out the welding kit!* “I hate it when people tell you the rules, but can never come up with a solution.”

“If I buy one, they are suddenly available.”

“Funny how that works.”

“Hilarious!”

“Bec called during her brief layover, but she couldn’t really do much, travelling as she is, so I guess I’ll punish the credit card once more. This being sick is super expensive. The one advantage of buying rather than renting is I don’t have to return it in a month. The local supplier has gone out of business, so I would have had to rent from here. The next challenge is getting one on such short notice.”

After calling around, I found you could ‘hire’ a freelance occupational therapist, and their fee and part of the fee for the walker were covered by a government programme. The freelance OT would come to the hospital, check me out and then go get the walker and deliver it back to the hospital. She would fill out all the government forms, so I only had to give her my VISA number. *Ok, this sounded like a scam, and I was quite nervous, but I was also desperate, so, not a great combination to avoid a scam.*

Finally, however, I figured I had brutalized my VISA card to the point, where, even if this was a scam, they wouldn’t really get away with a lot. So, I made the call.

Phew! It all worked perfectly. The OT was awesome, got a walker all set up, and it was even the right colour, and brought it to the hospital. I think Jen was mad that I did an end run around her, but she refused to be of any help, so in the end I was glad I had taken matters into my own hands.

Around 2:30 pm, Jane and I were preparing to head to the pharmacy. I was still in my hospital gown along with my cape, and I wanted to try out my new walker, when Tanya said, “No, patients must be in a wheelchair whenever they are off the floor.”

That seemed a little weird, but maybe they were afraid of falls or something. So, Jane had to push me in my wheelchair, and we made our way down to the pharmacy. Once there, I realized I had forgotten my binder, and I need that to confirm my medications, so Jane went up to pick up the binder. I sat in my wheelchair, trying to take up as little room as possible in the tiny pharmacy.

When Jane returned with the binder, she presented it to me and said, “Bec arrived and is hanging out in your room. I figured it was easier for me just to come down since I know the way.”

Perfect. My discharge was less stressful than I’d feared it would be. After so many ‘dry runs’, I almost expected bad outcomes. Perhaps this is to be the beginning of things going right.

Almost as that thought finished, the pharmacist said, “Wait, there is a problem.” *Thought too soon.*

The pharmacist indicated a drug on the list, and Jane replied, “Oh, yes, they switched that drug to the other one; the nurse told me.”

Strange, I never heard that, I must have been asleep or something.

“Oh, right, here is the note, good, yes, that’s right then.” It was only a \$30 charge to my credit card, which was a relief because I know the Prograf alone costs \$1500.

With the big bag of meds, Jane wheeled me back to my room, where I gave Bec a big hug. Jane gave Bec a hug. I gave Jane a hug, we all gave each other hugs. That moment in the hospital room marked the climax of countless tests, ‘dry runs,’ crushed hopes, and newfound hope. After years of living under ‘The Sword of Damocles’, I was given a new chance at life.

It was one of the happiest days of my life.

The Voyage Home



75 / 100

The discharge list was complete.

Even though I'd only spent a week in the room, I was *briefly* sad to depart. Like preparing to go after a vacation, I was packing up my memories along with my clothes and other personal items. *Clothes?*

"Jane, did you bring my clothes? I don't want to go home naked, what would the neighbours say?"

"Yes, I have your clothes in this bag." putting it on the bed.

"Oh, thanks, I'm glad you remembered, I forgot."

"No, you asked me to bring these specific clothes, yesterday."

That was alarming. Was I taking crazy pills? Should I ask the nurse if it's normal to be forgetful after a major surgery? Then again, I don't want to be stuck here for 'further tests'. No, I'll ask the hepatologist on Tuesday, I don't want a delay in my discharge.

Tanya came by to tell us she had requested a porter to wheel me to the car.

While I dressed, Jane and Bec wandered around, looking for items to pack... *reminding me of the Thermians in 'Galaxy Quest', looking for Jason's shoe on the ceiling.*

Even with her wheelchair piled with thrifted finds and her suitcase, Jane could fit some of my things. Bec had my walker and also my backpack and medical bag; the bag contained home-care items like gauze, gloves, and a measuring cup.

After a few minutes, the porter arrived and collected me, my cane, my shawl, and my flowers. I think the flowers were ready to go home as well; they looked... tired. Our procession went by the nursing station, where, I thanked everyone profusely, then we made our way to the elevator.

"Wait..." a voice called from behind, and a sudden chill surged through my body.

A young man hurried towards our little party and presented a USB cord. "You forgot this."

Relieved, I took the charging cable and thanked him, then we made our way down the elevator towards freedom.

The porter was kind enough to wheel me all the way to Bec's rental car, a big silver SUV. I was helped into the front passenger seat, along with my plant. Bec thanked him and then began playing Tetris with three people and a walker, a cane, and loads of luggage.

We were dropping Jane at the train station on the way back to my house, so my stuff had to be packed on the bottom, starting with the folding walker and moving up to the broken clock and carnival glass dish. Both Bec and Jane got in, and Bec asked me the best way to go.

Being utterly useless, Bec finally huffed and said, "You are utterly useless!"

"Indeed, I am."

So Bec put the locations in the GPS and off we went. There was a SNAFU at the out-of-order payment kiosk, but after enough yelling at an incoherent, disembodied voice, the gate lifted and we left.

Spending so long lying on my back, staring at the ceiling, I found the outside world rather overwhelming. The noise, the colour, and the chaotic movement were assaulting my senses. After a few *helpful* attempts at pointing out potential obstacles, Bec snapped at me, so I shut up and looked at the sky.

There are two seasons in Canada... Winter and Construction. We were in Construction, so the journey to the train station was slow, and though I was cleared for discharge, I found bouncing in a car, rather uncomfortable.

When we got to the train-station, I turned to Jane in the back, and said, "Thank you SO much for everything, Jane!"

"You are more than welcome, Hon. I hope you like the renovations."

"I'm sure I will... I'll text or call later and tell you how much!"

"Ok, gotta go."

"Thanks again, say hi to John and Sean for me!"

“Will do.”

Both Bec and Jane got out of the car, then I sat and watched them as they put Jane’s stuff on a small cart, and hugged. I waved through the windshield, and Jane waved back, then left to catch her train.

Back in the car, Bec said, “I think we will go straight to your place, you are looking a little worn out.”

Bec is very perceptive like that.

“Yes, I’m ready for bed.”

“I’m sure. We will go home, you can lie down and I will settle in. Maybe make some lunch, or go get something, we will see.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

The plan was foiled, slightly as we parked in front of my house, my neighbour, Jackie, was almost levitating with excitement, to show me Jane’s renovations. After the brief tour, I fell into bed and Jackie left. Bec asked if I wanted anything, and I said what I was really craving for lunch was a glass of water and a Tramadol.

“Sure,” she said, looking through my bag from the pharmacy. “There are only 4, they are pretty cheap with these.”

“Yes, I think they are really meant for when the pain is overwhelming, and now is one of those times.” Bec nodded, and after taking my pain relief, she left me alone to rest. *It was sure nice to be home.*

A few hours later, I woke to the sound of Bec talking on the phone. She was talking with her son, who was the Don of a residence at University. The students on his floor were being harassed by students from another floor, and he was upset. Once the call had ended, I got up and made my way to the livingroom.

“Sorry, did I wake you?”

“No, I was just luxuriating in bed without a nurse wanting to jab a needle in my arm.”

“I can stab you with a knife if that would help with your hospital ‘withdrawal’.”

“Thanks, no, I’m good.”

“Sounded like Sam is frustrated.”

“Yes, his boss is an idiot, and she is basically blaming Sam for problems on another floor.”

“Bummer.”

“Yah... Do you want something to eat?”

“That sounds good, but not a lot. I’m still weening myself off Jello.”

“Sure, how about a charcuterie board?”

“What is that?”

“A platter with cheeses, meats, crackers, grapes, breads, things like that.”

“Sounds good, then I can just pick away.”

“Yes. If you want something more, I can get fast food?”

“My sad tummy is definitely not ready for Ronnie Mac’s, though I’m not sure it ever was.”

Bec snorted before heading to the kitchen to busy herself with the charcuterie board. I took a seat in one of my puffy chairs, which Jane had moved next to each other with a small table between.

“Mm, I particularly like that creamy cheese and these crackers.” I said, holding up a round cracker.

“Gouda and Milk Crackers.”

I was avoiding the sausages because, though full of protein, I thought the nitrites might be hard on my still tender digestive system. I did have a few grapes, and along with cream cheese; they were very yummy, and I finished my meal with a cup of raspberry Greek yogurt.

Bec and I chatted for a while, then her daughter, Elizabeth, called, so I took that as a sign from the Gods to return to bed.

Bec was chatting with her husband on the air mattress when I returned to the living room hours later. I sat in a puffy chair, eavesdropping, until she hung up and called from the bed, “Hi, how r’ you feeling?”

“Glad to be home, and right now the pain is okay. I see you set up the bed.”

“Yes, it kind of blocks the front door, but this gives you your own space.” Bec got to her feet and came in to sit

beside me in the other puffy chair.

“Want some food?”

“Nah, I’m good, but you go ahead.”

“A drink?”

“Yes, a ginger-ale? I didn’t get enough at the hospital.”

Bec laughed and went into the kitchen.

When I was a child, I had to stay in the hospital for acute tracheitis and was in an oxygen tent for a week or so. I was about 8, and getting ginger-ale was a real treat, so I kept asking for more and more. Eventually, one of the nurses said that the hospital had run out of ginger-ale and I would have to have water. Being a naïve little kid, I believed her, and when my Dad came for lunch; I told him the hospital had run out of ginger-ale and I was quite put out. He nodded knowingly.

My, I was a stupid child!

Stealth Haze



76 / 100

I spent the bulk of Monday in a Mak'tar Stealth Haze.

My stay in the hospital had made me crave invisibility, and Bec understood my need for solitude, and so she spent the bulk of Monday out on a quest to find things to make my life in recovery more comfortable. She went to Costco and got me some cutlery, dishes, towels, high protein drinks, and a new phone. I had replaced the battery on my old phone a few years ago, but even so, it didn't hold a charge for very long. Also, it was so out of date it had trouble doing the most simple tasks, like reading a QR code. My new one was a Motorola G, with a stylus. I loved the stylus and spent a lot of time drawing little pictures.

I texted Jane:

Hi Jane,

I love the renovations. Bec and I can sit and have a meal together the way you put the puffy chairs side by each. It also made room in the front to put the blow-up bed. The Bidet is awesome, but I'm having trouble finding the little switch. Bec found it, as per your instructions, but I must be dumb, because I just can't figure it out. I think the operation made my thinking hazy. I hope that fades. The bed is good and Bec and I are going to screw that support piece of wood in before she goes.

Bec is taking good care of me, and I'm feeling much better now that I'm home.

Thanks again for all you did for me.

Love,

penny

While I lay in my haze, I thought about the new chance at life I had been given. While I waited for surgery, I started to give things away. I think it was my way of coping with my possible death. I wanted the things I cherished to be in a good home and not just thrown in the trash.

Now that I was looking at having a future, I was a little sad I had given so much away. *Oh well, at least I had had some knives and forks as well as a new phone.*

Time for a Tramadol.

OMG, I've run out! In a panic, I looked at the time, and it was 4:45. I thought the pharmacy closed at 5 pm. OMG. I had a script for another 12, so I hurried to the other room, where Bec sat reading, and blurted out, "I'm out of Tramadol and the pharmacy closes in 15 minutes!"

Bec didn't bother with any questions, but quickly put her shoes on, grabbed her purse and hurried out the door. Luckily, the pharmacy was two blocks away, so Bec sprinted there while I called to let them know she was on her way. The phone rang and rang, but, being close to closing time, the answering machine picked up. I left a frantic, incoherent message and then sat in a panic.

A few minutes later, Bec returned. Success!

I had called the hospital earlier in the day and had them fax a script to my local pharmacy. I then called the pharmacy to ask when I could pick up the Tramadol, and they said it would take an hour to fill. It was around 4 pm then, and I expected a pickup call. However, they never called.

Bec got there just as the clerk was locking up for the day, but thankfully; they had my prescription ready. Bec returned, she slumped in the chair, exhausted, and handed me the pills. "You are a pain in the neck!"

"I know, thank you SO much for running and getting those... I'm not sure how I would have made it through the night." I took one in celebration.

Bec made a nice supper of tomato soup and another charcuterie board, and I managed to eat a little more than yesterday,

so I really was on the mend.

Tuesday



80 / 100

I woke feeling significantly better than Monday.

My pain seemed manageable. I didn't even take a Tramadol, which was good because I only had a few left and didn't want to show up to the liver-clinic displaying drug seeking behaviour. Because I was having a blood-test prior to my meeting with the hepatologist today, I didn't take any Prograf, nor any of my other meds. Instead, I had coffee. *Wow! It's so nice to have real coffee again.*

I peeped into the livingroom, but Bec was still asleep, so I took the opportunity to have a long shower and another coffee. When Bec got up, I said, "Sorry, did my banging around wake you?"

"No, I had set my alarm, since we have to be at the hospital before 8 this morning."

"Right, sure, you want a coffee?"

"Yes, that would be good. I'm just going to hop in the shower quick."

We got away in good time, and the roads were clear, except for the odd school bus picking up kids. It was going to be a beautiful fall day, and I was feeling very positive about life in general. At the hospital, I did the usual bloodletting, then we hung out in the transplant unit. I hugged and thanked many people, and felt proud to now be one of the transplant people, on the mend. It was an interesting perspective, seeing people waiting for a transplant. The hushed conversations, and the worried looks by caregivers as staff assured them it would be alright.

My turn came, and the hepatologist said I was doing very well. He adjusted my meds a bit, and asked if I had any questions?

"Yes, I'm quite 'foggy', is that normal?"

"Yes, it will take a long time for the effects of the anesthetic to fully go away, but it's normal."

"That's a relief. Also, how about my hair?"

"Again, it's normal to have hair loss from malnutrition and the stress of the operation on your body... give it time."

"How long before I'm fully recovered?"

"A year. Some say a few months or so, but honestly, it takes a good year for everything to settle down. Do your exercises, walk a lot, and eat a lot of protein. Take your meds religiously and do the bloodwork so we can monitor your progress, and you will do fine."

"That sounds good."

"The nurse will take off the drainage bag and bandage that wound, but your incision looks great!"

Most of the little papers had fallen off, and I was told in a few weeks I could gently wash my Mercedes symbol.

After the nurse had removed the drainage bag, and the wound was bandaged, Bec asked if she could be shown how to attach a new drainage bag if it became necessary. The drainage bag was the last of my Borg implants, and I was a little nervous to let it go, but the nurse seemed confident the absorbent pads would be enough, though she did give me a fresh drainage bag and showed Bec how to apply it, if that became necessary.

After we left the hospital, we had an errand to run to pick up a part for my walker that had gone missing. I insisted on walking around the mall with Bec, which turned out to be a big mistake. I thought I was more fit than I was, and exhaustion soon forced me to sit on a bench while Bec picked up the part. Back in the SUV, I was sweating and felt sick, so we went straight home. This experience started me worrying about being on my own, once Bec left. She had already booked a flight home, so sink or swim, my recovery was all on me now.

I grew significantly stronger over the week:

Wednesday



85 / 100

Thursday



90 / 100

Friday



94 / 100

Saturday



96 / 100

By Sunday, I was confident in my ability to manage my recovery. My health bar had reached 100% and though my stamina bar was still low, my pain levels were negligible, and my appetite was returning.

Sunday morning, Bec asked for the umpteenth time if I was okay for her to go.

“I can extend my visit if you need it?”

“Nope, thank you. You are getting on my nerves, and I want you to leave.”

She smiled, relieved to get back to her life and my assurance that I would be just fine.

Bec and I went out to the SUV, and after she put her suitcase in the back, she turned to me, and we had a long hug. When we pulled back, we both had tears in our eyes.

“I’m so happy you got your transplant.”

“Thank you, I’m glad to” I was finding it hard to speak through the emotions, so we hugged again, she got in the SUV, and drove away.

I made my way back to my puffy chair and began the long recovery, but I knew

my treacherous journey had found me safely home.

Epilogue

Saturday, March 1st, 2025

It is a gloomy day today, and the melting snow and light rain put me in a nostalgic mood. It has been about six months since my transplant. Today, I am going to write a thank-you letter to the donor family, and, as I sit looking at the blank card, I watch the rain spit at the window.

The day after Bec went home, was a rainy day. It was a much harder rain, than today, and I decided to stay inside. Though I felt better, I had a few minutes of self pity at my sudden loneliness. In the hospital and indeed for the better part of the year, I had had people checking in on me and asking how I was doing. Now, I just sat listening to the clock on the wall tick, while the rain pattered against the window.

“The world, she was crying for me.” I smiled to myself at that thought. When I was studying music in university, we had to take ‘sight-singing’ class. The prof was Hungarian and spoke with a thick accent, and once a friend of mine was struggling to sing through an exercise, while it rained outside. The professor stared absently out the window and said, “Valter, the world, she is crying for you.” We all laughed, and Walt turned red. Well, today the world she is crying for me in my loneliness.

I still had endless appointments up at the hospitals, both local and regional. I had to go to a medical lab service in town several times a week, so it wasn’t like I was that isolated, I just didn’t have anyone to sit and have tea with, or chat with about anything non-medical. I had made it a point to try to go for a short walk every day, and now that the snow was melting; I felt a lot safer. There were times in the winter, where my walker couldn’t manage the unplowed streets, and I lived in fear of a fall.

I wanted to give out candy on Halloween, but just didn’t feel up to it, especially after I ate all the candy.

My stent had to be cleaned out, so I was booked for a minor operation. I asked my neighbour Jackie to accompany me, because nobody in my family was available, and the hospital required someone to be with you during the procedure. It was much the same as the last time, though; I did mention to the anesthesiologist that I had remembered some of the previous operation and could he maybe increase the forgetting drug?

He must have listened because this time the operation was a complete blank, though my neighbour said I swore a lot as I was waking up. I swear little in real life, perhaps I have more of a ‘sailors’ mouth than I realized. The plastic stent was removed and replaced by a metal one. I have to have another ‘stent cleaning’ in six months or so, and they gave me a card to carry in my wallet, because I will now set off metal detectors.

I recovered quickly after the stent change, and was back on track with my walking, exercising and eating lots of protein. My hair suddenly turned dark brown and became very thin. Prior to the transplant, my hair was thick and curly and mostly white. Now it was baby thin, dark brown, and straight.

Perhaps I’m aging in reverse.

Vick came up for a wonderful visit near Christmas. We had a great time, and she didn’t even have to massage my puffy feet. Christmas itself was awesome. I drank ginger-ale, and though I still couldn’t play any wind instruments, I could play the piano, and the best part was, I wasn’t in the hospital. I opened my presents Christmas morning, though they were mostly envelopes with cash. Being sick had been expensive, so money was the most helpful present I could receive.

I called my son, and we had a nice long chat, reminisced about Christmas’s past, and what a miracle it was that I was alive to see this one.

The walker was no longer a requirement, except when I was picking up something heavy, like a bag of milk, from the store. My cane was fine for short walks, and I had just started walking with no support to check my mail. I had to go to a mailbox just a block away, and I was surrounded by neighbours, so if I fell, I would get some help. The first few times I walked without support, I was like a toddler and kept going crooked and wandering off the sidewalk onto someone’s lawn or into a bush. Lately, I had been doing much better, except if it was raining or icy, then I just stayed inside.

Originally, I had to go to the regional hospital twice a week, and after a month and a half, I could skip one visit and just go to the local medical lab service. Then, the regional hospital visits were twice a month and having blood taken locally could be twice a week. I looked forward to once a month blood-taking and regional hospital visits once every three months. My medications had changed here and there, but the Prograf was still my primary anti-rejection medication. My body had indeed acclimatized to the Prograf, and all the shaking had stopped, making

knitting, playing music and eating all the easier. My brain fog had cleared and other than my stamina still being an issue, I was healed.

The rain had stopped, and after making a cup of tea and getting out my ‘fancy’ pen, I sat at my desk and began to compose my thank-you letter.

“Dear Donor Family,

Words cannot express how thankful I am for your family’s generosity and compassion...

Acknowledgements

My three sisters, Bec, Vick, and Jane.
I literally wouldn't have made it without you.

The LHSC transplant unit
and the staff that were so kind.

My son, Stu,
Who helped me write this book and supported me
with stories and laughter.

About the Author

Penny Will was born in Toronto, a middle child in a family of seven. She was always interested in the Arts and studied Music and Visual Arts at Western University.

Having taught for years in both the public and private systems, she left teaching to run an educational website of play-along music for flute. Flutegirl.ca

Penny also composed music for the National Film Board of Canada and is a member of SOCAN.

Penny enjoys cartooning and posts some of her work on pennywill.com

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