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3. False Pride

No one at the hospital told me exactly how long it would take the infection stewing in the swollen pocket in my chest to travel from the device, along the electrical leads, through the vein into my heart, and kill me. It was 10:30 in the morning when the surgeon sent me home to pack a bag. He had reserved an operating room for 12:30. I'd have to pass through Admitting and pre-op before the fun began, so I knew I had about an hour to make the ten-minute drive home to Cambridge, call Peter, and be back at the hospital.

Since my father's death in 1961, I had learned to live with the knowledge that people I love might suddenly die. Since my genetic diagnosis in March 2004, I had learned to live with the idea that I might suddenly die. By the time I was seated in my Saab again on that sunny September morning, I'd had about fifteen minutes to get accustomed to the notion that my death might be imminent. I found my cell phone on the dash, dialed Peter's direct number, and got his voicemail. I left a calm message with no alarming details, presumably for the same reason my family didn't bawl at my father's wake and funeral. Tragedies and emergencies are excellent opportunities to teach other people how to behave.

I instinctively pulled the shoulder strap across my chest and felt the sting. I wasn't sure about the physics of that puffy pocket, but I knew the strap was putting a lot of pressure on the situation, and the infection had nowhere to go but south on the highway to my heart. I remember thinking it would be ironic if I hastened my own death with a safety device, so I slowly retracted the belt. This was the first time it occurred to me that the surgeon was proposing to prevent my imminent death by removing the device he'd inserted to prevent my sudden death, an emergency surgery which—if all went well—would leave me at risk of sudden death.

I called Peter's assistant for the first time ever and asked if she could locate Peter and tell him to meet me at home. I told her it was urgent. She seemed as surprised as I was by the request, but unlike me, she didn't doubt me. As soon as I hung up, I was peppering myself with questions about the accuracy of my characterization of the situation as *urgent* and accusing myself of overreacting.

More than the infection, I regretted that call, which registered on my venerable family scale of emotion as an incendiary outburst of melodramatic panic. On the drive home, I reminded myself I was lucky my chest hadn't blown up while I was scuba diving in Belize. Suppose I was one of those people who weighed 550 pounds and couldn't even lie down on an operating table without suffocating myself? If I were blind and lived alone on a farm with no electricity before the discovery of antibiotics – that would be urgent.

I got home, and to fend off another panic attack I downed a cup of cold coffee – an old family remedy. It worked. In a fit of rationality, I sat down and Googled *ICD* and *infection*. Was I ever lucky. Some people ended up with exploding pustules on their chests, and lots of others never even knew they were infected before it was too late. I glanced at my shirt to confirm my good fortune. No blood stains. There was a noticeably warm updraft of air rising under my chin from the open collar of my shirt. I undid a couple of buttons, then a few more, and the next thing I knew, I was standing shirtless in front of a bathroom mirror. This is known as pressing your luck. There were several new circles of hell surrounding the device, and just beneath the surface of my skin, cherry-red streaks of something were streaming from my shoulder past the elbow of my left arm.

I had a really hard time killing the rest of that hour. I did locate an overnight bag. Packing wouldn't take as much time as I'd hoped it might. I didn't need any slacks, shirts, shoes, socks, or underwear, and even on a good day my personal-hygiene kit is basically what you'd find in any hotel bathroom minus the skin lotion, conditioner, and shower cap.

I had a momentary flirtation with an open bottle of wine, but I remembered the interrogation the admissions nurse had conducted about my food and beverage intake before my implant surgery. I wasn't convinced I could lie about not drinking anything for as many hours as were required with anything other than coffee to back me up.

I went up to the roof deck to get some air. I carried the telephone, in case Peter called. It was pleasantly breezy up there, but I found the air to be of no help whatsoever. I gave it a few minutes, and breathing deeply did prove effective after I added a cigarette into the mix. I called my sister Mary Ann. I explained the situation.

Mary Ann said, Oh, Michael.

That was permission to feel sorry for myself, which I appreciated.

Before she asked any questions, she guessed I was feeling scared and frustrated.

I said, Scared and discouraged.

She said, Where are you?

I said I was outside, but I wasn't sure she'd heard me. The wind was picking up and I could barely hear her, so I ducked back inside and apologized for the intrusive breeze.

Rather loudly, Mary Ann said, Outside where?

I said, Now, I'm inside.

Through a window in the clerestory, I saw Peter's car approaching.

Mary Ann said, Why are you at home?

I said, To pack? It was the first time my assignment seemed a little dicey.

Mary Ann said, Why aren't you in a bed with sedatives and antibiotics? She is constantly saying things that make you wish she were your doctor.

I mentioned Peter had just pulled in.

Mary Ann said, Then you're fine. Tell him I'll call him later.

I was walking down the first of two long flights of stairs to our living room when Peter began to call my name, which stirred up the first real air I'd breathed all morning. I stopped. He was coming up toward me two steps at a time. His reassuring presence made me dizzy, as if I'd had the courage to look down and noticed that I was walking on a thin and wavery high wire.

I said, It's infected. They're taking it out.

Peter said, Let's get you to the hospital.

I said, I haven't packed.

Peter said, That's not your job.

I said, This isn't going so well, is it?

Peter said, Are you in pain?

I said, A little.

Peter said, So it really hurts.

I said, Uh-huh. The pocket was hot and throbbing, a steady thunder occasionally shot through with a little lightning bolt, a sharp spasm with a thrumming, metallic half-life inside my chest cavity.

When we were in the car, Peter said, You drove yourself home from the hospital after you saw the surgeon?

Instinctively, I thought how lucky I was that my car battery hadn't died.

[END]