

Medical Merry-Go-Round (Reading copy) 9 mins

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I ...am an absentee landlord to my lower extremities. I'm a tall guy so I live far away from my feet. I rarely ever visit them and the deal is that they carry me around and I leave them alone.

I have very little feeling in my left foot which is the result of smoking when I was younger. Smoking damaged the nerves and narrowed the blood vessels. It's called neuropathy and it mercifully spares me any foot pain at all. Not bad, but the flip side of painless feet is that things like infections that can kill you can get a comfortable head start before I have a clue that I'm being attacked.

So, having a teeny tiny cut on the bottom of the tip of the left middle toe goes unnoticed for a week or two until my podiatrist, trimming some callouses, notices that I have a toe that's pinker and fatter and hotter than the other nine and it's staining my good socks and making my whole left calf plumper than the Goodyear Blimp. This toe's been crying "wee wee" for a week or two but I just haven't noticed. My doctor tells me that this little piggy wants to kill me with something called Osteomyelitis.

I muse at the idea that I'm being threatened by something that sounds like a new Greek yogurt.

He assures me that we can get ahead of this little bad-ass's evil intentions by putting modern medical science to work.

He scrapes, cuts and cleans up the infection site, tears off unneeded skin and then marinates the tip of my toe in iodine and wraps it in a dressing that I must learn how to replicate every day for the next month.

Now, I'm a really good patient and when it's time to get to work to save my life, I spring into to action. I'm attentive and reliable and do what I'm told; no cheating.

Usually, it's only for a week or two before I've fixed whatever ailment is making me miserable. Now, I have a ticket for a ride on the medical merry-go-round.

I start with a series of medical appointments that don't seem to end. Tests lead to more tests.

In the next three weeks I lay in dark rooms having differential pressure testing while listening to science fiction sounds of "blump-swoosh, blump-swoosh," while vivid color radar-like screens display the blood moving through my vessels.

The test looks for traffic jams. When the blood is late for work, it deprives the toes of healing oxygen on its way to cure the fat little piggy on my left foot. There are more tests to find out exactly what caused this infection including three different varieties of ultrasound for leg clots, two full MRI's (because the tech forgot to use the contrast on the first one) a CT Scan, lab tests for fungal activity and **so** many blood tests that I display enough perforations on both arms to begin looking like Matzoh Man.

Every morning for the next five weeks I shower with a giant vinyl waterproof leg-cover and then spend 30 minutes disinfecting the wound, dressing it with a wild assortment of sterile medical dressings, tapes and tubes of healing stuff before yanking on my socks so as not to rip off all that work. My legs are very long and my arms are short so dressing the bottom of a toe requires placing magnifying mirrors, a local gooseneck quartz lamp and borrowed couch cushions to limit the pain of bending and twisting like a pretzel to make a neat dressing that is germ-proof for a day

All this while grunting and swearing and pushing Lulu the cat out of the operating theater that used to be her bedroom.

Once a week I visit the Wound Care Center at my hospital where the professionals laugh politely at my bizarre overworked lumps of wrapping, peel them all off, measure the little wound with a paper ruler to see how much it has healed in the last week, pull out a tiny digital camera and make a photo of the ruler and the wound all with one hand, I can't resist announcing, "Say cheese!" I wonder why they're using a cheap paper ruler when everything else here is medical grade? Then, I realize that they are putting the ruler against the wound and it's safer to toss it away than reuse a fancy gauge that must them be sterilized for the next patient.

The technician rewraps it after a patronizing, "Good Job." I feel proud like a preschooler who hasn't pooped his pants all morning.

A month passes with me playing Junior Doctor. The wound is getting nonchalantly smaller. It's in no rush.

Finally, on the fourth Friday morning I have an eleven o'clock appointment at the wound center where I think I may be ready to graduate from the daily wound-dressing job in favor of living with a bare toe again and taking a normal shower. I'm excited and reward myself with an extra cup of morning coffee.

When I look at my watch, I see that I'm going to be late for my graduation so I grab my keys and jacket and race for the front door. I yank the door open and burst into a beautiful warm sunny spring morning.

The rubber sole of my right shoe catches the top step and suddenly I am airborne and flailing my arms as I bypass all the steps on a non-stop flight to a crash-landing on the stone walk.

I hear somebody say, "You fucking idiot!" I realize that I'm the one talking so I must be OK. I'm face-down with my head on the grass-side of the walk in that post-crash quiet moment of collecting myself. Yes, I did find time for a bad critique before getting up to find pains in my hip, long nasty scrapes on my arm and knee and a head full of dirt. I start to wobble for the car when I see the scrapes on my forearm starting to ooze a little blood. The last thing I want to do is get blood on the upholstery. I reverse course, lunge back up the steps, fly through the front door and stagger into the guest bathroom near the entrance. Lights on, water on, medicine cabinet open, alcohol bottle flipped open, gobs of tissues snatched and ointment uncapped.

I gingerly wipe the wound **with** alcohol and before it starts seeping blood, I slather ointment onto the wounded area, charge back outside and dive to the car.

In the Hospital wound-care center, I present myself to the receptionist and sit to wait for my turn for what I hope will be a toe graduation. There's a crowd of people waiting so I ask if one of the staff could come out and do a quick wrap job on my now-bleeding arm.

A nurse obliges while a waiting room, full of sick people watch silently. I've become a coming attraction.

Inside, the Doctor looks away from his notes at my toe and says, "Looks good to me. You don't have to dress that anymore."

In order to try to save myself a trip to the Emergency Room, I put on my best helpless face and ask, "Doctor, I fell on the way over here. Would you be able to take a look at the damage?" I point to my hip. "Let's have a look, " he says. I open my pants to see a purple lump the size of a three-pound eggplant on my right hip.

(BREAK)

He asks, "When did this happen?"

"About 45 minutes ago," I say.

He looks concerned and says, "Any bruise that gets that big in such a short time could indicate internal bleeding."

Somehow I know from his tone of voice that I have just bought another ticket for the merry-go-round. This time it's a first class ticket. I'm told to go into the next building and immediately have a cat scan to see if there is any bleeding. He writes "stat" on the written prescription and tells me they will move me to the front of the line and I should know within a half hour if I'm staying over night." Whoaa! I know from past visits here that the food is really crappy and the tv is a wildly expensive and grainy. The Hospital TV here is a tortuously boring trip down Leftovers Lane.

I limp down two long halls to find the Radiation Department where I deliver my Stat prescription. I'm immediately escorted to the changing room and my date with the CT Scannner. Boy, I like traveling with a Stat ticket. After donning a "might-as-well-be-naked" gown, I'm whisked into the CAT Scan chamber, strapped down onto a very narrow bed and my six foot five self is shoved into a very snug big

donut hole and moved back and forth in and out while the donut is talking to me in a woman's voice. She's saying, "Take a deep breath and hold it." I slide in and then out. She says, "Now breathe normally." Then she says again, "Take a deep breath and hold it." And I slide back in and out. As I slide out she says again, "Now breathe normally." I can't help but visualize the Orgasmatron scenes in Woody Allen's movie, "Sleeper" about the future.

When it's over I get off the table, turn and mumble to the donut, "Nice meeting you."

After showing the doctor the full report I discover that I've just won a free overnight stay. Assuming that the following blood testing says there is no bleeding, I'll be released tomorrow afternoon.

My stat status allows me to whizz through the admitting process in five minutes and my diploma is a white wrist band containing my name and date of birth. This band is not just for identification. It is for a sanity check. Every attendant, aide, technician, nurse and doctor will greet me with a glance at the bracelet and then ask me, "What year is your birthday?" It's a check to see if I have yet gone stark raving mad or slipped into dementia. It's an easy test. A least they don't ask who Jimmy Carter's Vice President was.

(Walter Mondale)

An attendant arrives with a wheelchair and I am chauffeured to the 4th floor where my examining doctor pops in and reassures me that my stat status will get me a bed instantly. Assuming that the following blood testing says there is no bleeding, I'll be released tomorrow afternoon.

Having had a coronary bypass twenty years ago, my Cardiologist managed a very successful recovery without any other coronary events for twenty years. His secret is an intricate blending of medications that all work together to solve all my medical issues at once. He's a genius because it all works. I take ten different tablets twice a day. They are my religion and only in hospital visits do I risk the regimen being screwed up.

They never seem to have all the meds and shrug when I say, "Where's the Amlodipine and Lipitor?"

WHEN THEY ARRIVE BESIDE
WITH A LITTLE PAPER CUP OF
TABLETS

---more

Two-fer
Go for a Cat Scan
Get admitted
No meds for me
3:15 am Dress and leave
Hall confrontation
Cops