

## Off Road

### Hospital Journals 9/04

Whoopee! I'm grinning like a Lottery winner as I'm <sup>being</sup> wheeled into my freshly assigned hospital room and discover that there is only a single bed. <sup>Now, a single</sup> room and there's not going to be a roommate.

I've had the usual ~~occasional~~ minor surgeries in my 69 years from tonsils to heart bypass. All turned out well so I am a pretty laid back patient. I figure I'll just have a short anesthesia nap and the experts will do their thing and then, it's all about recovery not dying. I think of Woody Allen's quote where he says. "I'm not afraid of death; I just don't want to be there when it happens." If I die, I won't know it because of the anesthesia. I save my anxiety for who's going to be my roommate during the recovery.

I've had a few torturous bedfellows. There was a young man in for a hernia who read and was quiet enough except for ~~this~~.

~~His~~ <sup>with</sup> visitors were apparently all deaf because for three or four a night, they would shout things like "Whad'ja ya say? Huh, huh? Did you say Gretchen's feet were...what? What?" I can't understand you. Are ya drugged up?" So, it wasn't a boil? Y'know, Uncle Arthur had a carbuncle.

Another roomie was a sports nut and watched football hockey and basketball with his pillow speaker turned up to max. hockey

*Ultra Sound*

I'm not a very gregarious person. I talk on the phone a lot. While writing, I test <sup>DIALOG</sup> ideas and phrases by talking out loud to myself. Having to be considerate all the time, hurts the process.

Moments ago I was staring at the ceiling in a cold dungeon-like operating room where a troublesome and irritating tiny piece of bone was removed from my left foot. It left only a small scar and a serious bone infection caused by the errant bone. (I'm not fond of infections however I'm a secret lover of

scars from childhood where a Frankenstein stitch job was most coveted amongst my pre-teen buddies.)

The absence of another sick person in my semi-private room is the first semi-good thing to happen in the last few days. I've been racing around from doctor to doctor, lab to lab waving my insurance cards.

All this, as prime-time October shooting weather slips away. I have a short manuscript delivery deadline for the pictures and text for the next book, With the approaching winter weather and shorter daylight hours, driving to 60 more towns across the United States before next April seems almost impossible. Medical and professional urgencies are clashing. I need to get this foot fixed pronto.

This morning, below my window, a curtain of morning fog draws away from the parking lot revealing angle-parked doctor and patient cars all pointing at a large blue medical waste dumpster. I'm smiling because the scene seems a humorous medical icon. I can almost see the smug smiles on the Mercedes.

It's three days since I became a patient in my local hospital. Getting into the hospital is like being a draftee in bureaucratic boot camp. The dehumanization started with the first exchange at the Ambulatory Surgery Reception. I was offered a mechanical smile and asked "What are you here for today?" Without waiting for an answer, she continues with the longest question I ever heard. "I need to make a copy of your insurance cards, who is your Doctor and you can set that bag out of the way over there and what did you say your name was again and spell it for me?"

"I'm Gary Gladstone. I was scheduled for a 10:15 check-in but the Hospital woke me at 6:30 this morning with a call to come in early as the operating room had suddenly become available."

Having never been presented with an early opening for any medical appointment my head swims with scenarios for why this room is suddenly available. Was it a slip of the knife? Wrong anesthesia? Patient cowardice? Could it have been a

dignity issue where the patient simply refused to wear the fashionable ass-revealing hospital gown?

The receptionist takes my cards, glances at her clipboard and says "Oh, you're not Gladstone, you must be Cavallo." She hands me menus from which I'm to make meal selections for the next three days. As the newly named "Cavallo," my consumer confidence plummets and my heart beats a little faster. I'm sure the blood pressure is now rising and will show abnormalities which will, in some way, cause the food to be worse than anticipated.

Later, I discover that the "choice" feature embodied by this selection circling process is an empty gesture. Apparently if there is the slightest doubt or shortage, the meal choices default to the most basic level of medically safe food, that is to say dishes that taste like heated Nerf balls.

AGE.  
? RAGGIZY (ANDY) ?

The dignity-stripping marches ahead as I am prepped and Gurney-ized. A Gurney is the rolling table that, like a Rose Bowl Parade Float, is designed to let as many people as possible see the attraction aboard in the shortest time. The

attraction, in this case, is a variety of poorly gowned personal body parts belonging to a six foot five photographer. I felt like waving at the rubbernecking crowds.

In spite of having been admitted a full hour early, the O.R. availability somehow evaporates and I lay in shivering blank-eyed boredom. I reread a Hudson Valley Real Estate magazine nine times, looking for new content each time. It's like sucking tidbits of meat from a lobster's legs. I find an ad featuring lovely properties. The agency owner is pictured wearing a short-sleeved printed barbecue shirt. He's asking me to let him help me make the single biggest purchase and financial investment of my life, dressed for hot dog grilling.

^ AND he's

Being wheeled is fun. I like the breeze flowing through my toes as I'm wheeled into my room. I am hungry and have not eaten for 18 hours. A late mercy lunch arrives. The menu on top of the green hump that is keeping this meal warm proclaims it's a diabetic, low fat, low cholesterol lunch. In other words, it's totally tasteless. I am not diabetic nor overweight and I have my cholesterol well under control. This meal must be for someone else, probably Cavallo, but it

has my name on it. Opening the green dome reveals a tiny portion that is clearly for a sixth grader, not a six foot five inch 215 pound guy. It must be a punishment of some kind.

I'm reminded of the moment in a restaurant when, after a too-long wait, the waiter, with a dramatic flourish, presents the wrong dish. Send it back and starve for another 10 minutes or just eat it now? It's a hard choice. Since hunger always beats correctness, I take a deep breath and smile at the walnut-sized dollop of scrambled Egg Beaters served with hard, dry English Muffin pucks. They actually clatter when dropped back on the plate. There's no jam or butter. There is the awful coffee that actually tastes like a rubber tire fire. The deal breaker is the skim milk intended for mixing into the rubber coffee. I am not the poor culinary Cretin that this meal was intended for. At this point, I snap remarking forcefully "I want regular food, scrambled eggs, jam and half-and-half for the coffee." It's explained that only the Doctor can change the menu requirements and he's not available until Monday. Until then, I'm stuck with this meal concocted by the legal department.

I rise from the bed, pull my socks, pants and a shirt on and start tying my shoes. "What are you doing?" the stunned nurse asks. "I'm going to town for breakfast and will be back in an hour" I say with studied conviction. The Nurse says "You can't do that." I say, "Yes I can. I want a decent breakfast and my car's right outside." She runs into the hall and bellows "He's going to town!"

Five minutes later the nutritionist calls and promises a new breakfast. A Doctor certifies that I may now receive not only the regular bland food but I may have real salt to sprinkle and double portions for every meal. Patient Power!

In the evening, inspired by this victory, I set out on a late night Commando junk food raid after the last round of antibiotics, medications and vital sign recordings, I slip into my street clothes and stroll casually past the Nurse Station. Turning a corner, I bolt for the elevator and push the button for the third floor where earlier intelligence says there is a small farm of vending machines. I find the vend area and discover that none of the dollar slots work. Curses! Back to the elevator and then out to the parking lot where I rob my



own car's ashtray full of bridge toll quarters. Hobbling in my surgical shoe back to the vending machines, I score Peppermint Patties, Sourdough Pretzels and a Diet Pepsi. Fine dining at last!

Sadly, my laptop computer is safely at home and I'm having withdrawal symptoms, having been separated from word processing and the internet for four days. Last night, after a late night visit to the bathroom, I pause momentarily in the middle of the dark room. It's the e-mail addict's midnight "Should-I-check-my-e-mail?" pause. This is a bad sign.

I've been reduced to writing these journals with a number two wooden pencil on ruled paper. It's very hard. You can't move paragraphs around without a scissors and glue. I have erased so many times that the floor is covered with rubber nubbies. I've worn through nine erasers and there are no more pencils at the nurse's station. Pausing as breakfast arrives this morning, I put the pencil down and inexplicably hold my hands in midair over the note pad. I wonder what am I doing? Then it came to me. I was searching for the

"save" keys. Feet, don't fail me now. It's time to get outta here!

*more to nursing home*

Only ten days more of antibiotic infusion in a facility near my home. I've managed to wangle a deal where I can get day passes to go home and feed the cats but at night, I must sleep in a supervised setting. I crave a good strong cup of fresh brewed coffee.

It's almost impossible to tell you how much I hate being yanked out of the best shooting weather of the whole year, but I'm making the grown up choices here so I can continue to finish the project.

Now, where's my stash of York Peppermint Patties?

Gary

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