



Magical Days

He knew how to be healthy, but after disease ravaged his body, he learned how to be sick—with a little help from a beluga whale

* Either this happened twice, or it happened once and I hallucinated it the second time. I'd done the emergency room routine many times before, but the fact that I had no measurable blood pressure and my heartbeat was racing slightly faster than a hummingbird's was new and unusual. After hours of pumping me with IV fluids and attaching me to way too many machines that made erratic beeping sounds, the doctor told my wife, "He probably isn't going to live through the day."

I don't know why he said this right next to my bed. Maybe he thought I was unconscious yet again. But I heard him. And so I called out to my beautiful wife, "Goodbye, hon, I love you."

Lynn, the center of my entire universe, looked at me and said, "Shut up."

* * *

If you want advice on how to be healthy, our country supports a multi-billion-dollar industry that serves it up in abundance—through books, television, the Internet; through health gurus, snake oil salespeople and mira-

cle pills; through spas ready to align your chakras and drain your wallet.

If you have to learn how to be sick, though, you're pretty much on your own.

Thanks to Crohn's disease wracking my digestive tract and my heart deciding it was no longer satisfied with a steady rhythm, I know how to be sick.

It wasn't easy. It took a stupidly long time to learn, but after 20 years of constant illness and energy-sapping pain, being sick is one thing I'm really, really good at.

Certain moments in life carry all the portent of a comet cutting across the sky during a total eclipse. For me the big moment was in 1989, when the world quite suddenly went black and I discovered the floor of a very busy Japanese train station is not a terribly attractive place to regain consciousness.

Until then I had been writing off my lousy feeling to the usual surreal experience of Christmas abroad, my fourth since moving to Japan after college. Or maybe it was the flu. I was 26, after all, and you don't get sick when you're 26. Not seriously sick.

I was seriously sick.

The rest of that winter I moved only from the bed to the bathroom, and when I'd faint, to the floor in between the two. By spring, when I finally flew back to the States to see a doctor, I weighed less than 120 pounds and had to be helped onto the plane because my knees no longer bent. I smiled at the people in the seats next to me, but the next time I looked up, they were gone. For all I know, they spent the entire 14-hour flight huddled in a toilet stall, afraid of catching whatever I had. →

And when I hobbled off the plane, my walking stick the only thing keeping me upright, my mother caught sight of me and collapsed into my father's arms.

* * *

In those first years, I learned what anybody in constant pain knows—that after a while, pain is more boring than anything else. Pain is predictable. Illness, though, is a species of chaos, and I handled it badly.

I lived in a state of constant rage, smashing things as carelessly as rock stars smash guitars. I even punched a doctor who had just saved my life, since dying would have been easier.

But the moment I realized I was truly out of control came in Paris. My wife and I had gone to spend time together, to remember who we were when we were not dealing with my problems.

I was miserable. I was screaming fury the entire time. Late one night, trying to count change in my palm for a subway ride, I shrieked curses in three languages at a woman who had stopped only to help. Her face full of fear from what she'd seen in my own, she turned and ran. The worst crimes are crimes against innocence and good intentions, and in my eyes I had just become a vile criminal.

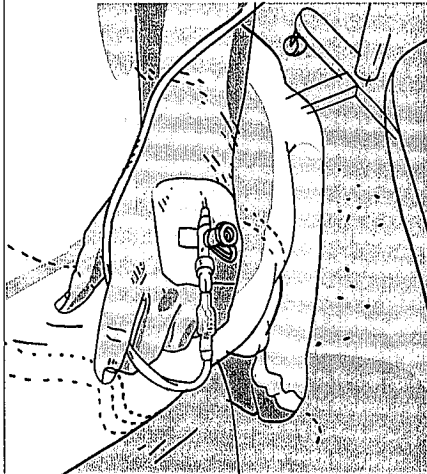
Yet I could not stop fighting myself or the world, because nothing I did to fight the disease worked. And I tried everything. No wheat, lots of wheat, no sugar, Gatorade galore, fiber supple-

ments, no fiber at all. I took herbs, bee pollen, castor oil packs. I experimented with Asian medical therapies to counter the impact of the steroids, the only treatment the doctors offered other than nearly a decade of surgeries that left me with some fairly interesting scars. I thought happy thoughts, meditated, even visited a psychic, who lived

in a much nicer house than I ever will. And through it all my wife, my friends, and the people who loved me learned when to be supportive and when to leave me alone. I still lashed out, but they put up with me, giving me their strength when I had no strength of my own.

A fun thing about Crohn's disease is that because it's an immune system problem, doctors get to blame it for virtually everything else that goes wrong. When, for no apparent reason, I started to go blind, every specialist I visited offered the same diagnosis: Crohn's side effect. Nothing to be done about it.

And so I did the only thing that made sense. My wife drove me to the airport. I stared at her beautiful face until she was lost in traffic, and then I flew to Alaska, the place where I grew up, the place where the landscape actually makes sense to me.



My wife, I came to realize, had given me a choice: either I could be bad at trying to be the person I'd been before I got sick, or I could figure out who I was now and learn to be good at that.

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Breathing that scent I love—ocean and forest and dead fish and raven feathers—I rented a car and in an act that showed an utter lack of reason, started driving. I was determined to hold the shapes of the mountains and the glare of the rapidly diminishing light forever in my memory.

One evening at Cook Inlet, as I lis-

tened to beluga whales bark and honk at one another, a woman noticed I was squinting in the wrong direction.

"I can't really see anymore," I said, so she handed me her binoculars, which brought the shadows of whales into focus. No matter how many times I offered the binoculars back, the woman only smiled. "A pleasure shared is a pleasure doubled," she said.

A beluga came up, right by shore; tucked safely behind a fin was her calf, the same cloudy white as the sky. And, starting to cry at the grace of the whales and the woman's kindness, I suddenly understood why my wife had told me to shut up.

* * *

In the wonderful movie *Harvey*, Jimmy Stewart says, "In this world, you must be oh so smart or oh so pleasant. Well, for years I was smart.

"I recommend pleasant."

My wife, I came to realize, had given me a choice: either I could be bad at trying to be the person I'd been before I got sick, or I could figure out who I was now and learn to be good at that.

So as the belugas swam, singing, into the Gulf of Alaska, I let go of it all. The fear, the anger, the sadness, the loss. All of it.

And my grand experiment began.

Not only was I going to be pleasant to everyone I loved; I thought I'd try something radical and be nice to myself once in a while, turn my face to the warm sunshine for a change.

Each morning I'd wake up and think, "What's possible today?" Not "What do I have to get done?" but what's possible.

I turned off the overanalyzing part of my brain and listened to my body.

Some days the possible was nothing more than petting the dog and lying on the couch. But other days it was looking at unfamiliar stars in New Zealand, squinting with my eyesight that had more or less come back, to see stars that were arranged in patterns I had no names for at all.

I discovered that the more attention I paid, the more I enjoyed everything. I spent hours on the back porch, enraptured by the way bats came out of the

pecan tree at twilight. I bought an upright bass that I never quite learned how to play, but the reverberation of the notes filled me with the same kind of joy I felt when I was able to travel and watch light come through the stained glass of a medieval cathedral.

I realized it didn't matter that I had days when I could walk only 50 yards down the beach before I had to sit and rest. It simply gave me time to watch an egret fish, its feathers so white, the bird could be a mirage in the spume.

"Being sick made you human," my wife said one night when I was apologizing, yet again, for how my illness had changed the boundaries of our lives, rearranged every dream we'd had in the early days. But then this amazing woman pointed out that the way I'd had to react to the illness—to go more slowly, to make everything matter, to simply worry about what was the right thing at that moment—had actually brought out the best in me.

And that taught me the most important lesson of all: that nothing—no pain, no illness, no day no matter how bad—would ever again stop me from taking care of the people I love. Whatever energy I had, I would give to them, as they had done for me.

And I could not believe the strength this offering gave me.

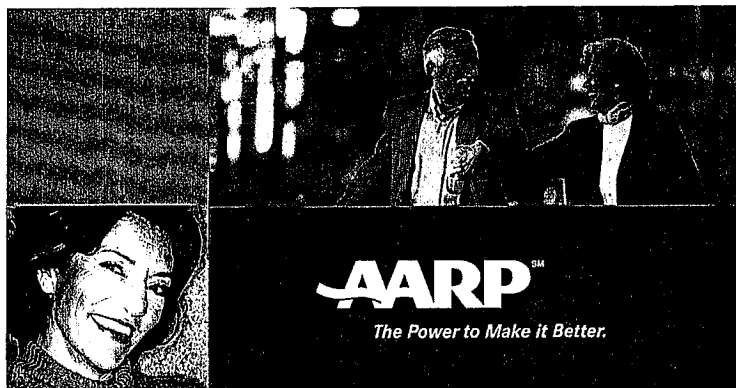
Make no mistake: I still had days when I cried in frustration, screamed in rage. But good day or bad, it was the day I had, and that had to be accepted.

Meanwhile, I had more surgeries, and I woke from one of them surrounded by cardiologists, which did not bode well. And somehow I still felt better than I had in years. I had shut out the fear, and that was like coming up from swimming underwater for much too long, finding just how sweet that first breath can be.

And so, yes, tomorrow when I wake up, I'll be sick.

But that's not what defines my life. "Shut up," my wife had said, and she was right. Shut up. Listen instead. ■

Edward Readicker-Henderson is working on a book about his search for the quietest place in the world.



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