

He Had Some Tears

The Aetna Undergraduate Creative Nonfiction Award, 1st Prize

I came here for x-rays, and now I might die?

My father, still in his factory work clothes, stood against the wall as the doctor whispered to him. We were in one of the exam rooms at the Yale New Haven Children's Hospital, and they didn't think I could hear them from where I sat, but they were wrong. The whole thing was wrong.

"The ball joint of his hip is slipping out of its socket, causing the limp and the pain."

"Okay."

"What we want to do is drill a screw through the head of the femur to secure it in place."

"Okay." A pause. "How much is this going to cost?"

"Your insurance should cover most of it."

A look of relief.

"How long can we wait until we have this done? My uh... my wife usually handles these things. She's at work."

"This is highly unusual, but there was a cancellation and we have an opening now. The surgeon is ready to go on your say so, and this guy's the best. Your son would be extraordinarily lucky to get this level of care. He should have it done tonight. The longer we wait, the more chance that serious damage will occur. Even now, he may never be able to walk normally again."

"Okay." He unbuttoned the top button from his oil-stained shirt. "What do I need to do? Is there something I need to sign for the insurance?"

The doctor handed him a clipboard and pen.

"The folks at Griffin sent us his medical records, so we don't need you to fill anything out. You just need to sign this waiver in case something goes wrong during the surgery."

"What?"

"With a surgery like this one there's a risk of nerve and bone damage, and, very rarely—in patients younger than your son, really—there is a small risk of death."

"Okay."

My dad took the paper, gave it a quick glance, signed it, and

handed it back to the doctor, who smiled at me before leaving. The smile didn't carry anything with it; there was no emotion underwriting it. It was just meant to keep me calm. It was a smile that said, "Trust me." But I couldn't.

After the doctor left, my dad sat down in his chair and stared past me, at a poster showing a cross section of the human body. Was he picturing his son like that, splayed open on an operating table? I don't know. All I know is that he didn't say anything to me, and we sat there in silence.

The parchment on the table under me crinkled as I shifted my weight. There was a smell in the room of air that was too clean mixing with the sweat and motor oil from my father's body. He had closed his eyes, and I thought he might be asleep. I tried to make like him: I stared ahead, at the back of the door where my jacket hung on a metal hook. But I couldn't be like him. I couldn't just sit there.

His eyes remained closed until I started to cry. I don't know how he heard me, because I had been crying as quietly as I could—maybe it was the sound of the tears falling against the parchment, maybe he had heard something in the hall outside that I couldn't hear. Either way, he had heard me, it was done and there was no use trying to hide it anymore, so I sobbed loudly and without care while he stared silently at the poster. There was liberation in those tears; a breaking of tension that I thought would have smothered us both.

Within five minutes, I managed to calm myself down. I dried my eyes on the sleeve of my middle school uniform and put my mind to disassembling the Mr. Potato Head doll that was left behind from a previous patient. And maybe five minutes after that a nurse came in to give me a paper gown. She asked me how I was doing.

"He had some tears," my dad said to her with a smile before I myself could respond, and I couldn't help but look at him. "But he's fine now."

She left, and I got changed. He would talk to her, but he wouldn't say anything to me? I didn't understand. She hadn't even been talking to him. She asked *me* a question, and he took the liberty to answer for me. Had I embarrassed him by crying? Did he need to clarify, in case someone had heard through the door, that it hadn't been him that was afraid? That it was the *boy* that was crying?

He had some tears. These words had more of an effect on me than anything else my father had ever said to or about me. They made me angry. They filled me with resentment. This man who didn't know me, who wouldn't talk to me, who was embarrassed by me... this man had the nerve to speak for me?

The nurse came back after a few minutes to take me down to the operating room.

“Want your dad to come with us?” she asked.

I looked at her and shook my head. She nodded as though she understood, and started to roll me out the door. I couldn’t bring myself to say anything to my dad before we left; if he couldn’t acknowledge me, I wouldn’t acknowledge him. I just wanted to get it done and over with. Anything was better than staying in that room.

When I was down the hall far enough so that I knew my dad couldn’t see me—his eyes were bad from years of factory work—I turned and looked back. He was doing what I thought he’d be doing; staring straight ahead. But there was something different about his face. It was red, his eyes were glossed over, he kept swallowing; he looked as if he were in pain. But then the nurse turned the corner, and I settled back into my seat.

I absorbed nothing of what the surgeon said to me a few minutes later as he explained how he was going to fix my leg. I stared at him without blinking and nodded my head. The next thing I remember, I was lying on a table being told to count backwards from ten.

Before they put the mask on my face, I heard myself speak. But what I said didn’t make any sense, because it wasn’t at all what I had wanted to say. I don’t know where it came from, because it wasn’t what was going through my mind at the time. I was thinking that I might never wake up again; that I might never see my mother again. Those words that came from my mouth—even now I doubt that it had actually been me that said them.

“Tell my dad I love him.”

The anesthesiologist smiled—I could tell by the way the corners of her eyes moved that it was real—and put the mask over my mouth. *Ten. Nine. Eight.* And then I slept.