

You are the one!

2001

It was midnight at San Francisco General Hospital. It was a day after the surgery. I stood in line for some food in the basement cafeteria. My regular comfort food was a grilled cheese sandwich and lots of pickles.

With my tray, I entered the seating area. I found a table with only one other person. His white coat and badge showed that he was a surgery resident. I didn't know him, but I had seen him once before. In my wife's hospital room, nurses made repeated attempts to start an IV. After the prescribed number of failures, the nurses called this particular resident. They told me he worked with children and had amazing abilities with tiny veins.

Since I remembered the doctor. I began to chat with him.

His questions were gentle. "What brings you here?"

I said, "My wife had most of her liver removed".

Suddenly the conversation stopped.

He stopped eating, looked at me and cried out:

"Oh my god, you're the one. It was your wife."

I nodded.

"Yes," I said, not pleased to be a notorious case.

"Does that happen very often," I naively asked.

"God, no! Everyone is talking about it".

The day before the surgery, in the Fall of 2001. The few trees on the street were giving a bit of color and beginning to drop into the street. I was driving with a paper map in the late afternoon. Fog from the San Francisco Bay was rushing down the streets, chilling the air. The streets were becoming wet.

I was searching for The Blue Mansion B&B. It was right on the edge of the Haight Ashbury. In fact, it was half a block from the famous Haight Street.

In the '60s, Haight Street was a hub of a hippie/drug life. I had not lived that scene, but I knew about it. I had never been part of the counter culture scene. Now Haight Street was a place on the tour bus circuit. Huge buses passed by as tourists behind smoked glass looked out. Today's Haight Street had tie-dye shirt vendors and a ragtag of street musicians. They focused their sales efforts on the visitors.

From my car window, I could smell a mix of pizza, beer and patchouli oil. The streets were old and sad with piles of trash, pizza boxes, beer cans, some broken glass. As I drove, I glanced at a few small groups seated on the sidewalk. What were they up to? Why were they there? The bars blasted rock music. I imagined and anticipated what this area was like at night.

I pulled off on to a side street and called the B&B for directions. The music was loud enough to make it hard to hear. A panhandler approached me. I waved him away and he moved on.

My phone call was answered:

“Where are you?”

Frustrated and tired, I snapped: “I don’t know where I am, but I think I’m near you. I’m at the corner of Haight and Scott.”

I felt and then heard a loud I group of teenagers approaching from behind. They yelled to me. “Hey, hey! What are you doing here man!”

My phone call continued: “OK, go towards the park on Haight and turn onto Steiner. You’re close. I’ll come out on the porch and look for you.”

I put the car in gear and rolled up my windows. Surely, I thought, that would make me safe.

True to it’s history, the Haight, as the neighborhood was known, was not the kind of neighborhood I would voluntarily visit, no less rent a room. It was walking distance from the hospital. I planned to park and not try to use my car in this congested city.

An hour earlier, I had dropped my wife Sarah off at San Francisco General Hospital. Part of my mind was still at the hospital. The unfamiliar streets confused me, I juggled the map and looked for numbers on the old residential homes and apartment buildings.

The owner had warned me about parking, but I quickly realized this was urban San Francisco. There was no place at all to put my car.

The B&B had a narrow driveway that lead to a little garage. I was annoyed, and sweaty as I tried to maneuver the car. The owner came out:

“Hey, are you Mike? I’m Jim.”

I rolled down the window. “Yes, that's me.”

Jim offered: “I can park it for you.”

I jumped out of the car. I was so relieved that someone would help me.

Sarah and I had thought this would just be a short hospital stay.

So far, the day had been scary. We had done the admissions tests, filled out the forms and met with Dr. Bennett who again warned us very explicitly of the danger of the surgery. It was potentially life threatening. We were jammed into a tiny exam room. The doctor brought in a student to witness our conversation. Sarah did not hesitate despite the doctor’s repeated and solemn warning. She said: “Let’s do it!”

Sarah and I returned to her hospital room. We kissed goodbye as I left her. I felt a whiff of relief when I finally left the hospital. The relief was mixed with guilt at abandoning my wife alone in a hospital bed. In the past I had constantly stayed at Sarah’s bedside, but I was so tired.

I staggered a bit when I stood up to leave. “I’ll be back early the morning,” I said.

I found my car in the giant hospital parking lot. I had parked on the top of the lot and could see San Francisco arrayed from the hilltop. I ignored the dramatic view. I thought, I'll go to the B&B and rest a bit. I gave myself permission to leave Sarah.

We had driven over from Napa via the Golden Gate Bridge. The afternoon traffic was fast, close and tight. I gripped the steering wheel. I was extra vigilant as we headed for our pre-surgery appointment. My mind was not on the drive. I forced myself to focus on staying in my lane and watching other drivers.

After Jim parked my car, I retrieved my bag and followed him up a tall flight of wooden stairs. This house was one of the old mansions with many rooms. Jim showed me the huge common kitchen and explained the drill. Coffee and breakfast were help-yourself. If you got up before 5 am, you could make your own coffee.

Jim offered me a tiny cottage away from the main building. It was in a courtyard filled with flowering vines and some ferns. There were wind chimes. You could see a patch of sky if you looked straight up. It looked very private and safe. I wanted that: privacy and safety.

Once inside and alone, I sighed and sat on the edge of the bed. I turned on the heat. There was a skylight. No TV, no radio, no phone... No cell phone coverage! No phone! I was in a canyon down in my cottage.

I ran back up the main house stairs. "Jim! Can I give the hospital your number in case they need to reach me?" The thought of

Sarah alone in that giant hospital up the hill, worried me. I carried that worry constantly.

“Of course. How long do you think you’ll be here? You told us three days.”

“I’m not sure.”

“Ok, just let me know as soon as you know.”

He touched my shoulder. He said: “We won’t make you leave if you have to extend.”

That little exchange meant that as I returned to my room, often at night, I would check in with Jim and extend my stay a few days.

The morning of the surgery, I awoke before 5 and quietly climbed the stairs to the main kitchen. I knew there were about twenty other people sleeping throughout the big house. I made my coffee and began my favorite part of the day. I was alone. I left the kitchen lights off and sat quietly in the dark.

After about an hour, the sun began to come up and men and women came into the kitchen. They helped themselves to cereal or pastries and poured themselves mugs of coffee. My solitude was over.

I listened to the banter of businesspeople who traveled for work. These were not tourists. I was the only person waiting on a hospital patient.

The men ignored me, but the women wanted to know why Sarah was in the hospital.

“She had uterine cancer?”

“Didn’t she have routine tests”

“Now she’s having even more surgery?”

“Another new cancer? Oh, wow!”

“So how did you find out? Oh, wow!”

After the brief breakfast/coffee interrogation, I retreated to the front door and headed to the hospital. The B&B was at the foot of steep hill leading up to the hospital. I was breathless by the time I climbed up to the entrance. The day had now begun.

Laura arrived in the morning to wait with me. We sat for a while in the surgical waiting room. We took turns going for walks with one of use staying in the room in case the surgeon might call. We observed other family members receiving such calls. Or at times the surgeon came into the waiting room.

“Mr. Gorodezky”

I was summoned to a reception desk in the waiting room. You can just go up and wait in Sarah’s room. She is out of surgery, and she will be coming to room 1212. You can just take that elevator there.” She pointed down a hallway. Take the blue elevator to 12.

Laura and I headed to the room. We sat and waited. It had been 9 hours. We were both wound tight. We barely spoke. I said, “Well they said she out of surgery, I wonder why she isn’t being wheeled in here.” I looked out in the hallway and began to walk toward the nursing station, far down the long hallway.

A nurse saw me coming and asked a coworker something inaudible. Then I heard her clearly say, "Oh she's not coming back to the room.!" She was surprised.

I rushed toward the nursing station to get an explanation. I didn't tell Laura where I was going. I just took off down the hall. I thought the worse. I thought something terrible had happened after surgery.

"Oh, Mr. Gorodezky, Sarah has been taken to Intensive Care. She'll be there for a while and we need the bed in 1212, so she won't come back to that room. She'll return to another room. You can go to Intensive Care. Take the elevator to the 8th floor. They will tell you when you can see her.

As I look back to that night of the first surgery, I suppose I should have known it was unusual. After the surgery, while I was with Sarah in intensive care, two technicians hurried into the room. They wheeled in in a portable x-ray machine. With a quiet efficiency they set up their equipment. Sarah groaned as they rolled her about.

A tech said: "Would you please step out. You can watch from the door."

They spoke to Sarah although she was still semi-conscious from the anesthesia.

"Now Sarah we need to roll you over a bit"

Sarah gave a groan of pain.

They took several x-rays. This seemed a bit odd. The surgery was over.

As soon as the technicians left the room, a young surgeon, Dr. Mary Green came to talk with me. She explained she was the lead surgeon for Sarah. Her badge showed Chief Resident. I had never met Dr. Green.

Sarah was still not yet conscious.

At first Dr. Green stood above me while I sat on a chair near the bed. Suddenly, Green pulled a chair close to me. She began to speak but her voice was soft and hesitant.

With halting breath and then some tears;

“We counted all sponges and knew one was missing, but we couldn’t find it. So they decided the initial count was wrong. “
“I kept worrying about it so we just did another x-ray”

“The x-ray showed the missing sponge. “

Dr. Green continued, “It was a 12 hour surgery. I’m so sorry.”
The whole team was tired.”

I tried to make sense of this news as Dr. Green explained the error.

Naively, I asked, : “Do you have to go back in and get it?”

Dr. Green who had initially been tearful, was now fully recovered and clicked back in to *proper-objective-doctor* mode. My question helped her to remember she was the expert and I was the family.

She said, "Of course, we have to open her back up. I know just where it is. We'll be in and out quickly."

I looked at Sarah with a huge bandage across her abdomen area. I imagined what these words meant. "Open her up."

Dr. Green said: "I'll call you just as soon as I finish. Give me your cell phone number."

I replied that I worried my phone would not work inside the hospital.

Dr. Green said: "Wait in the main waiting room, by the big doors. It will work there. We'll start right away, I have a surgery ready."

I went to a couch in the main area. I held my phone almost as a talisman. I stared at it. I was afraid to call my daughters to tell them what had happened. I tried to imagine when Dr. Green began the surgery. I watched the wall clock.

What were they were doing?

Had they started?

Had I been too passive? Should I have asked more questions?

It was 11 at night.

On the carpet in front of me, there was a raucous group of toddler size children. They played loudly and were having a great time tumbling about.

"Why are they here so late at night?", I thought.

I normally would have loved such a scene, but tonight I wanted to be away from the noise. But I was afraid to leave. I was exhausted, and had not eaten since the morning. I feared my phone would not work if I moved.

I replayed my bedside conversation with the surgeon. It was so fast. In just a few minutes, she told me they were “going in.” “Should I have less passive? Should I have asked other questions?”

I gripped my phone and waited. I watched the laughing children.

No reading.

No radio.

Just breathing and waiting.

It was about 1 AM by time Dr. Green called me back up to intensive care. Sarah had now had two surgeries in the same day, both with general anesthetic. With reassurances that Sarah would sleep for hours and more apologies from the staff, I began walking back to my cottage, my refuge.

The streets were dark, no traffic or people at 2 AM. It was cold and it was lightly raining. I felt very unsafe on the empty street, but did what all urban folks do, I pulled my jacket hood up, and walked with determination and speed. I first jogged down a steep hill then quickly ran across Haight street which still had plenty of action. I could still hear the music and the drunks. I took out my key to make a quick entry in to the B&B. The front

stairs had broken beer bottles strewn near the steps as I struggled with the key and quickly darted inside.

I walked through the hallway of the house. It was dark everywhere except the kitchen. I got through to the back door. I started my descent down the wet metal stairs. As I walked large security lights began to click on. They each made a banging sound as they illuminated my path. I felt like a prisoner darting away from the spotlights.

In my room, I lay down and tried to relax. I trusted the nurses on the ICU, so I didn't feel too guilty for leaving. I stared up at the room's skylight. The security lights were like the sun. I could see wet leaves all over my view of the night sky. I wondered if it was fog or rain.

The next morning, I climbed back up the steep hill to the hospital. At the crest of the hill, I stopped to catch my breath. I imagined that I was on a carnival ride. Perhaps it was a complex roller coaster. This hill was the top of that first climb when you feel the most fear. I was breathing hard. I could hear my heart pound.

I did not know if I would plunge down or make a high-speed turn. I didn't know what was around the turn. No matter how hard I strained and thought, I did not know what was ahead. I had to hold on tight.