

The condition

Lynn John

They cut through my chest with an electric saw, opened my ribcage wide, like a briefcase, and lifted up my heart. They detached and then re-attached two arteries from the front of my chest to the beating heart, cut out a 22 cm section of vein from my left inner forearm and attached it to the still beating heart, literally by-passing the three clogged arteries, which they left there, under-performing. Then they drilled holes into the bones of the separated halves of my sternum, pulled the two sides of my chest together, inserted wire loops in the holes, twisted the loops tight, sewed up the skin, and I was done.

The day after the operation I woke up in an Intensive Care ward with three other heart by-pass recipients. All men.

A young nurse was staring down at me. She smiled and squeezed my hand. "How do you feel?" she said.

What do you say to a question like that? I thought. I said nothing. Wasn't sure if I could say anything. I felt removed from my throat.

"Do you want anything?" she said.

I wanted to pee but couldn't tell her.

Another nurse came in. A senior nurse. With epaulettes.

She immediately took charge. She told me they were going to remove the four drainage tubes that were sticking out of my belly and disappearing over the side of the bed. I tried to look down but failed. I decided to take her word for it.

Senior then instructed Junior to pull out one of the tubes from my stomach on the count of three and put the end in a basin to catch any spillage.

"One, two, three!"

Junior whipped out the tube so fast that a gout of blood and ooze sprayed down the wall, in an arc, behind her.

The pain was like nothing I had ever experienced before. Searing hot. Blinding white. And a total surprise.

I gasped and gagged. But, strangely, did not emit a sound. I should have howled, kicked, vomited. But I didn't do any of those things.

And Senior said, "Good! Perhaps a little slower with the next one, please."

I suddenly found my voice. "Next one?" I gasped.

"Yes," she said, "you were so good with the first - even if it was a little fast - most people react a little, but you didn't, so maybe we should do the same with the ..."

"No!" I gasped, "slower is better, definitely better."

"Right you are! Slower it is then. Ready? One, two, three!"

By now, of course, it was an issue of honour. Of manliness. Of courage. Of stupidity. I held my breath as she counted, and the wave of pain and nausea escalated rapidly, reached a peak, then slowly subsided. I wasn't sure if I preferred the slow or the fast version.

"Well done!" This was to Junior, not to me. "Now, just two more ..."

And they moved on to the next victim. Lying in the bed next to me. Completely unsuspecting.

His first scream would have been heard in Hell. I laughed out loud - I didn't mean to - it just slipped out - and I regretted it immediately because the laughing hurt. A lot. I didn't remember much more about that day.

When I next woke, I was out of Intensive Care and in my own room. It was dark - not night - the dark of evening. I could make out blue and white curtains with a little motif, and bland, off-white, hospital furniture.

I was the only occupant of the room. Or so I thought. Because when I looked towards a desk that was slightly behind me to my

right, there was an older man sitting at it. He was in his sixties or early seventies, rotund, verging on fat, hair receding but still long over his ears. He was bent over the desk as if reading or writing. I could only see him out of the corner of his eye, so I moved my bottom very carefully to the left and turned so I could see the man full on. He wasn't there. There was nobody there. I faced front again and squinted back. And there he sat at the chair.

"Hello," I said, broken voice, like glass.

The man didn't answer. He didn't move. But he stayed with me, hunched over, all that night, and for the next days, but only when I was on his own, and only when I squinted.

After a week, they told me I was allowed to go home.

A Community Nurse sat with me, clipboard on her lap, and checked me off against her list.

"Age?"

"Thirty five."

"Appetite?"

"Small."

"Bowel movements?"

"Small."

She laughed. "Hallucinations?"

I stared at her. "How in God's name did you know that?"

"Hallucinations?"

"Yes. I've been seeing a man - over there in the corner - sitting bent over - writing something - never seen anything like it before."

"Quite common after this kind of operation."

"Why - because of the drugs?"

"No, doesn't seem to be. People on heart-lung machines are on the same drugs but they usually don't hallucinate. You were considered strong and fit - apart from your veins - so your heart wasn't stopped. Hallucinations seem to occur only when the patient's heart is kept beating - and handled. The surgeon reaches in and takes your heart out of its sac ..."

"Sac? I didn't know hearts came in sacs!"

"Protective sac - kind of membrane - anyway, they attached the arteries to your heart while it was beating - touching it of course - and that seems to have effects afterwards."

"Like hallucinations?"

"Yes - and other things."

"What other things?"

"Look, I don't want to put ideas in your head - everyone's different."

"Are these ... effects ... permanent?"

"It varies ... we don't really know. Have you noticed anything else different?"

"No, not really."

But I was lying.

I cried a lot. Not bad cries. Good cries. Much of what I would have previously regarded as mundane, everyday, was suddenly momentous and moving and beautiful. Astonishingly beautiful. Not because I was glad to be alive - even though I was - but out of sheer wonder at the line, the shape, the colours, the sound, the texture, at the breathtaking newness of it all. Simple things: birds flying and alighting on a branch of the tree just outside the window - especially the moment they stretched out their feet and touched or gripped; the songs they sang, each note separate, new each time they sang; individual drops of rain - that drop and that drop; a child laughing somewhere; and as soon as I got home, music, particularly 'Dove sono' from Mozart's 'Le nozze di Figaro' and 'Nacqui all'affano' from Rossini's 'La Cenerentola' - both sung by women, both pieces demanding extraordinary voices that ranged from deep contralto to coloratura soprano, with agile leaps and breathtaking runs, over and over. So much amazed me, and with each amazement, came the crying.

And they were sobbing cryings. None of your tears in the eyes cryings. We're talking pull-over-to-the-side-of-the-road-and-bawl cries here.

And I had to write. Compelled to. Banks of notes. They sang in my head and I had to write them down. And stories. Anecdotes and scenes and characters and plotlines poured out of me. Within days of getting home I had my wife place a pile of blank sheets of paper and a pencil at the side of my bed, in the kitchen, next to the toilet pan - in every room in the house. When the urge came, and it came often, I wrote. I wrote on paper, on walls, arms, hands, legs, napkins, tables, bench tops - anywhere, everywhere. I taught himself to write in the dark for if I turned a light on, my wife would sigh, one of those deep, meaningful sighs, and if I didn't write the thought down, I would lie there awake all night anyway trying to remember it. My first efforts were a scribble - lines of words on top of earlier lines of words, intertwined, indecipherable. Like a code. Until I learned and trained myself to move my hand, in the dark, a double space down for the next line.

And when I wrote a sequence I was happy with, when I finished a scene, a story, or whatever, I started on the next one. I had no choice. I was driven.

The condition, I discovered quite by chance from a 'New Scientist' magazine, is shared by some people who have suffered severe physical trauma. The condition, it seems, is called Hypergraphia.

The first real piece of writing I completed was the result of a suggestion from a conductor of an opera I was singing in. His name was Eliano Mattiozzi. He had mentioned an interesting storyline to me two years before I had my by-pass operation, and I had been researching the story for those two years. One year's research on Mozart. One year's research on Rossini. I'd assumed I'd hand the research over to a writer, a real writer, an established, known, perhaps famous screenwriter, when the

research was finished. But now I couldn't stop myself. Five weeks, five days and eighteen hours after the operation, I wrote the opening scenes of the film. Then they poured out of me. I couldn't stop them coming. It was like they were all there ready, sitting in my brain, and all I had to do was let them out. Six weeks later, I finished the screenplay. It was a Friday. The next day, Saturday, I started on my next screenplay. And that pattern, that disease, has repeated itself over and over now, for thirteen years. Twelve screenplays, four novels, three stage-plays, two opera librettos, two Children's TV series, two cookbooks, and one short film, later.