



## Seven Hospital Vignettes

By **Rachel Marcy** on March 21, 2014 in **HEALTH**

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The attending physician asked me to hop up on the exam table. There was a smattering of dried red flakes on the sheet, which he wiped away. “What’s that from?” he muttered. I lay down, and saw the origin of the red flakes: congealed globs

of blood, adorning the overhead lamp.

“Ummmm...” I nervously giggled. “There’s blood on the lamp.”

The doctor apologized and I was ushered into a new room, where I came to the deeply uncomfortable realization that the blood could only have reached the lamp by spurting upward, and that hospitals are never as clean as we hope.

I was supposed to have a cyst removed. The doctor originally thought it was an adenoma, which is a more serious affair, but on the day of the surgery decided it was actually a cyst, and they shouldn’t bother cutting it out.

It was supposed to be a 15 minute outpatient procedure, and he’d prescribed Ativan for anxiety. I felt like I was floating. I was concerned about something, and the nurse looked at me kindly and told me not to worry about it. For once in my life, I believed it.

When the doctor decided against removing the cyst, I struggled to focus my brain to absorb this new piece of information. “Well, I’m already here,” I reasoned. I felt kind of embarrassed, because I’d taken off work for it and everything. “This is one scar you don’t need,” everyone said.

My aunt wrapped her hands around my shins. “Hi,” she said, trying to bring me back to reality.

I have gaps in my memory from that point, partly because I kept falling asleep, although that doesn’t explain how I got from the hospital to the car. My aunt drove me toward home. “I think you need some food,” she said. So we stopped at a diner. I observed the other customers with a degree of frankness that probably would have been considered rude.

There was a pet store across the parking lot. “Can we go see the guinea pigs?” I asked.

So we went to see the guinea pigs. I asked if I could take them out of their cages.

“Well, we don’t normally let people take them out,” said the pet store employee.

“What if I sat on the floor?” I suggested. That was apparently a satisfactory compromise, because I remember sitting in the aisle of the pet store, cuddling a guinea pig with sleek black fur.

My aunt drove me home and put me in bed. My poor, befuddled brain told me that she sank through a hole in my bedroom floor, but she probably just took the stairs.

Later, she told me I had been remarkably functional. “Was I acting really weird in the pet store?” I asked. “No,” she said. “You just looked like you reverted back to your natural self.”

There wasn’t enough room in my jaw for my wisdom teeth to come in, so they had to come out. The nurse walked me from the waiting room to the surgery. She looked at me curiously.

“Did you take the prescription we gave you?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Most people wouldn’t be able to walk right now.”

I smiled to myself.

"I've lost weight," I said. This seemed like a crucial piece of information, because any amount of weight loss on my body is notable and potentially concerning. Weight loss means I've lost muscle. I was feeling weak.

"Yeah, how do you do that?" the doctor said. "I wish I looked like that."

I blinked at her.

I came with my own barf bag—I'm not rude—but when I lunged for it at reception, the man behind the desk handed me a hospital-grade version, which had a hard plastic opening and looked like it was meant to go in a vacuum cleaner. I heaved into the provided bag and daintily (limply) extended my arm to be affixed with a hospital bracelet by the receptionist, who looked bored rather than disgusted.

I was put in a wheelchair and pushed into the ER proper. They installed me in a room, and I shakily climbed onto the bed. Table? They gave me a blanket.

The doctor walked in and asked what brought me into the ER today? I looked at him and started puking into my bag.

"So," he said, turning to my boyfriend. "How long has this been going on?"

A couple of hours. It came on quite suddenly, with disturbing vehemence.

"It's a lot of mucus," I offered, when I could speak again.

"I noticed," the doctor said, wryly and without condescension.

I was cold and dehydrated and shivering.

The nurse had to take my blood and start an IV. I'm very easy to stick. My skin's so translucent I'm practically a walking diagram of the circulatory system. He inserted the needle into my right arm, and—I believe this is the technical parlance—blew my vein. That is, he pierced the vein all the way through.

"Oh," he said. I turned to look, and saw him lifting my skin from underneath with the needle.

"Whoa," said my boyfriend. I felt sick, but mostly indignant.

The nurse seemed flummoxed, but finally got the needle out. He proceeded to give it a try on my left arm, as the diffusing blood formed a bruise on my inner right elbow.

"Stop shivering," the nurse said peevishly, as if I was doing it on purpose. Probably he was embarrassed.

He took several vials of my blood, which seemed unnecessary, and then started the IV so I could be rehydrated. The fluid entering my arm was cold. My boyfriend foraged in the cupboard for more blankets, and tucked me in. I still shivered.

I call to make an appointment. I go through a version of the same ritual every time.

"Last name?" asks the receptionist.

"Marcy," I reply.

“No, your last name.”

“That is my last name. M-A-R-C-Y.”

“Oh, Mercy!”

“No, Marcy. With an A. A as in Apple.”

I sit in the waiting room.

“Mercy?” asks the receptionist.

“Mercy!” announces the nurse.

There could be someone else in the room actually named Mercy, so I look around before I get up. I see people cradling broken arms, and people trying to cough discreetly, and children waiting with their parents, and Mercy starts to sound more like a plea than a name.

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Rachel Marcy likes history, sleuthing, ballet, fencing, and guinea pigs.



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Jaya Saxena · 201 weeks ago

+55

Oh my god the losing weight thing. That doctor!



ginkgotree · 201 weeks ago

+82

"Yeah, how do you do that?" the doctor said. "I wish I looked like that."

This frustrates me so much. Even among medical professionals, I've encountered the idea that any weight loss, for any reason, must naturally be a good thing. At the nadir of my chemotherapy, a nurse took my weight and exclaimed "You're so lucky!" Yeah. That's me. I'm on the promethazine diet; it's working great.

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icebergmama · 201 weeks ago

+29

Wow. wow. Too vivid. Yeah, this is good stuff. More vignettes please.



embryoconcepts · 201 weeks ago

+46

"Wow, you've lost 40lbs in 6 months! Looks great!"

"Yeah."

"Wish I could do that!"

Dead-eyed stare at the nurse. "It's from starving, from not being able to eat or keep anything down."  
"Oh. So, what are you here for today?"



sunfastrose · 201 weeks ago

+11

I wish I could see the full stories behind all of these. Especially the vomiting one.



safvn · 201 weeks ago

+20

Gah. This was beautifully written, and I have nothing to add except that you seem to have had the worst doctors and I am sorry.

[1 reply](#) · active 201 weeks ago



embryoconcepts · 201 weeks ago

+48

"So, I appear to be having an allergic reaction and some of the 'serious' side-effects for this drug."  
"Hmm...those side-effects are pretty rare."  
"Yes, I know. I was skeptical too, but they are just getting worse. And the allergic reaction..."  
"Oh, you couldn't be allergic to that. And, really, the side effects probably aren't actually happening."  
"Spontaneous nose bleeds 2+ times a day, severe bruising, intense nausea, heart palpitations, are all listed as 'serious!'"  
"Yes, but..."  
"And as for the allergy, I'm pretty sure my throat closing up after I take the drug is an allergic reaction."  
"It's very unusual, lets give it some more time. It probably all in your mind."

Three days and one very expensive ER visit later, I cancelled all future appointments with that doc.

[2 replies](#) · active 201 weeks ago



turanga\_leela · 201 weeks ago

+48

I walk into the emergency room and go up to the desk. Clutching the counter for support I calmly explain to the nurse that I am being treated for an ectopic pregnancy and I think my left fallopian tube has just ruptured. Nurse says something along the lines of, "probably not but we will check you out."

In the back room, as she gets the blood pressure cuff ready, she gives me a lecture on how the medication they gave me for the ectopic pregnancy would give me intense cramps and everything is fine. She also rolls her eyes at me as I begin to dry heave. Then she takes my blood pressure and it is 50/30.

Suddenly there are about three or four nurse swarming around me to get me ready for surgery and throwing all kinds of warmed blankets at me.

[2 replies](#) · active 201 weeks ago



littleinfinity · 201 weeks ago

+5

This piece is disturbing and great! And I mention this error only because it takes away from the vignette at the very beginning: it should be "I lay down," not "I lied down". I like the guinea pig/ natural self anecdote :)

[4 replies](#) · active 201 weeks ago



Rachel · 201 weeks ago

+6

Grandma was dying of cancer, and her niece visited and said to me, "she's lost some weight!"

Yeah, lady, it's the cancer diet.



anachronistique · 201 weeks ago

+61

Hospitals are fucking terrible.

(I'm waiting in an ER bed after downing a huge barium milkshake before an MRI, to determine if I have appendicitis or something else. I tell my mom I am going to be sick. She asks the two nurses and a physician standing nearby to get me a basin; nobody moves. I projectile vomit Tang all over myself, the bed, and the floor, nearly splashing the shoes of the doctor. According to my mother, I then look up like Linda Blair in The Exorcist and proclaim: "FOR THIS YOU WENT TO MEDICAL SCHOOL?")

[1 reply](#) · active 201 weeks ago



roumbaba · 201 weeks ago

+11

All of these stories are terrifying!

My boyfriend's sister works in clinic administration for the kidneys department of a well-regarded hospital and the stories I hear from her are chilling... incompetent small-town doctors screwing up patients' health, hospital receptionists sending people walking from clinic to clinic, causing them to miss their appointment time because too lazy to check computer to see if they had an appointment at a certain place... just extremely frustrating and scary stuff.



CleverManka · 201 weeks ago

+46

My ER anecdote: Several years ago, I suddenly became Highly Allergic to PPD--black hair dye. I discovered this when I had a horrible reaction to touching up my roots (do an image search on "PPD allergic reaction" if you have a strong stomach). Within 24 hours, my head was swollen beyond what I thought was humanly possible and my eyes were so severely swollen shut that I could barely feel my eyelashes between the puffs of flesh between what I remembered as my eyebrows and cheekbones. A good friend drove me to the hospital and filled out the forms for me. When the admitting nurse asked what had happened, I told her it was from my hair dye. Her response? "Oh! Well, I never would have guessed you dyed your hair. It looks really great."

...Thanks?

[3 replies](#) · active 201 weeks ago



kat\_nap · 201 weeks ago

+24

Mr Nap goes to the emergency room after receiving a negative strep throat culture while continuing to experience excruciating throat pain. Dr Busy says, "just keep drinking fluids and taking Advil. You'll be fine. Next!" Mr Nap says, "but but I can't swallow Advil. Or fluids. My lymph nodes are visible from the outside of my neck." Dr Busy ignores him and moves on.

Three days later, I demand that my daddy MD (sigh, there's no single tier healthcare in Canada) get Mr Nap an appointment with his colleague who is an ENT specialist. Mr Nap's father hauls him over. He waits in the waiting room, falling

sleep every two or so minutes. ENT sees him for 25 seconds and says, "well, that's a case of mono if I've ever seen one! We'll have to rehydrate you and get you some drugs." FOUR DAYS in the hospital later, Mr Nap re-learns how to swallow.

Ten days later, Mr Nap receives phone call from first hospital: "hi Mr Nap, just calling to let you know about your positive mono test results." Everyone sucks. Except for Daddy and his ENT friend.

[7 replies](#) · active 200 weeks ago



**AmazingSandwich** · 201 weeks ago

+1

I would've felt that way about the cyst too.



**thebellewitch** · 201 weeks ago

+18

I read the first two paragraphs of this and started frantically looking for the "fiction" tag. Noooooo...



**Olgasrevenge** · 201 weeks ago

+42

On the one hand I am frustrated that these things happen and keep happening; on the other hand this piece and the comments are really comforting me right now after some insulting medical incompetence this week. Apparently, if you have a mental illness, any physical symptom you might feel is just part of your mental illness, it doesn't matter that you're managing it well, it doesn't matter that you live with this mental illness every day and you know what it feels like and it doesn't feel like this, no we won't run a blood test. /endrant



**YoungLeafedJune** · 201 weeks ago

+25

Did everyone read that article fairly recently about how shitty women are treated in healthcare situations? Women are given sedatives where men are given pain medication (because we're probably just hysterical!), we wait longer for treatment (because we're probably just on our period or secretly pregnant, it's not like women actually have heart attacks), and all kinds of other horrible things. It filled me with so much rage and convinced me that I'm going to have to be the biggest, most assertive bitch possible if I ever have to go to the ER.

<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052...>

[3 replies](#) · active 201 weeks ago



**blueblazes11** · 201 weeks ago

+7

I work for a health system, though not in a clinical capacity. For every horror story, there is a triumphant one. That said, I would really prefer that we stop having so many horror stories.

My husband had to come to my work repeatedly for chest pain. Never got a diagnosis of the cause, only of the symptoms. Because, you guys, pleurisy is not a disease, it is just a symptom of a disease. I am still 90% positive that he had TB and managed to beat it on his own because no doctor we saw was willing to test for it.



**Bittersweet** · 201 weeks ago

+2



Wow, this was beautifully written, and really hit home for me, especially because I've [had my share of hospital stays](#).

Also I'm very jealous of how easy you are to stick - I've got very small, very deep veins that require the child butterfly needle - but not jealous of your blown vein.



**thenotestaken** · 201 weeks ago

+16

I could write so many of these, ugh. The one that stands out in recent memory was when I was admitted to a hospital for a flareup of my chronic disease after being jerked around in the ER for over 12 hours, and I had been asking the entire time to see a specialist and kept being told later, later. When I was finally admitted around 11PM, not having eaten the entire day in case they had to do scans and whatnot, I was told that I would probably not be able to see the specialist until tomorrow and even though I was now allowed to eat they didn't have any food aside from two stupid apple-sauce cups. I was crying over how scary and shitty everything was and when the nurse came in to take my blood pressure she admonished me for crying, saying, "It could be worse! You could be bleeding!" What? How is that the right thing to say, at all?



**lawrence** · 201 weeks ago

+10

My doctor had just successfully convinced me that, despite my severe asthma, my month-long cough was no big deal. "So, I'm okay to just go to work tonight?" I asked. "You don't think I need a course of extra corticosteroids?" "Yeah, you can go," they said, "unless you want to get an X-ray to confirm the pneumonia."

It's not even the worst medical treatment I've received-- I did persuade them that probably they *should* give me corticosteroids and, you know, *antibiotics*-- but it's the most vibrantly idiotic.



**bumbleblu** · 201 weeks ago

+8

After my week-long hospitalization for a TBI, I was given a bunch of follow-up appointments and CT scans and such. A week after being discharged I went back to the hospital for a CT scan and an appointment with the neurosurgeon. I was stuck at the hospital by myself for seven hours before I finally saw the neurosurgeon. He was in the exam room with me for less than 30 seconds before he says "You shouldn't have bothered coming in, everything is healing fine." And that was it.

The whole ordeal still fills me with rage because over the course of a year of appointments with a neurologist and a couple ENTs, I never once saw any of these CT scans, nor was I ever told what specifically happened to my brain/skull when it smashed into the ground or did I get an actual prognosis.

I mean, maybe it was discussed while I was in the hospital. Where I was first unconscious and then doped up on morphine. So.



**brigidkeely** · 201 weeks ago

+12

While getting a tour of the office my first day on a temp-to-perm position, I started seriously cramping and then bleeding. I made my excuses, called my temp agency, and informed them I was en route to the hospital (via public transit) and they needed to send another temp out. Why? because I was having a 2nd trimester miscarriage! What fun!

I sat around the ER for about 6 hours before being seen. I was scolded for not having ID (my wallet had been stolen

and I hadn't replaced it yet) and told I should be ashamed for having bloody pants because OF COURSE all pregnant women carry around pads, right? Gosh! MEN MIGHT SEE MY BLOODY PANTS. The nurse didn't mention how shameful blood was to the several dudes whose shirts were soaked in blood, mind. There were NO functioning bathrooms in the ER area, and when I gave a urine sample I had to use a bathroom with no working sink which meant I was unable to wash urine and blood off my hands. The ultrasound machine they initially used was so crappy they couldn't see anything, so I had to go to a different room, where the techs yelled at me for making them stay late, shoved the wand up me, and yelled at me for crying because LOL having an ultrasound wand shoved up your bits and into your cervix doesn't HURT, I was just IMAGINING it! I ultimately expelled the contents of my uterus in a toilet during the long time I was completely unattended by anyone.

When I made a follow up appointment, they set it up with a doctor who was out of the country. Even though the appointment was made by an employee of the clinic, they blamed ME. It took me about two hours to get to the hospital, and I had to call before each appointment to make sure they weren't cancelled without my knowledge. The clinic I had follow up appointments at did not have doors on the public bathroom stalls, and there MANY hipaa violations. I also got to hear a woman sobbing in an exam cubicle while her doctor/nurse/whatever told her to shut up, the procedure didn't hurt THAT much.

I really regret seeking medical care for that. I would have been better off just going home. It would have been a lot less stressful, way less expensive, and I would have felt like a human being the entire time.

Stroger Hospital! What fun! Let's hear it for the health system of the USA!!!

[2 replies](#) · active 201 weeks ago



mirandawmeyer · 201 weeks ago

+4

The best time I went to the hospital for some kind of virulent food poisoning or stomach flu, I still don't know which, and at one point woke up (I had drifted off) to find myself with an empty IV port sitting in my arm, and me bleeding, without a doctor or nurse to be found anywhere. I waited around for EVER for someone to come by and do something--I honestly can't remember whether I finally got some attention or if I went full zombie apocalypse and pulled the thing out and left on my own. (I know now that that can be super dangerous, and I'm betting I didn't do it, but the fact that I think it's a serious possibility AND I CAN'T REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED says a lot.)



Elaine Guenette · 200 weeks ago

+1

The last few lines sums it up so well. Have Mercy on us. Hospitals can save lives, and one saved my husband from what would have been a fatal heart attack (then the insurance company threatened to not cover the care because I hadn't taken him to "his" hospital). But it seems that hospitals are no place for sick people and staying too long in one exposes the physically vulnerable to drug-resistant bacteria created by the very system charged with helping us. Hospitals, and the healthcare system in general, have their own culture which can sometimes result in callous and "tunnel vision" responses that can be not only rude, but life threatening. I have also had instances when the doctor simply refused to listen to anything I had to say, even though it turned out that I understood what my symptoms meant better than he did and endured additional and unnecessary months of pain before receiving successful treatment elsewhere. There are many good people working in healthcare, but the system contains its share of jerks and fools and everyone has had to bow before the insurance company's stranglehold. The Affordable Care Act is only a first step in a system that needs a major overhaul that puts promoting health first and removes the profit motive entirely.

[1 reply](#) · active 200 weeks ago



Melky · 200 weeks ago

+2

I really really like guinea pigs!!! I am not surprised that cuddling guinea pigs would allow you to revert back to your natural self. I hope you get to cuddle more guinea pigs.



**cheekypinky** · 200 weeks ago

+3

Last June, the Husband had a heart attack scare, which ended up being an esophageal spasm (same symptoms, same crazy-scary). He was given steroids, and sent home to rest after being observed for six hours in the ER.

That afternoon, he broke out into the worst case of hives I have ever seen--all over his body, huge, searing red welts.

We took him to another ER, his throat starting to close up, and STILL had to wait for four hours before we could even get to the first basic vitals test. We told the nurses that the hives had broken out after he took the prescribed steroids (even brought the bottle with us, told them the amount he had taken, etc.) and were shut down with a curt, "That reaction is impossible from this medication; what else were you taking?"

It's infuriating to be treated with discourtesy, disrespect, and contempt on a regular basis by medical professionals. I mean, I *\*completely\** understand that the ER is hard, stressful, and often thankless. I truly understand this. But it does not excuse the standard behavior of treating patients as though they are morons, and not believing them when they describe their symptoms.

I hate being the stubborn, loud, insistent patient/patient advocate, but when I'm faced with that treatment, all bets are off.



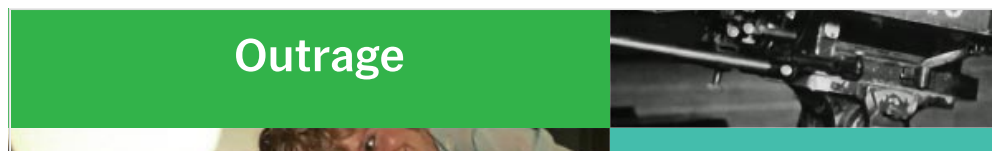
**JGlo** · 174 weeks ago

+2

"I heaved into the provided bag and daintily (limply) extended my arm to be affixed with a hospital bracelet by the receptionist, who looked bored rather than disgusted."

I work in a hospital. Most of those folks have been there longer than I've been alive and are stone cold mofos when it comes to bodily fluids. They've seen it all, and they are not impressed.

**Outrage**





Hey Ladies: We Wrote a Book!



Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market,"  
As I Understand It



Lord Byron's "Fare Thee Well," or "I  
Just Think It's Funny How"



Questions I Have Asked During The  
Only Episode Of *Doctor Who* I Have  
Ever Seen Until My Friend Said "Okay,  
Mallory, Why Don't You Write Your  
Questions Down And Ask Them All  
After We're Done Watching?"



Joan Didion and Anna Wintour: Best  
Friends Forever



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