

Dancing with Death, Dance for Life

Two weeks after I got out of the hospital, I went to see John Dawson. His nurse weighed me, wrote down numbers, and said, "Doctor Dawson thought we were going to lose you."

By then, I walked without assistance, though I still didn't have much energy or stamina. I had lost more of my sense of balance and some control of my movements. I couldn't play my guitar at all, because my fingers wouldn't go where I meant for them to go. My keyboard ability for my computer was so bad, I bought a program that would turn speech to computer files. The program didn't work. I threw it away.

I worked at my computer and my guitar. I accidentally deleted files because I didn't remember how to handle them, dragged my fingers across guitar strings when I meant to sound strings only with my pick. I kept at all of it, walking, guitar, computer, trying to remember what I wanted to remember and succeeding more and more. When I gained enough strength, I started swimming again.

My fifth night in the hospital, the first night I knew I was there, I knew I would die before sunrise. I waited, awake. I wanted to be alert when I traveled into death. I wanted to see and feel. I didn't want to dream my way to heaven, to hell, to a world beyond this world, to oblivion, wherever death took me.

I remembered one fevered moment of the first five days, before I came back into my aware mind. I held my right hand in front of my face and screamed, "Six fingers. My god, so ugly, six fingers." Five fingers and my thumb, all fat and ugly, like large, greasy pork sausages, no knuckles.

"...know where you are?"

"St. James Infirmary."

"This is Saint Charles Medical Center."

Grey-shirted man holds a metal clipboard, looks down at me. I'm lying in bed. He asks me, "Do you know where you are?"

Somebody told me. I try to remember. Is this some kind of game we play from boredom? He wants me to answer his question. He

waits for me to respond. “Oh, Saint James Infirmary. Maybe Saint James Medical Center, a medical center. Some infirmary, or maybe something for the infirm?” I watch his face as I talk, hoping to see recognition there if I chance on the right name.

“This is Saint Charles Medical Center.”

“Oh.” King-size headache, absolute mammoth, squeezing, ripping pain through my head and neck, can’t see worth shit, sick enough to wish I would die, and people play this stupid game with me, Do You Know Where You Are?

A large, translucent plastic receptacle for drinking water stands on my bed table, hospital logo in maroon letters. “St. Charles Medical Center,” sits in condensation from ice water. When I’m alone, I reach from where I’m lying in bed and turn the logo more toward me.

A man in a grey shirt, grey pants opens the wide, wooden door, walks in, leaves the door open. I watch the door. Outside that door, down unknown corridors, out through wide glass doors, the world. I will leave this place and walk into the world. I will be free. The man dressed in grey asks me, “Do you know where you are?”

I look at the maroon hospital logo on the translucent plastic container sweating onto the formica table top, “Saint Charles Medical Center.” Victory.

Sun shines into the room through the southeast-facing window. I don’t know it yet, but I’m in a hospital room five stories up, Saint Charles Medical Center. Words flow into my mind, register there, flow back out again, obscured in wispy fog I sometimes see through to meaning and sometimes don’t. People push at me for answers. I’ll have to start understanding what we’re headed toward, if only to get the people to shut up and leave me alone.

The man dressed in grey holds his metal, enclosed clipboard, looks down on me where I’m lying in bed, blanket up to my chest, looking up at him. He asks me, “Do you know who I am?”

Nuts. I thought I won this game when I told him the name of the place, and he would leave me alone. I study his face, smooth-shaven, waiting. He’s some kind of professional, and I’ve probably met him before. “Physical therapy maybe. Rafael, Raymond. I met you, probably. I don’t remember.”

“Doctor Michael Miller. I was the emergency room doctor when you came in. I’ve been seeing you twice a day.”

Thought I’d finally won something. Flying like a banner in my swollen and wildly-hurting head, this understanding; they think I’m difficult, ready to argue vociferously over anything that rubs me slightly wrong, and they can’t predict what will rub me wrong. Me too, I don’t know. I do know playing games with me drives me to instant anger.

I’ve had headaches before, but this tops anything I could imagine. I try to fit into the way they do things here in hope of getting out of here sooner, getting out of guessing games. What I realize that I didn’t realize a few seconds ago is, I don’t have to let them know I’m angry.

I ask the nurse, “Can we try morphine? Nothing seems to help.”

“We have been giving you morphine. I’ll see if it’s time for another shot, yet.”

She slips the needle into the IV needle taped to my arm and pushes the plunger. A little while. Pain fades some. I slide down into sleep.

They give me Vicodan and Ibuprofen pills. A nurse brings in IV apparatus, and I ask her what it is, “Antibiotic.”

“I’m not taking it.”

Nurse Gregory holds a hypodermic needle, tells me, “We can get a court order, strap you in bed in a lockdown room and give you the medication even if you refuse. Once you’re in the psychiatric ward, it can be really hard to get out.”

Is what he’s saying even true? I don’t think so. This is still the United States of America, with a constitution. Oh yeah, this is the United States, so maybe he’s right. Maybe they can do whatever they want with me.

The needle for IV, taped to my arm, itches like crazy. I tear at the tape just as Nurse Dave walks into the room. “Don’t take that out.” Alarm and anger overflows his face. He rushes toward me, but I rip the IV needle out before he reaches me.

“Jon, why do you come to the hospital, if you won’t go along with our procedures? Our procedures are tested and safe. If you had a reaction to a drug, we could treat you immediately.” His words

fascinate me. They come from different moments, different times he's walked into the room. I only understand part of what he says each time. I lose some of it as soon as he says it.

I'm barely back into awareness. I haven't the presence of mind to tell him, "I didn't choose to come here. I was so out of my mind, I have no memory of the events leading me to this bed."

Days after that, Laura tells me three paramedics worked hard to load me into the ambulance. I didn't try to hurt anyone. I just didn't intend to go with them. I said, "Quit. Quit," and I tried to get away from them.

"Jon, lay down," Laura says one of them told me, and I said, "Lie down. Lie down. It isn't lay down. It's lie down," fighting for my freedom. I must have been pretty crazy by then. I never correct anyone's grammar. I don't remember any of that.

I can't sort out the order of events on my first days of awareness. I refused the IV antibiotic because I believe healing comes by spiritual paths, not from medication, and antibiotics can mess people up. Sticking needles into people is dangerous and painful. Even a touch, anywhere, hurts. Light hurts. Sound hurts.

Dave walks by my open door, and I call him in. I say, "I apologize for making you angry, but you need to research and find out how many people die every year because of approved hospital procedures."

"I already know that, Jon. You don't need to apologize. I understand. Before I came to work here, I was in this hospital as a patient for three weeks. Long before my time was up, I would have killed somebody to get out of here. We're used to being in control of our own lives, and we come in here, and we control nothing. We're totally in everyone else's control."

I consent to the hypodermic Gregory wants to stick into my arm. To leave his hands free for wrapping my arm with a band that will bulge my veins for the needle, he sticks the hypodermic into the mattress. That horrifies me. Any mattress is a long way from sterile, but I'm not completely back into my mind. I'm worn out from fighting with everyone. To hell with it. I don't know what he'll do if I say again that I won't accept it, kill me out of frustration at my lack of cooperation? It seems to be my time to die, and I'll stop fighting it.

He sticks the needle into my arm and presses the plunger.

Doctor Zachem rocks back and forth on the balls of his feet next to my bed. He seems young, for a doctor. He sees what no one else has figured out; I don't know anything about the last five days. I don't even know I've been here five days. I started being here about the time the sunlight shadow of that chair was over there instead of almost touching the door.

He says, "You've already received four days of antibiotic IV drip. That's why you're pulling out of the meningitis. We think it's very important to complete the 14 days of treatment scheduled, to make sure we've really whipped the meningitis."

"I've already received four days of treatment?"

He nods and rocks on his feet, balances his motion with his arms across his chest.

"So, if it was going to kill me, it would have killed me by now?"

He nods again. More accurately, if it's going to kill me, it will. The process has started. It only needs time to complete. They hook me up to the IV. Yellow fluid drips down through the clear plastic tube into my vein and mixes with my blood. An alarm on the IV beeps repeatedly. The nurse comes in and does things to the machine. I ask her, "What is it? What's the matter?"

"Air in the line."

"Oh. If people get air in their veins, it kills them."

"It takes a lot more than this. I'm taking the air out, just a bubble."

They can't control their machinery. Air in my veins will kill me. How do I even know she knows what she's doing? I don't even know if she actually works here.

Morphine again, vicodan, and ibuprofen. Antibiotics, a contaminated needle, morphine, meningitis. Dusk thickens outside my window. I realize I'll die before morning. It's knowledge given to me in complete form. I will die before the sun rises.

The first day I was in the hospital, raving in delirium, a nurse told Laura she might have to have me committed to an institution if I survived. Many people who live through meningitis, she said, suffer damage to their brain and never are the same. My fever is so high, there is sure to be damage.

About the fourth day, when my reputation for obstreperousness was well established, another nurse told Laura, "It's the ornery ones who live. If they don't care enough to fight with us, they might not care enough to fight for life, and they slip away from us."

I no longer want to fight. Now that I can think about what I'm doing, I'm too tired to fight. I give up. I accept death.

I don't like the clock on the wall. I've gone off western, scientific, rational man's straight line time. I'm on sidereal time, spiritual time, time of eternity, waiting for death, calmly. I pull myself together and try to be ready. But I don't know how to be ready, when I think about it. Calm, I guess. At ease.

The clock doesn't bother me anymore. It's just there, black and white, along with the ugly colors of the hospital, light blue and dark blue walls, synthetic blue carpet, light blue and dark blue screens and curtains of synthetic material, as ugly blues as you could find if you went out and shopped for ugliness.

The bed is cranked up, so I sit, slightly reclined. I don't want to lie down. I see around me better sitting up. I stay alert all night. I've often tried for times when the words that almost constantly run through my mind stop for a while. Sometimes I've achieved consciousness without words, briefly. The night of dying, I achieve many of those moments without words more easily than ever before because I'm so recently restored to conscious thought, to the dwelling place of words.

Thought about the material world I've lived in until now is as unrelated to my position in eternity as the television shows I browsed through briefly earlier because I couldn't read, couldn't see the words well, couldn't remember the beginning of a sentence by the time I read to the end of the sentence. Confidence that the future of this material earth doesn't exist for me, sitting in a cranked-up hospital bed waiting for death, makes it easier to find and reside in calmness and acceptance. This has been a trip, this life I led, and a good trip, and now I am ready to leave.

The sky lightened. Sun rose. A new day. Sunshine. Huh. What d'ya know about that? My thoughts moved slowly. My head hurt. My butt hurt. My existence began to assume sequential order. I accepted life, my life, life itself.

Well, I'm still here, so I need to deal with my sore butt from sitting up so long. I pressed the button that causes a motor to run, turn a gear, and lower the bed. The bed moved down a few inches, then stopped. Pushing buttons didn't help. Huh. Well. Do something else.

Depression. I can't do much of anything, weak, in pain, blurred vision, blurred movement. Doc says, nurses say, "Don't get discouraged. A lot of stuff that happens from meningitis gets better. It takes months, even a year to heal. Sometimes problems with vision, with hearing, balance, whatever, become permanent, but count on getting a lot better. Give it time. It takes time to heal."

45 minutes pass. I try the button again. The bed moves two inches toward flat and stops.

Nurse Victoria comes in when I push the button time number 10. She comes over and pushes the buttons. The bed doesn't move. She says, "Leave it alone. You broke it. It won't adjust anymore."

I tell her, "The motor needs time to cool, and then it works again, a little bit at a time." She thinks nothing I say makes sense. That might have been true yesterday.

I say, "It was already like this when I pushed the button the first time."

She says, "Leave it alone. You broke it. Just leave the button alone." She leaves. I adjust the bed a little at a time. I push the button and adjust the bed when I'm alone in the room. A couple of times, I get caught at it, but all anyone can do is talk to me. Everybody does.

The motor needs a lot of rest. Maybe it needs love too, but I have trouble loving the people around me, let alone material objects, even the ones I'm dependent on, because everyone and everything battles me.

My head hurts worse when I twist around to reach the buttons mounted on the bed rail. I ask a nurse's aid to put a chair close to the bed. I get out of bed, sit in the chair, and go to work on the button. I try to figure out what's the shortest time I can allow the motor to cool. If I don't wait long enough, the motor won't move the bed, but it heats up, and I have to wait the full time for it to cool down again.

Nurse Victoria comes back in. She says, "Get back in bed. Now. You are not to be out of bed under any circumstances. Get back in bed. Now." She pulls on the chair I'm sitting in.

I grab tight to the seat of the chair and say, "You keep pulling at my chair, you're going to dump me on the floor." I say, "Are you going to use physical force on me? If you don't let go of my chair, I'll start yelling about what you're doing." I couldn't possibly yell. The additional pressure would shatter my aching head to a million fragments. But I can threaten to yell.

She let go of the chair and backed away a step. She said, "Leave the bed alone. I told you, it's broken."

"It's very uncomfortable. I can't sleep sitting up. I have to lie down to sleep."

"I'll get another bed. Just leave the buttons alone. I'll get another bed." She walked out of the room. I pushed the button again. The bed moved down a little bit and then stopped, hot motor again.

Victoria came back. She said, "There aren't any more beds. But you still have to get back in bed. You aren't supposed to be out of bed at all, yet."

"How about a maintenance man? Can you get a maintenance man to look at it?"

She's angry, but she says, "If you'll get back in bed, I'll go see if I can get somebody in here." I got back in bed, and she left.

A maintenance man comes in, looks under the foot of the bed. "You've ruined it. You've burned the motor out and the controls. Don't use the buttons anymore. You'll start a fire. It's ruined."

He's pissed. He says something about how much the beds cost, but the numbers don't stay with me.

It's a moral thing with him. If people are going to ruin hospital stuff, don't let them in here. If somebody tells a guy, leave the adjustment buttons alone, then leave them alone. Don't burn out expensive motors. "So just leave it alone," he says. He glares at me through thick glasses above green work clothing, outlines his eyes with multiple lines of anger shooting through righteous skin. So what next, I wonder, attack me in the broken bed with a hammer or a wrench?

"Yeah," I say, and nod my head, in case he is waiting for a

response. He turns and walks out of my room through the doorway.

I move the bed down another inch. There's such a fuss when I go to the chair, I'll have to do it from bed, headache or no. I think I told Victoria I would stay in the bed if she tried to get another bed. Tried. Now the clock becomes handy. Mark 45 minutes on the face. Doze. Go someplace, then spiral back in pain and at peace in this white space between black marks on the face of the clock.

Victoria says, "You act like your life depends on putting that bed down."

"It does. Yes. My life depends on putting the bed down."

"I can have you hauled out of here and locked down if you don't leave that button alone."

"Okay. Do it. Haul me off and lock me down. Do they have a bed down there that works, I can lie down flat so my glutei maximi don't give me agony? Write it down on your chart I'm offering nobody any harm. My butt really hurts. I can't sit on my butt and sleep at all. I'll get the bed down. I didn't live through dying to come back here and get thrown into misery by everybody telling me what I can't do at all, but I'm halfway there, crazy or not."

Morphine, vicodan, ibuprofen didn't cut it. Head unbearably, thud, thud, thud, heartbeats of increased pain. Victoria said, "Some people say I have the touch. I can try to massage the pain away." She brought in a recliner chair. I sat in the chair. Victoria stood behind me in the dimmed room and gently massaged my head, neck and face, warm, gentle hands. Her hands felt like water, washing my hair, washing my head, warm, gentle water. I slept.

They came for the recliner.

They told Laura I was having psychological problems, and she came in half expecting me to be bouncing off the walls babbling about being inhabited by demons. I sat on a chair next to the bed, waiting for the motor to cool down so I could rearrange the bed toward flat. Victoria had gone off shift.

Everybody who came in was afraid of the madman in 516, and nobody pushed me about getting back in bed. I didn't yet have very good command of the verbal part of my mind. I'd already explained why I was doing what I was doing. Trying to explain further irritated me severely. I didn't explain very well. Just leave me the hell alone,

and I'll get it done.

Laura said, "Victoria said you said your life depends on the bed being right."

"Why does it make sense my butt hurts bad enough to kill me added to the pain in my head, but accept the way the bed is? Go along with whatever they tell me. Be docile and cooperative. I tried that. It's over with. I can eventually get it down flat so I can be more comfortable. It's working. It's just not working very fast. So everybody take me to court, get me declared insane. I doubt it will stick."

Over the next ten hours, I adjusted the bed down flat. Nobody said, "Well, you weren't so crazy after all. You did get it down flat for the preservation of your physical self."

After that, I spoke sharply to anyone who started to raise the bed, "Don't touch that switch. Back away. Don't you dare undo the work and the anguish that putting that bed up would start all over again. I'm telling you, talk to me before you touch anything. What are you planning to do?"

"Raise the bed so I can make it."

"No. Don't raise the bed. Make it while it's down. The motor is almost burned out, and we won't be able to put the bed down again. I'll have to sleep sitting on my aching butt. I'll stand right here, because if anybody touches that button, agony and misery, and I'm going to get violent."

Three or four instruments. At least one guitar, a violin? another instrument. Three or four instruments, maybe three voices. Wow. Really nice music fills the hospital. I listen, struck silent. The music comes clear and sweet from a ways away. A while after the music stops, a nurse comes in. I ask her, "Who was that?"

"Who was what?"

"Singing. Music."

"Oh. That. That's a patient down the hall. She's confused."

So we are still at war, thee and me. Now I remember music like that the night I got ready to die. I didn't think about it. It carried me a while, and after it stopped, new depth of peace stayed with me.

I want out. Now. Everybody around me thinks I'm nuts. That isn't a healing attitude. Somebody said, "Anger, nervousness (did

somebody say paranoia?), fear, depression result from meningitis, from high fever, from serious illness.” I can’t remember who said that, but that’s what I’m going through, anger, uncertainty, fear. Why don’t the nurses and their assistants understand this and work with it?

I told Laura to bring my clothes. She did, but she didn’t bring my shoes. I said, “Where are my shoes?”

“Victoria stopped me in the hall when I left yesterday. She told me not to bring your shoes. They’re afraid you would try to run away,”

“Is this a hospital or a prison? What if I run away? Where would I go? Take a taxi to Whitney? How much would that cost?”

“Whitney?”

“How long does it take you to drive home?”

“Fifteen minutes.”

It really hurts my head to shake it, but I forget that and shake it and regret the hell out of that. Hurts so bad, nothing else in the world but that pain. Something is terribly wrong. It surges toward me, about to overwhelm me. I say, “Bullshit. Fifteen minutes, bullshit, more like four hours and fifteen minutes.”

“Jon, where do we live?”

“Whitney. Whitney Valley. Northeastern Oregon. Everybody around me says I’m crazy. I’ll tell you what’s crazy, bring me clear to Bend, more than two hundred miles to the hospital. What’s the ambulance for that cost? Did they bring me in a helicopter? What’s that cost? Is everybody crazy? Isn’t there a hospital in Baker City, thirty miles?”

Realization dawns in her eyes. It may include realization that all the people saying I’m nuts are right. Tears run down her face. I hate it when she cries. She says, “Jon, we left Whitney twelve years ago. We moved to Tumalo Mountain. You took care of the water inlets for the city of Bend. Then we moved to Colorado, to Tomahawk Ranch. You took care of the camp for the Girl Scouts. Then we moved to Magic Sky Ranch, near Red Feather Lakes, and you took care of that ranch for the scouts for seven and a-half years. We moved back to Bend a year ago.”

All that night, details come up from deep and fill in greyed-over

areas with life and color. I remember. I remember Tumalo Mountain, the waterfall, 97 feet of whitely-falling water and mist from water hitting rock and bursting the air into tiny pieces, Bridge Creek, cleanest water in fifty states, Tumalo Creek. I remember Tomahawk ranch, 8,800 feet in the Rockies. Magic Sky. I hated to leave that beautiful place in the Rocky Mountains, but I couldn't do as much physical labor as unhealed injuries I received from a drunk driver when I was thirty slowed me down more and more as I aged, and eventually I had to go on Social Security disability.

I told Laura I intended to divorce her for joining their side instead of joining with me for my freedom. "There's no reason to stay here. They're not doing anything I can't do at home. We can have a nurse come in for the IVs. It would be cheaper than staying here. How am I supposed to pay for this? This is going to cost a lot of money." Laura was really upset that I would so casually promise to divorce her, but she still wouldn't help me get out.

"I'm afraid you'll fall and hurt yourself. I have to keep teaching. I can't afford to stay home and take care of you. You would be alone part of the time, and I don't think you're ready for that."

"I can crawl around the house. We'll get a walker."

The next morning, the doctor talked to me, "There's no reason for you to stay here. A home care nurse can come by and give you the rest of the IVs."

On my eleventh day at the hospital, I pack, and Laura takes me home. At home, I can't do anything with my guitar. Delerium dream of fat sausage fingers comes true when I try to play my guitar. I can use my hands, my fingers, but not for the more delicate movements I need to make music. I'm a lousy typist usually, but it would crack you up to see what I did to the keyboard when I got home, can't manage one damn word. I bought voice software. It didn't work. I've had really slow dogs train up faster'n that software, with more words they understood.

Depressed, yeah.

I got scared in the early morning hours, vivid wide-awake nightmares about losing enough financial cohesion to hold our lives together, sitting on the curb, holding a sign, "Homeless. Need Help. Will work for food." I can't even work. I cried every morning at the

breakfast table until I could get in gear for the day toward more cheer, with help from Laura and from Amanda, our younger daughter, who still lived with us.

A large part of the depression they talk about accompanying serious illness comes because visions of poverty, brought by huge medical bills, dance in the ill person's dreams. We are not nice toward the infirm.

My doctor offered to prescribe mood-modifying drugs, but I have a strong distrust of prescription drugs, don't want to be held together by drugs. I tried marijuana against depression, but I was still so delicate, it had strong, frightening physical effects. My heart raced. My remaining sense of balance fled, and my muscles didn't do what I meant them to do. I rode that unpleasant high, tried to keep my breathing deep and steady, and waited until effects subsided.

Is there a literary community, and does community exist partly to help members in need? I needed help. I had contributed to the literary community and to readers of *The Sun*, short stories, essays, and "Readers Write." I wrote the editor, Sy Safransky, and he published my letter of appeal. Donations from readers came in every day's mail, from a dollar to five thousand dollars, with letters, cards, and love.

We paid most of my medical bills and arranged time payments for the rest. We would be able to make our house payments and other costs of living. Money let me deal with material expenses of living. Love brought powerful spiritual force to my healing.

Slowly, my music and writing began to come together again. My essays, poems, and short stories came out in several publications. I played songs I liked, though my fingers often still dragged over strings I meant to touch only with my flat pick. I kept playing. A song with buzzing strings beats no song at all.

I gained strength and coordination. I had trouble with depression, but not nearly as deep nor as often. I found it hard to be depressed when so many people help, when so many express love. I still walk like a lonesome drunk, straight a while, then veering and staggering, but much of that unsteadiness predated meningitis, came from the injuries I received from a drunk driver.

When I came into coherent consciousness in the hospital after meningitis, I thought the disorder rampant in my life continued destructive results from the wreck, from the force of evil, from the force of injury and death from unnatural causes, the force against life, the force against my life, the force that has no sense of time, always in the world and gaining ground as humankind brings destruction to life, to the earth itself.

Doctors said they thought meningitis penetrated my skull through my inner ear, then through a hole in bone left when my fractured skull healed after the drunk driver hit me. I couldn't figure out what to do with that knowledge. It was still time to get on with living.

The strongest craziness I carry is the craziness of refusing to submit to the force of evil. With older eyes, I see the evil force dominating humankind's ways and manifesting strongly now in highly technological ways that may bring about the end of life on earth, the end of the earth itself. I do whatever I can that might help change what seems to be our future, and I try to remember not to speak of loss of hope to younger people, because I recognize they must have hope to infuse their lives with energy, and that with enough hope and energy, they can still change our direction.

My life was freely given to me. Healing was freely given to me. I'm not free of all limitations given me by injury and illness. I have healed enough to do most of what I want to do, to write an essay for you, a poem, to sing a song for you.

Please forgive inadvertently brushed strings and recognize the positive force of this imperfect song I wrote for joy and sing into today's sunshine. Sing with me. I love you. I love even those who would destroy the earth. Love brings healing, to me, to all, to the earth itself.

Everything important to me was given to me, my life, healing, joy, help from people I know and from people I've never met. I express gratitude best for these gifts when I find joy from recognizing that I share life with all forms of life. I share existence with people, with mountains, with all forms of life, stone, the soil I walk on, the earth. I find joy in writing, in creating and singing songs, in visits with friends, in a walk on the desert for the rhythm of motion, a walk to

see and love life and the earth.