

Heart Attack

I think I learned something about cooperating with my enemy the weekend I joined forces with my older brother and refused to go along with my parents on a trip out of town for the funeral of Mom's cousin. At 16 and 15 years, we boys were beginning to feel our oats.

"You should take Mike," I said to Mom, referring to our seven year old baby brother.

"Yeah," said Paul, "David and I can take care of ourselves."

The two of us had no interest in accompanying our parents on their death drive, as Dad called it when he had earlier muttered his distaste for the trip to Mom. That's no doubt why he lacked the heart to manhandle the two of us into the car for the trip. Instead, he pulled himself up to his full height and towered over Mom in a mock attitude of threatening menace. She was supposed to laugh at him but still take his point.

"I think they'll be OK alone together for one night," he said.

She didn't bat an eye. "Are you crazy, Jack?"

"Uncle Billy is only a few blocks away," said Dad. "and we can get home in a hour if necessary."

"David could start World War Three in less than an hour," she said.

"Not anymore, Mom," I said. "I'm going to be a priest now."

Mom threw her head back, looked at the ceiling and sighed. "When did you decide that? Ten seconds ago?"

"It's been on my heart for some time. I just didn't want to mention it until --"

"Until it was useful." she said

Paul came to my aid with a bit of needling. "I'll make sure he stays in prayer all weekend."

"Better yet," said Mom, "make sure he tells his girlfriend."

"We've been very chaste," I said. "Except maybe for the time after that Elizabeth Taylor movie"

"I don't want to hear about it," she said.

I was trying to provoke her, getting her to think the worst. Evidently I failed, because years later she told my future mother-in-law she wondered if I'd know what to do on my wedding night. But just now her mind was on the overnight trip and she turned her sights on her youngest.

Mom told young Michael to leave his Teddy Bear at home.

"No-o-o," he screamed the wide eyed panic of a scared addict written across his face. The last time he left Teddy around the house unattended either Paul or I ... I honestly don't remember who ... nailed it through the heart to the railing on the front porch along with a note saying, "You're next."

We were all kind of embarrassed by a seven year old having a Teddy Bear, but as Mom pointed out, "he'll get over it in his own time."

"An accident would be quicker," said Paul.

Finally, a compromise was reached and Teddy was interred in an old round cookie tin Dad used in the cellar to hold his collection of screws and bolts. Michael promised to not remove the bear from what I suggested was Teddy's casket. The ten inch round metal box was bound up with at least a half roll of shipping tape. Any attempt to unearth the bear would take long enough to be noticed. When Michael insisted a couple of air holes be punched in the top of the box, Dad refused but then relented.

The travelers climbed into the old Buick and Dad backed it out of the driveway. Mom sat in front with Dad and lit up a Chesterfield. Michael, looking forlorn, sat in back holding the tin box on his lap.

Paul turned to me as the Buick sputtered down the street. "If you step out of line even once, I'll call Uncle Billy and he'll get the county here to take you to the orphanage for the weekend."

I snorted. "Wow, new friends. Get me in the girls dormitory, huh?" Billy was a cop and it would not be surprising to see a police car drive by a few times on the weekend. It was doubtful he would stop in unless he saw other emergency vehicles on the scene.

And so at precisely 1:41 p.m. Eastern Daylight Savings Time, June 20, 1959, Paul and I began life as the odd couple. I checked my watch one more time. On Monday I wanted to be able to tell my friends how many hours I had been left on my own. I wouldn't mention the presence of my older brother, who in any case wasn't watching me. He shut himself in our bedroom closet with a portable

record player and his Bill Haley records. The player's power cord snaked out from under the door to a nearby electrical outlet.

Twice I tipped the plug out of the socket momentarily and the record slowed down. From behind the door I heard him swear and punch the little player until I coughed and he realized what was happening. He chased me through the house and down the front stairs and part way down the street. But that was the only excitement all afternoon. The neighbors didn't start hollering at us, so it turned out that all went well until after supper.

Around five o'clock Paul came out of the closet and made us a light supper. Except for well timed derisive comments, I let him accomplish his work. Although Paul had been assigned the cooking chores, he didn't know how to cook any better than me, but he was considered more careful around fire. Specifically, I wasn't allowed near the stove since curiosity got the better of me the month before and I heated up a D cell battery in one of Mom's Revere Ware copper bottomed pots over an open flame. I did indeed employ a safety precaution by placing a lid on the pot. You could still see the round impression on the ceiling left by the lid when the battery blew up. The explosion made the neatest sound. Not a bang, but a sharp whoosh with a green flash of flame shooting up from the pot.

When supper was over we sat back and finished up a dessert of candy and bananas. I noticed Paul massaging his chest.

"I think I'm having a heart attack," he said and leaned forward hunching his shoulders. We hadn't even begun to argue about who would wash or dry the two plates and two milk glasses.

"You can't have a heart attack," I said. "You're only sixteen." But he really didn't look so good. His face was pale and he wheezed with each breath.

"My chest hurts something awful," he said.

"It's the peanut butter and fried baloney sandwiches you made us," I said. "Topped off with the marshmallow chocolate cookies and the chicken corn candy for dessert. It's called heartburn."

"I don't think so," he moaned. "It really hurts."

"Should I call Uncle Billy?" I said.

"Hell, no. Mom and Dad would never leave us alone again. Ever."

I was getting concerned. "But if it's a real heart attack, maybe we should—"

"Can't you think of something? Remember the time you said toothpaste would work for Athlete's

Foot? Well, it did."

"It did?"

"You made it up?"

"Not exactly," I said. "It was based on my long experience in topical ointments."

"You're full of crap," he said.

"Watch your tongue. I invented the use of ketchup for itchy scalp."

"It worked?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen Mrs. Bletcher on my paper route since I recommended it to her. Seemed logical to me."

"My chest really, really hurts," he said and moaned again.

I racked my brain and finally an idea came.

"Take the long wooden spoon Mom uses for spaghetti and stick it down your throat as far as it will go."

"You mean, like a sword swallower?"

"Yeah, that's it. Don't swallow all of it. When it hits bottom, with just an inch or two sticking up out of your mouth, twist it around two or three times."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes, it'll mix up all the stomach acid with your food and that'll take care of the heartburn."

Paul sat there silent, his face a mask of pain.

"It *might* work," I said, "if you don't choke to death."

He moaned again.

"Can you ride your bike?" I said.

"To where?"

"The hospital. It's only a mile or two over Pleasant Street. Maybe three."

"I don't think I can ride that far."

"I'm sure it's just heartburn," I said.

He seemed to be getting worse as he pushed his knuckles back and forth over his chest. I had to think of a solution.

Another helpful thought came to me. "Where's the Reader's Digest Brain Surgery Manual?" That's what we called the Home Health and First Aid book Mom kept on a bookshelf in the living room. I went and got it, brought it to the kitchen and thumbed through the heavy book waiting for my older brother to get over what I hoped was a bad case of heartburn.

"Here's a diagnosis chart in the book," I said.

"Let's go through it. Is the pain inside or outside the chest?"

"Inside."

“Above or below the solar plexus?”

“What’s a solar plexus,” he said.

“If you don’t know what it is, you don’t have one. Left side or right side?”

“The middle.”

“Well,” I said, “the middle more to the right or the middle more to the left?”

“The middle of the middle.”

“Have you had this pain for over thirty days or less than ten days or –”

“I just got it, for cripe’s sake!”

“Have you participated in any strenuous activity in the past 24 hours? Lifted heavy objects or worked overtime?”

Paul ignored me.

“Does your skin possess a pallor or grayness?”

“I don’t know. Does it?”

“Just your hands from changing the bicycle tire this morning. Is there pain in your left arm?”

“I’m calling a cab,” said Paul.

On the phone he gave our address and asked how long it would take for a taxi to arrive. He said he needed to go to the hospital and volunteered he might be having a heart attack, but refused the suggestion to call an ambulance. “I’m only sixteen,” Paul told the dispatcher,” so I don’t think it’s bad enough for an ambulance.” Dad would have his own heart attack if he had to pay an ambulance bill.

The taxi cab arrived in fifteen minutes and pulled to the curb in front of the house. Mom and Dad and Michael pulled in the driveway seconds later as Paul and I were about to get in the cab. Gone only a few hours, they surprised us.

“You guys are certainly traveling in style,” said my father as he got out of our car and came over to the taxi. He didn’t look very well, his summer tan now rather peaked.

Paul began to whine. “My chest hurts something awful, Dad.”

“Paul’s having a heart attack,” I said.

Dad nodded and smiled. “No, he’s not. He’s got the flu.”

Mom walked over to us and Michael ran along behind her with his tin box. The tape was mostly off and trailed down like a ribbon..

“Your father has to go inside now and lie down,” Mom said.

“What’s the matter with him,” asked Paul.

“He has a bad case of the flu. It hit him just as we were leaving the city. We spent the afternoon in

the hospital emergency room.”

“Thought I was having a heart attack,” Dad said. “You’re OK, Paul, you’ll have the heartburn for a little while longer, but it goes away when you start throwing up.”

“Thanks, Dad.” said Paul.”

“But that doesn’t last too long either,” said Dad. “When the chills and the muscle pains start, the vomiting is over.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Paul said again.

“Good thing, too,” said Dad, “because that’s when your other end cranks up.”

Paul was looking worse.

“I should go inside now, Dad.,” he said. “David will give you his blessing.”

“I think I’ll wait for his ordination,” said Dad.

Mom lit another Chesterfield. “I’ll have to call the family and tell them why we didn’t show up. Oh dear, they planned for us to stay overnight.”

Dad laughed. “They’ll forget all about us when they get the gin and whiskey out.”

Over the next few days all five of us came down with the symptoms. I told Michael we’d caught the flu from his Teddy Bear.

“Serves us right,” he said, “for stuffing him in a tin box with only two air holes.”

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