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Diagnosis and Treatment

Maria Beuchat Hoagland

At times since his diagnosis, I've felt a little uncomfortable around Greg. Two weeks ago he came home from the doctor with armloads of pamphlets, syringes, cotton swabs, bottles, and a diet plan he would have to follow for the rest of his life. In the process, he brought me a migraine and nightmares about nursing a fat old man with gangrene feet. I don't want to be a widow at fifty-five.

That's why I came home from work later than usual. Frankly, I loathed coming home: seeing my husband waste his life propped on the couch, TV remote in hand, and the only consolation being some answers for "Jeopardy." I didn't want to be reminded that he was as afraid of this as I was. So instead of driving through town, I took the back way home, ramming in a Willie Nelson tape and cranking the volume. Listening to the nasal voice plodding "on the road again," I challenged myself in seeing how fast I could maneuver my car around the turns and potholes.

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Greg never lets me listen to country music when he's around. As soon as he hears one note, he winces as if it were hurting his ear, rather than his pride. Suddenly, "uncultured, degrading, and depressing," become a few of his favorite adjectives. Although I've tried explaining, Greg just doesn't realize how comforting the music is to me. Some of the older songs retrieve memories of my dad, grimy after a scorching day of disking the fields, finally exonerated to the couch. My brothers and sisters and I would scramble to see who could be first on his lap to feel his tickling, bristly red beard. I faintly remember my mom saying something about him being too tired to play around and then almost teasingly kissing his cheek. Music from times when money and health were never worries, love never questioned.

I pulled the car into our parking stall and turned off the headlights, relaxing for a moment before I retracted the key from the ignition. Nervously, I swung the other keys around, fantasizing about the full tank of gas and friends in Las Vegas just a few hours away. Swallowing hard, I retracted into my pre-fab fortress, again bracing myself against reality. When I walked through the front door, Greg was sprawled on the floor, blinking slowly at the ceiling.

"Greg! What's wrong, Sweetie, did you faint?" I asked, touching his cheek, which felt oddly of left-over mush.

He continued to blink dazily, not focusing and not responding. Panicking, I grabbed a handful of pamphlets, and dropped to the floor beside him. Cradling his head in my lap, I leaned against the couch. As I looked at his ashy complexion, I couldn't help but notice how it matched the dirty-white stuffing that bulged through the worn material of the old couch.

I remembered when he told me he had diabetes. Already a month after we moved in, we were inspecting our desolate living room, discussing limited decorating possibilities. I had been saying

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something about how we could get some plants to liven up the place when he told me. He had me sit down on the room's only piece of furniture—this dilapidated, abandoned couch. Throughout his explanation, I was looking down, concentrating on the worn-out pattern of the couch so that he wouldn't see the tears in my eyes.

He warned me that he might "get a little weird" if his blood-sugar dropped too low, but what did he tell me to do? I began flipping frantically through the pamphlets.

His hand twitched at my thigh, and I watched his eyes look around the room, disoriented, but grateful to see me.

"I waited for you . . . to eat dinner." He lifted a shaky hand to point at the covered pans and set table with a tablecloth and even candles. "I thought I'd make it, but . . . I'll be fine . . . as soon as we eat." It wasn't until then that I noticed soft jazz wafting through the room, rather than the TV's usual babble.

Clumsily, I helped him to the table, apologizing for making him wait. All through dinner I tried especially hard to concentrate on what Greg was saying and not to interrupt him. In the future, what I should do when he has symptoms of hypoglycemia. What happened at work. The water heater needs to be fixed. I nodded my head, attempting to appear interested, but he could see through me. I just couldn't quit worrying about what might happen to him. The pamphlets say that people with diabetes can live normal, healthy lives if they can control their blood-sugar levels; yet I had heard of eye problems and blindness, high blood pressure, hardening of the arteries, and even heart attacks. Is fainting a "normal, healthy life" for a diabetic?

He commented on how beautifully my wedding ring sparkled in the candlelight and asked if I wanted to dance. I resented the worry and I resented the smothering.

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I consented to a dance, begrudging and savoring each time he pulled me closer. Then, for the rest of the evening, I muddled around the apartment in a bad mood, singing country songs to annoy him.

When my leg wandered over to the cold side of the bed the next morning, I realized I'd slept late. I had meant to eat breakfast with Greg when he got up to take his insulin at eight. Yet I relished escaping the rigidity of his feeding times, and avoiding his witty comments like the one he said yesterday: "I'm so full of holes, I'm surprised I don't leak!" How could he honestly expect me to laugh at that?

I slipped on a sweatshirt and jeans, reaching for my sock drawer. As I did so, I noticed Greg's silver "diabetic" necklace still lying in a mass on the top of the dresser.

Suddenly filled with jealousy, I grabbed my discarded negligee to cover the necklace. "That's about all lingerie is good for now anyway," I mumbled. I thought about how frustrating it is to try to be intimate with someone who can't stay stimulated longer than five minutes. Always wondering if somehow I don't fulfill his expectations. He protests, saying that the doctor told him he'd be functioning normally within a couple of months, but I haven't seen any improvement. Of course, Greg keeps trying; but I get so discouraged. Instead of bringing us closer together, physical intimacy only creates an added tension in our marriage.

I laughed cynically, remembering the comment my brother-in-law had made: "Not a good thing to happen just a month after you got married. At least it doesn't affect your sex life."

Of course, I didn't correct him.

I pulled on a pair of socks, my big toe enlarging the hole, and stepped into my roper boots.

When I walked into the living room, Greg was leaning against the couch, munching on corn flakes, his eyes intent on basketball

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highlights. A commercial came on and he winked in my direction, proving he wasn't ignoring me.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

"Ready to go where?" I scooped the cat into my arms and rubbed his neck.

"I thought we both could use a break. You know, get away for a few hours. Just point the car and drive—like we used to." He slurped the last spoonfuls of milk from the bowl. "Cereal's just not the same without sugar. The milk's too bland at the end."

"Are you sure about just taking off like that?" I certainly wasn't.

"Sure. All we have to do is pack our lunches and my snacks. And we'll have a blast." He could've sounded more convincing.

He concocted yet another creative lunch: a tuna, ketchup, Miracle Whip, and sunflower seed paste stuffed into a pita shell. He was becoming quite resourceful in coupling his required amounts of meats, starches, and fats while exacting as much taste as he could find in the allotted "free foods." I, on the other hand, went for the safe peanut butter and jelly sandwich. We shaved and sliced three slender carrots, and Greg grabbed two bananas, two tablespoons of raisins and six low-salt crackers.

As we left the city, I felt a release from the skyscrapers and constricting metro schedules, and eagerly accepted the open honesty of the desert. By its very nature, everything about the city involves competition—beating the yellow light, flagging a cab, getting the promotion, fighting for a niche in a hierarchical world. But the desert doesn't care about the victories you've won. Each struggle for survival is difficult no matter how successful you've been in previous battles. It doesn't get any easier, but then it doesn't get any harder.

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Jokingly, I began to sing country songs, waiting for Greg to say something. Usually on long drives he's relaxed and talkative, but now he just absently turned on the radio, concentrating on the road.

Ahead of us, I noticed what appeared to be red arches and holes carved in the side of an upcoming mountain. "What's that, Greg?" I leaned forward in my seat, straining my eyes to distinguish what it was. "Can you tell?"

"Kinda looks like the Aztec ruins we saw in Mexico on our honeymoon, doesn't it?"

I agreed as I studied the rust-colored arches and walls that blended into the jutting rocks of the mountain.

"That was fun," Greg said.

I giggled, remembering how embarrassed I was every time one of the Mexican merchants called out "Hey, honeymooners" as they tried to draw our attention away from each other and into their lean-to shops. Greg never seemed to mind their cajoling and would simply squeeze my hand or brush his lips across my cheek. At the time, that had just embarrassed me more, but now I longed for that closeness.

About a mile from the arches, Greg identified our Indian ruins as an old mining plant with rusted barrels and boilers, but we decided to explore it anyway. Greg parked the car behind a low juniper tree, ate his morning snack, shouldered his backpack, and we started up the hill.

"Race you to the top," I said, scrambling among the loose rock and withered plants.

I reached the first rise mere steps before Greg and gloated as he arrived, panting. We worked our way up the terraced mountain, examining the crumbling filters and walls. Rusted reinforcement bars jutted out of the cracked concrete, surrendering to green sagebrush and lichens. The juxtaposition was beautiful.

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For a while we played hide and seek among two or three thirty-foot diameter holding tanks, carelessly chasing each other through rusted holes, our laughter uninhibited. He ran past me to a flat slab of concrete, picked up a piece of short pipe and turned to confront me. Arms outstretched, he surveyed his territory, and then wielded his “sword” around his head and pointed towards a similar pipe at my feet.

“Aha! A pirate ship in a sea of rubble. I’m captain of this ship and if you don’t pay me mind, I’m gonna poke ya so full of holes nobody’ll be able to save ya, kid! En garde!” he said.

“I wouldn’t want to embarrass ya by hurting you, cap’n. That jus’ wouldn’t do—me killin’ ya an’ all.” With sarcastic arrogance I picked up my pipe-sword.

“No fear of that, li’l lady. Ya can’t get rid of me that easily! ‘Cuz I’m immortal! But I dare ya to try.”

“No thanks, I’d rather walk the plank.” I tried to sound as if I were joking, but I was too much aware of the fallacies in his last comment. I set my pipe back on the ground.

“C’mon, or I’ll hafta send Hook after ya! Or worse yet, I’ll throw ya in with the snakes and alligators!”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I looked down the hill into the barren valley of still sagebrush and rocks.

“You’re not playing the game anymore, are you?” he asked, becoming serious. He half-poked his sword my way, planting his feet and staring at me—ready for a real attack.

I lifted my hand to shield the sunlight from my eyes.

“What’s wrong, Megan? It seems like you’re always running away from me. For the past two weeks you’ve avoided any meaningful conversation or physical affection. I’m giving you a chance to fight it out with me and still you shut me out.” He dropped his sword and turned away. “What’s happened?”

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As I weighed his words, my gaze trailed down the mountain, this time surveying the thriving plants among the decayed walls and rusted ruins. In a way, he was right, but I could've given him the same exasperated lecture and been right, too. Gently, I took the blanket from the backpack and smoothed it on the cracked concrete. I touched his arm briefly as we ate our lunches amid the crumbling walls.

A few days later we splurged and bought a new couch. The old one sat waiting to be discarded, tufts of matting oozing from the worn cushions. A tired old leg buckled underneath, causing the rest of the couch to teeter, supported only by the corner of the room.

"So what are we going to do with two couches?" I asked, letting my end of the new couch drop gently to the floor.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe we could build a fort with all of the cushions." He winked at me, wriggling his ears.

Teasing, I threw a pillow at him. "Only if we can knock down the walls," I said.