

Strange miracles

Kevin Pottie

Mrs. Strange* shuffled her 93-year-old frame into my examining room. She turned, slowly, and said: "I need a miracle. My mouth is dry, my legs hurt like hell and I keep peeing myself. You've got to do something for this old bag."

"Now Mrs. Strange, you know I don't do miracles."

"Well, just give me a pill then," she growled, "so that I'm not such an old bitch."

She reached into her purse and pulled out a urine sample covered in white tissue paper. She placed it on the desk directly in front of me.

I ignored it, and began to flip through her thick chart.

"As we have discussed, Mrs. Strange, you have spinal stenosis, and unfortunately an operation is not possible. This causes you to go to the bathroom frequently, sometimes in your pants."

"You've got to do something for me."

I started to list, not a problem list, rather a sinking-ship list. Then, suddenly, I felt a warm sensation in my pants. No. It can't be. Or could it? Could I be suffering a sudden loss of bladder control? "Impossible," I said aloud. But just in case, I wiggled my toes inside my new shoes.

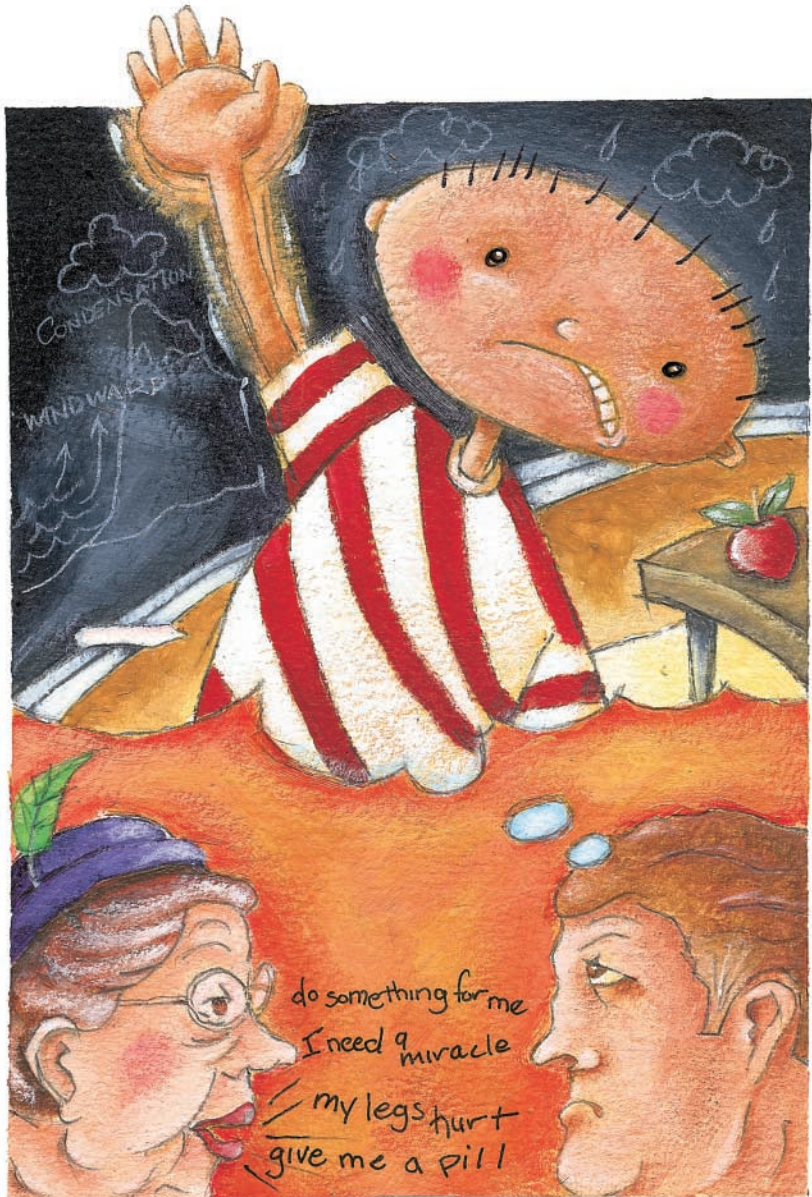
"Impossible?" said Mrs. Strange. Then she coughed; the kind of cough that's meant to help focus a daydreaming doctor. It didn't work.

The warm sensation sent me back to my grade 3 classroom where, despite my frantic hand-waving, old stern-faced Miss Harrington kept saying: "Just settle down, settle down. Kevin!"

So I did settle down for Miss Harrington and the relief came immediately, like sinking your toes in a warm bath. But then came the reality of wetness in dry pants, and as the puddle grew under my desk so did the snickering of my peers.

"I find it so humiliating to have to wear pads all the time," said Mrs. Strange.

I tried to listen but my mind, tied up in grade 3 humili-



Graham Ross

tion, was still fixated on the warm sensation on my inner thigh. My pant leg was definitely getting heavier. Something was definitely seeping through the fine wool of my Harry Rosen pants and collecting in the hemmed cuff.

"Can't you just give me something so I can stop wearing these damn pads?"

"Well, Mrs. Strange. ..."

Suddenly, I remembered. I had carried an empty urine container around for days, always intending to follow my doctor's order but never quite getting around to it. That is, until just before my appointment with Mrs. Strange.

* Pseudonym

I looked up, or I should say down, just in time to see yellow droplets slide down the outside of my shoe. Time lost all meaning. There, again, was that yellow puddle forming under my desk.

“Mrs. Strange, I gotta get to the bathroom.”

“But, what about. ...”

I ran off before she could finish her sentence. In the bathroom, I fished a wet specimen bag from my pocket and discovered my urine container with the lid half-off. The urine had seeped into the plastic bag and slowly trickled through the front pocket of my pants. I dried my shoes, changed my pants, and found myself considering if I had any of those damn pads kicking around my office.

As I hurried back in to see Mrs. Strange, I noticed a smile. She hadn't spotted the puddle beneath my desk, but she had found a subtle humour behind her doctor's unexpected trip to the bathroom.

“I can go now,” she said. “You made me smile.”

I wish I could report that I returned her timely and priceless smile, that I offered a full account of my own accident that day, but it didn't quite happen that way. Instead, I sat low in my chair, watching, like a distant third grader.

“But, what about that miracle? Don't you want that pill?”

I watched her smile continue to grow as our distant worlds briefly intersected. She was simply lighter, less creaky.

I guess some things are meant to happen, reminders of how illness can distance and accidents can, at times, serve to reconnect. And that priceless 93-year-old smile makes my future of collecting urine samples, both my own and my patients', something to anticipate.

And Mrs. Strange eventually did get to hear the full story.

Now, rather than cough, she often asks: “Are you listening, or planning another trip to the bathroom?”

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CMAJ's no-muss, no-fuss Holiday Review quiz

Malvinder S. Parmar

Preparation time: 25 minutes

Answering time: 15 seconds each, 4 minutes total
(Pathologists should do particularly well.)

Match the following:

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|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Cream of tomato soup | A. Amoebic diarrhea |
| 2. Black water fever | B. Amoebic liver abscess |
| 3. Pea soup stools | C. Severe hypertriglyceridemia |
| 4. Mulberry buds | D. Brucellosis |
| 5. Red current jelly | E. Yellow fever |
| 6. Cayenne pepper spots | F. Neurofibromatosis |
| 7. Sago grain stools | G. <i>Mycobacterium butyricum</i> |
| 8. Strawberry tongue | H. Intussusception |
| 9. Cherry red spots | I. Angioma serpiginosum |
| 10. Goat's milk fever | J. Falciparum malaria |
| 11. Anchovy sauce | K. Cholera |
| 12. Café au lait spots | L. Oxalate stones |
| 13. Butter bacillus | M. Leptospirosis |
| 14. Mud fever | N. Scarlet fever |
| 15. Caddy stools | O. Typhoid fever |
| 16. Rice water stools | P. Amaurotic familial idiocy |



Answers: 1: C, 2: J, 3: O, 4: L, 5: H, 6: I, 7: A, 8: N, 9: P, 10: D, 11: B, 12: F, 13: G, 14: M, 15: E, 16: K

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