

ENCOUNTERS

Church going

I try calling my wife at the microscope room at the Ontario Veterinary College. Tara, a pathology colleague, answers the phone. “No, she’s not here right now, Shane — I’ll leave a note for her at her desk.” Even emergency messages can take a long time to deliver. But in the emergency department, doctors have to act fast. I used to work shifts. I understand how strange time is, dependent on place.

An hour later, Janet calls. “What’s happening?”

“Kaz had a seizure at the daycare. He’s on my lap, not moving much. Right now he’s watching everybody. He wants something to d-r-i-n-k but it’s not allowed.” My tone is off. I don’t know whether my son will be okay.

Kaz is two-and-a-half years old. “Is he going to die?” Janet asks.

“I don’t think so. He’s conscious. He wants juice. The doctor needs to figure out why he seized.”

“Do you think I should come now?”

“Just a second.”

A nurse asks me to hold Kaz so she can draw blood. Another nurse comes, then another. I lay Kaz down on the bed. One nurse takes his legs, the other his right arm and head, the other pins his left arm to draw the blood. Kaz doesn’t fight, the nurses talking to him as if they love him, telling him he is a good boy, so good. The needle goes in, the tubes fill with miraculous red.

“Shane?” Janet asks, her voice breaking. An old woman in a wheelchair rolls down the hall, IV pole manoeuvred by her daughter. The old woman has a massive, red left leg. Her right leg is small and white.

“Yes, come now,” I say to my wife.

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Kaz’s doctor’s name is Jaime. He smiles, peering at my son. “Oooo, you look very very very strong. Are you strong? Let me see here now. Those are



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super-big muscles!” Jaime pretends to measure Kaz’s bicep with a measuring tape usually used on neonates. “Look at the size of these massive muscles!”

Jaime acts silly for Kaz. In return, Kaz decides to like Jaime. “Doc-tor, doc-tor Jeemy.”

I worry that excitement might provoke another seizure, but Jaime looks in Kaz’s ears and shines light in his eyes. Kaz lacks the strength to resist.

“There’s no fever today, but did Kaz have a fever in the past week?”

“No.”

“Has he been sick in any way? A cough?”

“No.”

The ceiling of the hospital room is alabaster white. For some reason, I remember reading Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles*:

“It may be, sir, that we’re looking upon a phenomenon that, for the first time, would absolutely prove the existence of God, sir.”

“There are many people who are of good faith without such proof, Mr. Hinkston.”

Jaime’s muscle-measuring has exhausted Kaz. I lay my son down in the adjustable hospital bed, tuck the covers to his chin and raise the bed rails. Name-Band Lady swoops by. Seeing that Kaz is asleep, she pulls

two small packages of Oreo cookies out of her green work vest and sets them on a ledge near the sliding doors.

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Kaz sits up in the bed and sways. “Mommy?”

“She’s coming.”

He shakes the bed rails, so I drop one of the rails to stop the noise. Success — Kaz slowly slides out of the bed, my hands close if he should fall. He takes a step, then falls onto a floor gleaming from housekeeping’s kill-all shine. Kaz, as usual, wants to be anywhere but where he is.

I lift him to stand. He leans to the right and falls again. I pick him up and put him on my lap. He comforts himself by kicking his legs rhythmically against my legs. “Look out there, Kaz. Pyjama people. In the hospital, healthy people wear pyjamas and sick people wear their normal clothes.”

“Sick?” he says, looking at his pants. He notices the cookies near the sink. “Candy?”

“Yes, candy. Nice Name-Band Lady brought you candy. But the doctors will make sure you’re not sick anymore *before* you eat the candy. I promise, you’ll get candy as soon as you’re not sick anymore.”

“Not sick any-more. Mommy!” he demands imperiously.

I shove the cookies into the sink where Kaz can't see them. Jaime returns, rocking on his tiptoes. “Well, Shane, the good news is Kazuo's blood work is normal.” Jaime bends down to eye level with Kaz. “So how are you now, Kazuo?”

“Not sick any-more!”

“Good! But I need to check out your muscles to make sure, okay? I'm the doctor. I check out muscles.” In a gesture that must endear Jaime to parents and children alike, he raises his arm and flexes. “See? Just like that. Muscle Doctor!”

Kaz raises his right arm in an attempt to mimic Jaime, but he just holds his arm out straight. Then he covers his eyes.

Jaime performs the neurologic exam on my son, making it fun. “Do you hear the sounds in the hall, Kaz? That's *beeping*, Kaz. That's *alarms*. Do you see the wheelchair people? I check their muscles too. I do muscles all day. Your muscles, their muscles. You're Muscleman, Kaz.”

Kaz likes his new name. Jaime turns to me and says, “No focal findings. Power is good, reflexes are fine.”

“But he falls after just a step.”

“Yeah, that's what happens after seizures. He just looks too good right now for this to be meningitis. I'm consulting Peds; they'll talk to you about what to do next. Things are good right now.”

“Can I give him something to eat? We have cookies.”

“Muscleman, you gonna build muscle on *cookies*?”

Kaz loves Jaime. I like him too. “Yes. Candy.”

“Okay, Muscleman. Dad of Muscleman, give Muscleman cookies.” Jaime raises his arm, as if to salute, but instead he flexes his bicep again. He walks out into the hall holding that posture and disappears from sight.

“Candy!” Kaz demands. I give Kaz one of the two cookies. “That one! That one!” he yells, meaning he wants both Oreos. I give Kaz the other cookie. He rubs them both around his mouth, the external shells blackening his lips and cheeks. Janet appears in the doorway, pausing there. Her happy face unsettles me until I realize she's coming at this the opposite way: seeing a son who's moving and responsive. Who is, in short, alive, and in the hands of a parent. A son who's not so bad that he can't eat cookies.

“Mommy!” he says, sliding off my lap with a soggy cookie in each hand. After three steps, he falls, cookies rolling across the floor. Janet picks Kaz up and lets him nuzzle her neck.

Janet's neck wears cookie transfer. She asks, “What's happening?”

I say, “We're waiting for a consult.”

Kaz says, “I Musclemans!”

Janet walks to where I sit and presses my head against her chest. Her neck is wet, black. “You must have been terrified,” she says.

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Kaz Muscleman eats cookies. From under the bed, Muscleman says, “More.”

I push closer to Janet, put my hand on her abdomen. “They're not supposed to get sick, right?” Her hand moves to my hair. She bends down to see Kaz under the bed. “Under-the-bed monster! Under-the-bed-monster!” she gasps in mock alarm.

In the Guelph General Hospital, another kind of church that houses our human frailties, I think of a part of Philip Larkin's “Church Going”:

In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;
But superstition, like belief, must die,
And what remains when disbelief has gone?

Janet smiles at the monster under the bed. The monster flexes its muscles. “I Musclemans monster,” a disembodied Kaz declares proudly. Beyond the threshold of the room, Jaime hurries down the hall.

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This article has been peer reviewed.

This is a true story. Janet Sunohara-Neilson has given her consent for this story to be told.

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Encounters articles in CMAJ Humanities give patients and health care practitioners room to reflect on their experience with illness or medicine. Encounters are memoirs that become narratives through a turn of the poetic possibility and a nod to literature, as well as imagination, storytelling and a creative exploration of metaphoric spaces. Together, these provide a sliver of understanding about life.

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