SUDDENLY, SUMMER

June 21, 2008 By Regan Hofmann

I am writing from my hopital bed while the latest antibiotic concoction they have devised for me drips into my arm...the nurse informed me they are springing me from the joint this a.m. - and she reminded me that today (June 21) is the first day of summer!

Hospitals are like casinos. You have no idea about the passage of time, the outside world or climate changes. The only hint of an external world happened last night when a string of ambulances, fire trucks and marching bands passed along the avenue beside my seventh-story hospital window. I could barely hear the blaring sirens and beating drums, but somehow, through the seemingly hurricane-proof-glass window that's sealed shut with industrial-strength glue (presumably so you don't hurl yourself out in despair, something I considered doing when I was denied my breakfast order of "bananas, ice cream and chocolate sauce" by the nutritionist who suggested I try the oatmeal instead) I heard the unmistakable tinkling of the Good Humor truck. I wondered whether I could get past the nurses' station, downstairs in the elevator and across the street (wearing, mind you, a very non-fetching pair of sweat pants, a tank top, and non-skid rubber-soled socks and crutches under my arms) before he got away. I would have killed for a butterscotch sunday. But alas, I could only press my nose against the cool glass and watch summer pass me by.

But today, I get to emerge. I am almost afraid. It seems like I've been in here so long. I feel that I've forgotten how to eat, walk, sleep, even converse (with anyone but a nurse or myself). I am so pale my skin my just self-combust at the first touch of sunlight.

For those who didn't read my last post, I had a staph infection in my knee and had surgery to expediate the healing process. I will spare you most of the gory details except one, because I think it might make you think I'm tough. Yesterday, the
vampires (I now call my surgeons "the vampires" because of their propensity to swoop into my hospital room in the middle of the night and draw many vials of my blood) inserted a "pic" line into my bicep - into my vein and down into the space above my heart, leaving what I prefer to think looks a little like a screw cap wine top sticking out of my (much less bulging after a week in bed) bicep. To this I'll attach chardonnay - oops! I mean liquid antibiotic - once daily for three weeks until I will (hopefully) have suceeded in killing all the bad (and most likely some of the best) bacteria in my body.

Assuming that my knee heals as scheduled, I should be otherwise as normal as one can expect of me and not laden to the gills with pain pills (as I have been much of the week) in a few days. When my horse fell on me in October, I took one Percocet. This week? I can't count that high. But I was pain-medicine free for most of yesterday and last night, getting through the night with the help of a lot of bad TV. I watched a pirate movie starring Judy Garland, MASH reruns (at least I don't have shrapnel in my knee, or Klinger by my bedside) and an infomercial complicated dance moves that give you killer abs (assuming you can dance like the women on "Dancing with the Stars" which I definitely can not).

Despite my fears that the staph was linked to the HIV, my doctors reassured me repeatedly that the staph infection was neither related too nor made worse by HIV. This is simply a reminder that HIV is not the only thing I have to worry about.

This morning, as I was joyously packing, I realized I hadn't totally allowed myself the thought that I'd definitely be going home. There were moments, when my temperature soared over 103 and the pain killers were no longer working and we weren't sure exactly what we were dealing with and whether even the Guns of Navarrone-style antibiotics they'd sent coursing through my veins were effective...that a dark corner of my mind eeked out the question about whether I'd need the chaplain's services afterall.

It's funny, with HIV, I've faced mortality for years. But because I've been lucky enough to be able to get care and tolerate treatment, and because I've just taken pretty good care of myself and been lucky to have the compassion, support and love of my amazing family, friends and coworkers, I've made it through all these years with HIV without ending up in the hospital. I have to say, I'm embarassed to admit that until this happened to me, I'd become a little complacency about my survival.

To suddenly find myself in the E.R. on back-to-back nights, hooked up to machines writhing in pain despite morphine, not caring what day it was or whether it was day or night was a real shocker. As I waited for the cultures of my blood to grow whatever brand of bug had infected me, I got a tiny sense of the terror that those in the early days of the epidemic experienced, and that far too many people today know - the notion that either the doctors don't know what's wrong with you - or they do, but they don't know how, or don't have the tools, to cure what ails you.

Every brush with death has a way of recalibrating our dials so we remember what's truly important. Embracing mortality has a funny way of reminding us to appreciate life.

In the elevator on the way out of the hospital, I was sitting a little hangdoggish in my wheelchair - across from an eldery Chinese man. A cheerful hospital worker said, "Going home today, are you?" and both the man and I nodded. Then, our eyes met and he smiled at me. Then, he laughed. And I laughed back. I knew exactly how he was feeling - I couldn't believe we were going home. They wheeled us out onto the sidewalk and I took my first breath of fresh air in a week and felt the sun on my closed eyelids. Our families had gone to get the cars and the man and I were just parked there, breathing in life. I felt his spindly hand on my arm and he squeezed it. We never said a word to each other but as he drove away looking backwards out of his family's car, I felt that we'd said a whole lot more with our silent understanding than we could have with words.

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I'm home now, having slept a couple of days and having sucessfully learned to use the IV port in my arm. Not since I first got my diagnosis of HIV have I felt this appreciative of life. My first bite of ice cream was amazing - and perhaps because my leg is still recovering from surgery, I am walking a whole lot slower, which, amazingly, affords me the time to smell the wild roses and freshly cut grass. The newfound sense of appreciation I am experiencing reminds me of the first bowl of pasta I had after I was diagnosed. The sauce was Prego - out of the jar - and the pasta was dried and in a box, but somehow, an accute knowlege that death is inevitable is enough to render even the most ordinary daily experiences extraordinary. If there is an upside to this darm disease, I think that's it.

There was one bright spot of the week (aside from the visits and calls and emails from so many lovely

people). After not washing my hair for 5 days (I know, gross) and then washing it with whatever the hospital gave me and being unable to dry it or brush it (they only gave me one of those tiny men's combs) and then falling asleep in a painkiller haze on it for like 4 hours, I sat up in bed…to hear the nurse exclaim, at the sight of my mile-hile mop, "Oh, you did your hair!" And she was totally serious. That's Jersey for you.

Apparently, you can take the girl out of New Jersey…

I'm just glad to be back.

Whatever state I'm in.

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