

ATTENDING

Ruminations on the medical life



ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

A SICK CHILD AND ALBERT CAMUS

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY FRANK HARRIS

Author's Note: This story comes at an intersection—where the true memories of others and the imagination of the writer meet. Simply put, I recount here a tale from a time well before my brain finished wiring all its synapses. It's told with only a few known facts, but written under the mindful eyes of the protagonists—or at least a photo of them. My parents watch carefully from inside the frame as I share this story.

Their young son had been very sick—blue lips, a lack of appetite, and an overall listlessness that made my dad think that he was perhaps the only man alive who had more energy than his toddler. A spate of doctor's appointments had occurred and would occur. My dad, head bowed, would pad down the opaque halls of IBM, wondering how long his bosses would empathize as he answered every question about my condition (except the one about how much time he needed off) vaguely and in the third person.

Never one for fashion, he begins a system where, to bring a measure of stability to his life, he wears the exact same outfit every Monday, every Tuesday, and so on through the end of the workweek. The system falls apart when he occasionally must go in on Saturdays to make up time. And one day he looks down, thinking it is Friday only to be reminded it is Wednesday, and he almost tears up, realizing how much all of this is completely outside of his control. Shortly after he takes to absent-minded

drumming—he is a drummer—on anything that will hold still long enough for his fingers to settle on: his desk, the steering wheel of a gray Chevrolet station wagon. He even drums the large containers of pressurized gas that line the hallways of the T.J. Watson Research Center. His coworker and closest friend, Max, is able to learn more about my father's mental state each day listening to the rhythms coming from the hallway than by taking in the words coming from his mouth.

My mom is at home with me and one, almost two, graduate degrees and her professional knowledge of biology. She knows some-

prayers, some days she wonders whether getting pregnant again was the best idea; she is a few months pregnant with their second child. My kid sister lies hourly in a sauna of tears. For weeks my mom cries—for herself, for me, for the child within her, for the overall state of the world. Eventually she becomes deeply suspicious of crying. Years later, one of her hallmarks will be how she saves her tears for seasons of joy.

The blood and pathology work come back. The boy has a condition with a long name, erythroblastopenia. Those with training in the classics can readily deduce its meaning.

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her head on its shoulder—all day long.**

thing is terribly wrong with me. She pays too much attention to unimportant details and finds herself thinking I am making a turnaround when, at lunch, I take nine spoonfuls of food instead of my usual six or seven. But these events signal no meaningful change.

She envies her husband for his ability to take a daily break from this reality, even though he calls home on his lunch hour every day. Only years later does she realize how terrible it is to have a reality call in the middle of the day. She sits with reality—her hands in its hands, her head on its shoulder—all day long.

Even though she never speaks it aloud and even dances around the idea in her silent

The body has stopped producing red blood cells. This means, among other things, that the baby isn't growing, and that, because the problem hasn't fixed itself, we—Dr. Cat, the family pediatrician, always says “we”—we are looking at a bevy of treatments involving the bone marrow and perhaps a steady stream of blood transfusions as long as the anemia continues. Dr. Cat looks into the eyes of Mr. and Mrs. Laux and says, yes, in bad cases, this disease does result in the one event, besides war, which encourages some to claim human experience as their strongest evidence against the existence of God—namely, when parents must smart over what succinct phrases to put on an undersized headstone.

Dr. Cat reaches into his white coat and takes out a map. My mom and dad know that the doctor walks to work, so for him to have a map in his pocket that belongs in his car's glove box means he saw this coming. My parents are Midwesterners; and New York City, with buildings so tall they block out a prairie-based sense of direction, is not someplace they go of their own accord. Dr. Cat realizes this, so on the map he has highlighted the route he recommends to get to Presbyterian Hospital on the West Side of Manhattan. They must go to begin the final stages of a diagnosis that cannot wait. He has already contacted the hospital to let the doctors know they are coming.

My parents make a Saturday appointment. Dad wears his Friday clothes. The family cat sees us to the door, and we gently press into the gray station wagon and head for the interstate. For the only time in her maternal career, my mother insists on holding me as we ride. She notes joyfully that her pregnant belly allows her to support and cradle me easily, and I sleep well the entire way despite her constant barrage of love talk.

This trip is the first occurrence, among many, where my unborn sister gets to support me, as she would throughout our lives, beating me to all of life's major rites of passage—including meaningful education, marriage,

and, in all likelihood, parenthood, despite my two-and-a-half-year head start.

My parents budget way too much time for the journey. They arrive at the drab office before the three appointments scheduled prior to theirs. But in that waiting room, with me still sleeping, they are able to be in each other's presence in a way that has been impossible in recent months.

The time passes so quickly in small talk that the nurse has to say my name twice before they hear it. My mother stands with such gravity that I immediately wake up.

This appointment is like other appointments, only this doctor speaks a lot more and a lot louder than Dr. Cat. My parents are smart enough to keep up with him, but his ramblings unearth their weariness. They manage to stammer only a few questions at the end, but none of the ones they had discussed asking on the drive down.

The doctor says that a bone marrow sample must now be drawn, and, as if on cue, because they are on cue, a few medical residents and interns materialize in the room. One of them, the most senior, gives the speech explaining what will occur and that it is best for the parents to leave the room and wait nearby.

On the way out, my father is able to glimpse the needle—as long as my young forearm and very sharp—they will use to puncture

my spine. Both he and my mother know how the procedure is done. But as they wait in a side room and nurses check on them, he vows to himself not to give away the sheer size of the instrument. Instead he tries to pick up the earlier waiting-room conversation but surrenders to silence amid the curtain of blood pressure cuffs and sterile instruments hanging from the walls. He and my mother writhe in silent, still horror as they hear two screams in the next room, one for the insertion and one for the extraction. My mother swears to this day she felt both.

I am placed in the car seat on the way home. It's a quiet ride. My dad adjusts the rearview mirror between me and the road. Other than that, the only noises are his gloved hands tapping the steering wheel and my mom turning around in her seat and tickling my feet a hundred times to make sure I still number among the living. My parents reach home as the winter sun sets and only realize then that they haven't eaten since the night before.

My mother and father never had cause to visit that hospital again. I got back there eventually, for a medical school interview in early 2008.

In the ensuing weeks after their trip, even my father, who didn't want to get his wife's hopes too high, had to admit that I did seem to be much more comfortable and in better health. And soon Dr. Cat was able to conclude, with exquisite joy, that it appeared as though I would be rejoining the ranks of the chronically healthy. This turnaround remains the event that, to this day, will be my parents' counterbalance to Camus' challenge that the proof against God's existence is the death of children.

Steven and Kooki Laux gave birth to a healthy baby girl, Kathleen, in December of 1983. ■

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