



The grayest day

A BOY FALLS FROM HIS BIKE;
A FAMILY DESCENDS TO NIGHTMARE'S EDGE

I was wrapping cellophane over a mound of lemon-poppysed scones when the telephone rang. It couldn't have been a more ordinary Monday. Except that my boys were off from school. It was Columbus Day. ■ My 13-year-old had gone out to the Green Bay Trail, a miles-long stretch of asphalt and promise that on a golden autumn morning beckons a boy on a bike to pedal. My Will was out riding his bike. Or at least he was, and then the phone rang. ■ It was a stranger on the other end. She started with this: "We're on the Green Bay Trail. We have your son. He's fine," she said for the first of three times, making a refrain of "He's fine," I later realized, as if to make it be true. "You'd better come get him."

No more rattled than a mom out to pick up her son with maybe a banged-up knee, I grabbed the 5-year-old and drove north.

As I lurched my old station wagon into the lot where we agreed they'd bring Will, I gulped as I saw the sight staggering toward me. It was my Will, but he was bloodied from his forehead to his ankles, holding his left arm at the oddest of angles. Some blessed man was gingerly leading him toward me.

Once he saw me, Will started to moan. Somehow we got him into the car, Will and his helmet, and then I started to drive. Called the pediatrician's office, gave them name, age and destination: Evanston Hospital's emergency room.

As we coursed through the streets on the once-golden morning, Will asked through his stupor and moans, "Mom, am I going to die?" The 5-year-old in the back seat was crying by now. I was holding it in.

Once at the ER door, Will was tossed into a wheelchair, and I cradled the scared-out-of-his-wits 5-year-old. Will hadn't a clue how it happened. Just that he'd been found, under his bike, on his back, bleeding and coming to consciousness.

But then, as he was wheeled down the hall to the first of many scans, this one a CT scan, he suddenly remembered:

"It was a chipmunk," he said, making me laugh. "A chipmunk darted in front of me, and I didn't want to hit the poor little guy, so I swerved. I hit a pile of leaves and the next thing I knew I was flying over the handlebars. I remember hitting my face first, then when my chest hit the handlebars I blacked out. The next thing I knew I was waking up on the trail, wondering, how in the world did I get here?"

By the time Will's father had taken a cab to the emergency room, we knew this: Will had, basically, broken his neck. There was a fracture at T-1, the bone at the base of the neck. There might also be a fracture at C-4, or the fourth cervical vertebrae. His left elbow, which sure looked broken, was not. And the bones in his beautiful Irish cheeks, they might be fractured.

Here's the deal when someone tells you your firstborn has just broken his neck: You don't quite absorb the whole of it. You are looking down at a beautiful bloodied face, a face that still remembers to smile, a boy so kind and so good he is telling them thank you, thank you for putting that IV in my arm, and the other one on the back of my hand. You are remembering that you saw him walk to your car, that as you drove him, he was sitting up in the front passenger seat. You can't quite put the pieces together. You are calmer than you ever imagined you'd be. You are simply

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taking in bits.

But the longer we were there behind the curtain in the ever-bustling emergency room, the more and more frequently teams of doctors were coming in, asking Will to squeeze, to squeeze tight. Running sharp things up and down his hands and his feet, comparing the right to the left. Going out, beyond the curtain, conferring.

Wasn't long before the chief doctor, the terse-talking one wearing the cowboy boots and the gold dangly chain, came in, leaned against the wall and told us we had a window, an eight-hour window, and the clock was ticking. There were signs, many signs, he said, that Will's spinal cord was in trouble, and they needed to give him steroids, a super-high dose.

Well, I was a nurse, am a nurse, a pediatric nurse, actually, though I haven't worn whites in 25 years. But I knew enough to know this was serious.

Suddenly, from every wall, the buzz picked up in intensity from a 3 to a 10. Within minutes there was talk of airlifting to Children's Memorial Hospital. But first, they wanted a good look at that spine. They ordered an MRI that was scheduled to take three and a half hours. Before even that, they wanted those steroids; they ordered them STAT, which comes from the Latin word *statim*, immediately.

When the subject is spinal cord and swelling, every fraction of a second counts.

The steroids, given in ultra-high doses, keep the swelling in check so the very fibers that move every muscle, transfer every impulse, do not get bruised, or, worse, broken, pushing up hard against the bone of the spine that's there in the first place to protect the incredible cable of nerves.

I was scared, scared to trembling. But, like a mother lion, I would not, could not, be stopped. I called three souls whom I trusted more than anyone else in the world in that moment: a dear friend who is an ER doctor and has long been my go-to guy in a crunch; my beloved internist and old family friend; and the pediatrician on call in our practice.

Go for the steroids, they said. Get him transferred; he needs to be at Children's.

Before we could move him, though, they wanted that look at his spine. So while he was taped to a stretcher, the steroids coursing into his veins, his father and I, we paced. At the midway mark, when one hour and 15 minutes were past, I started to worry. In their rush to get him down to Children's, they'd decided to go for the brief MRI, not the long one. So as the clock ticked toward two hours I became convinced they'd found something they needed to zoom in on and study.

Three-plus hours later, the phone in the ER rang. Will was ready for pickup from the MRI; the transport ambulance from Children's could now head up to get him.

As the ER was busy, no one had time to wheel Will back from the MRI, so I, a woman who has pushed my share of carts, went down to get him.

The MRI tech, the one who had just spent three hours looking at slices of my 13-year-old's spine, didn't know I was standing there, as he stood in the hall, his hands wrapped around a Styrofoam cup of hot coffee. He was stopped with a colleague. He said these words: "His parents are here. It's really bad."

I froze. My gut nearly wrenched. My every bone shook.



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As he came around the corner, I tried to play cool. “How’d it go?” I managed. He told me I’d need to talk to the doctors.

As I wheeled Will back to the ER to wait, I literally, truly talked my knees out of buckling. Someone tucked Will back behind the curtain, where he and his father laughed and joked about steroids and beards and hair on your chest. They didn’t know what I’d heard, and I couldn’t bear to stand anywhere close. I couldn’t repeat the words; couldn’t bear to imagine their consequence while looking into the face of the boy I so loved.

I paced. Back and forth in my clogs. Making the sign of the cross. I made signs of the cross for the next 30 minutes, pacing, rewriting the script of our life.

So that’s why the boy has such a beautiful mind, I kept thinking. That’s all he’s going to have left.

It would be nearly an hour before word came—the spinal cord appeared to be intact. In one nod to us from the doctor with the phone to his ear, my visions of wheelchairs, of legs gone limp, were slowly wiped from the slate. I nearly dropped to my knees. My Jewish husband, who had by then figured my pacing meant something was desperately wrong, attempted his own sign of the cross—albeit done in reverse.

We rushed down Lake Shore Drive in the ambulance. Got whisked to the intensive care unit at Children’s. Spent a few days there and, miraculously, Will walked out with no more than one broken neck.

It would be eight days later, in a dimly

lit room at the doctor’s office, staring at the MRI images of Will’s brain, his spinal cord and the vertebrae in question, that the neurologist would spell out how serious it could have been.

Pointing to an opaque blob on the vertebrae—serious bruising of the bone—and the black fissure of the fracture itself, just fractions of a millimeter from the central nerve cord, he said softly, “You’re very lucky that was a stable fracture.”

“Otherwise?” I asked.

“Quadriplegia,” he answered, letting the hard, cold word soak into my own spine.

The world has never looked sweeter. Will weathered it all with his incredible wit. His friends teased him with handmade posters of a chipmunk on a bike trail hoisting a sign thanking young Will for sparing its neck at the expense of his own.

Months later, I still tiptoe into his room as he sleeps. I run my finger along the curve at the back of his neck. I tap the tips of his toes, grateful when he jerks back his legs.

I cannot imagine the whole of it all, had it worked out quite another way. But I have been close enough to the edge to be singed with the knowledge that in an instant, your whole world, it can change.

We escaped by a hair’s breadth. And not for a moment will any one of us ever forget: Every leap down the stairs, every pluck of his bass, every move of every one of his muscles, is a miracle. And we give great thanks that our story ends with a boy on a bike who soon will ride again. □