

What Counts

Laura sat in the waiting room, trying to breathe deeply to slow her racing heart. The ride in the ambulance had set the adrenalin running as the medics worked to stabilize Tom. They had set up an IV and started medication. She'd studied him, reflecting on the kindness that could light his face. Now he lay quietly, grimly fighting the pain while trying to reassure her. She smiled at the thought. He was the steady one.

At the hospital, the paramedics took Tom to a cubicle and directed Laura to registration. As soon as the bureaucracy was satisfied, she hastened back to the cubicle to find Tom was gone. She frantically searched for a nurse and was told that they'd taken him for tests. The harried nurse on the surgical floor couldn't give her more information, just that the doctor would be out as soon as the tests were over to let her know more.

"Why don't you make yourself comfortable in the waiting room?" she'd said and reached for a ringing phone.

It was cold in the brightly lit waiting room. She shivered and pulled her coat on, snuggling into its warmth. But the cold was inside and didn't go away

She concentrated her thoughts on Tom, sending her love and fervent hope for his safety and healing. Their marriage had been damaged by an infidelity several years ago and by her reactions to it. She'd considered divorce, not only when Tom confessed his infidelity, but many times after. She'd built thick walls to insulate herself from further hurt and pulled away from re-establishing the intimacy they'd had early in their marriage.

Then they each retreated into their careers. Laura knew it was not all his fault that they had become strangers living under one roof. The betrayal had taken residence inside her like a

core of ice. It took the jolt of his first heart attack and the angioplasty surgery to breach those walls and shock her into forgiveness.

“It’s hard to wait.”

Laura looked up at the voice to see an elderly gentleman studying her. He ran gnarled hands through sparse white hair and smiled encouragingly at her.

Laura nodded and smiled. He’s very old, she thought, then looked down at her own hands, beginning to show the crinkly loose skin of age.

“Yes siree, it’s hard to wait.” He scooted to the edge of his chair.

Laura realized that he needed someone to talk to, maybe even more than she needed solitude to calm herself, more than she needed to think about the past. “Yes, it is,” she replied. “Have you been waiting long?”

He stood with effort, shuffled nearer, and sat in a chair next to Laura. “Ears aren’t as good as they used to be,” he explained.

Laura raised her voice, “Have you been waiting long?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, I have.” He thought a moment. “Wife, you know. Been married sixty-eight years last fall. Never been sick till she fell and broke her hip a couple of years ago. Seems like that started everything going to hell.” He looked at her to see if the mild obscenity had bothered her.

She smiled, thinking of some of the terms her students used when they thought she wasn’t around.

“Encouraged by her smile, the old man offered his hand. “Jerry Webster. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

She took the hand, thin and fragile but with unexpected strength.

“Laura, Laura Adamson.”

“Been here for four hours now. Docs took her in to surgery and said it’d be about three hours. Guess that doesn’t sound very good, does it?” He looked at her, appealing for assurance that the world was not going to end for him.

“Doctors never really know how long surgery is going to take, Mr. Webster. Sometimes they run into complications. Try not to worry too much.”

“Yes, I suspect you’re right. Just don’t know what I’d do without her. Been married sixty-eight years, you know. High school sweethearts, too.” He let his head droop and then shook it slowly from side to side.

Laura wanted to reach over and put her arms around his shoulders, to tell him his wife would continue to share his life. She wanted someone to tell her the same about her husband.

“Don’t you have someone from your family here?” she asked.

He looked up and shrugged. “Son’s in San Diego. Daughter lives in Atlanta, married an executive who moves around a lot. Should have called them, I guess, but we try not to bother the kids. They got their own troubles, you know.”

“Mr. Webster, I think you should at least let them know their mother’s in the hospital. You could use some support.”

“Maybe you’re right.” He studied her face. “Sorry, I haven’t asked about you. Been so worried about my own problems. It’s your husband isn’t it that’s having surgery?”

At her nod he went on. “You have children?”

She nodded. “Yes, we have two daughters. Like yours, they live far away – Toronto and Los Angeles. One’s a nurse and the other is a business woman. I’ll call them as soon as Tom’s out of surgery and I know more.”

“And you? You a nurse, too?”

She laughed. “No, I teach seniors in high school. English literature.”

“Teaching. Good job for women.” He glanced at the clock, worry etching the lines in his face deeper. “I’m afraid to leave the waiting room. Suppose the doctor comes back to tell me about Linda? That’s my wife - Linda. You know these doctors. Zip, they’re gone if you’re not right there. Then you don’t know anything.”

“Mr. Webster, I’m here and will let your doctor know where you are so they can find you with news. Why don’t you go ahead and call.”

The old man examined her as though to test her worthiness with such an important task, then nodded once. “I’d be mighty grateful.”

He rose with a soft groan and hobbled out of the room. She wondered if he had neighbors close by that he could call. He was probably like her parents who just didn’t want to be a bother and wouldn’t call even when others would gladly help.

A thin, graying doctor in surgical scrubs came into the room. Dr. Harrington, Tom’s cardiologist. “Mrs. Adamson,” he nodded and sat down next to her. He had papers in his hand and handed them to her. “I need your authorization. Tom needs open heart surgery. He has two major blockages and requires a by-pass. Further angioplasty wouldn’t be enough.”

Laura’s heart banged painfully. “Of course. Is he going to be all right?”

“He should come through fine, but we need to do the surgery now. I’m sorry to rush you, but I need to get this signed.”

She signed the papers and he left.

By-pass. Saws going through bone and muscles being wrenched back to get to the damaged heart. God, she thought, so much pain for Tom and what if ...? She caught herself

and forced herself to stop. Her habit of jumping to worst case scenarios drove her crazy. Now she needed to be the steady one.

Mr. Webster came back into the room. "Saw a doctor leaving. Was it about Linda?"

"No, it was my husband's doctor. No one has come about Linda."

"Oh, well, then no news." He frowned and looked distractedly around the room as though not sure that he was in the right place.

He coughed and said, "Left a message for the boy on his answering machine. Never home, he and his wife, always gadding about. Got ahold of my daughter. She's going to take the first flight out. Be here in three hours. Guess that computer of hers got her all booked and told her when she'd arrive. Amazing things, computers."

Mr. Webster's voice became a steady stream of sound, rambling on about his son and daughter. Laura heard only bits and pieces. She didn't know whether she was annoyed or grateful for the distraction. Occasionally they each glanced at the crawling hands of the clock. He would frown and mutter, "Taking too long. Much too long."

As the clock slid past midnight, the old song, "What a difference a day makes," began to run through Laura's head. Yesterday she was hugely upset by a problem at school. Today it was the least of her concerns.

Around one o'clock Mrs. Webster's doctor came in. Laura didn't think the doctor's hesitancy and apologetic look forecast good news, but he told Mr. Webster that his wife had survived the surgery and was resting relatively comfortably. "Don't be too shocked by her appearance, Mr. Webster. She's hooked up to an IV and catheter and has a breathing tube. She looks very pale and has all sorts of monitors around her."

"But is she going to be all right, doc?"

“It’s a waiting game, Mr. Webster. We’ll do all we can and hope for the best.” He patted the old gentleman on the shoulder and walked out with him. Engrossed in the doctor, Mr. Webster waved at her as he left the room.

Laura looked again at the clock. She had slept badly the previous few nights. Her muscles felt stringy and her bones ached. She felt as old as Mr. Webster looked. Giving up any hope of rest, she began a mental list of all the things she would need to do in the morning. First, call her daughters. Then she’d need to sort out what to do about school. As soon as she heard from Tom’s doctor, she’d let her best friend Carol know. Hardly a day went by that Laura didn’t bless her friend for her droll sense of humor, her wickedly sharp commentary on school politics.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Dr. Harrington walking into the waiting room. “Tom is out of danger. Because you got him to the hospital quickly and we rushed him into surgery, his chances significantly improved. You can see him for a few minutes.”

In the intensive care recovery room, Laura held his hand while tears of relief streamed down her face. He looked pale and tubes sprouted from throat, nose, and chest. The heart monitor beeped steadily, every beep a reassurance that he would live.

She had a passing thought for Mr. Webster, wondering if he, too, would have a reprieve and be allowed more years with his wife.

She could have been making funeral arrangements. The surgery and a new medication should mean a lot of good years ahead for Tom and Laura. And Laura wanted those years.

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