

In Sickness

By Amy Peterson

I'm lying on my side, my back pressed against my husband's naked back, my sore ear facing down toward the bed, and throbbing. I try to concentrate on his back and press into it with my own so that the heat—our heat—will lessen the frequency of his spasms. An hour goes by and another and we sleep fitfully, turning over now and again, repositioning ourselves with a grunt or a moan, snuggling again and waiting until the throbbing in my ear and the spasms in his back subside.

Once, as I drift off, I think back two days to the Redi Care when his back, still bothering him after five prone days, brought us to a waiting room. And I, sitting there, leaning against his spasmed side, realized that my ear bothered me, indeed hurt and badly, and I had ignored it for how long now?, because his back had so debilitated him and I had been so busy, helping him shower and dress in the morning, rushing off to work and back again to tend to food and other needs of a husband and a house and a dog and four ferrets. And then Saturday and cleaning and laundry and slowing down like a music box in need of winding, and Sunday and not even moving until 10 a.m. and only then because his back hurt so much that he wanted for the pain to be gone. Now.

Leaning so against his spasmed side, I stood and signed my name on the sign-in chart, and waited an hour, maybe more, until the nurse called for my husband and he grunted and wambled down the hall. Later, the nurse called my name and after a few questions and checking my blood pressure and my temperature, the doctor came in, checked my ear and said, yup, an

infection, here's a prescription, good luck. I followed him to the checkout room, paid my co-pay, then looked around...for the man with the bad, back, I asked the nurse? I followed her to another room where she announced me to the doctor as the man's girlfriend or wife or somebody, and inside, my husband, lying flat on his back, looked up and said, hi girlfriend or wife or whoever you are. How long have you been married, the doctor asked, and when we told him three years, he said he'd been married four years and whatever was there to bind him to his wife four years ago was gone now, his marriage as flat as a can of old soda.

And then, as if he'd said nothing, he continued talking to my husband, kidding him for pulling his back doing laundry, for crying out loud, not something manly and macho like fighting a ninety-pound fish while bobbing on choppy seas. No, laundry. Go figure.

He stopped at the end of this badgering, looked up at me and said, we were deciding about x-rays before you came in, to see if something serious had happened to that back of his, a fractured bone, a dislocated disk. And before I could voice an opinion, the doctor added that first, though, we're going to do something about that blood pressure, because it's 140 over 95 and normally when that second number gets to 100 we take people to the hospital. Probably temporary, that high number, him fighting the pain in his back and all, but we don't want him stroking out on us, now do we?

No, I mumbled, we sure don't.

As the doctor jotted down a script, he rambled on about other options for my partner's back, something about muscle relaxants, pain killers and physical therapy, and I held my partner's hand and said, whatever you decide is fine, in the hopes that he would decide quickly and we could go home soon and I could give him a back rub and help him relax. Get that blood pressure down. Because I don't want him stroking out on me.

I helped my lover up and he wobbled to the checkout room, where he opened his wallet and found a wrinkled one-dollar bill, tried to shrug and was trying to free his checkbook from his back pocket when I stepped forward with my wallet and said, I've got you covered, honey, why don't you just race yourself out to the car. He smiled and I caught up to him at the car, where he moaned loudly as he bent to get inside. Home was five minutes and seemed an hour away, with prescriptions to fill and the physical therapist to see, and finally he was flat on the floor, sighing deeply, the TV controls within reach, the TV tuned to an old movie which filled up the silence so that he might sleep.

I curl up around him, pull a blanket on top of us and feel his muscles relaxing, his breathing subsiding. As I try to fall into the rhythm of his breathing, I think back to an April night almost three years ago, when I repeated the words the minister spoke, not thinking about them, just saying them as if I knew what was meant by in bad times and in sickness and in poor times. The in poor times I knew, for my groom came with four kids and an ex-wife who made sure she got what she could. But not of the bad times, the times like last winter when our ferret named Chunky got sick and one veterinarian tried and another and another, each giving up in turn, each simply saying, I'm sorry, good luck. We took our pet home and tried all we could to bring back his life, rising at one in the morning, at four and at six. I had the first shift and when I rose in the night and called Chunky's name he didn't open his eyes, didn't lift up his head. Sure he was dead, I cried to my partner and he rose so determined and raised Chunky's head, stuffed food in his face and told him to eat. And some more.

And as our sick ferret ate, I thought to myself, how wonderful my partner in bad times.

And my, how precious life is in sickness.

As my partner rolls over and I press my back against his, I am suddenly reverent about simple things, like the warmth of bare skin, and standing and bending to get into a car, and being able to leap into the air like our little ferret did when life took hold again. And hearing. And breathing.

In tune again with my sweetie's breathing, I am drifting off to sleep, content in believing my gentle touch will slow the pressure in his veins, my warmth will slow the spasms in his back, my love will permeate his soft skin. And he will not stroke out on me.

There is no counting the hours, the days we snuggled and loved and held each others' miserable selves as his muscles spasmed and my ear throbbed and we moaned and laughed at ourselves in what should have been misery but instead was a sort of vacation, he said, just you and me and our naked little selves just loving each other. And it's too bad, about the doctor and his wife, we agreed, and how their love had disappeared, perhaps because they were never sick together, sharing a bed, a futon, a floor, she helping him get dressed because he couldn't bend down, he helping her with ear drops and holding her as she wiggled to get away. Yes, loving each other in sickness.

Entwined again around each other, having drifted off again, the phone rings. I say, why don't you spring up and get it, and my husband says, you're real funny. I answer and it's Tim, so I hand my husband the phone. I hear Tim say, whataya doing, you lazy bum, lying on your back with your woman and what kind of spasms, oh sure. Wish I had thought of that.

To which my husband says, you should try being sick with your spouse sometime. I've rather enjoyed being sick here with mine.