Reality

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Honorable Mention Short Story (Tie)

“He looks awfully small, doesn't he, Louis?” I asked my husband.

In the sterile hospital bed, Bart's tiny body seemed lost. He was just two and a half, and was on his way to surgery to have his tonsils and adenoids taken out.

“Mr. and Mrs. Michaels, you have to sign these release forms before we can do surgery on your son. All this does is release the hospital from any responsibility connected with the surgery,” the lady at the admissions desk had said.

We signed, without even thinking about it. It was just something we had to do. At 20, the thought of anything going wrong never really crosses your mind. My parents knew better, of course, like parents always do. They had come along for moral and emotional support.

“Daddy... Daddy,” Bart cried as the nurse carried him down the hall. His little arms reached back for Louis and he seemed smaller and smaller the farther the nurse carried him away from us. In his semi-drugged state, he sounded pitiful. Bart knew he was getting his tonsils out, but he didn't really know what that meant.

Concern clouded my parents' faces as they assured me, as much for themselves as for me, that everything would be all right. We watched “The Price is Right” and waited. Bart was more like a son than a grandson to Mother and Daddy, and he spent every Friday night with them.

After what seemed like days, Bart came back to his room, this time on a gurney pushed by a surgical nurse. He was clutching the black gas mask they had used in surgery for all it was worth.

“What have you got there?” I asked him as the nurse eased him onto the bed.

“My Darth Vader mask,” he whispered. He was just a toddler and had never seen the movie, but my two nephews had turned Bart into a real Star Wars fan.

Dr. Johnson came in the room, still in his greens.

“Everything went just fine,” he assured us. “Bart will be back to normal in no time.”

“What can he eat?” Louis asked.

“Really, anything he wants, which will probably be ice cream or popsicles.”

That afternoon Louis and I spent most of the time taking care of Bart. He drank a lot of ice water, so that kept us busy going to the ice machine. That in turn called for lots of bathroom trips, so we maneuvered him carefully across the cold tile floors every time he needed to “go.”
About suppertime, I asked Bart, “What do you want to eat?”
“Crackers.”
“Crackers?! Are you sure? Don’t you want ice cream or something like that?”
“No, I want crackers.”
“Whatever you say, but that’s the craziest thing I ever heard of. I hope it doesn’t hurt your throat.”

After he ate his crackers and didn’t bleed to death, I felt a lot better.
“That hurts, Mom,” Bart whined as I snagged a knot in his blond hair.
“I’m sorry, baby, I won’t brush so hard, okay?”
“Okay.”
I tucked him in the big bed and pulled the white sheet and white blanket up under his chin.
“Give Mom a kiss and go to sleep.”
“When do I get to go home?” he asked as he cradled his Darth Vader mask in one arm and his Curious George that Louis brought him from home in the other.
“Tomorrow,” I said.
“Can I stay at Granma and Granpa’s Friday?” he asked.
“We’ll see.”
He didn’t get to stay that Friday night, but a few years later, Bart had a sister he had to rotate his Friday spend-the-nights at Granma and Granpa’s with. They always liked it if one of them could get away with staying twice in a row.
“Mom, my nose is bleeding!”
When I heard Wendy scream, I was at the kitchen sink rinsing dried blood out of her sheets from yesterday’s bloody nose episode.
The urgency in her voice pulled me
to her room quickly. I was not prepared for what awaited me—blood gushing from her nose into an already half-filled puke pan. The blood was the color of Dorothy's ruby slippers in the Wizard of Oz. I pinched her nose tightly with one hand and called the doctor with the other.

"Bart, bring a towel, quick!" I yelled to my 13-year-old Nintendo addict.

"Aw, Mom, I'm in the sixth level of 'Karnov,'" he griped.

"Get in here!"

"Put that towel under your sister's nose," I said. Three weeks earlier her adenoids and turbinates had been removed. This crisis was an extreme complication of that surgery.

"Hello? Tell Dr. Wells we'll meet him at the hospital. Wendy's nose is pouring blood," I told the answering service in a panic.

"Which hospital?" she wanted to know.

"Mercy Hospital," was my terse reply before I hung up and prepared to leave. Small complication. "I have to go the bathroom, Mom."

"You can't go now, Wendy," I said. She had other plans. "I can't wait!" So she went. Fast.

Bart pressed the towel under Wendy's bloody nose while we ran to the car. We jumped in our little white Toyota and fired it up. Bart held Wendy's nose—I drove. That hot August night, we discovered our little car could break 70 and not break.

We whipped into the emergency entrance and the doctor was already there. Even he was shocked at the sight of Wendy's blood soaked face and clothes. Her yellow tank top was pink and her orange jams were red. By this time she had lost at least a pint of blood.

Apologizing, he said, "Wendy, I'm going to have to pack your nose." But even in the confusion, she said through her tears, "I don't care. Just make it stop."

In the emergency room, the nurse handed him two index-finger-sized packing pieces that he proceeded to shove up my nine-year-old daughter's small, freckled nose. Later he told me he would have put a Mack truck up there if it would have fit.

With the packing in place, Wendy immediately started vomiting into a stainless steel basin blood clots the size of chicken livers from blood that had been seeping into her stomach for days. She threw up. And threw up. And threw up. When the blood overflowed the basin, we abandoned it for a plastic-lined garbage can. Her face turned chalk white and her lips turned blue. She was in shock.

The nurse called her name. "Wendy
... Wendy." No response. Now two pints of blood were gone. The nurse snapped a command for oxygen. "Hurry!" she said, trying to keep the panic out of her voice.

Now "hurry" has a whole different concept when people are using it concerning your own child. I thought, "God, please don't let her die."

"Mrs. Michaels, we need you to fill out these forms," the admissions clerk said.

She had followed me into the emergency room!

"I've got all night to fill those things out and I don't intend to do it now," I snapped. I fully realized for the first time that one of my children actually could die. If looks could kill she was dead where she stood. I'm sure my eyes shot lasers through the woman, since Louis has always said that is a particular talent of mine.

My mask of pretense fell. My fingers were suddenly ice cold. My hands began to shake. I always had a head knowledge of death, but seeing her lying there when I could do absolutely nothing but pray gave me an instant heart knowledge.

"Are you all right?" the nurse asked me. "You're white as a sheet."

"Yeah, I'm fine, don't worry about me."

Machines beeped as the medical team hooked Wendy up to them. They brushed her matted brown hair out of the way and the nurse threaded a liquid protein IV into her arm. Dr. Wells quickly stuck white round things with silver knobs on Wendy's chest that connected her to a heart monitor. I thought it was one of those electric shock things at first. I could see worry on his face as he worked. Wendy's feet were elevated. Finally, as the level in the IV went down, her responses went up.

"How are you feeling now, Wendy?" Dr. Wells asked as he wiped a tear from her cheek.

"Tired," she said through half-closed brown eyes. "Where's Mom?"

"Right here, baby."

"Where's Daddy," she said with a slight suggestion of panic in her voice.

"I'm here, Wendy. Looks like I stayed at Wal-Mart longer than I should have, doesn't it?" Louis said.

"Yeah."

Bart came in from the waiting room.

"Looks like you didn't have it quite as easy as I did." "How long will you have to stay?"

"She'll be here at least three days," Dr. Wells answered.

Bart piped up, "Great, that means I get to stay with Granma and Granpa."
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