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GAUZE

It is 4:00 o'clock on a January morning. It begins with gauze. Every important thing begins with something like gauze.

The nurses and technicians clamp my head to the mammoth steel table at Swedish Hospital like a lid on a pot. Not to make me miserable, but to keep my head still. The surgeon will drill three holes in my skull and attach a glass drain to collect the blood pressing against my brain. Extricate all the blood you want, but not the rosary in my left fist.

Pope Francis blessed this rosary at an audience my daughter, Katy, and I attended on a raw November day in Vatican Square six weeks before I ended up in the Swedish Hospital operating room. We'd been standing for hours, Katy pirouetting on a rickety chair with her iPad. I looked up at her and pulled my wool muffler tighter around my neck. "I am too old for this. No wonder only young people are here!"

The crowd roared as if it was opening day at Cubs Park at Wrigley Field: my old Chicago neighborhood. Tightening the muffler, I glimpsed Pope Francis, blessing all 35,000 of us! "*Viva il Papa!*" I waved the yellow pom-poms that the children in my aisle had given me. "*Viva il Papa,*" I shouted with them, clasping my rosary in the other hand, hoping he'd bless it again. Francis had already blessed this rosary that Katy collected at the Visitors' Office at The North American Pontifical College. It was in a white cardboard box filled with blue ersatz-crystal beads with white plastic crucifixes. The nuns at the office said that the Pope regularly blessed batches of rosaries for the many tourists who came there seeking information on

audiences. She jubilantly bore it back to the convent where we were staying. “Mom, this has Francis’ blessing!” So here we were, the next day, with him fast approaching our part of Vatican Square. Now my rosary would have two blessings.

I was lucky the headaches came late in this trip— my third to Italy, but my first in 60 years. In 1950, Daddy surprised me at my high school graduation with news of the *grande tour*, complete with a chaperone and a trunk filled with crinolines. For both of us it was a poignant promise unhappily redeemed after the years of my late mother’s battle with Parkinson’s disease. In 1954, the year I graduated from college, Daddy invited my sister Marie and me to accompany him on a business trip. Each time it took a week to get there and a week to return, via the *RMS Queen Elizabeth*. With my daughter, in 2013, things were different.

For the past year, Katy and I had been planning a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, with several days in Rome. We lived on opposite coasts – she in New York, me in Seattle. We missed each other sorely, even though we communicated regularly by phone and online. The thought of exploring the regions where Christ was born, grew up, lived out his ministry and died, was something that I was determined to do before I was too frail to make the trip. Verging on that now, I seized this opportunity to share such an experience with my only daughter and engaged Iyad Qumri, a Palestinian faculty member at St. George’s College in Jerusalem, to be our guide. But when our president threatened a missile strike against Syria, we chickened out. Sasha, my Israeli neighbor who lived in the apartment across the hall from me, felt that was a wise decision.

“My relatives in Israel are buying gas masks, preparing for an attack. It can get especially ugly over there for Americans.”

My friend Peg suggested spending “the entire two weeks in Rome and a few days in Assisi. There is more than enough to do!”

It was an easy sell. The “trunk” on the Aer Lingus flight out of JFK was now an overhead bag with two pairs of slacks, two sweaters and Anderson’s Orthopedics walking shoes. These would serve me well for the two weeks. As an added bonus, we were joined by my granddaughter Liana, who flew in from Aix – the site of her Wellesley Fall Semester. We landed. We met. We went to the Chapel.

As my two girls navigated my wheelchair through the Sistine Chapel crowds, we gasped, as we listened to the tape describe how Michelangelo and other Renaissance artists struggled to create this *magnum opus*. When we tilted our heads backward to absorb the Genesis portion of this masterpiece on the ceiling, our eyes froze on the creation of Adam. God’s finger touching humanity’s was a spiritual awakening, and the subject of our dinner conversation that night when we celebrated Liana’s birthday. There we were munching on caprese and Panini in between gulps of Chianti in a Piazza Navona café, with torches ablaze on each side of our table. No birthday could match that one, I told Liana, even if she lived to be an octogenarian, like her grandmother.

In the daytime, the three of us went our separate ways – Katy to yoga on Via Aurelia, and Liana, jogging in the Villa Borghese Gardens. I started the day with Mass at one of St. Peter’s side altars, followed by tea at a nearby café, where I could get a “New York Times.” Then, cane in hand, I traversed the cobbled stones, climbing hills with the determination of the gladiators. That cane and I took on one of the Eternal City’s highest staircases, the 124 steps to St. Helen’s tomb in Santa Maria d’Aracoeli Church. Concerned that I wouldn’t make it down the stairs, a Jordanian woman and her family scurried up to the top, grabbing each of my arms, and gently glided me down all 124 steps. The kindness of strangers!

All was well in Rome, and we would complete our trip with three days in Assisi. But fatigue was setting in. I was not surprised, given that I walked at least ten miles a day, often in the pouring rain. My sightseeing appetite was insatiable. There was always another chapel, another monument, another piazza to take in. I resolved to return in the spring, to smell the flowers, dine without torches, and linger in the markets with my gelato.

The headache introduced itself on day one in Assisi, where Katy and I visited the *Basilica di San Francesco d'Assisi*. Mesmerized by Giotto's panels of St. Francis' life, we intended to cap off the day with dinner at *La Fortezza*, a restaurant Peg said was "a must." But first I had to address the headache. Katy googled "*farmacia*" on her iPad. Navigating the labyrinth of medieval byways, we found it tucked away on a side alley. *Comprese, per piacere!* I blurted, throwing five euros on the counter. Katy spoke in French: *Nous avons besoins de Tylenol*. The pharmacist presented a small box - *Comprese, 500 mg*. *Grazie!* I whispered, resisting an urge to hug her. I bore this box to *La Fortezza*, as if it were Olympic gold. But when I saw the steep stairway leading to the restaurant, I caved. Gourmet food would be wasted on me, with a skull that felt like a crew of construction workers was drilling inside of it. We settled for a bowl of tomato soup at a nearby cafe.

That Tylenol served me well in Assisi, back in Rome, and even for three days in Katy's fourth floor walk-up on New York's Upper West Side. I saw the Caravaggio at the Met. I got my son, Eddy, a blue flannel shirt at Loehmann's on Broadway. I ate escargots on the Upper East Side and clam chowder at Zabar's. And I saw the lighting of the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center. But I slept a lot between Tylenols. "It must be jet lag," I surmised.

Back in Seattle my doctor agreed. "You have a stiff neck, tight shoulders and swollen ankles – not unusual after an overseas flight." She suggested physical therapy, after doing a

thorough neurological evaluation, which I passed with flying colors. The therapy brought some muscular relief, but the headaches persisted. I even went to the dentist, wondering if I had an abscessed tooth. “No, just use your night guard,” he said.

When Eddy arrived from Toronto for Christmas, I wasn’t up for celebrating or shopping, and I was grasping for words. I usually had friends in when my children were with me. But not this year. We even stayed home for Christmas, having a quiet day filled with the smells of Eddy preparing a succulent chicken breast. Not to be a complete party pooper, I suggested St. James Cathedral’s New Year’s Eve French baroque concert.

But there was Tylenol before, during, and after this beautiful event. And there was Tylenol at Peg’s wedding, as I embarrassedly asked a dinner partner if she had some. When the holidays were over the headaches would subside, I mused. Eddy left the day after the wedding, and I stopped in to see my neighbor, Anita. She looked at me with a perplexed stare, “Helen, you’re not making sense. Get to a neurologist today!”

The neurologists were busy, but my primary care physician had an opening. This time she ordered a CT scan, for she was concerned about my speech and inability to follow her directions. The scan revealed a subdural hematoma. Yikes! My Uncle Leo Hogan had died of a brain hemorrhage, when he was 49. Was this hereditary?

“Go to the Emergency Room. Do not take time to call your children,” my usually soft-spoken doctor blurted on the phone, which had been ringing, when I walked in the door from the scan.

I crammed lemon lozenges into an overnight bag and ripped medical directives off the refrigerator on my way to catch a taxi to Swedish Hospital. I grabbed my rosary. My neighbors Barbara and Jim got off the elevator.

“Hi, Helen. We’re just heading for Costco’s. Need anything?”

“I have a hematoma on my brain. Can you take me to the hospital?”

“Oh, my!” said Jim. “Of course, I’ll meet you in front, with my car.”

Barbara rode down in the elevator with me. We encountered Rose, a neighbor on the 14th floor, and a young man I had not seen before.

“How are you, Helen?”

“I’m on my way to the hospital for brain surgery.”

“The Carmelites will pray for you at Mass tomorrow.”

“God bless you,” said the young man, taking my hand. He was a complete stranger, but I felt that he was a soul mate on that elevator.

Jim held the car door open. He and Barbara insisted on staying in the Emergency Room.

Everyone asked if I’d fallen. I thought of Natasha Richardson, the brilliant actress who died of a subdural hematoma after a ski accident. “I’ve not skied in years. I *did* bump my head on the kitchen cupboard before I left for Europe, but it was just a gentle tap.” Evidently a tap is a big deal when you’re on the blood thinner, Warfarin.

The Emergency Room doctor reviewed my scan and admitted me. Katy bought her first “day-of-travel” plane ticket ever.

Beside my gurney to the ICU, Barbara and Jim ran to keep pace, until we reached my “deluxe suite,” where three men in starched white jackets with stethoscopes as jewelry, soberly introduced themselves. They’re younger than my kids. But there was nothing childlike in their message. When the neurosurgeon told me that he was going to drill three holes in my skull, I told him I really did not want to subject myself to that kind of trauma.

“That is certainly understandable. But your headaches will worsen. You may go into a coma.”

A call to my nephew, E. J., a physician in Pittsburgh, changed my mind. The neurosurgeon said there was a 20 percent chance the hematoma would return. I reached for my rosary, tucked it under my pillow and said yes.

Katy was at Newark airport, waiting for the red-eye. She would be the spokesperson, everyone agreed. My other son, Tommy, in Bethlehem, PA, said I’d get through it. Liana wanted to fly from Wellesley. Eddy chimed in from his Canadian Rockies ski vacation. My niece/goddaughter, Sue, left a meeting in Portland to join me. Against my wishes, my friend Joyce insisted on coming to the ICU. We were to have had dinner that night.

Then I called Marie in Annapolis. My oldest and only living sibling, we dreaded losing each other. Most likely she would die first, for I was eight years younger. But tonight the odds were that she might be the sole surviving Donnelly. Marie emailed her eight children and fifteen grandchildren for prayers for her little sister. Her eldest, Joan, asked everyone to unite in prayer on Facebook at 4:00 pm. About 100 people “liked” heaven on my behalf. Such are the advantages of an Irish Catholic family!

The anesthesiologist stands next to the heart monitor. “What about heart arrhythmias you’ve had? What about that embolism? What about...?” It’s no surprise that she’s interrogating me about my heart problems. All of my procedures and hospitalizations are on the computer screen in full view. She tells me that my heart history puts me at risk. So, my heart is trumping my brain right now. In conference with the medical team, I ask Joyce to hand me my Advanced Directives and the Physician’s Order for Life-Sustaining Treatment (POLST) form to make my wishes clear.

“For example, if my heart stops, I do not want CPR.”

“We have to give you CPR if your heart stops. It’s our job to keep you alive.”

“But if I have a stroke and am brain dead, I do not want CPR.”

“Hopefully, you will not have a stroke, and we’ll evaluate that if you do.”

“I do not want a respirator, or – what do you call that machine that keeps you breathing?”

“A ventilator.”

“Yes, a ventilator. And I don’t want feeding tubes.”

I hand the papers to them.

“It’s unusual to be so clear on one’s directives, and we’ve never seen this form before.”

“I suggest you acquaint yourself with it. This is my life. I’ve been blessed to have 82 years of it. I don’t expect to have it prolonged for a few months with painful procedures that burn Medicare dollars. Spend it on our nation’s children and the poor. Now what else do you plan to do to me before you drill holes in my head?”

“You’ve covered it, Mrs. Goehring. You’ve had this conversation with your children?”

“They’ll tell you—too many times!”

“Thank you for being clear. It’s refreshing.”

Father Ryan is on the phone. The pastor of St. James Cathedral is my friend and spiritual inspiration. He’s about to baptize six babies, “But I want to talk to you, before you go to surgery.” His blessing seeps through the telephone. The aides lift me onto the gurney.

I scoop my rosary out from under my pillow and dive into an ocean of thoughts, as the orderlies roll my gurney to the Operating Room. Will I survive? Will the kids be okay? What are they thinking? What’s Heaven like? Who will greet me? (I hope my mother. It’s been 66 years.)

Multitudes of technicians in the Operating Room inspect every nook and cranny. The anesthesiologist unclenches my fist to discover my rosary. “You can’t have that in your hand,” she explains. She is cutting off my lifeline. Holding on to this rosary is just as important to the success of this surgery as finding the right “anesthesia cocktail,” I want to shout.

I don’t say anything.

“I’ll put it on your chart.”

I can’t say anything.

The anesthesiologist hands my rosary to the nurse. Then she looks at me again.

“Wait!”

Dropping the rosary back in my hand, she wraps fine mesh gauze around my fist, concealing the treasure that will get me through this.

What changed her mind? My heart jumps for joy as her nurse tucks me in.

My speech comes back, just like that of the Prophet Zachariah. The Angel Gabriel had struck him deaf and mute because he didn’t believe him when he said that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a child -- John the Baptist -- in their old age. With this rosary tucked inside my fist, my faith and confidence are restored.

“Thank you. What is your name?” I ask the nurse.

“Bernadette.”

“After Bernadette of Lourdes?”

“I’m going in two weeks.”

“You’ll love it,” I tell her, as the plastic mask floats over my face.

“Deep breath, Helen.”

A glacier of emotion sweeps over me. This team is going to give me its best shot. And on a Saturday night! Tommy is right. I'll get through this.

Joyce's comforting arms are around me when a young woman comes into Post-Op to tell me I did well. The woman is in jeans and a plaid flannel shirt, with short, curly hair framing her youthful face. Did I see her at Starbucks? The surgeon is the next visitor, still in his green surgery garb. How does he do it? He must be exhausted! Does he have a family?

Then I feel someone rubbing oil into the palm of my hand. It is Father Ryan administering the Sacrament of the Sick.

At eight a.m. on Sunday, the day after my surgery, St. James' chimes are ringing at the start of Mass. Lying in my room at Swedish Hospital, for the first time in six weeks, I have no headache.

Je n'ai pas besoin de Tylenol.

I utter a prayer of thanksgiving and instinctively reach for my rosary under my hospital pillow. Who put it there? Who unwrapped the gauze from my hand? Does it matter who?

Every important thing begins and ends with something like gauze.