

Henry's Heart

Lub-dub. Lub-dub. Lub-dub. No matter how hard I pump, my strength is waning. There is nothing I can do. My efforts are futile. I picture the atheromatous plaques accumulating. His blood vessels will soon succumb to the inevitable. I know it! I feel the self-destruction! Corridors are narrowing day by day, as cholesterol crystals deposit. Necrotic lipid cores expand within the tunica intima. The thin fibrous caps will not withstand the invasion of foamy macrophages any longer. I have come to dislike Henry. Children are so careless about their health. The excessive fries, cookies and Cadbury cream eggs are revolting. While he enjoys, I bear the burden. Life in this suffocating body is a misery.

Then it comes, just as I anticipated, a visit to the GP. Henry has been complaining about stomach pain for two weeks now. The doctor asks him about his diet. Does he eat fruit and vegetables? Henry hesitates. Then he answers, "*No I don't; I think I'm allergic to them*". His mother holds her breath. By now I am becoming furious. How can he get away with such pathetic lies? His mother should be making him eat properly, but instead she recounts how his pain started after returning from a birthday party. I am absolutely not impressed. Everyone knows that birthday parties are just an excuse for children to stuff themselves full of marshmallows and other toxic substances, without parents having to feel guilty. But that is not the crux of the problem. Henry's aversion to healthy foods in general is to blame. His mother should take responsibility. I bet she's one of those parents who is too busy with work to cook proper meals. All I detect are the ready-made hamburgers and fries Henry ingests every other night.

That was three weeks ago. As far as I remember the doctor urged Henry to change his habits. He emphasised the importance of a "*balanced diet*", not only for the stomach but also for vital organs like the heart. As I expected, Henry's eating habits were extraordinarily difficult to break. But I'll give her credit where it's due, Henry's mother gave him persistent encouragement. Henry now eats carrots, apples and bananas, amongst other things. I can even hear him convincing himself, "*an apple a day keeps the doctor away*".

Henry's stomach pain went away two days ago. So why do I still feel this insurmountable pressure? Why the agonising pain? Has a plaque finally ruptured? I begin to contemplate the possibility. An embolism of the necrotic core might be obstructing blood flow. I do sense blood stagnating; blood cells desperately trying to escape the shrinking battle field. One thing is for certain: I'm having to work harder every day. Henry's eaten so much rubbish in his few years that I'm irreversibly damaged.

So here we are today at the cardiologist. She sounds kind and experienced. I like her. And finally, I'm getting some attention. The cardiologist enquires about Henry's symptoms. Henry describes dyspnoea and fatigue; not in those words of course. The cardiologist listens attentively. She places a stethoscope on Henry's chest. Now I'm being listened to. I feel the adrenaline rushing through me as I work to make my suffering heard: lub-whoosh-dub, lub-woosh-dub, lub-woosh-dub. I want her to hear me struggling to pump blood through the aortic valve. Lub-woosh-dub, lub-whoosh-dub, lub-whoosh-dub-dub. She lifts her stethoscope and Henry's mother anxiously asks, "*Is everything alright?*". There is a very brief silence, a moment of hesitation, and then the doctor says calmly, "*I'd like to perform an ECG*".

Oh no, Henry hates having any sort of test or procedure done. The last time he had a vaccine he screamed and had to be held down by two nurses. I can already hear his mum saying, "*Don't worry honey, it's just a test... just hold still for five more seconds. As a reward I'll give you some chocolate when we get home*". But this time Henry is quiet. Throughout the ECG he doesn't flinch. Maybe the healthy diet is paying off after all.

After a short delay, the cardiologist returns with the results. "*Mrs Brown, I'm afraid Henry has a congenital heart defect, a Ventricular Septal Defect to be precise. This means he has a small hole in his heart...*"

What? Is she saying I'm the problem? Is it my fault now? Feelings of bewilderment surge through me, then remorse. Henry isn't to blame after all. I have been so consumed by my antagonism towards Henry, that I didn't see what was wrong with me. Oh Henry, forgive me! I think I'm having a panic attack; the palpitations start. My contractions become fast and irregular. I wish I were a brain, at least then I could have some vitamin B12 supplements. In the distance I can still hear faint chatter. Questions. Answers. Then the dreaded word. Surgery.

I am ready to confront my fears. We've just arrived at the hospital. Henry has an appointment with the cardiologist. I suppose she'll answer any final questions before we head off to the operating theatre. I hear the cardiologist's voice, but it no longer sounds soothing like during the first visit. All I can think of is the procedure that is about to take place. The scalpels, the scissors, clamps, retractors. I can't hear a thing. My panic escalates. Any moment now they'll whisk us away.

I'm terrified. I visualise the artificial light in the operating theatre, its glaring eyes fixed on Henry. I picture the cold, the reek of disinfectant, the soft beeping sound of the monitors. Everything feels contrived. I imagine the cardiologist meticulously working through the procedure following years of training and dedication. Having said that, she seemed surprisingly young to me. Images of her light green scrubs and black hair neatly tied into a bun cross my mind. All of a sudden I think back to Henry's mum voicing her concerns: "*Every operation involves an element of risk. I only want what's best for Henry*". Those words still resonate. What will they do to me now? Will I survive? Will they replace me with another heart?

The cardiologist's next utterance takes me by surprise.

"So, Mrs Brown, if you'd like to make an appointment with my assistant, we can give Henry a check-up in three months. The furosemide seems to be working very effectively, but we will need to keep a close eye on his progress. I must say I'm very happy."

Then she turns to Henry. "*You're a lucky boy, Henry. Most children with a heart condition like yours would need an operation, but it looks like we might be able to avoid that. Just keep taking your medication as prescribed*".

No operation. What a relief. What a surprise. But should I be so surprised? Now I come to think of it, the burden seems to have diminished. Feelings of pride in Henry, for his perseverance, for everything he has achieved despite his condition, suddenly permeate my thoughts. I want to say sorry for ever doubting him. I want to let him know how I feel. I want to show how grateful I am to be his heart, always beating for him. Lub-dub. Lub-dub. Lub-dub.