

Through Irish Eyes: Two ambulances, an ultrasound and a slug of Irish whiskey

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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It started with wheels and ended as a comedy of errors.

Since late December I've been glorying in my new power chair. It's wonderful for getting around the house with minimal effort, and somehow, I've reasoned, it should be possible to use it away from home as well.

Recently I learned of Health Express, a subsidized transport system that includes vans with lifts to take one to health-related appointments.

I made my maiden voyage with Joel Reeves as driver. He was attentive and kind, we had mutual acquaintances, and I arrived at Dr. Alan Gruenefeldt's office in fine shape. The return trip was equally easy, and for the price of a small donation I felt like the little engine that could.

One small cloud — the doctor wanted to see me again in a few days, plus get a chest X-ray and have some lab work done. Obviously he felt that swollen legs and shortness of breath were questionable.

So once again I called Health Express for a Tuesday afternoon appointment. Routine, I assumed, and pared the contents of my tote bag to the minimum.

But it was far from routine.

"I want you to go to the emergency room for some tests," I was told.

"Now?" I asked in disbelief.

"Now," he said firmly, warning me that any possible blood clots in my legs might migrate to my lungs and could have a sudden and fatal result.

Yeow! There was little choice.

So it was not an easy ride home, but strained transport to Sutter Auburn Faith Hospital while I worried that one of the things I had pared from my tote was my health identification card, along with some supplies that might now be needed.

Rapidly I found that information from a previous visit was already available in the computer; no need to worry.

So I trundled back to emergency and prepared to be punched and pinched and assessed from all angles. Hopefully I'd still be able to catch a timely ride home before Health Express services halted for the day.

Hah!

By 4:30 p.m. the nurse informed me that I had four minutes to decide if I wanted to go home then. "What if I stay?" I wailed, conscious that not all the tests had been run. "Oh, we can get you a gurney van," I was assured.

I'd never heard of a gurney van, but what the heck, it must be OK. I agreed to stay for the rest of the tests.

When I had first arrived the second bed, shrouded in curtains, was occupied by a grandmother who'd fallen in the bathtub, badly bruised but no bones broken. She was admitted to the hospital and replaced by a 21-month-old girl who turned out to have pneumonia in her right lung. She protested loudly about the "owies" involved in needed tests.

"Sorry about the crying," said hospital staffers.

Hey, I had three children, 16 grandchildren and 23 great-grandchildren. Howls of dismay were not unknown. I felt sorry for the tyke.

Eventually, as the evening wore on, a technician arrived to take me to ultrasound. My only reference to ultrasound was in pregnancy, and I was sure, at 87, that I wasn't pregnant. Has there been some screw up?

"No, no," the nurse assured me. "It's to check for blood clots in your legs."

So we made the long circuitous journey to the ultrasound department, while I marveled at how the hospital had changed since I was involved with it some 60 years earlier.

"Have you been here before?" the man in charge asked. For a moment I hesitated. Should I tell him of my early involvement along with Joe Chevreaux, Chester Gibbs, Frankie Kee and others? Should I mention that once I had climbed the girders of the new wing, taking pictures to document the progress of a hospital's evolution?

Should I tell him how grand it was to have such a fine, modern health care facility in our community?

No, that was old history. I shook my head.

At last I was back in emergency, hopefully headed home. Generously IV-applied Lasix had reduced the swelling in my legs quite a bit, and my breathing seemed under control, though my blood pressure hovered just under 200.

It wasn't helped when the gurney-van team took one look at my power chair and vetoed taking it along. A second van would be needed.

"Why can't I just go with the chair in the second vehicle then?" I asked.

No, it seemed that the first van had both a driver and attendant, while the second had only a driver. "You need an attendant with you" I was told.

"Whaaaaat?" my Irish independence started to stir, but then I subsided. The important thing was to get home.

So I was strapped to their gurney and popped into the ambulance while I secretly wondered what my arrival home with TWO ambulances would do to the neighborhood.

Actually, the street was dark. No one even noticed. I slid off the gurney, reclaimed my power chair and made it up Dave Hyde's ramp from the garage. Now it was time for a generous slug of Jameson Irish whiskey, a sampling of Rosemary Headley's strata and head for bed.

Wednesday morning brought wild news and good news. The hospital apparently was concerned about me because I'd left against medical advice — they were even going to call the police to request a welfare check at my home. Fortunately Dr. Gruenefeldt had intervened and then called with the good news: no blood clots or other major difficulties.

I could still get hit by a truck, of course. Only the rocks are forever.