

Not the Weekend I Had Planned

I am scared.

Last week I went to the doctor with a closed throat and shooting pains from my right ear. The diagnosis was that I have severe laryngopharyngitis. The cure is danger-red antibiotics for a week and aspirin to help with the ear pain and throat swelling.

The ear pains have continued, but they have moved to my head, behind my ear. Sometimes they come in waves only 8 seconds apart, other times I may not have one for 10 minutes. The aspirin seems to slow them down but they are always there. There is a muscle down the right side of my neck that runs all the way into my shoulder that is incredibly tight. I think it may be from tensing with the pain.

Four days after my doctor's visit. I still have no voice and have an occasional growl of a cough. The other night though, it started getting a whole lot worse.

As I was getting ready for bed, cleaning my teeth, something didn't feel right when I spat the toothpaste foam into the sink. It felt like a small part of my lip was numb. I looked closely in the mirror and noticed that my smile was a bit lopsided - one side lifting higher than the other. Odd. I figured a good night's sleep would help.

In the morning I woke and showered and went to get a coffee. I was in a small village in the south of England at a dance workshop. Trying to sip my coffee I realised that the right side of my face was not working properly. I went into the bathrooms to look in the mirror.

When I smiled, only half of my face smiled. If I laughed, I looked like the Joker. My eyes were bloodshot and one was open wider than the other. If I tried to scrunch my eyes shut it only worked on the left eye. The other closes and then ignores my instructions. Weirdly, I couldn't wink my right eye - the left closed when I tried. I felt like I had been to the dentist and had a needle, with half of my face numb.

I stupidly went to a dance class unsure of what to do. I still had no voice, so greeting each dance partner was a disaster. I whispered a greeting and gave them my lopsided smile feeling completely self conscious. Towards the end I walked away knowing I had to do something.

A friend did some research for me and gave me the number for NHS direct where I tearily described my symptoms. They expressed serious concern about the facial numbness and told me to go to the hospital. The guy I caught a lift down with kindly offered to drive me.

On arrival I was feeling pretty emotional but managed to rasp out why I was there and they took me through quickly. They documented everything and said even though it was unlikely I'd had a stroke they had to send the stroke nurse down. I waited 15 minutes and someone took my blood pressure - it was unsurprisingly high. 165/115. They then left me for around two hours. I alternated between dozing and listening to the pain around me. Not a fun time. I have no idea what happened to the stroke nurse.

Finally the doctor came to see me. She was gentle and sympathetic at my emotional distress. She did a lot of motor-neuron tests. I could do all of the strength level tests on both sides of my body until it got to my face. Apart from the things I'd already noticed, she asked me to squeeze my eyes tightly closed. I could only do the left. She tried to open my eyes manually while I resisted and I had no strength in the right. She also asked me to puff my cheeks out with air. I couldn't do it - I couldn't keep the right side of my mouth closed to trap the air.

They took blood and sent me for a cat scan. It was a strange feeling having my head taped down to restrict movement and then being run back and forth through the machine. I was worried that I wouldn't be able to keep my eyes closed, but passed the test and the results came back clear. Not a stroke then.

Back in my cubicle after some more dozing they

did an ECG. Also clear. Another blood pressure check and I was up to 175/120. Possibly my highest ever in a rested state. That made them nervous, but the next one was back down around the normal rate. It's been fluctuating crazily since then. They fed me soup and jelly here in between tests.

They told me I would need to be transferred and admitted into hospital at Eastbourne. I felt bad asking the guy who gave me a lift if he could pack my stuff and bring it over but he was happy to do it. He didn't exactly rush though (probably not helped by me unpacking everything and scattering it across the cabin) and the ambulance arrived in the meantime so he had to trail us all the way there.

My first ambulance ride was less dramatic than I would have anticipated. No flashing lights. No sirens. No stretcher. Just me chatting with the paramedic. The highlight of his career has been delivering 17 babies.

At the hospital I was admitted to the ENT ward. They took a swab from my nose and armpit to test for something I forgot the acronym for, that is resistant to antibiotics. More facial movement tests, ears, hearing and then I was sent to bed and put on an antibiotic drip and paracetamol.

The next morning I was woken to have my blood pressure taken and given a cup of tea, then my two drips. A specialist dropped by and they agreed on a diagnosis - Bell's Palsy- although they took more blood to check for mono-nucleosis (glandular fever). Clear. The painkillers knocked me out so I slept most of the day, being woken for meals, most of which I could eat very little of, or drips, or bp tests.

I did manage to send out a few texts and got amazing support from some of my UK friends. Thank you. You know who you are. Your care made my weekend somewhat less miserable.

In the evening I spoke to the doctor about my throat still being closed and he decided to take a look by inserting a camera through my nose down

into my throat. This is even more unpleasant than it sounds. 'It's a really thin tube...' he said, showing me what looked like a jointed mechanical straw, the circumference of a shoelace. That's not thin. Cotton thread is thin. He sprayed a local anesthetic into my nose then delved in. After much fiddling and discomfort he gave up on that side as being too swollen and had a foray into the second nostril. This one worked although my body was not happy about it, sending me waves of nausea and a cold sweat in return. I had to grip the iron bed head and concentrate on staying upright. At least I got the all clear, the only worry being that the camera doesn't actually see as far down as I think the blockage is. The doctor doesn't seem concerned though, so I'll just have to accept the husky voice and eating difficulties. That's one way to lose weight.

Another night and today I will be released. I still have the facial paralysis. Apparently 80% of Bell's Palsy sufferers recover within three months. I hope I am part of that 80%. I am horrified at how I look and scared of how people are going to react. A good friend is coming to collect me so he will be my litmus test. I'm not sure if I can bear for my friends to see me looking like this. I know that sounds vain. I have a new understanding of how stroke victims and people with facial disfigurement feel. I can only hope that in my case it will not be permanent.

