

TONSILLECTOMY 1966

By Ivy Eisenberg



I didn't turn around to see if anyone was chasing me after I bolted from the examination room, sprinting past the marble statue of the Virgin Mary in the lobby of St. Joseph's Hospital. I pushed open the heavy doors, and raced as fast as my chubby, ten-year-old legs could carry me, zooming into the street toward the corner. When I finally stopped and quickly glanced behind me, I saw that not only were my mother and my sister, Heidi, chasing after me, but the nurse from the examination room was with them too.

"GET BACK HERE," my mother yelled. She caught up to me, grabbed me by the arm and pulled me back.

"This is just a simple blood test. Quick. It won't hurt and you have to have it."

St. Joseph's was where Heidi, who was 13, and I were to have our twin tonsillectomies. I did not trust doctors. I did not trust nurses. I did not trust dentists. It was 1966, and I did not want to be touched by anyone but Paul McCartney. Even in my dreams I knew that Paul would be gentle and totally infatuated with me. In my dreams I was sure that doctors were going to strap me to a table, drug me, and wheel me to the morgue.

We'd lived three doors down from St. Joseph's when I was very little, and my two older sisters had played in the back of the hospital. My sisters would tell me that they took dead hospital patients back there—dead ones. I often dreamt that my family would wake up drugged and strapped in a row of parallel beds, locked up forever behind the stone walls we used to play by. No one was going to do that to me.

They caught me and pulled me back into the hospital. I shuffled past the Virgin Mary in the dead center of the entrance hall, with her contented smile, her clasped hands, and her eyes downcast, like she was watching over me. She certainly wasn't my "Mother" but she seemed like the only sane, nice lady in the whole joint — my own mother had turned into a co-conspirator.

Heidi marched ahead of me, defiant, brave, and disdainful of my babyish resistance. It was Heidi, with whom I had shared a room for my

whole life, who had regaled me with nightly tales of our upcoming hospital adventure. My oldest sister Rochelle was too busy locked in her room, keeping it neat and doing all her homework. Heidi had been talking up this operation for weeks, yammering and yammering on about all the ice cream and pudding we would eat, obsessing over which pajamas to pack, and painting a picture of the blissful recovery week we'd have, watching TV together in our room. My parents said they'd move the TV from the living room up to our room, which actually made me more nervous. If this tonsil operation was such a small deal, why was there such a huge payoff?

I knew Heidi was as frightened as I was, but just to piss me off, she offered to get her blood taken first. I watched as the nurse tore the wrapper and took Heidi's trembling hand, pricking her finger and filling a small straw with oozing blood. A tear made its way down Heidi's cheek as she stood up solemn, but defiant, and motioned for me to sit down in the chair.

Even in the face of death, Heidi was upstaging me. She was always the diva.

The blood test hardly hurt, but still I held the alcohol compress against my red finger for most of the day.

Two days later, we returned to check in for real. At administration they clamped ID bracelets onto our wrists while my parents gave us a suspiciously cheerful goodbye. Heidi immediately unpacked. She put on her pastel blue baby doll pajamas with the white ruffles, (even though it was afternoon,) and poured herself a glass of water from the plastic pitcher on the hospital bed stand. I sat on my bed in my sweater and pants. I dangled my sneakers and thumbed through a comic book.

A few minutes later, two starched-white nurses came in to take our temperatures — rec-tally of course. I wasn't going to let Heidi humiliate me with her bravery this time.

The nurses approached Heidi first and blocked my view of her rear end so I couldn't see whether she flinched. Within minutes I saw her pulling up her pajama bottoms. Then was my turn.

Of course, in my case, the nurses decided to stand on the other side of my bed, giving Heidi

a bird's eye view of my rear end. I flipped over quickly and worked hard at looking calm. But then I saw Heidi smirking, which meant that the temperature taking was not going to be without pain. I jerked and wound up kicking one nurse in the breast in my attempt to push her hand away.

She doubled over with a groan; her white cornered hat went crooked on her head.

"Help! I need help!" The other nurse said running into the hall.

Now four nurses arrived to hold me down. They placed the thermometer in my rear.

I didn't resist.

"Really! She was violent and did kick me in the chest," the nurse said apologetically to the others.

That evening, we were forced to don flimsy gowns with open backs. Luckily they allowed us to keep our panties on. Heidi settled in to watch "I Love Lucy."

I lay in bed, working my morgue nightmare into a more elaborate frenzy. Where was Paul McCartney when I needed him?

After we found out that we weren't allowed to have dinner, and right before we were told we had to go to sleep, a nurse was back to take our temperatures again.

"Here's a little pill for relaxation," she said sweetly.

"I am relaxed," I said, managing a smile and slight giggle. This could be the drug that would start the process of me losing consciousness and the doctors strapping me down against my will.

"I don't want it. I'm so hungry," I begged.

"You'll have plenty of ice cream and pudding tomorrow after the operation." I took the pill.

Heidi lay back on her pillow and turned off the TV. About two minutes later she fell asleep, peacefully.

More nurses and more temperatures— at 6 in the morning! Nurses appearing, then disappearing. Temperatures. Blood pressure. More pills.

Heidi began to whine — her throat was getting hoarse and she begged for water. Finally, a nurse handed her a tiny cup, "Sip this and try to grow up!" she said to Heidi.

At 10 A.M., two new nurses came in with rattling trays— large hypodermic needles. Heidi immediately turned over onto her stomach

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to receive her injection.

"What is that?" I asked one of the nurses.

"This will make you drowsy," she said.

"My father said I would get a gas mask, not a shot."

"No. We give shots now, then the masks."

"I refuse."

She won, but we negotiated a compromise. I had to be sitting up. No buttocks. The injection went into my thigh.

As we were strapped onto our gurneys and wheeled down the corridors side by side, Heidi was smiling at me. Her eyes were glassy and heavy lidded. I thought I saw them close.

"Heidi! Stay awake. You promised."

Heidi and I had made a pact that we would keep each other awake as long as possible. Heidi was obviously not going to keep the pact.

The noises became more distant as if people were talking underwater. I knew we were in an elevator. I wiggled. I was not giving in. Not me.

"Count to ten," someone said as they placed a mask over my nose and mouth. I would try for twenty.

"Hi," I whispered when I awoke in the recovery room at 4:30 P.M. My parents were standing beside Heidi's bed.

Heidi pointed to her lips. She couldn't speak.

"Where's the ice cream" I managed to say when we were wheeled back into our room. I didn't see it there.

Tricked. It was a trick. There was nothing but soup and Jell-O.

Heidi hadn't said a word yet.

The next day, after one more injection and two temperature readings, we had a real breakfast. My throat was burning trying to eat but it made the thought of sucking on cool desserts all the more exciting.



Heidi's eyes had hollowed, and she barely touched her food, taking one spoonful of the hot cereal and making a sad croaking sound before she started to cry.

In the early afternoon our parents took us home. The TV was indeed in our room.

"Mom," I rasped, "Bring me the vanilla ice cream and some orange sherbet."

"Ma!" Heidi sobbed in raspy grunts. "It hurts." *Gilligan's Island* was just starting as Heidi began very slowly licking the ice cream. By the time she was done with one spoonful, I had already finished a soup bowl of vanilla and a tennis ball scoop of bright orange sherbet.

It took Heidi a few days to stop crying.

I finished the entire carton of Breyers and then some.

I did outgrow my fear of doctors shortly af-

terwards, and I did have to give up on Paul McCartney, who never came to rescue me anyway, and I never talked too much about my remarkable recovery from my tonsillectomy in front of Heidi or the family.

Heidi, the brave sister, eventually spoke and recovered fully. She went on to become an opera singer in Vienna, Austria, and has been trilling and yammering across Europe for more than 30 years. *

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