

Back in Trouble

The doctor walked across the Casualty waiting room as I stood dreading what he was about to say. I noticed his wavy black hair bounced as he walked, but it was the intensity in his gaze that held me.

“Ah. Mr. Hampshire, you’ve broken your back. You must stay here. You can’t go home.” His dire words felt at odds with his Indian lilting tone. His dictum that I needed to stay sounded more like a jail sentence than a treatment.

“Really?”

“Yes. There’s a phone over there, if you need to call someone. How’s the pain, right now?”

“Excruciating. It feels better to stand and walk.”

“I’ll ring the matron on the Orthopedic ward to warn her that you’re coming. If you can walk, I’ll send an orderly to take you.”

“Thanks.”

The doctor left me gripping the back of a chair while my mind spun. *How long will I be in hospital? How would I tell my parents, especially my mum? I’m only 21. I’ve never been in so much incredible pain. If there’s a hell, I’m in it, right now. I hate to admit it, but I’m really scared.*

I had to focus and pull on every ounce of determination to make the ten shuffling steps to the phone. I dialed my team lead at the office.

“Hey. Kaz.”

He cut me off before I could anything further. He had driven me to the hospital earlier that morning and it only took my two words for him to recognize my pained voice. “Barry. How the hell are you? What did the doc say?” His questions sounded comforting as his thick Polish accent coated his words. I imagined him sitting at his desk, enveloped in a thick cloud of sweet smelling pipe-tobacco smoke. He probably had sat more upright to pay attention to our conversation, but I had no doubt that he took deep puffs on his pipe, sending billowing clouds across the office.

“The doc says that I’ve broken my back and they’re going to hospitalize me. That’s all I know, right now.”

Kaz could be caustic and hard, but his voice sounded soft and concerned. “I knew you were seriously hurt. Is there anything you need?”

“I’m not sure what I need. I don’t know how long I’ll be here.”

“Somebody will come to see you later today or tomorrow.”

“Thanks. The orderly just came to walk me to the ward. Bye.”

The orderly stopped close to me. “You’re Mr. Hampshire, I assume.”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure you can walk? It’s quite a wander to the Ortho ward.”

“I’ll be slow, but I can do it.”

We cautiously meandered a route through endless corridors, but thankfully, no stairs. Eventually, we arrived at a set of open double doors. We stopped at the doors because the matron-in-charge appeared to be in a frantic hurry, ordering nurses here and there to do various tasks.

The orderly hesitated and looking at the matron, and his manner became timid. He tentatively called, “Matron. I have.”

Her squinting glance froze him. “I don’t have time right now.” She proceeded with her duties.

After a few minutes, I felt a wave of pain that almost caused me to collapse, I let out a small groan. This spurred the orderly into action. “Matron, I think I have the.”

She looked at him furiously. “I told you we’ve an emergency case and we’re waiting for the patient.”

“Yes. This guy is,” pointing at me.

But she wasn’t to be distracted from her duties. She held up her hand to stop the conversation and then checked her watch. “Where’s this new patient. I would’ve expected him by now.”

The orderly plucked up courage. “This is him.”

The matron rounded on both of us with a look of disbelief. “What? You just walked here from Casualty?”

“Well. Shuffled.” I moaned.

“In that case, you can get yourself into bed. Pajamas are on the bed. Nurse Pendleton, show him his bed.” Matron stormed back to her desk without any further word to me or the orderly.

I slowly followed the nurse to a small section of the ward that had four beds. Pajamas laid on the one, to which the nurse pointed, but she left me immediately to contend with changing into them on my own. I looked around the section. Two patients in the beds on the opposite wall studied me briefly and then pretended to sleep so that I had a little privacy to change into the pajamas. The bed next to mine was unoccupied.

Privacy wasn’t a consideration in hospital wards in England in 1970. I had been admitted into Stafford General Hospital, which lay in the middle of the country. Like many English hospitals, it was built decades earlier and in need of repair.

Changing into the pajamas was a little easier than I had expected. Walking to the ward had loosened up my back enough. After about ten minutes, I laid on the bed and the nurse soon returned to lay a sheet and blanket over me.

“I would really appreciate a pillow.”

“Oh, no. Not for you. Matron will explain in a few minutes.”

I lay still, sensing the tension in my back begin to melt. I had been traumatized for about twenty hours. I had slept a little, the night before, but I hadn't been able to settle for long.

I wanted to stop hurting. I wanted to rest. I wanted to know that I would recover. I wanted the fears that had invaded my mind to be gone. In 1970, back injuries were considered to border on paralysis. How would I look after myself? Laying in that bed, alone, I felt both good because I could begin to physically relax and bad because my mind spun anxiously, out of control.

The matron appeared a short time later. "Mr. Hampshire, I'm glad to see you're all settled in bed. As nurse told you, you cannot use a pillow as the doctor wants to keep your spine as straight as possible. You cannot move and must lay on your back as still as you can. You may move your arms only as necessary. You shouldn't pick up anything heavy, that includes a book so there'll be no reading, not even a newspaper."

"How long will I need to stay like this?"

"Only the doctors can tell you that. He will be here in the next day or so."

I looked straight up at the ceiling. "You mean I can look up at that flaking paint above me and that's it?"

"That's about it. You shouldn't look around too much, either. Now, have you contacted your family yet?"

"No." I was afraid how my mother would react to the news of my accident. I knew she was already very stressed as my father had been seriously ill with heart issues. I asked the matron. "Will you call my mother and tell her what happened?"

I suspected that she had heard that type of request before because her response was immediate and, unfortunately, made sense. "No. I will string extension cords together to get a phone to your bed. Your mother will feel much more assured that you will recover if she hears your voice. If she hears the news from me, she will wonder why you cannot tell her, yourself. She will fear the worst. She can ask you questions, directly, it will be for the best."

"I don't know how to tell her."

"Just tell her the truth. That will be much better."

"Okay."

After matron departed, I lay staring at the patch of flaking paint in a corner of the ceiling and reflected on the previous 24 hours.

The day before, three friends from the office and I had gone rock climbing. A buddy, Iain, had found a small rock ridge lay out in the country, just west of the city of Shrewsbury. He managed to obtain a sheet with descriptions of a few climbing routes on the ridge. So we decided to try the ridge as it was much closer than a more popular climbing areas in north Wales. After finding a small village where we

parked, we walked a mile or so out into the countryside. I found the area to be very picturesque and felt at ease as we trooped along, towards a ridge that was mainly lost in a grove of trees.

Several other groups of climbers were already ascending routes up the cliff, which stood about 80 feet high. To climb such a cliff, one climber would lead the route, which meant being on the front of the rope, and the second climber followed on the end of the rope. To safeguard the lead climber, he would attempt to jam shaped pieces of metal into cracks, as anchor points, about every ten feet. The climbing rope was passed through steel wire loops that were attached to the metal pieces. This arrangement could stop a climber's fall and prevent them from falling all the way back down to the ground. The lead climber was most vulnerable at the start of a route, until they had their first metal piece jammed into a crack.

Both Iain and I led climbs up a couple of easy routes as warm-ups. I was intrigued by a route that I had seen in the description sheet, but the actual rock face didn't align with the description. We worked out where we thought the route started.

I tried climbing what I believed was the route, but I needed to restart it several times before I felt sure that I could see a way upward. I managed to climb up to a crack where I hoped to insert a metal piece that would protect me, if I fell. But the crack was too wet and slimy to jam in any protection securely. I decided to continue up another couple of feet to a point where the crack appeared to be drier.

Unfortunately, before I gained the drier crack, one of my hands slipped. The next thing that I recall was having the unusual sensation of my heels bouncing down a vertical wall of rock, but I was watching my feet as this happened. Having my feet catch on the rock brought them up level with my head, leaving me to descend backwards in a shallow U-shape. I think I can say without a shadow of doubt that landing on a stony trail with the small of my back as the point of contact was not advised, but that was what I did. I had fallen just 15 feet, but gravity can gain an amazing amount of destructive impetus in that short distance.

I screamed, I hollowed, I swore, I let out primordial cries. Nothing helped in that moment. My climbing friends gathered around me, without any idea what to do. They asked if I was alright, but I felt that was like asking a fly that had just been swatted if it felt fine. Movement was the initial enemy. Laying still brought a little relief. Other climbing groups had heard my screams and came running over to check out what had happened and if they could help. One man asked the most important question, "Can you move your arms and legs?" I tried and they functioned normally, which everyone agreed was good. After half an hour, I had calmed down and lay quietly, but awful waves of pain consuming me several times each minute. I feared having to move, so I told my three friends to go climb for a while.

Laying alone, on the trail where I had landed, I realized that I needed to be the one to get myself back to the car. Painfully, I managed to roll over and push myself up onto my hands and knees. Ignoring the excruciating stabbing pains, I stood up on my two feet. I felt utterly broken. My head was foggy, my

body had never known such pain, my mind was awash with emotions that I feared would overwhelm me. But, I stood, unsteadily, but I stood. I stayed on my feet, leaning against trees or the rock face. I describe my situation as having pain, but the word “pain” is totally inadequate.

Eventually, we packed up and my friends took my gear so that I could focus on slowly shuffling along the trail. It probably took us three or four times longer to walk back to what we had taken in the morning. The main obstacle was having to clamber over a gate. That took some time and more swearing. Nowadays, I would probably have been airlifted out of that location, but in 1970, the prospect of being hauled out by ambulance drivers, with limited medical understanding, sounded worse than getting myself back to the car.

Sitting in the car was both good and bad. It felt comforting to have my back supported, but having to sit was close to hell. Halfway home, my friends suggested stopping for a pint in a pub. I actually thought it was a good idea, being 21 and completely freaked out. When we each had a pint in hand, we chose a table around which to sit. I recognized I couldn't bend down enough to put my pint on the table and asked one of my friends to put it down for me. That was the very first time that my mind allowed a rational thought to say, *Barry, this is serious. Man, you're in trouble. This isn't gonna be just a few days to recover. Oh, fuck!* Up until that time, I had been in shock and my thoughts had been simply trying to negotiate from one bout of pain to the next one.

For the rest of the drive home, I was quiet and withdrawn. Iain dropped me at the house where I rented a room. I couldn't entertain the thought of getting in and out of a bath, so I washed up in the sink and went to bed. It was a long night. The alarm was a relief, but it required movement. Dressing was a challenge, but by far, the worst items were my socks. They, alone, took 45 agonizing minutes to put on. I didn't feel able to eat breakfast and took a slow walk into the office.

My friends came into my office to check on me and after a while, everything returned to looking like a standard Monday morning. Our office seemed normal, Kaz belched clouds of pipe smoke, Linda prayed it would be a good day, Malcolm scowled at everyone, but I wondered how I was going to make it through the day. After we enjoyed our first round of coffee, I tried to focus on my project but found concentration to be lacking. At about 9:30, our departmental boss, Alan, came to see how everyone was, after the weekend. This weekly check-in with his team was Alan's way to stay connected. Sometimes, it was just a cursory “Hi, how you doin'?”

But that morning, he walked over to my desk and stopped. “Barry! What the hell's wrong with you? You're green.”

I cowered under his words. Did I look that bad? “I had a bit of an accident yesterday when I was climbing with Iain, over near Shrewsbury.”

Appalled, he said, “Have you been to hospital? You look terrible.”

“No.”

Alan turned to Kaz. “Who has the most comfortable car in the office, Kaz? Oh, I suppose it would be you, now that I think about it. Yes. Your Jag would be the best car. Take him up to Casualty at Stafford General, now.”

Kaz looked at both of us. “I was keeping an eye on him and wondering when I should suggest taking him.”

Alan said emphatically, “Now.”

As Alan returned to his own office, Kaz stood up, saying, “OK. Barry, grab your jacket, we’re leaving.”

Kaz drove me the twenty miles to the hospital in his Jag. He dropped me in front of Casualty and said, “Call me when you want a lift back to the office.”

“Okay. Thanks.” I slowly turned and took careful small steps into the hospital.

I explained my situation to a nurse and then to a doctor who ordered x-rays. In his sing-song Indian accent, he told me to return to the waiting room as x-rays needed to be developed and it would be an hour or so before he would see the results. Once, he had determined the extent of my injury, he would come to find me. I returned to the waiting room, stayed standing but holding on to anything that could give me support.

Laying in my bed, I knew a few details about my injury, but did I know enough to allay my mother’s fears. I suspected they would pour forth, when I told her about my situation. I knew I had broken my back, I was to look at the patch of flaking paint on the ceiling, and not move around. That didn’t reassure me, so I had no doubt, Mother would feel overwhelmed by the news. My mind kept spinning, *how am I going to explain this to Mum, without her losing it?*

In the middle of the afternoon, a nurse came around a corner, holding a phone and unraveling a length of phone cord. She smiled at me. “Oh, thank goodness. This is the forth extension lead I’ve had to find to stretch the phone line all the way down the ward to your bed. I hope nobody trips over it while you’re on the phone.” She placed the phone on the bed next to me. “Your mum’ll be happy to hear from you.”

“Oh, I don’t think she’s gonna be happy with this call.”

“Here’s the receiver. Do you want me to dial for you? You shouldn’t pick up the phone as it’s heavy.” I gave her the number and she dialed it.

“Thanks. It’s ringing now.”

She smiled and hurried away.

My mother answered in her usual friendly manner.

“Hi Mum, this is Barry. I know it’s the middle of the afternoon, but I have some news.”

“What’s wrong? There must be something wrong if you’re calling me in the middle of the afternoon.”

“Well, yes. I had an

To be continued.