
NON-FICTION | SPRING 2015

MY HEART IS IN MY HANDS

By **KAREN JAHN**

Nothing about my first visit to my seventh cardiologist was typical. As I was escorted into her corner office ablaze in mid-day light, the brilliant redhead, dressed in a vibrant magenta dress trimmed with gold beading, rose from her chair and held out her hand. “I’m Dr. _____. Welcome _____. Please sit down. Why have you come to see me?” Responding to my query about my medical records having arrived, she pointed to the two-inch high file before her and said, “You’ve been through quite an ordeal. Tell me what I can do.”

Most doctors I’d been to spent most of the visit going through my complex medical history, laboriously writing everything down, or reading the file, till I wonder why I’m there. As a retired teacher, I also wonder why they didn’t do their homework. Dr. S gave me the floor. “As you know, I’ve been through the wringer with surgeries, but since my last one in October, everything seems fine, except . . . I’m breathless. I can’t walk very far or go up stairs without becoming breathless. I can use aerobic machines, but only on the lowest resistance. I thought everything was fixed, my circulation was healthy, but I can’t catch my breath.”

At the end of our conversation, she told me “I want to see your heart.” I had had many echocardiograms before, but never had a doctor called it “seeing your heart.” After the test and an examination, we returned to her office. She thumped the two-inch stack of data in my medical record in front of her. Looking decisive, she said, in two weeks she’d give me a stress test.

Never during my eight surgeries had I been afraid. When Congestive Heart Failure made my lungs fill up with liquid, I was terrified. It felt like drowning. But this breathlessness was different. My primary care doctor, pulmonologist, and sleep specialist could find nothing wrong. So I had made an appointment with Dr. _____. Two friends had recommended her highly, but they had only minor circulation issues. Dr. _____'s blog asserted that her experience as a high school cheerleader had been crucial for her cardiology practice. How was that a prerequisite to being a cardiologist? I was intrigued.

Two weeks later I returned to her office for the test. I had had two nuclear stress tests before, both of them traumatic. Two or three techs worked on me in a lab with carefully insulated walls. They took pictures at prescribed time intervals before and then after several injections over the course of three hours. Instead of being sent to a lab clinic, this time I was brought down a hall in her office suite to a small windowless room with a treadmill, with an EKG, and an echocardiogram testing set up. Apart from the typical diagrams of the circulatory system, there were no decorations. This room was Dr. _____'s lab. After the tech had applied the seven electrodes on my chest and feet for the electrocardiogram, Dr. _____ strode in wearing a white coat. None of my cardiologists had ever been anywhere near a stress test or electrocardiogram they'd ordered. Her treatment was hands on! No injections, no complicated intervals of pictures and endurance, just her, me, and the tech in this little windowless room.

Walking on the treadmill brought back my feelings of climbing my hill half bent over, ready to collapse on a boulder to catch my breath. Standing on the road I wondered what if my heart failed and I crumbled? How would anyone find me? Only one car passed in an hour.

Waiting for my heart to stop pounding, my breath to ease, I'd look up at the sky framed by the trees. How could it be so beautiful when I felt so desperate? The shale boulder had ferns, weeds, and saplings growing out of its crevices, and a stone wall on top of it. My chest was heaving, distracting me from the immaculate woods my neighbor had cleared. Life's energy was coursing around me.

Back on the treadmill, my hands gripped the bars tightly as I heard my sneakers slap on the hard rubber accelerating beneath them. I feared I'd trip because my feet couldn't keep up. I didn't have my earphones with shuffle to distract me, so I listened to my breath come sharper, a bit of a wheeze as I began to panic. What if I fell off? Dr. ____ was beside me, snapping the blood pressure cuff off and on, the sound of the Velcro punctuating my breathing. She'd turn away to record the reading, and then snap it back on. I was torn between my fear of falling and of not cooperating. She had been so supportive, but now she was making me breathless. Then she warned me that the speed would soon double. I was gulping air. "Just one minute longer," she barked, "and then jump off the treadmill and onto the exam table as quickly as you can."

If I had been at the gym that would have been the moment I would step astride the belt and let it continue for a minute without me, waiting to catch my breath. Surely Dr. ____ wouldn't have wanted me to have a heart attack right there in the exam room? So I pushed, and panted, my head feeling light and my legs tingling, and finally the read-out hit 4:45, a minute after I began to struggle for breath.

I jumped onto the floor and lurched onto the exam table, turning on my side. I couldn't catch my breath, so I was gasping for air in the tech's face, my chest pounding, and my head light. The wand used for electrocardiograms feels odd, at once a foreign and an

intimate touch. After applying a lubricant, JoAnn slid it across my chest, under one breast at a time, up the center almost to my collarbone. It was cold, somewhere between slimy and creamy. She would stop the wand at a point, and wait for the image to appear on the screen. Meanwhile, I heard the echo of liquid moving, of the heart pumping blood that eventually drowned out my heavy breathing. Images of my heart chambers and the blood moving appeared on the monitor above those she had taken before I stepped on the treadmill. By the time she was done, I could finally breathe just through my nose.

She printed them out for Dr. _____. “Okay. I think I’ve got it,” she said. “I’ll see you in my office in a few minutes.”

The day before this stress test, I had backed out of my garage right into the bumper of our cleaner’s truck parked in our driveway. Clearly I was worried something was really wrong with me. I had had trouble finding my list, my glasses, and my yoga mat. After going around the just-mopped floor, I found the garage door locked. By the time I shut the driver’s door, I needed to escape. I had known a car was parked in the driveway, but once I got in the car, puzzled that I felt frazzled, I never looked back. There had been room to avoid it if I had seen it. Instead I recalled it was there when the sharp sound of metal on metal interrupted my tuning the radio. “Oh no!” my husband yelled out the window where he had been watching the accident happen. I was late, so he agreed to resolve it, but only after several minutes of racing to my appointment did I begin to catch my breath. Tossing and turning that night, I was gripped by anxiety. What’s wrong with my heart *now*?

As I dressed after the stress test, I recalled moments of breathlessness—at the top of stairs, at the bottom of an inert escalator, at a green walk light, up hill. I was alone in the windowless room, wiping the lubricant and bits of adhesive from the EKG off my chest. How

could this simple test show more than all the lab work I had had over the past six years? But something in Dr. _____'s tone made me hopeful.

I couldn't wait to get down the hall to find out what she had got. Was there a new problem with my heart? Was nothing wrong? Did I fail the stress test? Once I sat in her office, she told me I was simply out of shape.

"How could that be? I work out in the gym six hours a week and do yoga for three. I have for years." My stomach sank as if I'd been punched. I'd worked hard to avoid the typical late-middle/early-old syndrome of sedentary life.

"Wait," she said. "Your heart is fine; it's not bothered by the stress. We took pictures when you could hardly breathe. You just have to work harder."

How could I have failed to get fit as I exercised? When my vascular surgeon had responded to my complaint by telling me to walk, I felt unheard. Surely my regimen was sufficient. But I didn't walk much because it made me breathless.

She explained another way: "You were minus 100 in fitness after all your diseases and surgeries. Your working out brought you to minus 20 fitness. So you have 120 to go to be really fit. I see you not as a heart patient, but as a person who is still recovering from her heart conditions and surgeries."

I recalled my husband, George, telling me I should work harder, that I needed to push the pace on my aerobics. I'd watch him out of the corner of my eye, pumping away on the bike, the elliptical machine, using his arms at high resistance for long periods. Once I'd tried it, but found I was breathless after a minute. I thought that meant I wasn't up to it, my heart couldn't take it. But Dr. _____ had disproved that conclusion. Scientific method. Admitting

the error of my ways and the shrewdness of George's would have been difficult EXCEPT it meant my heart was okay.

Now I'm sheepish when I catch myself taking the easy way: the shopping cart in the grocery store, the expired handicapped hang tag in the parking lot, the elevator instead of the stairs. My anxiety has kept me unfit. For the first time, a cardiologist has convinced me that there's nothing wrong with my heart. In that stack of medical records, a list of my heart issues: congestive heart failure (three emergency trips to the hospital, one extended stay in the ICU); intermittent claudication (severe pain in calves caused by blocked femoral arteries that would have eventually led to dead feet); atrial fibrillation (irregular heartbeat and quick pulse causing weakness and dizziness); hypertension (high blood pressure that caused and/or aggravated all the other conditions).

Throughout my illnesses, friends and acquaintances have remarked at my courage, my optimistic spirit, and resilience. It's true that I always believed that I could overcome each issue. But my fears had made me breathless. Hidden even from myself, I feared that my heart was diseased, unable to sustain me. Dr. _____ had made me see my heart: it's in my hands.

A retired professor of English, Dr. Karen Jahn earned an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts in writing creative nonfiction. She is revising her memoir, called *Surrender Blues*.