

Holding My Breath

By Diane B. Forman

I've often wondered how long I could hold my breath if a life depended on it. I remember watching David Blaine submerged underwater for 17 minutes on the Oprah Winfrey show, certain after a while that he must have had a little breathing tube hidden in his beard. Most of his stunts terrified me. I've seen him buried alive, entombed, frozen, hung upside down, but for some reason, that underwater illusion intrigued me the most because it challenged my fear of drowning.

Unlike David Blaine, I've never been able to suspend breathing for more than a minute and a half underwater. At the first sign of oxygen shortage, I come to the surface gasping. As a teenaged lifeguard, I pondered whether I'd be able to successfully retrieve a swimmer from the depths of the diving pool, twelve feet down. Could I swim to the bottom and drag the person to safety before running out of air myself, or would the adrenalin of life-saving expand my lung capacity? This thought occupied my mind on numerous occasions as I sat officiously on the metal lifeguard tower, slathered with zinc oxide. Some of the other guards flirted and chatted, half an eye on the pool. But I sat immobile and anxious, pressing that donut shaped life preserver against my chest as if *my* life depended on it. I knew that saving a life was a monumental responsibility.

I'd saved numerous box turtles, several beautiful painted specimens, and even a diamond-back, by moving them off bike paths and streets to taller grasses and then waiting, to ensure that they'd heaved and clawed off to safety. Although I'd been warned that wild turkeys would madly peck if you get too close, I've often held up traffic while an errant gaggle lumbered across the road. I routinely capture spiders, particularly gangly Daddy Long Legs, under a plastic cup and release them to nature where they belong.

Saving a life is not always that easy. I was heartbroken when a mother rabbit abandoned her babies and I was unable to nurse them to a healthy infancy. Those bunnies needed their real mother, not a surrogate with a syringe. I couldn't save a nest of pale blue eggs either. I had witnessed the mother Robin carefully assemble twigs, moss, leaves and grass into a loose woven cone into which she'd deposit her future progeny. It tore my heart when the nest was upended and her eggs smattered on the pavement.

It's assumed that mothers protect and save their children, both the animal and the human variety. Is it a freak of nature when things don't work out that way?

My daughter didn't begin restricting her food to 300 calories overnight. Already a vegetarian, she became interested in intermittent fasting the summer before college. I found a *Vogue* magazine describing the practice lying open on the kitchen table, but thought little of it. After all, we were a family of dieters and I was a champion.

She began preparing meals like zucchini boats, by hollowing out the vegetable, filling it with a spoonful of tomatoes, a sliver or two of red pepper and topping the concoction with a pinch of cheese. After eating these thimble-sized meals, she took increasingly longer and faster bike rides, seeming to be in a race with only herself. I could see that she looked thinner, but through my own peculiar body image lens, she was a good thin, not a worrisome thin, at least at that point.

Could I have saved her then, had I not missed the signs?

Months later, at art school in Baltimore, she stopped eating almost completely. We needed to pick her up from an overcrowded emergency room, not at the world renowned hospital I had requested, but the one in closer proximity to her school, which seemed better equipped to deal with gunshot wounds than starving girls.

When we arrived after 2 am, we found our daughter hooked to a heart monitor, flashing red numbers: 31, 29, 30. The terms I'd learn: Bradycardia, orthostatic hypotension, abnormal EKG. "She has a prolonged QT segment," the earnest resident told us. "It can be deadly."

That should have scared me, but I wasn't listening carefully as I was aghast looking at my daughter. She was so tiny. Like a small child in too big a bed. I recalled her first bed with its white wooden frame and pink butterfly comforter. She really was a little girl then, who hoisted herself onto those butterflies with her strong, sturdy legs, proudly calling, "Look at me, Mummy! I'm a big girl on my big girl bed!"

Now she was a grown up tiny girl in a large metal hospital bed, only lightly covered and shivering. "Stop staring at me," she scowled. It was hard to look away.

"Can't you get her a warmer blanket?" I demanded, because I didn't know what else to do. I couldn't make her heart beat faster or fix those faulty QT waves. I'd always been able to fix almost everything: hurt feelings, skinned knees, even slightly broken hearts.

I could see the outline of her bony elbows and hips jutting through the thin blanket but my eyes kept focusing on a violet vein pulsing in her forehead. She was cold. I tried not to notice fine dark hair that had begun to grow all over her body, an involuntary system's effort to keep her warm. It even had a name, lanugo, which I didn't know at the time.

Her body was trying to save her. Slow the heart. Slow the digestive system. There wasn't enough body energy to grow hair or muscle or bone and try to keep her heart beating. Eventually she'd lose half of her gorgeous curls, which fell out in clumps and clogged up the drain. Sometimes I'd hear her crying in the shower but I couldn't even save her hair.

The earnest resident rolled back the filmy curtain. His eyes and voice buried in sprawling notes, I heard, "She might need a heart ablation. We recommend transferring her to the university hospital." I felt like I was hallucinating, like I was trapped underwater. Like someone was stealing my breath. My daughter silently shivered in her too big bed, still scowling.

We had been driving in Columbus Day traffic for over ten hours, only to find our daughter alone, pale and freezing. No one had provided her with any food all day. Or hydrated her. She didn't even have a warm blanket. And we were expected to hand her over for a heart ablation, whatever that was, when there wasn't even a reasonable explanation for the necessity of such a procedure?

"We couldn't access a vein" the cheerier of the two nurses responded when questioned about the lack of IV. I didn't appreciate her mood. Apparently, she didn't know that my daughter's veins were shriveled and compressed, starved, no blood flowing freely. It isn't a

wonder that there was no ready access. The ER department of our Children's Hospital, where we'd eventually end up, needed to call a Neonatal Intensive Care nurse with a whisper of a needle, perfect for a preemie. Later I overheard the ER doc describing my daughter's blood as "sludge". I'm quite certain he didn't know that I was in the hall too when he shared that.

We had no intention of sending her for a heart ablation, university hospital or not. We just wanted her out of the emergency room and out of Baltimore. It didn't seem that the Sisters of Mercy, or even the Angels of Mercy, had been watching over my daughter.

"We're going to take her home, back to Boston," I told the nurse and resident, who both looked at me with expressions ranging from alarmed to perplexed. The head ER doctor was summoned, to try to talk some sense into us. He gently but repeatedly admonished us. He asked us to reconsider. "This isn't wise," he said, shaking his head, muttering.

But we signed her out of the ER anyway, against doctor's orders. Against medical advice. We had to place our initials on the form in several places, to acknowledge that we understood what we were doing. Maybe we had lost our minds in that moment, because it's true that we didn't really know what that heart beat, those QT waves, that blood pressure meant.

But I had a mother's love and protective instinct. I'd take care of my daughter, feed her and get her well. And we didn't go AMA with willful non-compliance, as I'd consulted with her doctor at home. I deliberated whether to say a Hail Mary on the way out of the hospital, before helping my tiny daughter to the car.

Once on 895, making our way toward the tunnel, she curled into the back seat and sobbed. Nine hours of crying, down endless miles of the Jersey Turnpike and finally to the Mass Pike, through slogging traffic and pelting rain, the worst we'd ever driven in. I tried to feed her small bits of granola bar or yogurt, just like a mama bird. But she locked her lips and refused, as if she were four months old when I offered her bland rice cereal for the first time. I still thought I could save her with spoonfuls of yogurt. Where was my life preserver? Could anyone rescue me from feeling like I had failed as a mother?

"Please eat," I implored. Helpless tears seeped out of my lids. Crying was contagious, like yawning. Outside. Inside. Everything was wet.

The first time I saved a child's life, it seemed like a small act. During an afternoon of babysitting when I was twelve years old, I saved a little boy from choking. I had watched my mother turn my gagging sister upside down and immediately dislodge whatever food particles had been caught in her throat. Sometimes the upside down trick was accompanied by a bit of back slapping. So when toddler Tommy was coughing and red faced, immediately, I flipped him over and gave him a little whack between his small shoulder blades. And then he was fine. It seemed easy.

I'd have to save a choking child again several years later because I believed my four year old niece when she told me she'd sucked on Life Savers before. I learned several lessons that day, not the least of which is that the hole in a Life Saver really helps the candy live up to its name.

As a lifeguard, I had plucked dozens of sputtering toddlers from the baby pool. Most of them had swallowed overly chlorinated pool water for the first time, and needed only a hug and reassurance from their mothers before they were back to splashing around. Numerous times I threw out the life preserver or grabbed kids from the shallow end, when their confidence outweighed their swim ability. Once I pulled out a little girl who was yelling for

help. Apparently, she didn't need help at all and was just playing a game. That girl got a talking to from the pool manager, because there is no fooling around when a life is on the line. It's why guarding the diving pool always spooked me. Fortunately, I never had to test my life saving skills at that station.

While driving from Baltimore to Boston, I didn't realize that my daughter was so close to dying. Maybe it's better not to know these things, how close to the precipice you are. I didn't know that a quarter of those who suffer from restrictive eating disorders end up dead. On that drive home I still thought that anorexia was some sort of choice, just a diet gone bad and that food would solve everything. I started fantasizing. I'd prepare her favorite flatbreads, topped with lots of extra fatty goat cheese. I'd indulge in pints of varied flavored *Ben and Jerry's*. I'd dig out my apron and become a baking fiend. Bake and feed. Bake and feed.

Then I remembered studying outdated "Blame the Mother and the Family System" theories by Hilde Bruch and Salvador Minuchin while in graduate school. I wondered if I was the reason that my daughter had starved herself. Forced to think of my fragile marriage and my fragile family, I looked at my fragile daughter, still shivering and crying under a pile of blankets.

How had we gotten to this? I needed a prophesy or a crystal ball. A mystic. Perhaps a tarot reading.

I wanted someone to tell me that my love could save her. I needed a sign that I could save my own child's life.

And I tried. Oh, I tried. But I couldn't protect my daughter from a life threatening eating disorder on my own. I couldn't just feed her ice cream or turn her upside down or throw her a life preserver. This was a really deep dive to the bottom of a really deep pool, way too deep for me. Even if David Blaine could have held his breath long enough to get her, an eating disorder is real life, not an illusion. My daughter needed real help, not magic.

It took ten days in the Children's hospital, three months in an eating disorders center and an entire team of doctors, social workers, psychologists and nutritionists to save her.

I will always be grateful.

Just yesterday, I witnessed a large spider in the process of spinning her web, hanging near the window in my downstairs bathroom. Although her size alarmed me, I didn't immediately go for the plastic cup. I just let her stop and start, languidly, even slightly precariously.

Then I noticed something else: a tiny silken sac filled with her babies, perhaps newly hatched. The infant spiders were guarded by their mother, who kept a watchful eye on the sac as she carefully moved back and forth between the window and wall, dragging more silk. Her children were safe and protected, as children should be. As I watched, I was reminded that sometime soon, those baby spiders would leave their mother's protective sac and go out into the world, as children do. Careful not to disturb them as I left the room, I wished them a safe journey.

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