

Northeastern

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Aching hearts heal in time.

By Herbert Hadad

In January, all the tests and consultations came down to this. A dimly lit office in the Westchester Medical Center, in suburban New York. A woman seated across a desk from me and my wife, Evelyn, talking in a detached tone while she points to an illustration of the heart.

Diana is a nurse practitioner, an assistant to a surgeon. The circled sections, she explains, are where my heart has to be fixed. "Let me take your pulse," she says.

I offer my right arm, though I'm still not convinced this is real. "It's not going to be normal," I say. "It's going to shoot up as soon as I look into your beautiful brown eyes."

Her training has not prepared her for this. "Oh, boy. Oh, boy," she says.

The surgeon arrives, dressed for the operating room. We have insisted on seeing him, not a colleague. He has strong hands and forearms. His face reveals no impatience. He smiles slightly. I decide I like him.

He goes over the illustration again. Two arteries require bypass surgery, and a leaking valve may need attention as well.

Dr. Spielvogel isn't just another surgeon. We had researched his credentials thoroughly. My wife called her friends in the Rockefeller family, who consulted Rockefeller University, in Manhattan, which gave Dr. Spielvogel outstanding grades for skills and personality...

"This is not an emergency," he says. "But I urge you to call my office to make a date in the next week or two."

"What if I don't?" I ask. Though I'm only looking for information, I hear the question floating toward Dr. Spielvogel and Diana with defiance.

"Good question," the doctor says. "Nothing may happen. You're an active guy, working, swimming. And you have a good strong heart. But, eventually, the faulty arteries are going to make the heart work too hard, and you'll end up with a weakened heart."

He goes on. "Look, we've had a lot of success with these procedures, but I'm also obliged to tell you there's one chance in a hundred you could die on the operating table."

Now it was real.



Illustration by Alik Arzoumanian

The night before the operation, my three children came up from the city, and we had one of my favorite meals, sausage pizza. I washed it down with a vodka martini. It would be the last supper of its kind for a while. The next morning, as is my custom, I went outside and prayed for family and friends, especially for my nephew serving in Iraq, and, for the first time I can remember, for me.

My family and I drove toward the hospital through the raw gloom of dawn. I was determined not to be scared because that would scare them.

I'd always adhered to Woody Allen's line: "I do not believe in an afterlife, although I am bringing a change of underwear." But as I was being wheeled into the operating room, reassuring small talk floating behind my head, I realized I felt liberated. The gravity of the moment had clarified my head and heart on matters that had confounded me all my life. For the first time, I wasn't afraid to die.

The gurney kicked open the operating room doors. I saw large round lights and people in gowns. A woman slid a needle into my right arm.

When I was wheeled out five or six hours later, my family was waiting. They tell me I touched my hand to my heart four times, then directed a kiss to each of them. I'd had a double bypass operation—I would later joke that two was all I could afford—and the doctors had decided to leave my valve alone...

Friends dropped in. The nurses and their helpers changed often but were consistently cheerful as they dispensed medications, brought fresh water, and got me to sit up and move tentatively out of bed.

One morning, a stern new nurse—short, olive-skinned, in her early middle age—appeared. She noticed a wonderful book of poems my daughter had given me: *The Gift*, by Hafiz, a Sufi master from fourteenth-century Persia.

"I am a Persian," she told me. "My name is Mehr." She proceeded to give her patient a thorough once-over, with commentary. "You are not ready to walk to the bathroom," she said at one point with quiet authority, chastising the more-permissive nurses under her breath.

Once she had finished her work and I was back under the sheets, I reached for *The Gift* and read to her: "Even after all this time/The sun never says to the earth,/You owe me./Look what happens with a love like that./It lights the whole sky."

She smiled mildly. On her recent day off, she told me, she had cooked her special soup and delivered it to her son in Manhattan, who had a cold. When I began to suggest she should have spent her day off relaxing, she dismissed my opinion as frivolous.

But I knew she liked me. Even on days when I was not her patient, she appeared at the door. I began to adore her tenderness and strength. Some friends had given me a leather-bound diary. One day, I handed it to Mehr and asked her to write down her full name and address. I didn't want to lose touch with her.

Not long after that, one of Dr. Spielvogel's associates, surrounded by other medical personnel making their rounds, came to my bedside. "The bottom line is, you're a young guy," he said. "You had a good operation, and you're going home to a good life"...

Herbert Hadad, an award-winning writer and Northeastern graduate, grew a beard during his convalescence but shaved it off after a vote of acclamation by his community.