



ME AND THE NIGHT VISITOR

A journey through a migraine ©1992

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“If migraine patients have a common second and legitimate complaint besides their migraines, it is that they have not been listened to by physicians; looked at, investigated, drugged, charged, but not listened to.” —Dr. Oliver Sacks

I know it before I awaken. As insidiously as it comes, the migraine finds its way into my dreams. The dreams are more vivid, usually nightmarish; though sometimes it is but an utterance of, “Oh no, a migraine is coming,” and then a pallid recognition. Uneasy, I stir from sleep. There is a sense of ill-being: pain, weakness, lethargy and malaise. And with it comes the resignation that it must be endured.

My thoughts vary as I drift in and out of an anesthesia-like sleep. Sometimes the pain is so intense that I need someone to rub my head, my only relief. Then, I drift back into this quick, deep sleep, which is unusual for me, a light sleeper. I am certain my sleep cycle defies the norm on these occasions — entering REM sleep the minute my eyes close. I am pulled under against my will.

How can I describe it? Imagine having an intense headache, feeling groggy — as if on a sleeping pill — experiencing extreme weakness, all while riding on an ocean liner in a hurricane. This for a day, perhaps two, or more. Too sick for lights, phone, television, radio — only darkness. If I move, so intense is the sensation of seasickness that I feel dizzy, sick to my stomach, and my head swims. If I attempt to walk, I reel and feel faint. So, when the migraine is severe, I don’t move, not even to go to the bathroom. I just lie still. It is during the worst of migraines that I fret as to what I would do if there were a fire and I had to get out. I am helpless. However, no matter how bad the migraine, I tell myself it will pass. The point is, they do go. I just have to get through it.

I have learned not to use migraines as an excuse. If I can’t make the wedding or party, it is “the flu.” Migraines just don’t cut it. The thinking

is, “Come on, if you wanted to, you could go. You’re not trying. You’re pampering yourself. It’s all in your mind. It’s psychological. You just need some fresh air. If I can function with a headache, so can you.” The implication is always that one is giving in to the headache, that one is coddling oneself. With a high fever and the flu, no one wants to risk catching it, so no questions are asked, and no unwanted opinions are given.

People expect you to pop up after the migraine is gone, not realizing the exhaustion that comes after so many hours and days of pain. If one has just been in labor and delivered a baby, it is expected that one will need to rest. I had a 49-hour labor. It was nothing compared to a migraine. During labor I felt healthy, strong, and not even tired. The pains were very sharp, but between contractions, I was fine.

If I have a set of appointments, such as dental visits, I say up front that I get migraines and if I have one on the day of the appointment, I cannot come. I add, however, that I will pay. That’s it. I’m tired of apologizing or explaining. I know it looks irresponsible to cancel. I’ve always been a conscientious person. It’s hard for me to be viewed as irresponsible. This eliminates the judgments. Money talks. It costs, but it is only one of many costs of migraines. A higher price I must pay is being robbed of time with my son. I must also endure the frustrations of missed events, and of work piling up. I’m tired much of the time as a result of all the migraines. I’m always running, but I can’t keep up.

I am fortunate to have a loving family that understands. They understand because they know me and they see the migraines. They see what a migraine is and what it does.

I wait for the migraine to go. It never fails to astound me when it does go — I am at last released. There is no thunderous applause, no standing ovations. But I know what I’ve weathered. I congratulate myself. Sometimes the migraine drops me off in the middle of the night, other times in the middle of the day. It has wreaked havoc with my circadian rhythm. If I am released at the wrong time, I must begin to slowly reset my inner clock. An abrupt time change will trigger another migraine. So, sometimes I find myself lost in time, out of sync with the world.

But the migraine has lifted. The air smells fresh again. Things feel good again. A sense of well-being replaces the sense of ill-being. I have yet to take the last step of the migraine, which is the requisite sleep, or the migraine returns. This last phase is a peaceful, quiet, and comfortable sleep. I can look forward to waking up renewed. But before I sleep, I take “my walk.” My walk takes me to my son’s room. I look at him, very glad to have him. I look out of the windows at the trees and flowers. I walk around the house and check everything. Everything is still in its place. Everything is still here. I touch things. The world is still on its axis. The house is still here. My people are still here. I am still here. Yes, I am still here... I thank God for all that. ☺

“Sorry, not tonight dear, I have a headache,” has been a long-standing “joke” of comics. But migraines are no joke. I hope “Me and the Night Visitor” will help illuminate a condition that has long been scoffed at and grossly underestimated. — Pat Gallant

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