

SINK OR SWIM

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I stare out the window at the pool in the backyard of our Florida home. Another hot, stagnant day is trudging along. My days repeat. I wish I was working. My right shoulder forced me into retirement. Swinging a hammer for 40 years takes a toll. My wife awakens me from my daze and asks if I'll run to the pharmacy and pick up my mother-in-law's prescriptions. She's been staying with us for the last 8 months. It's been 10 since I retired from the carpentry business I owned in Maryland. My father, too, was a carpenter. As a child, I worked with him. We would build anything and everything—from cabinets to tables. I found solace in hard work. At the end of each day, I'd be exhausted. A good night's rest came easily. Stress and nervousness, for the most part, was fleeting. That all changed when I traded my hammer in for a fishing pole at my wife's insistence to retire in Florida.

Now my life feels monotonous and meaningless. Each day seems much like the last, with the important exception that the panic attacks are becoming more frequent and intolerable. I've dealt with this before. As a newlywed in my early twenties, I found myself spiraling out of control. Trying to meet the demands of my new wife and beginning a family was an upheaval of my previous routine. The stress and angst lapped at my neck, often rising higher, overtaking my ability to breathe. It finally passed after a year. Now, I fear this time it won't.

As I grab my keys, thankful for a task, I see the reminder on the refrigerator. I have a doctor's appointment tomorrow morning. I've been dreading it for 3 months, since my last visit. I was told to have labs done. I haven't. I'm worried what they could show. My cholesterol is usually high. I wish I could cancel, but I desperately need a refill on my anxiety medication. I ran out 3 days ago. The panic attacks are becoming more insufferable.

That night, like most nights, the battle ensues. The fear of not being able to fall asleep begins early in the evening. By the time my wife is in bed, I know I should start the ritual of trying to make myself go to sleep. The mere act of undressing begins the cascade. My mind races with frantic thoughts of what my appointment will bring tomorrow. What should I say about the absent lab work? I'm sure my blood pressure will be high. I just have to get in and get out with my prescriptions. In and out. The red analog clock on my night stand reads ten-thirty...

midnight...1 am.

I wake at 5:30. I may have gotten four hours. I shower and dress. I make coffee and try to read the newspaper. My stress is building. I get into the car and the angst begins rolling into an excruciatingly loud crescendo in my mind. The traffic and red lights are sending me over the edge. I can tell my blood pressure is high. My heart rate quickens. I feel my chest rising and falling faster than it should. I pull into the parking lot and try to cool down.

I walk to the front desk and sign in. I sit, fidgeting in the cold waiting area. My stomach lurches when the nurse calls my name. She politely greets me and seats me in the exam room. I try desperately to take slow measured breaths, willing my pulse to slow as the blood pressure cuff tightens around my left arm. She tells me it's a bit high. Of course it is. She asks if anything has changed since my last visit. "No," I tell her. And that's the problem. "Did you get your lab work done?" she asks. I lie and tell her I didn't know I had any to complete. She leaves the room. My doctor is going to rebuke me for the absence of labs. I hear a knock at the door. I try desperately to still my nerves.

It's not my doctor. A young woman with brown hair and matching horn-rimmed glasses greets me with a smile. She tells me she is a medical student and would like to interview me before my doctor. I agree. She asks how I am doing. "I'm alright." I assume she'll brush past the unenthusiastic response and start asking about the blood pressure readings I'm supposed to check at home, but she doesn't.

She returns my response with a thoughtful look, and a query to tell her more. I hesitate, debating on how much to divulge. I relent. I explain the attacks that come daily now. How they rise and escalate and soon I'm in over my head. I relay to her the fight it was this morning, just driving to the appointment. She listens carefully. Not taking notes, not looking into the computer screen, but giving me full attention. I tell her I'm out of my anxiety medicine and she asks if they've been helping, if I'm improving. I concede that it seems I'm getting worse.

She asks if I'd be willing to try a daily medicine, that could, over time, help bring the sea of anxiety from the level of my neck, down to my waist and maybe further—like equipping me with a

life jacket instead of rescuing me at the point of nearly drowning. I wonder about this. It's something different. I fear potential side effects. She tells me this medication would modulate the chemicals in my brain, to help prevent my nervousness from building, to help prevent the attacks instead of treating them after they've already begun. This actually makes perfect sense to me. She continues to tell me the most effective means of treatment is a combination of therapy and medicine. I'm not a guy to go to counseling; I politely decline the offer.

Oddly, having just disclosed my embarrassing struggle to a complete stranger, I feel immensely better. Soon, my regular physician and the student return. He agrees with the thought to try a different means of confronting my problem. He still

criticizes me for not having completed the lab work, but tackling the underlying issue brings me a new sense of peace. Somehow, now, I feel a new leaf is about to be turned. I schedule another appointment on my way out for 1 month from now. I feel encouraged that next time, I'll be better and prepared, with lab work completed. Maybe then, I'll finally be beginning to enjoy the swim. ■

Stacy Ranson is a fourth year medical student who will begin her residency training in general surgery after graduation. She has served as both editor and contributor to HEAL and always looks forward to enjoying new art, photography, poetry and prose in each HEAL edition.



ICHTHYS

Lee Howell

H E A L Cover Artwork Finalist
Humanism Evolving through Arts and Literature

Lee Howell is a budget analyst for the FSU College of Medicine Finance & Administration office. When he's not in the office, he can usually be found photographing weddings and portrait sessions on the weekends. Howell has this to say about Ichthys: "I was originally drawn to capture this scene on the Ochlockonee River simply by the misty morning fog and exposed tree limbs above the low water line. Years later when entering this print into a local competition, it was pointed out to me the close resemblance it bears to the Ichthys symbol that I had inadvertently captured, and since then I've strived to purposefully incorporate duality and a greater reverence for the at-first-unseen in my work."