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Blowout

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“He’s a fainter!”

Three little words so quickly emasculate a grown man.

“His hands are cold,” one nurse said.

“He’s gone pale,” said another, the one in charge, I think. “Okay, we’re calling this off!” And with that, she stripped the rubber tourniquet from my arm.

“Don’t faint on me, okay?” she said, more of a threat than request.

A third nurse provided a cool washcloth for my neck and orange juice for some quick energy.

“Breathe deeply,” she said, then moved on to other duties, leaving me in the chair in the hallway of the medical center. Another out-patient three chairs down stared at me as if I might spontaneously combust or melt or turn into a chicken. I smiled wanly at her. She rolled her eyes and looked away.

I’d just stopped in for some routine blood tests — a couple of vials and I’m on my merry way. Now I’d been escalated to a problem case requiring the attention of the entire nursing staff. I was embarrassed. Still, I couldn’t bring myself to look at my arm to inspect the blowout. They were right.

I am a fainter.

I hate anything related to veins. I don’t like my wife to even touch the veins on the back of my hand. And needles! I can’t watch while giving blood; I’m not bothered by the pain, it’s the vein. And the blood. My blood. Outside my body. I don’t like that. I also hate IVs, ‘cause the needle has to remain in my vein for an extended period of time.

Honestly, I’m getting a little woozy just writing this.

That said, the simple blood draw seemed inconsequential, as I have found a way to distract myself while the deed is done. Look away. Go to a happy place. Ignore the minor pinch— no blood, no needle, just a pinch! La...la...la...

I got to the lab and confidently exposed my right arm — my good, blood-givin’ arm — then dutifully looked away as the nurse jabbed me with the needle. I was mellow. I breathed deeply and stared out the window waiting patiently for her to say “Okay, that’s it!”

Instead, she said, “Uh-oh.” Not exactly what you want to hear from a medical professional. I thought that it was the worst thing for a patient in my position to hear.

I was wrong.

In a mild panic, she called another nurse over. “Why is it swell-

ing like that?” she asked.

See, that’s worse.

The other nurse didn’t seem too concerned, “Oh, that’s just a blowout,” she said.

Now, I’m sure the term “blowout” is common nursing lingo for something minor, but to me, the one apparently blowing out, it did not sound good. My mind filled with images of tragic car crashes.

“How much more blood do we need?” the second nurse asked as she wrapped a tourniquet around my left arm and started probing for a new vein to tap.

“Three vials,” the first replied. “I only got a little over one from this arm.”

They weren’t talking to me, just each other. I was some piece of meat they were carving up. I wasn’t in a mood for discussion anyway. Remember how I hate veins? And needles? Here I am with two nurses, two needles, two veins and a blowout. I was freaking out just a bit, anxiously looking at the ceiling, unable to watch the left-arm probing nor subject myself to the right-arm damage. The second nurse, the one probing my arm for a vein, abruptly ceased her search and looked me in the eye.

“Are you okay?” she asked, suddenly very concerned.

“Uhh, well, yeah...” I said, trying not to think about the blowout.

“He’s a fainter!” she yelled out, signaling all nurses in the area to immediately converge on me for maximum humiliation. I was stripped of my tourniquet and pride, and left with a moist towel and OJ to compose myself.

I recovered for a few minutes. The patient next to me finished up and was on her way.

My original nurse, the one surprised by the blowout she’d given me, returned. “Are you ready to proceed?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said. The butcher couldn’t find a vein on my left arm, either.

She called over the nurse who seemed to be the senior nurse on call. As she was probing and probing my arm for a vein (and, yes, freaking me out), two other nurses rushed over in a panic warning, “He’s the fainter!!”

They might as well have declared, “He’s the bed-wetter!!”

The probing stopped. They moved me, carefully, to another room that had a bed. I reclined, extended my left arm again. After a quick review, the senior nurse declared, “That’s it, I’m going in through the hand.”

Good thing I was lying down.

I started seeing spots as she secured the tourniquet to my wrist. That hurt, and as I closed my eyes to the world swimming before me, I heard footsteps running. I opened one eye to see the nurse running out of the door. She quickly returned with a big needle in one hand and something dangling in the other, like a giant vein.

I passed out.

The vial of ammonia-smelling horridness used to revive me was a virtual slap to my nasal cavity. I shook my head and tried to exhale the nastiness.

“You better now?” asked one of the nurses, very serious as she checked the dilation of my pupils.

“Well, I am a fainter,” I shrugged.

“Lie there for as long as you need,” she said. After about fifteen minutes, I slowly swung my feet to the floor and tested my sea legs. Everything seemed in order, so I shuffled down the hall to the main lobby and wisely collapsed in a big comfy chair for another few minutes before heading out to my car.

That night at home, I stared at the bandage on my arm afraid of what horror lay beneath. My wife’s college roommate is now a surgical technician, so we call her whenever we have a medical question.

“A blowout?” she repeated back to me over the phone.

“Oh, sure. That’s when someone’s taking blood or inserting an IV and the needle goes in too far. It passes through the backside of the vein. Kinda scary looking, but not a big deal. Basically the sign of bad needle-work.”

Wincing at the mental image, I thanked her and hung up the phone. My arm ached.

Relieved that ultimately it was no big deal, no matter how bad it looked, I sat comfortably on the couch – just in case – and prepared to remove the bandage. Carefully peeling back the Band-Aid and cotton revealed a nasty, yellowish-green bruise about four inches long and two inches wide on the inside of my arm.

I sneered a little in disgust, then shrugged. Nothing really to faint about.

But I did anyway.

Jeff Laird