

19: Maladies, Ailments, Illnesses, Diseases

By

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WARNING: There are some yucky things in this chapter!

Illness, both mental and physical, strikes every family. I will cover in this chapter afflictions that I and others in our family have endured over the years. Some of those—L E's neuroses, Mom's phobia about cancer, Aunt Marg's kidney stone problems, Everett Crowley's alcohol-induced demons, my own 2 ½-years of treatments for depression, etc.—have been recounted in previous chapters. I'll first delve into my health problems and reveal how they have affected me before turning to those of others.

I had a lot of girlfriends and lovers before I met Mia. From that statement, you might assume that I was very self-assured with women in my younger years. In truth, I had a difficult time working up enough courage to ask a girl for a date. In part this was due to my innate shyness, but much of it can also be traced to acne, a disease I have endured since puberty and still must cope with as I move toward my eightieth birthday. Someone who has not experienced severe acne cannot fully appreciate the impact it can have on a person's psyche. It saps confidence from a young person, especially in relations with members of the opposite sex.

I often wondered whether the severity of my early acne was related to treatments for undescended testicles, treatments I received when I was around 12 years old. In a normal baby, the testicles descend into the scrotum in the first few months of life. If it hasn't happened by the age of 4 months, treatment is required to correct the condition. The options are hormonal injections and, more commonly, surgery. This condition was diagnosed in me by Dr. Hassi Shina, a partner of our longtime physician, Dr. Eli Goodman. Dr. Shina opted for the hormonal injections, which I endured for several months. Mom and I were reassured during each exam by Dr. Shina, who said as he prodded my scrotum, "He's coming along nicely." Eventually, I was pronounced healthy in the sexual equipment department.

The treatment of acne started early in my teenage years and continues to this day. We spent a lot of money on Clearasil and other over-the-counter acne treatments during my high-school years. It wasn't just for the obvious pimples on my face. There were other less visible and more inaccessible areas where I developed large lesions. Some even caused ingrown hairs on the back of my head and neck. Mom used to drain those pustules by using a needle to let out the pus and tweezers to extract the hairs, some of which were over an inch long.

Particularly strong in my memory are the acne treatments used by Dr. Shina in Charlestown, Indiana during my late teens. He apparently had advanced training in dermatology, and he used some interesting treatments on me. One of those was to peel the skin on and around the lesions on my back and chest. A sulfur-based ointment stripped off some of the upper layers of skin, but really didn't have much long-term effect on the root cause of the condition. A more grueling treatment was to zap the pimples with an electric needle. Dr. Shina claimed this would give me immunity in those places. I had to lie face down with my stomach and chest touching a metal grounding plate while he hit each of the lesions with an electric needle. No anesthetic was involved, and Dr. Shina warned me not to raise

myself off the plate while he did the treatments. Neither of these approaches had much positive effect on my acne, and it was only after I began to attend Indiana University in Bloomington in 1963 that I eventually found Dr. William Cron, a dermatologist who prescribed the antibiotic tetracycline. That brought the acne under control, and I took those pills well into my late twenties.

In recent years, skin cancers have led to several different treatments. I've had many, many lesions burned off with liquid Nitrogen treatments and quite a few others removed surgically. Most of the biopsies turned out to be benign, but some results were more serious. A malignant melanoma high up on my neck behind the left ear was discovered in 2008. The dermatologist deferred to an Ear, Nose, and Throat specialist for the actual surgery due to the large number of nerves in that area. The surgery left a ghastly scar, that eventually healed to be less noticeable.



Gary Wiggins after Surgery for a Malignant Melanoma in 2008

Other skin cancers were serious enough to require a special type of surgery known as the Mohs procedure, whereby layers of skin are removed one at a time and examined in real time in the lab to see how deep the cancer has grown. The most troublesome of the Mohs operations was on my nose. That procedure required 4 hours to complete because the surgeon had to go deeper and deeper that many times before making the all-clear call. It took some time and several cosmetic injections for that one to heal to the point that it is not too noticeable. Another Mohs procedure was on my left cheek below the eye, and it left a pronounced scar in that area.



Gary Wiggins after Mohs Surgery on His Nose in 2021

Old men frequently have problems urinating due to prostate enlargement (Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia, BPH). As I got older it became obvious that some treatment would be necessary. Flo-Max (Tamsulosin) to the rescue! The pills worked for some time, but then the flow began to slow, and trips to the bathroom became more frequent. On September 10, 2013 I was involved in a minor car accident (someone rear-ended me at a stoplight). I noticed some pain on my right side shortly thereafter, and it got much worse by my birthday on the 15th. On October 5 another car accident caused lots of damage to the car, but nothing new that was apparent to me healthwise. However, during the examination my doctor recommended that I have an inguinal hernia operation, which was performed on October 23. Shortly after that, I noticed increased difficulty urinating. My urination problem became much more pronounced in mid-November 2013 as we were driving to a celebration of my cousin Lana's 70th birthday in Charlestown, Indiana. Although we stopped on the way for several bathroom breaks, I was quite uncomfortable during the party and was essentially unable to relieve myself by the time we arrived back in Bloomington. My urologist scheduled TURP (transurethral resection of the prostate) (TURP) surgery for November 13, but a catheter had to be inserted before that. I won't go into the gory details of my recovery from the surgery, but a few weeks later I was cleared to make the 6 ½-hour driving trip to Alan's house for Thanksgiving. For some years after that, it was much easier to go to the

bathroom. However, the prostate never admits defeat, and it eventually enlarged again to the point that late last year it was recommended that I start taking Finasteride (Proscar). After using that for over a year now, I can say that it has been a great help.

Other recent operations were cataract surgery in January 2018, carpal tunnel syndrome surgery on my right arm on October 23, 2020, and a total hip replacement of my right hip on July, 15, 2022, all more or less as successful as I could have hoped. It is nice to be able to drive without glasses and to read the small print on the TV screen without glasses and even nicer to be able to apply the brake in my car or get out of a chair without wincing in pain!

Cancer has been the main scourge of our family on the Bolton side. I think Uncle Tip Grace died of cancer, and I believe his children, Danny and Annie, both succumbed to the disease, although Annie lived quite a few years after her brain tumor operation. Recently, Annie's daughter, Sheila Jordan, has had a successful fight with cancer. Our grandmother Corrine Bolton died from cancer, as did Uncle Bill Bolton. His death was particularly gruesome. Initially Bill declined treatment, but finally was convinced by his doctor to get medical assistance. Mom said that shortly before his death Bill cursed the doctors for leading him to believe that the treatment would cure him. Bill Bolton died miserably, with the cancer oozing through his stomach as he sat on the floor of the house he built on the old Bolton homestead north of Charlestown.

One of the most-feared conditions of old age is Alzheimer's Disease. "Old-Timers' Disease" affected some of our older relatives, and it gradually claimed Juanita (Seabay) Jackson, my maternal great aunt. One of the joys of Seabay's life was to prepare sumptuous country meals for us whenever we visited Central City, Kentucky. Our children, Alan and Tom, also looked forward to her good meals on our infrequent visits to my second home. Tom has never been one to hold back his emotions when he is hungry, and one morning he was very frustrated that Seabay was taking so long to fry the eggs and bacon and bake biscuits. We didn't think too much of it at the time, but we should have recognized that she was having memory problems even then. In retrospect, I think Seabay had to muster every ounce of concentration she could to remember exactly how to prepare the meal that morning. Another time we were startled to see her approach Tommy in their living room, come very close to his face, and say "Who are you?" As more bizarre incidents came to light, it was undeniable that Seabay had Alzheimer's.

On another occasion it became even more obvious that things were far from normal in the Jackson household. Her baked ham was always a favorite of ours, and the aroma of ham was the first thing that met us as we came through the door that day. When it was time to cut the ham, there was not a butcher knife to be found in the house. I asked L E where all the knives were. His response as he pointed to Seabay was: "Ask her." When Seabay heard him say this, she flew into a rage, yelling, "Oh, shit, L E!" She rushed to the living room and began to grope for something under the couch. She finally pulled out an object wrapped in aluminum foil. It was a large butcher knife. All other sharp knives had also been covered with foil and ensconced under the couch.

L E then told us of other disturbing incidents. Once Seabay took some of her underpants to the driveway and set them on fire, saying to L E "I'm not going to have things in my house that belong to the bitches you have been sleeping with!" Of course, L E had no girlfriends, and even if he had, he wouldn't have been bold enough to bring them into their home. Seabay would have visions of things that simply weren't there. She claimed to see women in white dresses in the trees around the house. Another habit we discovered only when she was admitted to a nursing home was that she hid money all over the

house. L E and I did a thorough search and found over \$6,000 squirrelled away in many different areas. She had always kept nice dress-up clothes in her closets, but all of them were gone by this time, replaced with things that looked as if they came from a Goodwill store or garage sale. We wondered how much more money might have left the house when her good clothes disappeared.

L E tried for quite a while to serve as caretaker for Seabay, but it eventually became obvious that he could no longer handle her. I had power of attorney for both Seabay and L E, and in consultation with L E and my cousin, Susie Winters, the decision was reached to admit Seabay to the Maple Manor Nursing Home in Greenville, Kentucky. When LE and I first visited her, she vented all her spite on him, saying, "Now you've got me where you've always wanted!" I wasn't brave enough to tell her that it was I who made the final decision. The next time I saw Seabay she was almost unrecognizable, nothing but skin and bones. I still remember the salty taste in my mouth when I kissed her forehead. Seabay died shortly after that when we were on a trip to Yugoslavia in the summer of 1998.

The last time I saw Uncle Jack Dennis alive, he was lying in his bed unable to recognize anyone in the room. A form of dementia claimed him after he had major surgery. Elderly people sometimes have adverse reactions to strong anesthetics. Aunt Elizabeth told us after he died that in his last minutes Uncle Jack was smiling and looking up at the ceiling. The doctor who was present said that he was apparently seeing things that none of them could see.

L E gradually became unable to care for himself. I got a concerned call from Susie long after Seabay's admission to Maple Manor. A neighbor talked L E into allowing a man to stay with him, someone who, according to Susie, was not an appropriate companion. I remember well the conversation I had with L E about going to live in Maple Manor. I arrived to find him in bad shape and in need of a bath. I took him into the bathroom and began to bathe him at the sink. At one point he said to me, "Are you going to wash my pecker?" I replied, "I'm hoping you'll be able to do that yourself." He said he could, and later as we sat at the table talking about his move, he made a final plea to wait a few months longer. He joined Seabay that day at Maple Manor, but in a separate room.

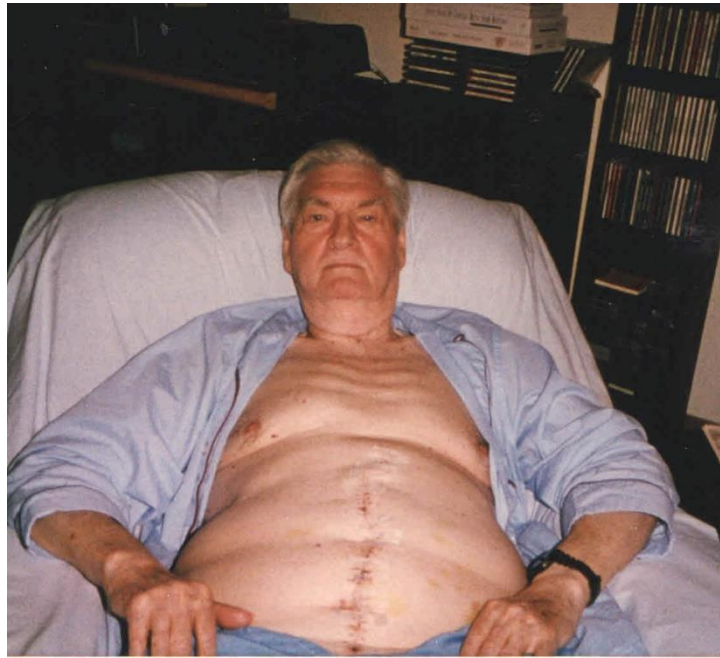
On one of our later visits to Maple Manor, L E asked to see the penal facility that had been built in 1994 on Green River near Central City. Before going there, we took a drive past their old house, and L E looked long and hard at it before we headed toward Green River. As we pulled back into the nursing home parking lot, he said ironically, "Home Sweet Home."

It was long after that when I got another disturbing call from Susie. She told me that one of her friends who worked at Maple Manor informed her that something was wrong with the catheter that L E had been forced to use for some time. She said the tube was now coming out of the side of his penis. I quickly went there and asked L E if I could see it. He was self-conscious about it, but finally agreed. I was shocked to see that the tube was no longer coming out of the normal hole in the center of his penis but was embedded a good half-inch or more up the glans. When I confronted the nurse about this, she said that they couldn't keep him from trying to pull out the catheter, and over time that resulted in the tube's displacement. I went from there straight to his doctor's office but got neither a good explanation of why this happened nor an alternative to the condition in which he found himself. The tube remained that way until he died.

I've been on pills for high blood pressure for many years, a condition that I suspect contributed to Grandad Orban Wiggins's stroke and eventual swift death in his sleep. Mamaw Wiggins told me that

when she realized he hadn't gotten up for some time to go to the bathroom, she touched him, and he was already cold.

I'm not sure of the final cause of death of my real father, Dorman Wiggins, on July 22, 2000, but he never fully recovered from a 1997 operation for an abdominal aneurysm. I recall vividly the long dark scar left by the operation.



Dorman Wiggins in March 1997 after the Aneurysm Operation

What my mother, Nell Bolton Wiggins Crowley, died from on August 12, 2013 was mostly old age. She was 93. Mom had quit eating and drinking a while before that date but held on for several days while Alan and his family were here. Alan even got her to drink a bit of water and eat a few bites, much to the amazement of the nurses at Brown County Health and Living. Alan and Jennifer had no sooner reached home in Plymouth, Michigan than we had to call them back to Indiana for Mom's funeral.

They say that no one can predict when death will come, but L E Jackson somehow knew that he would die on Christmas Day in 2002. We got a call from Susie saying that he had phoned her frequently that day in a very anxious state. When I called him, the only thing I could understand him to say was, "I'm going down!" When I asked L E what he meant by that, he said, "Down in the ground!" We talked for a while, and he seemed to calm down, but the next call from Susie that Christmas Day informed me that he had died. He passed away nearly 4 ½ years after Seabay's death.

The Russians have a saying "Starost' ne radost'," loosely translated as "Old age is no picnic." The Poles have an even more acerbic saying: "Smierc, Smierc—glosno pierdz!" "Oh, Death, Death—Fart out loud!"

May your life be long and happy and the end of your life short and pain-free!

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