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Pulmo-Mate: Mom's Best Friend

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Author Bio

Anna Markowitz is a senior and a psychology major. Anna Markowitz has many important preferences: she prefers warm weather over cold, she prefers the west coast to the east, she prefers nonfiction to fiction, and she prefers poetry over either. She prefers tacos to sandwiches and almost any other name to her own. She also prefers the bullet to the mercury.

Pulmo-Mate: Mom's Best Friend

What is a warped relationship? There are those of us, the judgmental, who say that absolute delight in another's misfortune is warped. But then there are those of us, the elite, who say—that's my mom! I am, of course, elite.

It's hard to pinpoint exactly when it started, her obsession with my medical maladies and my reciprocal development of weirder and weirder problems. I can say that since my first surgery as a three year old, I've almost constantly been on some pill or another, nasal sprays, the occasional topical cream. I needed ear tubes put in. I needed ear tubes removed. I've had a mysterious dent in my hip, a series of MRIs, a few dozen stitches in my forehead, and, the kicker, a falsely diagnosed lazy eye.

My mother and I have been in countless exam rooms, often seeing new doctors on consecutive days, trying to figure out why I can't hold my arm up or why I'm bleeding from the ears. "Is it a tumor? I bet it's a tumor!" My mom guesses right along with the doctors. "When are we going in?" This may be an atypical reaction to a vicious bacterial attack on your daughter, your oldest daughter, you know, the one that shares fully 50% of your DNA. You might think that the nine months I spent in her womb would have given her a sort of empathy for my illnesses and mishaps, but sometimes I consider that it may have been the hours she spent expelling me that shaped our relationship.

The truth, though, is that it has little to do with me, and everything to do with the impending medical crisis. My mother lives for the medical crisis. There is nothing better than the anatomical definitions, the doctors, the forms, even haggling with the insurance companies. And the doom! There is nothing better to spice up a Tuesday than a broken bone, or better, a rare, possibly incurable disease.

It is this fetish of hers that makes me the favorite child. Step aside, siblings, your accidents combined are nothing compared to my medical file, two feet deep and teeming with oddities and special cases. I don't break bones; I break growth plates. I've got a bifurcated uvula and a zest for life that brings me in and out of the ER more than a night shift X-ray technician. She loves it.

* * *

As a child, I was sickly. When I say sickly I mean, 'strap me to a machine at lunchtime while the other kids play hopscotch or whatever it is they could do with their fully functioning limbs' sickly. The Pulmo-Mate was my respiratory machine, my only friend. It gave me nebulizer treatments, pumping saline and bronchial-steroids into my small lungs, alleviating my throaty breathing and spasmic coughing. It was also a great conversation starter at the birthday parties I wasn't invited to. The Pulmo-Mate brought people together.

"Oh you're in Mrs. Csongradi's class?" I imagine this was how it started, so innocently. "So you've seen the machine? Really? Let's get you some cake; I'd love to hear more."

Classmates would regale their audience with stories of the plastic mask I wore and how they didn't suspect anything at first when I went to the nurse's office instead of the cafeteria for lunch.

"We knew it was bad when she went down there three days in a row, but we were thinking pink eye, lice, maybe diphtheria. Not this—it's unbelievable. It's the size of an oven! It sucks off her face!"

To be fair, the suction was necessary.

On the soft blue leather couch in the nurse's office, I swung my legs and sucked in that sweet medicated mist. The machine hummed and whistled. The air tube was probably cracked, and there I sat, free-basing at a young age. They called me a prodigy.

It was my mother who came in every day with the machine. This may have been the beginning of the medical obsession. She was proud carrying it around, gripping its off-white handle, its ten by five rectangle body dangly freely as she swung the grey cord like a lasso. Trucking the machine around in her blue mini-van, she was a woman on a mission. She was a woman explaining to teachers, other parents, and uninterested first-graders alike just what the Pulmo-Mate could do.

"Yea, we had kind of a rough year with Anna. She would be up all night coughing, it was a mess. We would steam up the bathroom, use that Vick's vapor rub or a mustard plaster with the ground up seeds and— you know what that is? You do? But yeah, the home remedies didn't quite do it. Eventually I had to take her to a specialist for some pretty painful tests. You should have seen her back! The thing inflated like a hot air balloon! It was redder than a fire truck! See, the needles were actually tipped with the very things she was allergic to! It was fantas... hey, where are you going?"

I sat listening in the nurse's office, sinking my neck down into my shoulders. She came back and enjoyed my mask-muffled conversation.

"Mom! Why do you do that?"

"Do what, sweetheart? Let me adjust your strap." She reached over to untwist the green elastic.

"Don't call me sweetheart at school."

The Pulmo-Mate was her first foray into the world of medicinal oddities. It came with us on family vacations and sat in the background of occasional scenery shots. After the allergist prescribed it, my mom used it frequently on my brother when he was sick, and occasionally, if the mood was right, on my sister. "Trying to get a piece of the action?" I would ask my brother as he sat miserably inhaling the Pulmo-fumes. It was a base play for attention, a cheap adaptation of my tactics. It didn't work.

* * *

After the Pulmo-Mate, it was allergy shots. Once the allergist was sure I could handle a weekly stabbing of irritants, he had to answer approximately 1,475 questions from my mother before he could proceed. "What happens to her after she gets the shot? Will this cause a reaction like the tests? Because, frankly, her back was huge that time, and I'm not really sure we can handle that weekly. Biweekly? Do I hear biweekly? How much will insurance cover? Are you sure about this? Because I was reading Concerned Parents Monthly, and..."

Eventually they reached an agreement, and together set me on the course that could solve my problems-- forever! "Or just until puberty, where allergies tend to switch anyway," my mother informed me with bright eyes. "But

typically immunotherapy works in patients about your age. Now if you were in your 60s or something, we'd have other issues to take into consideration..."

For six years I went once a week to ABC Family Pediatrics for a shot of dark brown serum, which indicates, as my mother explained, a high concentration of allergens, and requires a twenty minute wait for re-check that I typically spent with a cream soda Dum-Dum. I was allowed the Dum-Dum after my mom completed a comprehensive exploration of the effects of artificial flavoring. She needed to be sure it wouldn't inhibit my immuno-response. It didn't. My arm still grew a pink puffy lemon where the injection had hit, and the doctor still cleared me to head home after the re-check.

Roughly 300 twenty minute visits adds up to about 100 hours logged at ABC over the years. I became something of a fixture there, tidying the waiting room and making friends with the nurses. My favorite was Adrienne, twenty something years old and pregnant. My mom also liked Adrienne, who, post-partum, was willing to talk with my mother about her baby's bowel movements and teething difficulties, as if raising me had made her an expert. If it wasn't Adrienne it was Lindsay, and if it wasn't Lindsay it was the B team, temp nurses with poorly streaked hair and one syllable names, like Liz or Deb. My mom did not like Liz/Deb either, claiming that she was more qualified than either. Or both. We would sit in the waiting room whispering about them.

"Mom, I can't feel the back of my arm." I was rubbing my arm. I really couldn't feel it!

"From the shot?" Mom was all attention, darting here eyes around the waiting room, looking for clues or maybe a copy of The Diagnostic Guide. "Was it Deb? It was probably Deb. I saw her looking through a textbook before your shot. She has no idea what she's doing."

"She did seem a little shaky." I licked my Dum-Dum. I was enjoying this.

"She probably flicked a nerve. That angle was completely wrong! And don't try to tell me there were 10cc of serum in there today, she way overshot it."

"I'm not even sure if she's an RN. I don't think it says so on her name tag." Now I was just egging her on.

"What if she's not? Oh my God! I have to tell the Doc!"

Allergy shots were another victory for my mother. More than fascinated, she was involved, talking to Dr. Fugazzotto in the hallway, exchanging stories and getting the dirt on the germs shifting in the valley. On top of that, ABC was thirty minutes away-- for thirty minutes she had me trapped in the car, with only the radio to drown out the endless stream of medically related chatter. It was an hour a week where it was just the three of us. And the Pulmo-Mate never contributed much to the conversation. What could I do but talk about my day- anything to stop the current discussion of bubonic plague, and how it may not be the dead strain doctors imagine. With the right hook, I could engage her in non-medicinal dialogue.

This was a victory for me.

* * *

The shots worked. By the end of middle school I was able to behave like a normal child. I started to play sports. Sports! I was ecstatic, and Mom was too. She and the Pulmo-Mate would sit on the sidelines, eyeing the flying soccer

balls and shoulder to shoulder competition, sure it would lead to something big. She just needed to wait for the right moment.

Indoor soccer was a particular delight. The game was played off the wall, and there was nothing like a solid body check to cause a bloody nose ("shove a little polysporin up there, it will be fine"), brushburn ("don't forget to put anti-biotic ointment on that band-aid or the wound just sits in its own pus") or sprained ankle ("ave you ever tried arnica? It's an herb and it does marvelous things for swelling").

One January, soon after I commented that I'd never broken a bone, I was body slammed into the wall. It was a moment of pure panic. My mind was racing, "Not my face! Not my beautiful face!" I kept thinking. Desperate to protect myself, I threw out my left arm. It crumpled at the wrist, it felt like a snap, it wouldn't move.

Mom drove me to the hospital. "Maybe it's broken! Keep it elevated. No, higher. Does it feel splintered? Maybe it's splintered!" But the X-rays were negative. The X-rays were negative for the next two weeks even as I couldn't sleep or focus for pain. A sharp, squeezed sensation ran up from my arms and into my eyeballs, an unconquerable ache that needed attention. This was her moment. She and I were moving to the big time, to the orthopedic doctor, and a new waiting room, getting a special, moved-up appointment at the behest of Fuggie, as she could now call Dr. Fuggazzotto.

The new doctor placed his fingers on my wrist, on the right spot. "Yow!" My mom said as my scream reverberated through the entirely tan exam room. She was all questions, "What does that mean? Are we going to have to see someone else? How rare is this? Do you have something I can write on?"

"It's a broken growth plate," the doctor said, seizing the moment my mother had taken to breathe, "it only shows up on X-rays after the bone has healed."

"Excellent," I muttered, peeved at the lime green cast snaking its way around my forearm, and already calculating the hours we'd spend back in this office.

Mom took a swallow of air and was back in the game, "Will her wrist still grow like the rest of her body? What kind of treatment do we do? Will there be physical therapy?" It was one long, demanding sentence. The technician was taken aback. He quit smoothing my setting fiberglass, gave her a number of pamphlets and ducked out of the room. I assure you one must have been the mental health best-seller, "Understanding OCD: Take Control."

As we left, she asked the doctor, "Can I have your home number? Just in case?"

I would repeat this injury three more times, again in my wrist, in my shoulder and in my ankle. Each break took less and less time to diagnose, as my mother worked the system like an insider, coaxing Fuggie, as she now called Dr. Fuggazzatto, to write a referral without actually seeing me, and pushing for doctors familiar with my history.

She became an old pro on the orthopedic circuit. Anyone who had a question would go to my mother. I imagine the info sessions she held during my field hockey games.

"Yes, you— in the green? Right. Most HMOs will pay for a trip to an orthopedic doc, but you need to get the proper referral forms. Most pediatricians know what that means, but if not you can see me afterwards. Okay? Yes, I see another hand-- in the back?"

A few years later I ripped two ligaments in my ankle and needed reconstructive surgery and extensive physical therapy. She researched which area physician had the best surgical record and visited my teachers individually when I had to miss a week of school. She had me bed-ridden and eating homemade soup by the vat. She fetched pillows for me, and went to Blockbuster Video at my behest. One night we stayed up late watching Meg Ryan movies and wrapping Christmas presents. She wrote extensively about it in our Christmas cards. "Anna and I spent most of December in waiting rooms at different doctors' after she tore two ligaments in her ankle. It was a trip getting that one figured out, believe me. We got it sorted though; she's better now. " It had been a good year.

* * *

When my mother calls I block out at least an hour for our discussion of medical details. My health, her health, the heart condition of some woman she met at a park once. "Did you just cough?" She asks, overhearing the choking gestures I made into the mirror to amuse myself, "I hear SARS is going around. Why don't you come home for the weekend?"

My family now accepts my mother's disappointment that Avian Flu hasn't turned into a pandemic. We recognize that our mother not only has a hold on every existing disease, but is well on her way to discovering new ones. We endlessly mock her for wishing doom upon her offspring in the form of strep throat or, better, scarlet fever. But I'm starting to know better. I'm starting to think that she loves emergency situations because they bring her back in. They give her a plan of action and a role that puts her squarely at the heart of our lives. I know that my mom loves compound fractures and chest colds because she can be helpful, she can dote and shift out ice bags, and reasonably hound us to take care of ourselves. She can drive us thirty minutes, once a week, and coax out some conversation. She can wrap presents and eat soup with us; she can keep us on the phone five minutes longer. I know that when she's literally choking me with vitamins and news bulletins straight from the Center for Disease Control, she means something else. She means, "I won't always be able to take you to the doctor." She means, "Set up your own flu shots this year! I mean it!"