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One for the Record Books

As a child, I loved to read The Guinness Book of World Records. I would memorize and recite records at random. “Mt. Everest is the highest mountain in the whole world, did you know? 29,029 feet tall!”

Human record holders were especially fascinating. There was something about amazing physical feats that people could accomplish, how some could just push their bodies further than the rest of us. These were things to be marveled at.

After all, if you’re going to be something, be an *-est*. If you’re going to be fast, be the *fastest*. If you’re going to be big, be the *biggest*. Be the smallest, the strongest, the youngest, the oldest. At almost nine feet tall, Robert Wadlow still holds the record for being the tallest man and has been in The Guinness Book since its creation in 1957. Every year his name is there in black and white.

For being extraordinary, for simply being or doing that amazing thing and having the proper witnesses to declare it true, these people are recorded, if only once, in that both famous and infamous book.

In the 1997 edition of The Guinness Book of World Records, you will see my name.

I never liked going to Dr. Goldman’s office, even though he was a very nice old man. The office was probably clean, but it didn’t look that way. The waiting room was shabby and yellow; the plastic chairs had cracked corners, and I had already outgrown the children’s table where all the coloring books were kept. The lamp didn’t cast enough light from beneath its

yellowish cloth shade and there were no windows to speak of. It was a dim, dingy cube of stuffy space that always smelled of antiseptic, rubbing alcohol, and latex. The doors were brown and squeaked open and closed. At least it wasn't busy.

I was ten at the time, sick for days with some sort of virus that my parents decided required some further medical help than just sleep and soup. I opted to bring a Nancy Drew mystery with me to read instead of my old 1993 edition of The Guinness Book. It was two years out of date by then, but I still hadn't read most of the natural records and these don't become obsolete every year. Did you know that in 1993 the Sahara was the largest desert in the world, larger even than the entire United States? It still is. Nancy Drew mysteries were more to my liking at the time, though, and I was just finishing the last one my parents had bought for me.

My mother sat beside me in the waiting room chairs and filled out the forms as I read, noting my symptoms and how long I had been vomiting for. I reminded her to write somewhere that I was dehydrated. It was a special kind of bodily indicator that I thought should be noted separately. I had read about it in my assigned reading for school. It was a big word for me at the time and I thought it was the most interesting thing. I repeated it when I was asked what was wrong: "I can't stop throwing up and I'm always thirsty. I think I'm *dehydrated*." At ten years old, it felt cool to apply something from a story to real life, even if it was only one word and even if it did make my body feel awful. It was the only message I understood completely, out of all the things my body was trying to tell me.

Dr. Goldman's check up in the bright white examining room didn't reveal anything we felt we didn't already know: I was losing weight because I wasn't eating. I wasn't eating because I was throwing up. I was throwing up because I had a virus. "Fluids and rest," was his advice.

That seems to always be the answer to nausea, even today. Just keep drinking and sleep a lot; let your body take care of it.

Dr. Goldman missed it. He didn't know what my body was trying to say, either.

I wanted to be Pocahontas for Halloween. Mom bought a costume pattern that I could help her make; I cut the brown and tan pieces of cloth and she sewed them together.

I tried so hard to work toward being a little better, just a little; I just wanted to be well enough to wear my costume and go trick-or-treating, to collect enough candy to last me until next year. It was all about the candy; it was something I wanted, something I had waited for all month and it became my reason for being well. I tried to fool myself into thinking I was getting better the closer Halloween came, and I would sit down for breakfast and say, "I'd like a bowl of Cheerios. I feel good today." Those wholesome little Os would be at the bottom of the bucket before lunch rolled around, along with half a bottle of Gatorade. It was okay, though; my stomach always felt a little bit more normal after, like it was ready to try again. "Okay, that didn't work. Maybe some soup instead..."

At some point, you'd think it would have become obvious that there was no improvement as each day passed. But every night I would fall asleep and think, "Tomorrow, I won't be sick anymore. Tomorrow, I won't throw up and I'll go to school and then I'll be Pocahontas for Halloween candy and everything will be good again." *Tomorrow* everything will be better. Today wasn't good but *tomorrow* will be fine. It's hopeful, the way kids think. The endings are always happy ones when a person is young. I couldn't recognize that my body was trying to tell me something was wrong; I was ten. "Last time I threw up, it turned out okay. That was worse.

At least this time I didn't throw up on stage. Tomorrow I'll be better. It's Halloween tomorrow. Tomorrow will be good."

Halloween didn't happen for me that year. The costume was ready, but I was still too weak and dizzy to go walking the neighborhood; I couldn't even make it to the bathroom without running into a wall. My little sister Lauren took an extra bag with her when she left so she could ask for candy for her sick sister. She promised to bring me lots of Milky Ways.

I was so disappointed in myself. I couldn't believe that I still hadn't shaken the virus and that I was really going to miss the greatest candy haul of the year. There was a haunted house at school I wanted to see, that I had wanted to help set up. It was such a letdown, that I couldn't even figure out how to stop being sick. If I had slept longer, maybe, or drunk more... what if I had drunk more and *then* slept longer? Would it have stopped then? Would I have been well now?

On the dining room table my little Indian costume was spread out, arms wide, inviting me to wear it and celebrate. I fell asleep on the couch instead.

My mother took me to Barnes & Noble before dinner for a new Nancy Drew book to make up for missing the Halloween festivities. The sky was layered with thick gray clouds; it made everything dark and threatening. It was a suitable atmosphere for the holiday and it probably made the haunted house at the school feel even creepier.

"You know what I think, Blair?" A lot of Mom's conversations started this way. "You don't ever eat enough. You need to start eating more. If you ate more, you wouldn't be so tired

all the time and you wouldn't get sick. I have an idea... let's go in here and get you something to eat. We'll have a milkshake. Do you like chocolate?"

"I like vanilla."

"Let's have a vanilla milkshake. I'll get a large and we'll share."

So Mom bought me my first vanilla shake at McDonald's. The first sip was nothing less than amazing. It was the sweetest, most wonderful thing I had ever tasted, even though the sharp cold sensation snatched heat from my core and made my little body shiver. I accidentally drank all of it while Mom went into the bookstore for my novel. She was both happy and surprised to return to the car and find no more milkshake left for her.

It started to rain and everyone's Halloween ended earlier than they wanted it to. When we got home I was too tired to read more than two pages of my new book and I fell asleep in my parents' big bed.

When my father came home from work he took one look at me and decided we were going to the hospital. I heard them arguing out in the hallway.

"Don't scare her, Ken! Don't say 'hospital'!"

"Get her jacket, Barbara, and call the doctor. Tell him we're coming right now!"

I wasn't really awake enough to care very much or understand exactly what was happening. I'd never been to the hospital before. Dad took my pulse and said it was 155 beats per minute after hours of sleep. He picked me up and put my jacket on as everyone hurried out the door into the rain.

We drove to Dr. Goldman's house and Dad carried me to his front door. I wish I could remember the doctor's expression. I can't imagine the guilt that must have been embedded in every wrinkle of his kind face when he saw my family standing on his doorstep in the rain,

carrying my failing body. What could he possibly have looked like when he said, “Take her to the hospital or she’s going to die”?

That may well have been the last time he opened his door to a patient. He retired from health care and closed down his practice almost the same day I was released.

He gave us directions to Winthrop University Hospital in Rockville Center, New York. It was a long drive, but the hospital was bigger and better equipped than Massapequa General. I sat in the front seat staring out at the torrents of rain and bleeding yellow lights from the lampposts as we drove on the parkway. I didn’t understand what was going on; each new moment wasn’t connecting to the last and around me the scenes played like a movie I was already bored with. Yellow streetlights gave way to the bright white radiance of a gas station. Dad talked to someone and climbed back in. We drove back in the direction we had just come from.

When we reached the hospital, I just wanted to go back to sleep. I think I did, once or twice. The emergency room was very crowded when Dad carried me in. He set me down in a seat and went off while everyone tried to get my jacket off. I wasn’t being terribly helpful with that; I couldn’t remember how to move my very heavy arms. I saw Lauren standing nearby.

“I had a milkshake today,” I told her proudly. “I had a milkshake and it was *really* good.”

I don’t remember very much after we entered the emergency room, although I’ve heard about it often enough. I’ve heard all about the Russian nurse who pushed me to the front of the waiting list. He is the man who has been credited often with saving my life, and I don’t think I ever even knew what he looked like.

I was in and out of consciousness then, although I’ve been told I wouldn’t shut up. My mother said I kept rambling about soccer and school and the play I was supposed to be in at

school. I kept apologizing over and over again: “Mom, I’m sorry... I’m sorry, Mom, I’ll try to do better... I’ll try to eat more...” The nurses said I was cute and then turned to tell my mother there was no hope I was going to live in the same breath.

Juvenile diabetes came as something of a shock to my parents, but the real shock came to the doctors when they measured my blood sugar level. It was so high that the standard testing machine didn’t reach that level. They said my blood must have had the consistency of maple syrup. I was ten. I weighed a little over forty pounds when I got there. They just couldn’t believe I hadn’t slipped into a coma. That my kidneys hadn’t shut down yet. They watched and waited for the heart attack they were sure would happen at any moment.

At the meetings with doctors and nutritionists that followed, all the things my body had been trying to tell me began falling into place. I was so tired because my cells were in an energy crisis, unable to use the sugars in the foods I was eating to function. My liver used what little fat I had stored instead, which is why I had lost so much weight. I had been right about being dehydrated; my kidneys were using water to spill the accumulating sugars out of my body when I went to the bathroom, which was why I had been going so often.

Consider that the normal blood sugar of a healthy person is usually somewhere between 80 and 120 milligrams per deciliter. This means that the pancreas is producing insulin to convert sugar to energy that the cells can use to function. When my body stopped making insulin, the glucose could not be converted into energy. The sugars just sat accumulating in my blood with everything I had tried to eat, milkshake and all.

My blood sugar was 1,696 mg/dl. They had never seen a glucose level that high before and the fact that I had survived it made me something of a hospital celebrity. Many doctors and

nurses and interns all came to see the little girl who had such a ridiculous blood sugar reading and still had normal brain functions. A morbid sort of notoriety, I think now—that people should come to bear witness to a person that should have been dead.

I wondered afterward if there was a Guinness record that my extravagant number had perhaps beaten and found that “highest blood glucose level” didn’t exist. After such an awful experience, my father thought something good should come of it and gathered all the documentation and witness statements that the people at Guinness needed to prove that the number was real. It took a long time. We didn’t even realize that it had gone through until someone in my class asked me, “Hey, Blair, did you know you’re in the Guinness Book?” And so I was. On page fifteen of the hard cover version, right above an unidentified Los Angeles woman’s blood alcohol level of 1,510 mg/100 ml, is my name.

Alexa Painter from Virginia holds my old record now. In 1991, she was brought to the hospital with a blood glucose level of 2,495 mg/dl and somehow survived it.

She was two at the time.