

Small misfortune reminds us how lucky we really are



BARB GUY

The first day Chris was home from the hospital, beloved Jewish friends brought dinner and flowers. The second day, kind LDS neighbors delivered enchiladas and chocolate-chip cookies. The third day, godless vegetarians came over, cooking supper and dessert while their baby daughter made us laugh. The fourth day, a Rastafarian-leaning friend dropped in at lunchtime, bringing homemade tortilla wraps and beer in a cooler.

They came because my poor husband broke his leg. On his bike at a near-standstill, he toppled to the ground, unable to release his foot from the pedal. (He says, "Like the tricycle guy on 'Laugh-In'.")

For this, six weeks without bearing any weight on the leg, two weeks or more away from work, one month before driving, four to six months until he can bike. At 3:30 a.m, before Chris

even awakened from the operation, the surgeon told me, "A year from now, will he still be thinking about this? I hope not."

Looming over everything is the thought that it all may be in vain. It's possible, one doctor matter-of-factly reported, that the knob on the femur, the part of the leg bone that sits in the hip socket, may die from blood loss the day of the break, and if it does, Chris will need a hip replacement. At 48.

Still, as problems go, this one isn't that big. Americans are the luckiest people on the planet and most of us never face the kind of suffering that happens around the world. Chris's news certainly wasn't good, but no matter what, he'll be fine.

You may note I say this as the person who did not break her femur, so perhaps it isn't my place. And you've got a point. But, on the other hand, I am the person who must inject her husband in the belly every day at 11:15, do physical therapy with him and work around an impressively large array of specialized gear including a walker, crutches, shower chair and toilet seat. I must bring him things all day and sleep in a makeshift bed for six weeks because our upstairs bedroom is off limits.

Every night I dream I'm clinging to the side of a steep mountain, trying to keep from rolling down to my death. But it's just a bad rec-room futon with

another mattress piled on top.

In the hospital I slept one night on the floor and two nights in a prehistoric Naugahyde recliner. To keep the chair opened out, I had to constantly flex five different body parts (any five). If I drifted off or even began to relax, the chair would snap shut like the jaws of a Venus flytrap, leaving me buzzing helplessly inside.

Throughout the hospital, signs promised us "Level 5 Care." This apparently means being placed in a double room with a fellow who was just shot, probably by gang members. It's a strange sensation to peruse the *Trib's* crime blotter, the subject of the story two feet away.

In addition, Level 5 Care allows the man's purportedly armed wife to spend the day nearby, fielding 30 phone calls from concerned associates, saying things that could get you subpoenaed or worse, while a gangsta movie blares from the TV. You also get about 15 visitors (for the roommate) who come at once and stay all day.

Each time you wriggle past them to exit the hospital room (as your dear husband can only dream of doing), you see approximately 17 signs in the hall and they all say this: Only two visitors allowed per patient.

Level 5 Care also equals, if you're my vegetarian husband, a diet completely lacking in eggs, cheese and milk; never mind that he just broke the biggest bone in

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his body. Irrespective of begging to the contrary, Chris got soy drinks and bagels with jelly.

(Note to Nutrition Department: That's vegan.)

Meanwhile, his roommate (not the gunshot guy but the next one who howled bloody murder for two days) got eggs and milk every morning, despite being allergic to eggs, which his wife had noted on his food preference sheet, right where I put "vegetarian - eggs, dairy OK" on Chris's.

Still, I'm conscious of how lucky we are. From the moment our friends arrived in the emergency room and stayed until Chris was out of surgery, everyone has been stellar. Chris hasn't been in much pain and he did get lovely care from the nurses, aides, physical therapists, residents and docs, and that's what's important. Several staffers said they wished all their patients were like Chris, and we're indebted to them for their fine work.

I wish we could extend the compliment to the hospital administration. Perhaps they should skip the slogans and simply care about the patients - listening to them and keeping them safe.

Barb Guy is a regular contributor to these pages.