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When the world shifted.

It was early on Sunday morning when I heard the faint words of my wife, “I think I need to go to the hospital.” I had not been asleep long and had not slept much in the days prior, but those words, in that tone, woke me in an instant. Within minutes I had got both of us dressed, in the car, and headed toward the emergency room. She complained about shortness of breath and lack of energy in the months leading up to this, and it has only been getting worse. We met with her Dr. several times in the weeks and days before and were told she had asthma and to start using an inhaler. In the next few hours, this day would lead to events that would change everything. The moment I absolutely knew a change was coming was also the scariest moment of my life when I was told my wife’s blood pressure could not be found.

After arriving at the hospital and she gets to a bed in the emergency room, she gets an IV, blood pressure cuff, and EKG pads placed on her. There are all the familiar sensory overloads of being in an ER; bright lights, the aroma of various sanitizers, the noises of beeps, and different gadgetry going off in and all around her room. A nurse gathers information about her medical history and why we are there now. Then the ER Dr comes in and asks a few more pointed questions and lets us know that they will be keeping her for observation and are admitted to a room upstairs, and we’ll be moved shortly.

The room she’s transferred to is small but private and has a loveseat wrapped in a blueish-colored vinyl for company to sit on. Around this time, my mother-in-law comes to the hospital and sits with me on that loveseat, and we watch as my wife, her daughter, her only child, lay just feet from us. Small talk about the kids, weather, and work all cease when the alarms go off. The nurse comes in and presses a few buttons on the blood pressure machine, and we hear the cuff inflate; she presses the buttons again and inflates again. Now she removes the cuff and places it on the opposite arm, buttons, inflation. The cuff comes off that arm and gets placed on a calf, buttons, and inflation. The nurse leaves the room for a few moments and returns with another nurse, and this time, they are rubbing a device up and down her calf. Now, they call for the ERT code to come to this room, and someone tells me that they are unable to find her blood pressure and that we, her mother and I, need to leave and sit in the waiting room, and that someone will be with us to let us know what is happening. As more and more people rushed in and we moved out, I could hear someone say, “Her BP is 50/30”.

A numbness went over me as we walked to the waiting room. I don’t know if I had started thinking again before I got to the waiting room doors or if it was sometime after I sat down. All I could think of was “50/30”. What does that even mean? Will we leave here together? As I slowly returned to reality, I started to make lists of what I needed to do: let our kids know what was happening, arrange care for our youngest, and notify her and my work. I needed to do something, I had to do something. It turns out that when you have a great support system around you with many people who care about you, a list as short as mine takes less than thirty minutes to complete.

After waiting for what seemed to be a reasonable amount of time, I decided to walk back to the room. By now, my brother had arrived, and we journeyed to her room together. Everyone was still there, and we had to wait outside the room as they were getting ready to move her to the OR for emergency surgery.

The next time I would see her would be hours later and with two machines attached to her, one for her to breathe and one to help her heart pump. The sounds of these machines are loud and somewhat rhythmic, like a jazz band made up of middle schoolers, sometimes keeping time but mostly speeding up or slowing down at irregular intervals. These measures only stop gaps at the beginning of a process requiring other machines, other hospitals, more surgeries, talks about survival percentages, and more about transplant lists.

“I think I need to go to the hospital.” It turned out to be the phrase that would shift my entire world even more than the “I do.” spoken twenty years before.