

The Gift of Long Hours

By Robert Granader

I'm watching my first-born child's chest rise and fall in the glow of blue monitor lights. Listening to the air pass through his lungs, his small pursed lips. I move my face close to feel his fever. I take advantage of this opportunity to get close to him.

I gently, barely touch cheeks. Then I realize I don't know which razor stubble is his, and which is mine.

It's been more than 16 years since I've had the chance to spend so much time watching him sleep. How long since I checked on him. Sure I give him a thorough smell test when he gets home late on a Saturday night. Do I detect smoke? Drink?

When have I cared for him in this way? So completely. He doesn't cry when it hurts. Instead, he rates the pain for the doctor, somewhere between one and ten. He can walk, when he has the strength, getting himself to the bathroom to pee in a plastic container so they can examine everything that goes in and out of his body.

It's a staph infection in his chest.

There have been tense moments. Especially when we weren't sure if we could get him home from the coastal Spanish town where he'd been studying. Scariest when the hospital couldn't identify the source, a mysterious bug bite our only clue.

After a few days in the hospital, a host of treatments, doctor visits and endless blood-taking and pee-examining he seems better. And then it becomes a gift.

When the marrow-shattering fear subsides and the parental nightmare fades, it is our time.

I desperately want to feel close to him. Adolescence now an obstacle. Tensions rise over school, friends, curfew, cars, money, homework, Facebook, phones, computers. But none of those matter here in the dark of the hospital room. At night we watch ESPN. We talk about the games. He asks about things at home. He tells me about his trip to Spain without me asking. It won't be this way next week.

We are in his presence for periods of time that we haven't had since before pre-school. Interrupted by doctors and family and visitors and bouts of sleep. In our normal lives there are no long hours, just times together before we have something else to do.

The hum and wheeze of the machines that clean his system and fight the poison, rouses and confuses me. Is that his breathing? Are those strained noises his body trying to do something it can't? I check his fever. Its four o'clock in the morning. He moves his head and squints in the early light.

"Did you just put your cheek up against my face?" he asks in a whisper, somewhere between sleep and wakefulness.

"I did," I said smiling, feeling like a teenager caught sneaking in past curfew.

"That's just weird dad," he says, before fading off to sleep.