My Unexpected Journey

I'm not a Hobbit, but last March like Bilbo Baggins, I unexpectedly set out on a journey beset by goblins, orcs, and trolls that put me in a stranglehold and sent me to the emergency room.

Let me back up twenty years. I had stopped at a homey-looking pub in Sydney, Australia and ordered a bowl of the Irish stew bubbling in a huge black kettle over a crackling fire. It smelled delicious and arrived steaming.

Hunger from the long flight over the Pacific Ocean made me wolf down morsels of beef, potatoes, carrots, and onions. This was the stew of legends! One big spoonful after the other went down the pipe. Without warning, a cross-wind shear hit the plane and I skidded off the runway, choking. A chunk of beef, onion, or carrot had stuck right at my sternum. Hurt like a mother. I sat on the barstool with tears in my eyes, wondering what the hell just happened.

The husky red-haired waiter with freckles asked, "You alright, mate?"

Couldn't speak so I nodded, yes then no, then hell if I know, turning my palms up.

"Want me to call an ambulance?"

I shook my head yes, then no, and then unfolded from the barstool, leaving my mouth-watering stew, and made it outside where I attempted to puke, fingers down my throat. Didn't work. I wrapped my arms around my chest in an abortive self-Heimlich maneuver. Nothing came other than intense pain. Some goblin or orc had stabbed at my heart but he'd missed and hit a not as vital organ – unless a guy needed to swallow his stew.

I walked around bending, stretching, and doing strange postures to the laughter of passing Aussies who probably thought, “Must be an American,” until at last, my plane was pulled back onto the runway. Immediately, I disembarked for the incredible Irish stew bubbling in the big black kettle.

Back in the bar, my half-empty stew bowl had vanished. The big-bellied man with tattooed Popeye arms said, “Sorry, mate, I thought you left.” The waiter's concern for my wellbeing was matched only by the management’s indifference to replacing my bowl of Irish stew.

During the next years, unexpectedly, food stuck in my craw and periodically, I was haunted by green goblins and big stupid trolls stabbing my stomach during the dark of night. I often woke with my freckled nose stuffed up and a phlegm river streaming down my throat that a guy could float his canoe on. Chronic cough. I saw allergists and went through the shots. Didn’t help. Ears Nose and Throat (ENT) specialists found no cause. “Maybe it’s allergies.”

“As I told you, I’ve seen three allergy docs and I went through all the shots, and it turns out the only thing I’m allergic to is the medical bill.”

“You should go back to your family doctor. It sounds like you have long COVID.”

I shook my weary headache. “Thanks, most people have a pandemic story, and I was just beginning to feel left out.”

Months dragged their sorry butts along. At the new ENT, I pleaded, “I want to get rid of this chronic sinus congestion and cough.”

Doctor Blank Personality prescribed antibiotics and to my delight, my sinus cleared, but mysteriously, my arms and legs slowly covered in an itchy, painful rash that looked like the measles. A trade, if you like unfair trades.

The urgent care PA said, “Stop taking that antibiotic. It’s known to cause severe rashes.”

On Monday, the ENT Doc was pissed I’d stopped taking his magic pills and thereafter, he refused to see me. Fine, he was a cold fellow who didn’t like it when I interrupted his lecture to ask a question.

Okay, back to the family doc. She said, “Maybe you have COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease). Continue taking your allergy pills, the mucus expectorant, and cough syrup. I’m prescribing an antibiotic because your symptoms suggest walking pneumonia or chronic bronchitis.”

I was choking on food more often so I pleaded with moisture in my eyes, “It really hurts and it takes me up to a half an hour for the pain to stop.”

Family Doctor says, “You should see a gastroenterologist. He may put a balloon down your esophagus and stretch the constricted area, but it won’t help your bronchitis and sinus issues.”

I see Gastro Doc, schedule said procedure, and the day after it was carried out, I swallowed without orcs and hobbits battling with sharpened sticks under my sternum.

“Come back in three weeks and I’ll balloon it again because an esophagus tends to go back to the position it was used to.”

Three weeks pass.

Again, he balloons my beat-up swallow pipe.

Everything seems okay. Maybe I'm cured.

Two nights later, I'm coughing my head off, wheezing, and barely breathing. I drive to the ER.

There, green ghouls stab me with IVs in each arm and slap an oxygen mask over my mouth and nose. I stare at the ceiling thinking these green beings are from Middle Earth.

A couple of hours later, they do a CT scan, after which I lay in another cold cave with blinding white lights for hours. I shiver and wonder if I'm gonna die sooner than desired. I decide to expire at home with my sweet puppy licking my face rather than here. Getting up, I toss the oxygen mask and pull both IVs from my arms, then I'm out in the hall, looking for the exit sign.

A nonchalant nurse says, "Wait a few more minutes and the doctor will talk to you."

Time passes slowly when you're tired, freezing, and thinking brilliantly. I sing, "Bye Bye American Pie…"

At the break of dawn, ER Doc comes in. "You have a very angry esophagus and a hiatal hernia. It's likely that you're aspirating stomach acid into your lungs which is causing your coughing and shortness of breath. You should see the GI doctor again and also see a pulmonologist."

Wasn't sure if I believed him. Over the years, I'd consulted enough specialists to staff a small community hospital, each professional confident in their diagnosis and equally confident in their inability to treat it, having perfected the art of being simultaneously thorough and useless.

Another appointment with the GI doc. He said, “Apparently, your esophagus had cramped down to prevent stomach acid from drifting up your throat and damaging your larynx, lungs, and sinus.” A blank look. “You need your esophageal sphincter valve and the hiatal hernia repaired. There’s no one in this area that does that kind of surgery. You’ll have to go to Denver or Albuquerque.”

Two cities, two flavors of dread. I flipped a mental coin and it came up on its edge. Albuquerque is known as the car theft capital of the US and everyone, even the senior citizens, race around like their car is hot or is about to get stolen. And Denver was my least favorite congested, crime-ridden, and polluted city where people flip you off just for something to do.

I decide to fix this middle earth issue myself. I research acid reflux and generate a list of everything that causes it. It read like my favorite menu: red wine, vodka, colas, oranges, tomatoes, ice cream, chocolate, Mexican and Thai food, and of course, red meat.

A week later, I drive to the other ER in town with black spots floating across my brain, making the journey entertaining. Green trolls ram IVs into each arm while an orc douses my stuffed-up nose with high pressure oxygen. This white cave is quieter than the last emergency doom. As my consciousness returns, I become aware that I’m the only patient in the place. Once an hour someone looks in on me between the staff’s loud stories and laughter. A nurse says, “Your face has some color in it. Now you aren’t as blue.”

Hours later, I'm released as the sun also rises. No meds, no treatment plan, not even a vague, "You might want to try…," and I'm headed to the apartment where my young puppy has peed and crapped all over the new carpet.

Back to GI doc. "Isn't there something you can prescribe? It feels like there's a medieval battle happening right under my sternum."

He looks at me like I'm an alien and writes on a prescription pad. "This should help with the cramping." He didn't mention that a muscle relaxant dramatically improves your attention and concentration when driving over dangerous mountain passes and in Denver traffic.

"Can you recommend a surgeon in Denver who does the surgery I need?"

Gastro Doc went to college back east and retired in this Rocky Mountain tourist town. He didn't have time to go to conferences and meet referral sources since he's busy hiking, skiing, or fishing, five out of seven days.

I do a determined internet search and start calling doctors in Denver with websites mentioning esophageal and stomach surgery. One surgeon states firmly, "I've never done that type of surgery."

"Your website says you do."

"I'm sorry, I didn't build the website. I observed an esophageal surgery one time during medical school. I'm not comfortable doing it."

I admired his honesty. "Can you recommend someone?"

"No, I don't know any surgeons who perform the kind of surgery you're asking about."

I learn that most clinics can't do a consult for a month or three. Acid reflux must be endemic in Colorado. Hot spicy Mexican food and flaming Thai curry?

Weeks pass. Anxious nights, sweating, breathing just enough to avoid the ER. At last, I find a stomach doctor in Denver. The surgeon wants me to drive over the mountain passes to undergo several tests. I agree, but can't get ahold of his scheduler.

I keep calling.

Two weeks crawl by as the creatures of Middle Earth hold a championship battle over the Ring.

At last, an appointment.

Miss Assistant Tech says, "You will need to be in the Denver area for three to four months for testing and, if needed, surgery."

I tell a friend in Northern Colorado. He happens to have a vacant rental house. "You can live there for a couple of months but I want to sell it."

I move. Four trips. Seven hours one way over eleven thousand foot passes, toothpicks holding open my upper eyelids due to the muscle relaxant that keeps my guts from screaming from the cramps. Good thing I'm on oxygen. I'm white knuckled on the steering wheel, afraid I might pass out and wound some unfortunate family whose child was destined to become a renowned physician who cured acid reflux without surgery or nasty medications.

In the old rental house, I instantly start sneezing and coughing. The smell of black mold impinges during the shallow moments my nose is clear. The place is a pig sty from the last tenants. I had traded my clean, sweet apartment in the mountains next to the gorgeous Animas River for a monument to poor housekeeping. The mice aren't

too noisy, but their habit of leaving tiny black presents everywhere was their way of saying they hadn't agreed to share the space.

I clean, rest, paint the walls, suck on the oxygen tube, mop, nap, cough, and try to catch my breath. Nights, I wake dizzy, wheezing, and coughing up stuff as if I have black lung disease because the mice are having a party a few feet from my bed. I stumble to the bathroom, swallow liquid antacids, go back to bed, and cough until the bed levitates to the ceiling. The mice and me reach an understanding: they'd stay out of my paint, and I'd stay out of their pantry. Neither of us honored it.

Look at me, Mom, aren't I having fun?

The stomach clinic says I must have a doctor to follow-up after the operation. The surgery is pushed back until I see one. There's a shortage of GPs. Long wait. I ride a warhorse at nights, seeking a bonfire to keep the green and black, creepy waifs away. I cough so hard that it causes an inguinal hernia. I try to push it back in, then I punch 911 moments before blacking out. They arrive with flashing lights and blasting sirens at three in the morning, my favorite time to have no brain. I'm certain the neighbors are happy I moved in.

I'm in the ER for unknown hours, then I'm wheeled into an intensive care room which I didn't need. "I'm breathing fine now. I need to check on my dog."

"We need to observe you."

Translation, "The administration is pressuring physicians to increase patient use of the facilities." Bottom line: "The CEO and Board of Directors are heading to an expensive retreat in Hawaii."

I was observed so thoroughly that I felt like a medical documentary, yet not a soul told me what was wrong and what to do. I take that back, the nice respiratory therapist said, “When you get to coughing and cannot stop, drink water. It should help.”

It did help. A little. At least I could catch my breath. Apparently, acid reflux fumes burn the brochial sacks in lungs, mimicking chronic obstructive pulmonary disease as if I was a heavy smoker. So happy to hear that.

On the third day, I rise from the white tomb exhausted due to the lights, bells and being checked on. Back home, Puppy is shocked I’m still alive. Enjoyed the licking and paw hugs.

Three weeks slowly march by and I drive an hour to the appointment with the unknown family doc. Brain dysfunctional, I arrive at the clinic a week early. They react like I have severe Covid 19 because I’m coughing heartily with a bright red face tinged blue. “You need to go to urgent care.” She points. “It’s right over there.”

The urgent care PA starts to approach the coughing red-faced dizzy man, but she turns to the receptionist, “Call 911. He needs to get to the ER.” She ran away as fast as possible, probably thinking I had the plague.

Cough, cough, cough. “No, I came here for a family doctor appointment and was off a week. I just need some kind of medication.” Hack, swallow, hack.

The EMTs arrive, wrap green gloved hands around my blue wrists and toss me onto a stretcher. In the ambulance, an ugly orc with a dark beard slaps a plastic mask onto my face. Lashed to a gurney, another incompetent troll repeatedly stabs the IVs like tiny swords into each arm until one finally finds a vein.

Fading in and out.

At the ER, drunkenly, my head swivels to see more masked beings in green. The morgue scares the hell out of me, but the orcs just take one look and walk out shaking their heads, impressing me with their competence and caring. Later that night, I open my eyes, writhing with pain. Can't muster a whimper or groan. A boa constrictor had slithered in and wrapped itself around my chest. Its smile said it enjoys crushing my lungs to consume me. Suffocating pain as if a big tractor wheel had rolled up and stopped right on top of my chest. I pray, "God, please take me home, let me die. I can't live with this pain."

Blackness.

Woke up at noon, disappointed, hadn't been swallowed whole and I'm still on this planet of pain. *Well crap, there must be something the Great Mystery wants me to do.*

I remembered my puppy is stuck in the old moldy house with the herd of mice. Likely he's chasing them with ravenous hunger and relieving himself on the couch or my bed. I call my old college buddy, asking if he'll take the dog to his house until I escape.

This huge hospital is a zoo. Nurses, respiratory therapists, specialists, and others show up, look at me and shake their heads. Not a doctor in the place. No one tells me what the treatment plan is. In fear and loathing, I ask to see the ombudsman or anyone who knows what might be going on other than me laying under this oxygen mask.

This lady shows up the next day. She has the calm of a woman who never met a question she couldn't evade. She says a doctor should write any orders.

My John Wayne drawl, "I ain't seen one since I been here, ma'am."

Big smile under her bleached blonde locks. "The doctors are extremely busy." Insincere nod. "I'm sure one will show up at some point."

Hours crawl along like a pack of buzzards circling above my body. It looks like I need a lawyer to get out of here. Since I'm feeling a hell of a lot better, I tear off the mask and call a retired paralegal friend. He drives down the next day and ***attempts*** to interview anyone who walks in my oxygen machine hissing room. No one knows if there's a treatment plan and if there was, what it might entail. A lady swinging a mop says, "Some people are in here for a long time." My friend has other business to take care of. "You're not court-ordered to be in the hospital. If you feel good enough, I can take you to your car."

Dressed in civilian clothes and wheezing like an old coal miner with black lung disease who sucks down four packs of cigarettes a day, I sneak out with him. A pretty young lady chases me down as I step into the beautiful sky-blue day. "Please sign these forms saying you're leaving against medical advice."

"I never received any advice." I scribble my name and state, "The Hippocratic Oath has a loophole for abandonment by incompetence."

Ignoring my sarcasm, she's simply happy to get my signature and she struts away in a tight white nurse's outfit.

I observe, "Nice ass."

Friend says, "You must be feeling better."

I start coughing.

An hour later, I walk into moldy mouse house and see the remains of foam pillows. My other friend had brought my sweet puppy back to the rental because, "It seemed uncomfortable at my house." And, being scared out of its mind since I wasn't there, he ripped the snot out of the couch pillows.

Cleaning, vacuuming, and resting every few minutes tied to a twenty-foot oxygen chord, the concentrator hissing and whistling its irritating sound next to the wall where my mice friends come up in the night and leave little turds suggesting they would prefer to have the place like it was when I arrived: full of rotten food and trash to hide under.

Weeks pass and I'm at the Denver GI surgeon's clinic for testing. A metal hose is forced down my nose to measure esophageal pressure, and half an hour later, I'm knocked out for a tube down my food pipe to view the culprit spincter valve in full color. The doc concludes, "I'll pull your hiatal hernia back down where it belongs and staple everything so it doesn't sneak back up, and then I'll wrap the upper part of your stomach around the esophageal sphincter valve to strengthen it. That should solve your problem."

"Sounds fun." I try to ask questions and he repeats the pre-recorded message, irritated that I interrupted.

Two more weeks drag by.

At last, I'm at Hobbit Hospital down in Denver with my oxygen way down, but my hope crawling up. Surgery is carried out. The next day, I'm released without fanfare, no one required to pick me up. I wonder why the surgeon didn't bother to talk to me before I left. I drive to moldy mouse house wondering if my puppy finished off the new foam pillows and to make a point, also ate the fouton couch.

Two days out of surgery, my colon stages a work stoppage. I realize they had given me a morphine derivative for pain. I had clearly stated, "Don't give me any type of barbiturate or a opium derivative. I'm allergic to both. They make me itch, cause nausea, and I'll be badly constipated. Just give me a Tylonel or ibuprofin."

Nothing says 'we listened' like ignoring a patient's direct request. I itched all over, felt like vomiting my liquid-only lunch, and the stuff put my colon into a coma without remorse or recourse. Over the next days, I drink Milk of Magnesia, take Ex Lax, Miralax, fiber pills, stool softeners, and more Milk of Magnesia.

Colonel Colon is cramping instead of crapping like he's supposed to.

Days pass and nothing passes.

I'm in so much pain I can barely walk. And I cannot sit or bend at the waist. That afternoon, I drive to the ER down the street.

No one is around.

I sit in the lobby, aching and holding my guts.

A security guard asks, "Whats your problem?"

"I can't shit."

He laughs.

An hour later, I'm checked in and led to a dark room. Moans and groans in the area with an occasional scream of pain. A nurse says loudly, "We need more than one doctor tonight!"

Oh shit, I think.

Colonel Colon says, "Wish I could." He's enjoying the searing fireworks that he lights one after the other. It forces me to my knees on the cold linoleum floor. I'm pitiful, helpless, and scared. At midnight, I limp out, heading for the other hospital.

A laughing nurse stops talking to another relaxing nurse. "The doctor is coming to your room within the next thirty minutes."

I shrug both shoulders.

Colonel Colon fires frantic pain signals, “You gotta poop or you’re gonna pop!”

I drive twenty minutes to the other hospital.

Surprisingly, they check me in quickly, but again I sit in a dark room. Someone looks in once in a while. “I’m really hurting.” A panicked tone. “Do you have some Valium or something to relax my colon so it will stop screaming?”

Wry look as if I’m faking pain to get drugs.

Ah oh. Shouldn’t have asked for Valium. Beginning of a panic attack. Intense sharp pain. Hard wheezing.

A doctor pokes his head in. “We should probably do an enema.”

No volunteers.

Must be a shitty job.

I lie there another hour as time sucks every millimeter of oxygen from my lungs because I’m coughing wildly, wheezing, and thinking I ought to call 911. In a brief lucid moment, I remember I’m already in the ER. My nurse call button finger is plumb tuckered out and numb. Horrible, oxygen deprived headache. Extreme pain radiating up from Colonel Colon. He must be a pyrotechnic expert.

Things go dark.

Someone slaps an oxygen mask on my blue face.

I ask through the plastic, “Can’t you do something for my colon? I really need to shit, that’s why I came in here.”

Look of horror. Running from the room.

An hour travels through my wheezing body that ain’t gaining on the oxygen deprivation. The ER doc walks in and looks at me like, *I oughta do something.* He

glances at the cute nurse without a molecule of experience, thinking to impress her. “His right lung has collapsed and I’m going to insert a tube into his chest.”

Gasps from the onlookers.

Doctor Mean starts the procedure with the flair of a magician revealing his slyest trick, then he slashes into my chest, shredding skin and muscles. He’s from a race of evil, wolf-like creatures that are intelligent and allied with the orcs. Doctor Warg smiles as he cuts between my ribs with sharp gashes, separating my ribs like a side of beef hanging in a freezer – the only difference being that the lucky beast is deceased, not wide awake and wishing for something, anything to cut this pain.

“Ouch, that hurts like hell! Why are you cutting into me? Jesus, that hurts!” My brain rapidly cycles between the pain in my gut and the pain echoing in my ribs. “Don’t you have any lidocaine or something to numb the area?”

A twisted grin.

“Hey! I came to the ER because I couldn’t take a dump and now you’re hacking into my chest.” Deep cough. “Dang that hurts!” Cough, wheeze, whimper. “My bowel is about to explode.”

The toothy grin grows wickedly wider. Every medical professional with a needle or a knife pretends they’re cutting or stabbing you for a good purpose. They may be in the long run, but certainly, that look of sadistic pleasure is a dead giveaway. I realize the only difference between surgery and torture is the paperwork, a medical degree, and, if you are luckier than me, a touch of anesthesia. To deal with it, my eyes wobble, my chest heaves, and my lower bowel screams.

I pass out.

I come to in an intensive care room. Allegedly, the regular hospital rooms are full. Since I have medical insurance, seems the hospital is short of cash to pay for the new cardiac wing. My colon's contents are up to my once blue eyeballs and I feel the volcano rumbling deep within. I'm wrapped in IVs, oxygen tubes, monitor chords, and other unknown, useless, tubes. I let out a high-pitched whimper, cough, cough, and then a series of low groans from the base of my throat like a wraith. Hack, cough, choke. No one comes. I press the call button dozens of times, and since I'm about to experience an artillery barrage, I frantically start disconnecting plastic lines, but the unnecessary chest tube is lashed to a machine that's chained to the bed frame.

I decide to drag the bed and beeping machines ten feet to the bathroom.

Both feet hit the cold floor.

Alarms spring to life, lights flash, and a disembodied voice says, "Please get back into bed. Someone will be there shortly."

To show my education and calm demeanor, I yell, "I'm about fill this room with shit."

A much higher, tense voice says, "What?"

"I came to the ER because I couldn't crap, but they ignored my presenting problem but now all hell is about to break lose. I gotta go! Do you understand?"

I'm pulling at the chest tube when Colonel Colon orders a charge across no man's land. My desperate rectum relaxes and machine guns out: warm, brown, and wet ammo…

I'm in shock. Ain't done that since they threw away my diapers. I'm standing by the bed, soaked with shit, smelly and grossed out, unable to get the ten feet to the

restroom. My embarrassed head sadly shakes from side to side while the anal volcano continues to spew hot lava. Wished I'd stayed home to achieve this battle objective, in which case, my puppy might not have eaten another foam pillow.

The nice, caring and competent intensive care nurse screeches to a stop at the smell and grossity of the growing brown pool at my feet. He's cool though. "Looks like you were finally able to go." He is smiling and happy for me.

He tiptoes to the bed, attempting to avoid stepping in the… He pulls out the chest tube, seeping bloody pus. Hurts like hell but I've got other problems.

Slick floor surrounding my feet, I make footprints with the weird socks that have those sticky things on the bottom as a mud river plunges down the falls, drowning the last vestige of pride that has smugly hidden in a dark alley. A tiny squeak as my ego drowns in the deluge. At last, I sit on the white throne, listening to a flash flood's roar hitting the formerly pristine lake which spatters the two, used-to-be white, buttocks above.

Sure wasn't a journey I expected.

Maybe next year I'll try a Caribbean cruise and leave my reflux companion at home to chew on foam pillows.

Trolls, Orcs, and Wargs, not welcome.