

The Last Leaf

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IS MY SHIP GOING DOWN?

RECENTLY my family doctor announced that it was time for me to get an evaluation of how well my heart is functioning—and if there are signs of coronary disease. He went on to explain that my family history indicates that I may well have inherited a tendency toward heart failure; that my forty years of smoking, my age, my relatively inactive lifestyle plus the spare tire I carry and the fact that I am diabetic all point to an elevated risk of coronary problems. The thing to do, he said, was to undergo a few tests “just to rule out some things.” His words raised some very unpleasant thoughts and I wondered as I sat and looked into his unblinking eyes, “It sounds as if my future is being ruled out!” I finally said, “OK, Doc.” Two weeks later the fun began.

I had received a lot of forms to complete and either return by mail or bring with me when I had my consultation. When I checked in to meet a cardiologist for the first time, I wisely brought a copy of all the forms I had previously mailed to the clinic and which, as I suspected, had vanished into the black hole of documents mailed to the clinic. After a wait of only forty-five minutes, my cheerful cardiologist swept into the room, consulted my medical history and told me the exact same thing as my family doctor—I am at risk and should be evaluated. In addition to the treadmill and nuclear tests, I should also have a sonogram of my carotid arteries. Two days will do the trick. “OK Doc.”

A week passed and I was again deep within the maze of offices, waiting areas, long counters and a lot of DO NOT ENTER doors. My handful

of new documents and a wait of thirty minutes saw me into a darkened room where an ominous machine hung over an examination table. A young kung-fu type pleasantly invited me to recline, relax, and face the wall while he applied a solution to my neck and began the sonogram. He warned me to expect strange noises. After his work was done I was allowed to wait for another thirty-five minutes, after which a very charming lady technician invited me into her room of giant treadmills and a huge imaging machine with a device that revolved slowly over the patient for thirteen minutes taking pictures, I was told. But not for me yet. I received an injection of some kind and was told to go and eat something greasy and come back in an hour. What a treat!

An hour later and I was tucked into the maw of the imaging machine where I remained quite still for thirteen minutes. “Come back tomorrow to finish the tests, but don’t have any caffeine or chocolate for those twenty-four hours.” Dang!

Second day; same handful of documents; same waiting room in the bowels of the building; a feeling that this was almost over. This time a man came to get me and I was seated back in that room with the monstrous treadmills, my chest was littered with sticky contact terminals and I was asked to sign two release forms. For what? I was again injected, hitched to a harness with lots of wires and informed rapidly of what was about to happen to me. Climb up and hold on. OK, here we go. Not so bad. I feel it speeding up. It’s being inclined—I’m going uphill. *Wow! I can’t walk this fast*—my breath is rasping and I hear from both sides “*Are you OK? Are you OK?*” One attendant keeps taking my blood pressure while the operator keeps jabbing at the keyboard of the infernal machine. When the third increase in speed and elevation starts, I begin to pray for relief. Finally it stops and I am guided to a chair. I answer all questions with a wheeze and a look of panic. I should have quit smoking twenty years sooner. After another greasy meal and another thirteen minutes in the maw of the imaging machine, I was allowed to escape. Now I have to wait two weeks for a consultation on my condition. I already know it—I’m a goner!