

In Sickness and in Health



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By Al Kaufman

I always enjoyed the part of the wedding vows that said “in sickness and in health.” It gave me images in my head of my wife Kelly and me alone and sun-scorched in the desert. Kelly is delirious from the heat and some sort of virus. Her head is on my lap as I offer her the last of the water from my canteen for her parched, cracked lips. With all the strength she can muster, she opens her deep blue eyes and whispers to me that I must go on and leave her behind. But I remind her of our wedding vows and tell her I will never leave her. It’s all so romantic.

Fast forward 11 years and two kids later. Two kids means one thing: twice the chance to catch any virus, infection, disease, or plague that circulates within a two hundred-mile radius. When we had just Hannah, we would miss the occasional plague, but now Blake happily brings home any sickness Hannah may have missed. And both kids do love to share.

As I write this, I am hoping that the drippings from my nose onto my keyboard do not short-circuit my computer. This is cold number 824 since Hannah was born, and there is nothing remotely romantic about it. I used to average about a cold a year. I’d work through them, but when I got home, I’d drink juice, lie down, and generally tell myself that it was going to be all right; that nobody on the planet had ever suffered through a cold as potent and severe as this one, yet I was strong enough to persevere. This combination of self-pity and self-adulation, as well as that king of all cold medications, NyQuil, saw me through my darkest days.

Now there is no time for that. My nose is a washerless spigot because I spent the past three days wiping Hannah's nose, forcing medicine down her throat, and letting her breathe on me because her throat hurt too much for her to sleep in her own bed. In three more days I'll be doing the same thing for Blake.

But if a cold is a mosquito, then the flu is a swarm of killer bees. However, unlike bees, who can be heard approaching, the flu always sneaks in at night, under darkness.

It was about three months ago when Blake started crying and asked to sleep in our bed. About one hour later, he wailed, said, "I'm gonna be..." and then puked all over our bed. Kelly and I had the routine down from there. She cleaned the child, I cleaned the bed. We have found that this routine works best because when Kelly has to clean up puke from a bed, she has a tendency to puke herself. While I have no problem cleaning the soiled sheets, I have difficulty holding and comforting a child covered in puke. Kelly, the quintessential mother, has no problems with this at all. We know our roles and make a good team.

But then our game plan revealed its fatal flaw: We let Blake back into our bed.

Of course, what else could we do? He was scared; he felt crummy; he wanted mommy. We couldn't say, "Sorry little guy, but we only have three sets of sheets for this bed and you're going to use them up in under three hours."

We tried covering the bed with towels, but Blake demonstrated good aim and managed to avoid these obstacles and find the sheets. I considered a plastic bag over his head, but Kelly thought that would get us in trouble with the law. So we stayed up all night cleaning Blake, sheets, and ourselves, while we waited in anticipation for our own stomachs to begin their rebellion.

First we had to go through the whole routine with Hannah, who caught it the next night. Then, after I'd been home from work for two days cleaning up after the kids' "spills," it hit me. They stayed home that one last day, just to make sure all the piping was functioning properly. They were stir crazy from being home so long and wanted to jump around and play.

Meanwhile, I was shivering in sweat pants under three blankets in a cold sweat. My head felt like it was the size of a Winnebago, inside which someone had turned the radio on with the bass pushed to the max. My throat felt like I had eaten shards of glass for lunch. Midgets were practicing aerobics in my stomach.

Then Blake and Hannah decided to run into the bedroom and play Jump on Daddy. Too weak to open my mouth to tell them to stop, I forced open one eye wide enough to see the clock. I realized Kelly would be home in five hours. "I can make it," I thought to myself. "If I just find my happy place and count to one million and back, she will be home. She will ride in on a majestic stallion. Her soft white dress will billow in the breeze. She will

be tanned and magnificent. With one hand she will whisk the kids away, with the other she will give me my beloved NyQuil. She will be my hero. It's all so romantic.”

Who cares if it was just the hallucinations that come with a 105 degree fever?

[Al Kaufman](#) has published essays, features, and reviews in The Austin Chronicle, Time Out New York-Kids, Up Against the Wall, Common Ties and Creative Loafing (Atlanta), among others. His fiction has appeared in The Duck and Herring Co. Pocket Field Guide. He lives in Decatur, Georgia, with his family and medicines.