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Before I checked into the hospital in San Angelo in July, the last time was June of 1928 as a newborn infant. The exact dismissal date of that stay is clouded by time and record – a blank spot, so to speak. Delay in recording my birth and convincing mother to go home complicates the facts. She refused to accept that she had a red-headed boy instead of the blue-eyed, blond-haired girl her heart was set on.

The Catholic sisters she had as nurses were unable to console her. As a precaution against jumping ship, she became the first mother registered in the hospital to be required to wear an identification bracelet. I remember the bracelet part well, as a cowboy at the ranch cut mine loose when it began to impede the circulation to my hand.

Years passed before I investigated the mystery of the time of my birth. One hospital birth certificate reads, "Boy baby, 8 June 1928, Tom Green County." Other records show vague references to: "Boy baby, 17 June, 1928." A strange affidavit signed by a family member swears he was present at the birth of a boy baby on the third week of June 1928 and visited said child in 1930 at St. John's hospital. Mother refused to talk.

A cowboy told me after I started to school that he knew the crows didn't hatch me, because he was pretty sure my mother broke all records for staying in the hospital for

childbirth. Might be imagination, but I think she told her bridge club I was an orphan.

Whatever the time between hospital confinements, it was long enough for a deep-seated phobia to develop. "Terror" is a better word than phobia. After I had advised the doctors and nurses that the only reason I wasn't hyperventilating was because my body was in such a state of shock that the nerve tips were curling up like a sea horse's tail, I saw they weren't interested in treating cowardice. (*Reader's Digest* reported years ago that holding your breath or holding in your stomach causes the nerve tips to curl. Further, that holding in the stomach endangers collapse of the rib cage upon exhaling.)

The surgeon was forewarned that treating me was like bringing in a terrified savage from the banks of the Amazon that'd never been strapped on a stainless steel table to be gassed under bright lights. I knew enough about hospitals to know I didn't want to be knocked out in a place so full of germs that the help was wearing face masks and rubber gloves.

The operation was scheduled to begin at 8:30 on a Monday. In what a lady called "a slight change in time," the waiting and apprehension portion of the ordeal was prolonged to three in the afternoon. Four of my sons and a friend stayed by my side. After the 14th hour passed without nourishment or liquids, I reminded my supporters that in our tenacious bloodlines our greatest of great grandfathers had

once trailed and shot an Indian horse thief at the exact location of the hospital. Before the story finished, nurses jerked off the four blankets warming my nervous chill for a ride into what was to become "the Great Darkness."

Hours later, severe hiccups awakened me from weird slumber in a blue-ceiling room. In one sequence, I was a two year-old playing on a rock wall behind St. John's, the hospital of my birth. In the next, two Catholic sisters were holding me up by my hind legs, pounding my back, trying to force me to spit up 10 rosary beads (one decade of Hail Mary's) I'd swallowed.

Spasms from the hiccups rocked the IV stand and shook the TV monitor off the bed. (Today's medicine treats hiccups using the old "hair of the dog" remedy. The kitchen rushes up leftover broccoli soup or cauliflower casserole to the sufferer.) In a fuzzy frame, I told my friend that I understood now why I felt at home on the St. John's grounds. Much later, she said I mumbled, "I didn't mean to swallow the prayer beads. I want to go home."

Sometime in the grassy haze, a nurse stuck a thermometer in my ear without realizing a sponge rubber earplug was there to drown the noise. Had not my son Ben stopped her, she was headed for the telephone to report 101 degrees of fever to the doctor. Once I regained consciousness, I saw that unless I wanted a deep ear operation, the earplugs had better be saved for hotel rooms.

Weeks later, I am still being waited on at home. Doctors' orders restrict lifting anything over 25 pounds, which is 13 pounds more than I can lift. But maybe I will recover stronger than before. I've learned the language of the sick. Covered in books and comfort, I report daily that I am "weak as a kitten," because I know full well how the pastureland feels in 103-degree heat.