

The Next Best Thing to Dying

by Jeff Goldberg

When I opened my eyes I was lying on the couch in my living room. I didn't remember how I got there? Had I fallen asleep? Had I staggered in drunk and passed out? I wasn't sure, but I didn't think so. I was lying rigidly with my arms bent at the elbows, as if I was holding an invisible shoebox above my chest.

The television was on, and when I turned towards it, I began to remember.

Bill Maher was doing his show. I always watched Bill Maher on Friday nights. He can be wickedly funny and, as I focused my attention on the TV, I remembered. I'd been laughing. This was a few years ago when the Republicans were demanding that women seeking abortions have trans-vaginal probes stuck up their who-has so that they could see an ultrasound of the cute little ball of goo whose precious life they were about to cut short. He'd told one probe joke and I'd started to laugh—hard, like “HUH! HUH! HUH!” And he'd followed it up quickly with another, and another.

I'd laughed so hard I'd passed out.

Needless to say, this was worrisome as well as bizarre.

The next day, I searched the Internet and discovered to my relief that I was not alone. My condition even had a name: “Seinfeld Syncope.” (Syncope means fainting in Latin.) The first case on record, published in 1979, concerned a 62-year-old male who'd had several fainting episodes while watching the TV show Seinfeld, particularly the antics of George Costanza.

“While laughing hysterically, the patient suffered sudden syncope with spontaneous recovery of consciousness within a minute. During one event, he fell face first into his evening meal and was rescued by his wife.”

This guy was lucky, because on closer examination he was found to have life-threatening blockages in his carotid arteries, which could have caused a stroke if he hadn't been treated. He lived, but Seinfeld wasn't as funny any more.

There were more recent accounts, but Seinfeld Syncope is considered to be extremely rare, with only 15 cases reported since the first one. In all the other cases the patients were found to be completely normal, with no other contributing cause except that they laughed really hard, creating enough pressure in their chest to trap blood in their heart, cutting off circulation to their brain. The result: brief loss of consciousness.

In almost all the other cases, the syndrome only occurred once, but in a few, as well as mine, it recurred while watching *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* with my daughter.

She'd been after me to watch the show for weeks, and because her boyfriend was away and we'd been having a special father-daughter bonding day, I agreed. We were in her room and I was sitting in a chair next to her bed.

In the episode, Deandra is committing insurance fraud by claiming a baby she'd given up for adoption had died. (If you haven't seen this one you should, but be careful.) To convince the insurance inspector, the guys from the bar help her stage a fake wake and funeral, but Frank (Danny Devito) doesn't think she looks sad enough and to make her cry he blows cayenne pepper into her face, causing her to start bleeding from her eyes.

"HUH! HUH! HUH!"

The next thing I knew, I was looking up at my daughter's face. It was very strange, because I seemed to be on the floor beside her bed. She was smiling at me with a puzzled look, but not alarmed.

Later, she told me that she hadn't been scared because as I lay on the ground unconscious I continued to laugh, gradually relaxing into a big smile as I came around a minute later.

Sometimes I think how wonderful it would be if dying could be like that. You'd laugh so hard you'd pass out, and keep on laughing as you go, until you breathed your last with a smile on your face.

If I could have one last wish, it would be to have Bill Maher and Danny DeVito by my death bed *spritzing* me to heaven.

