

# Aspirin Won't Help It

## Algis Budrys

Illustration by Kandis Elliot

Working behind a sandwich counter is like nothing else in the world. It's one of those jobs where you run like mad for an hour at a time, and, in between, you sit around and think you'll go nuts if you don't see another human face pretty soon. I figured out once that the best kind of counterman would be something like a werewolf; he'd be an octopus on roller skates during rush hours and a Martian intelligent vegetable the rest of the time.

But that's not what happened to me. What happened to me was like this:

It was a day about six months ago, with the weather pretty cold and dreary. Most of my customers had sniffles of one kind or another, and Doc, over in the drug half of the store, was doing a good business in all kinds of anti-cold gunk.

Now, half of a counterman's income comes from tips. So, even if you don't get your pay docked for being sick, you drag yourself in to work if you can possibly make it. But, round about right after coffee-break time, I had to admit I was really down with something. My ears were popping, my eyes were watery, my face felt hot, and my throat felt pretty sore. I finished washing up the last of the coffee-break crockery and leaned against the counter, looking across the store at the display cards tacked up all over Doc's counters. There must have been nearly a hundred brands of guaranteed cold cures.

Like most people, I guess I've tried just about everything, at one time or another. I used to depend on hot tea with lots of lemon. I found out lemon juice is an acid, which does your throat no good, so I switched to honey. I found out honey just provides a nice sugar base for bacteria to multiply in, so I switched to strong tea, plain--figuring on tannic acid, you know--but that didn't do any good, either. Then I ran through the drugstore gamut. I've had my kidneys jolted, my histamine suppressed, my heartbeat accelerated and my ears jangled with quinine. I've had my stomach acids neutralized, my alkalis washed out, and once, I've gotten serious burns under a sunlamp. I've gotten roaring drunk.

But, somehow, every time it hits you, you try again. So I went over to Doc, picked up a couple of packages of tissues for when my nose started to run, and sighed as well as I could with my respiratory system as clogged as it was.

"What's good this week, Doc?" I asked.

Doc looked at me hopelessly, made sure there weren't any customers around to hear him, and pointed at the tissues.

"I'm afraid you've already got it, Charley," he said. "Two dozen hankies is about the best. That and a few days in bed. Plenty of liquids, and several good books."

I nodded. "Pretty much what I was afraid of," I said. "You sure there isn't anything else?"

"Well, there are various kinds of alleviants which will cut down your misery. But no cures. Besides, it looks to me that what you've got is one of these virus things. Catch them early enough, and you're all right. But I'm afraid it's a little too late for that, in your case. You're due for twenty-four hours of moderately high fever. I'd advise you to go home and go to bed."

I didn't like that idea at all. So I thanked him for his advice and went back to work.

Which was a mistake.

Noon rush was a nightmare. It felt like I was walking through glue, and my eyes didn't seem to be focused right. I'd reach for white and bring up rye, I poured coffee all over my hand instead of into cups and I swear I dropped a dozen glasses of water, thinking I had them down on the counter and missing by inches. Luckily, they fell over towards the inside, instead of at the customers.

It was one of those days, too, when lots of little things go wrong at once. The duckboards kept slithering around underfoot, and the refrigerator door kept popping open; and the knife was never where I left it.

By the time that was over, I had one steady customer less and no really satisfied ones. I had maybe a buck in tips, as against my usual three or four, and there were grease burns and cuts all over me, to say nothing of the scalds and the big splotches of spilled stuff all over my apron. I was running perspiration, and my voice sounded weird.

I'm stubborn, but not suicidal. I made a pass at cleaning up after the rush, decided even that wasn't worth it, and called the union for a replacement. The minute he came in the door, I had my apron off, and five minutes later I was on my way home, huddled up in a corner seat on the subway, counting stops, wishing miserably that I was already home. As a matter of fact, I did make it in what seemed like an unusual hurry, even for an off-hour train, but I wasn't in much of a mood for excessive gratitude. I just figured Lady Luck was making it up to me, and let it go at that.

I dragged myself up the stairs, opened the apartment door, and headed straight for the bedroom. Arlene looked up from the TV, saw the shape I was in, and headed for the kitchen to squeeze oranges and make tea. I sort of raised one hand and said "H'lo," but that was the best I was up to in the way of conversation.

I got inside the bedroom on willpower alone. The spots in front of my eyes were clotting together in big clouds, and every time I moved my head, it felt like I was falling.

I had it. Oh, I had it, and I was pretty darned grateful when I felt those crisp sheets all around me and a good soft pillow under my head. I pulled the blankets up around my neck and just lay there with my eyes closed, breathing.

When Arlene came into the room, carrying a tray, she made a surprised sound.

"Gee!" she said, "you got that bed made in a hurry. I didn't even see you going in the linen closet."

"Huh ?"

"Well, today's laundry day. I stripped the bed, and I didn't make it yet. Don't you remember?"

I shook my head. Not that it made any difference. I'd been moving in a fog all afternoon--if she told me I'd come home following a blue giraffe, it wouldn't have surprised me.

"Hm-m-m. Well," she said, setting the tray down and looking a little worried, "maybe I'd better call Dr. Marten."

*And what was he going to do for me?* I shook my head again. "No sense to that," I croaked. "I'll be all right tomorrow."

She felt my head. "I wouldn't be so sure. You're running a fever."

This was not news to me. My arms and legs felt they were floating a quarter-inch off the bed.

She felt my head again. "You're pretty sick. It won't hurt to have the doctor come in and look at you."

Well, maybe . . . At least, he might be able to knock the fever down. So I said all right, and Arlene bent over to kiss me on the forehead before she went out to the phone.

I came up to meet her.

This is tricky, and I'd better be specific. I didn't push myself up, or bend forward, or raise my head. I just sort of . . . rose. That is, her lips touched my forehead sooner than they should have.

She jumped a little, but she didn't really notice anything. For one thing, she had her eyes closed.

As for me, all this just proved how delirious I was. After all, I hadn't moved, and I didn't notice myself moving. It's just that, without anything in particular being done by me or to me, my head was three inches higher above the pillow than it had been.

So I just took advantage of things to kiss the tip of her nose, too, and then I was back down on the pillow. Like I've said, Arlene didn't seem to notice anything, either, but she stopped just inside the door and gave me a very puzzled look just before she went out to call the doctor.

The doctor couldn't make it for another hour or so, and Arlene had to go out and do the marketing, so I was all alone for a while. I lay in bed, not thinking of anything in particular. I wondered about how soon it would be before I could get back to work, and whether I could possibly get the Workingmen's Compensation Board to see this my way, but nothing important happened.

Except that, just before the doctor came in, I remembered drinking the tea and orange juice--yeah, I know that's an acid, too, but Arlene believes in it--and, when I looked, the cup and the glass were empty, but I didn't remember reaching over to pick either of them up.

So, Dr. Marten took my temperature and pulse, thumped my chest, looked down my throat and in my ears, and shrugged.

"Some kind of virus, Charley," he said. "Looks like one of those twenty-four-hour jobs. Lots of liquids, plenty of bed rest, and I can promise you a fairly miserable night. You'll probably come out of it sometime tomorrow night, be weak as a kitten the day after, and feel fine the day after that. Hold out your arm."

He had a hypodermic full of some kind of antibiotic, and he swabbed my arm with a hunk of cotton soaked in alcohol.

Now, understand me, I'm no sissy. I was night counterman in a little one-man hamburger tower near St Nicholas Park for a year and a half, and before that I worked down near the docks, in one of the loneliest diners in Manhattan. I've been in a fight or two, and there isn't a counterman alive that hasn't cut and burned himself pretty badly, at one time or another, and known it was going to happen again.

But I don't like hypodermics. I darned near fainted when Arlene and I went down for our blood test before we got married.

I did not want that needle in me.

Never ask me what happened, because I don't exactly know. All of a sudden, it seemed like my fever was worse--much worse--a *lot* worse. I grayed out completely. I wasn't unconscious, but I couldn't seem to get my eyes working at all, and I was thrashing pretty badly on the bed.

I heard glass break, and Doc Marten cursed a blue streak that ended in a kind of frightened yelp. That was when I heard what sounded like something tearing. My bed began to roll, and there was a sound like running feet. The doctor, I guess. Then I heard plaster fall, a door slam, and my bed rammed up against something.

My eyes cleared.

The room looked like a war had been fought in it. Plaster *had* fallen, in patches off the ceiling in a trail that led from beside where my bed had been to the door. The doctor's bag was upside down in a corner, at the end of another trail of vials, bottles, pillboxes, a stethoscope, a couple of hypodermics, and miscellaneous impedimenta. The orange juice glass and the teacup had apparently been flung at the wall--right past the doctor's head, I'd say, if he'd been running for the door just ahead of that cascade of plaster, and the tray was on the floor right beside the door. As far as I could tell, he'd made it outside before it hit.

But the most interesting part was my bed, which was up against the door and holding fast, in spite of its casters, against the doctor's thumping from the other side.

I felt awful weak.

Dr. Marten was banging on the door pretty hard. I was starting to climb out and pull the bed back when I heard Arlene's voice. It sounded pretty frightened, and pretty worried, too.

"Charley? Charley, what happened? Are you all right?"

I couldn't really answer either half of that. "I'm all right, I guess," I said back to her.

"Please let me in, Charley."

I started to tell her I was trying, but just then the bed began to roll all by itself. I yelled and got my legs aboard, and we rolled back to where the bed belonged, and stopped. I sat there, not too sure whether I dared to try getting out of it, with the blankets up around my shoulders, wondering what the devil *had* happened.

The door opened cautiously, and Arlene stuck her head in the room. She looked around and gasped at the shape it was in, but she was mostly worried about me.

"Charley! What did you do to Dr. Marten?" She came across the room and started to get too close to the bed. I didn't think that was such a good idea, but, on the other hand, what could I say? So I just waved her back, and I guess I looked pretty mysterious about it.

"Charley? What is it, dear?"

I shook my head and put my finger up to my lips. The thought had occurred to me that the bed might do something if I talked about it.

"Charley?" Arlene wasn't trying to get near me any more. She was backing away a little. I could see Dr. Marten standing uncertainly in the doorway behind her, looking at me with his head cocked. His jacket was rumpled, and his tie was off at an angle. His shirt was gone.

The bed seemed to make a threatening motion toward him, and he stepped back quickly. Arlene jumped.

I huddled on the bed, feeling miserable. I could see Arlene was pretty scared, and it had to be my fault. I didn't know how--I hadn't *done* anything--but that was the way it figured.

"I'm . . . look, honey, I'm sorry," I said. "Don't be scared."

She was looking at the bed with a very peculiar expression on her face.

"You didn't do that," she said.

"Do what?"

"Make the bed move. I was watching you. You didn't jump or anything. Wait a minute."

She got on her hands and knees across the room and looked under the bed. "Pull the covers up," she said. "They're in the way."

I tugged at them, and they pulled clear. Arlene grunted and stood up. "No motor." She looked at me thoughtfully.

I didn't quite get it.

Dr. Marten was back in the doorway. "Mrs. Holloway, I think it might be best if you came back here," he said, looking at me significantly.

Arlene shook her head impatiently.

"Mrs. Holloway, I'm afraid I've got to insist."

She waved a hand at him and muttered, "Sure, doctor, sure."

"Honey," I said hesitantly, "you mad at me?"

She shook her head. "I wonder what kind of bug you caught," she muttered.

"Mrs. Holloway! I appreciate the fact that you love your husband, but he's potentially dangerous. Any man in sufficient delirium to hurl glasses and . . . and other things . . . at another individual, and then attempt to run him down with a bed . . . tear his shirt off--" he finished up with a mutter.

I did all that?

Marten looked like he was getting mad. Arlene looked at me. "You stay in bed, Charley," she said. "I'll be in to see you after a while. I want to talk to the doctor."

"All right, honey," I said, feeling kind of low. But the bed seemed to have settled down, and I was pretty sick.

I remember, in between going off to sleep because of the fever, Dr. Marten's voice coming pretty loud through the closed door.

"Mrs. Holloway, what you're suggesting is ridiculous! I'll admit there are many types of unclassified virus, but a parapsychogenetic infection is absolute nonsense!"

Arlene said something back--I couldn't catch it, because she was using her low voice, but it's her low voice that's the grim and practical one.

A couple of times, Marten mentioned Bellevue, but he didn't mention it much.

Though I do seem to remember the room going wild again when a couple of strange men in white coats tried to get to me.

I don't know, for sure. The fever kept getting worse, and I kept going to sleep or passing out. I kept waking up, all through the night, sometimes because Arlene was sitting on the bed and stroking my forehead, but mostly because there was so much noise out in the street and all through the neighborhood. I kept tossing and turning, and outside there'd be noises like high winds.

I'm certain I heard glass break lots of times, and I knew Dr. Marten tried to get in the room once to pick up his bag and stuff, because they chased him out through the apartment, down the hall and down the stairs, and all the way out into the street. At least, I *think* I recognized the voice yelling for help, down in the street.

When I woke up, the fever was gone. The bed was soaked with perspiration, and I felt limp, as though something had cut my tendons. But that was just weakness, because, by mid-afternoon, I could walk around a little. I looked out the window, and all the television

antennas were down.

The neighborhood looked good, too--as if every speck of dirt that had been accumulating for a hundred years had disappeared. The streets were clean, and the air was crystal clear. Down on the corner, the pool hall that I knew was just a front for a lot of other things was being boarded up. It looked like a bulldozer had gone through it.

I looked at Arlene, who was cleaning up the room, and she looked at me "You're going to have to let Dr. Marten examine you," she said. "Just to prove you're O. K."

"Uh-huh." I knew what she meant by that, too. All the traces of the delirium would have to be gone.

"Charley--"

"Yeah, honey ?"

"I'd like to move the piano. Sort of change the living room around a little. I'm tired of the way it is."

Damn! *I hate* moving furniture. Say "piano" to me, and I duck instinctively.

Then I realized what she was doing, and I looked out in the living room.

I don't use it. I've got it, but I don't think Dr. Marten would describe it as anything but a chronic, systematic delusion. If he had to, he'd in all probability fall back on "mass hypnosis."  
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So I don't use it, except around the house to help Arlene, and maybe keep the neighborhood touched up a bit. It's no good to me at all, when I'm working, because I've got anywhere from one to twenty people sitting in a row, watching me. About the best I can do is, during a really bad rush, when everybody's yelling for service and everybody's intent on their own order, I can, if I'm careful let the toast butter itself.

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