

New Nonfiction by Jennifer Crystal: An Excerpt from One Tick Stopped the Clock



Chapter 12 of *One Tick Stopped the Clock*

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Some edits made for context

“Slow down, Mom! I want to get there alive.”

I don’t think my mother heard me. She rolled through a stop sign and swung a hard right at the hospital entrance, swerving as we roared up to the ambulance bay where she slammed the car into park.

“Mom, we can’t park here...”

But she was already out of the car, sprinting through the automatic doors, shouting, “Help! My daughter needs help!”

That September afternoon had started like any other during my multi-year convalescence from Lyme disease and other chronic illness. Too sick to work or take care of myself, I’d had to give up my independent life and, at age twenty-five, move back with my parents. Every afternoon, I left my sickbed and came downstairs when my mom arrived home from teaching. We made snacks as we talked. She had her usual flatbread with

margarine, and I mixed banana slices and peanut butter in a bowl.

"I can't believe you like that," my mom said. "Such a sticky mess."

"Yum!" I put a big glob in my mouth, flipping the spoon over and dragging it across my tongue for affect. "Much better than that cardboard you're eating." I scrunched my nose and ate another spoonful. "How was your day?"

"Long, and it was only the second day of school."

"Only 178 more to go," I joked, my mouth full and sticky.

"And to think they already made us have a faculty meeting today."

Suddenly I felt flushed and shaky, like I sometimes did before my blood sugar crashed, a symptom of the tick-borne illness babesiosis. Beads of sweat formed on my temples.

"The nerve, keeping us so late on the second afternoon—"

I stood up, feeling lightheaded and dizzy. My blood sugar couldn't be low; I was in the middle of eating. But I felt like I might faint. "I'm sorry to cut you off Mom, but I have to go lie down. Right now."

Alarmed, my mother stood up, too. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I don't know, I just suddenly really don't feel well."

I stumbled to the edge of the kitchen, holding on to the wall as I took the one step down into the den, then turned to the couch on my right and flung myself over its arm. I was gripped by a searing abdominal pain that made me scream and writhe.

"What? What's wrong?" My mother reached towards me, but I rolled away.

"Oh my God, Mom, it's like someone is stabbing me with a jagged chainsaw."

"What? Where? Is it your stomach?"

I gasped for breath, clutching the right side of my abdomen.

"Right...here...below my...rib cage."

"Maybe it's your appendix!"

"No, the appendix is lower." I moved my hand down on my abdomen to show where the appendix is. "This is up here." I rubbed the area below my rib cage. I felt like my insides were being sliced into little pieces. I threw myself off the couch onto the beige carpet, trying to get away from the pain.

"Please Mom, make it stop. Make it stop!"

"Okay, okay. You're okay. Here, just try to sit up." My mom crouched over me, trying to pull me upright.

"No! That hurts more!" I thrashed on the floor, kicking my legs from side to side.

"Let's call the doctor. What's the number? Do you know the number?"

Sucking in my breath to hold in the pain, I slowly called out my doctor's number as my mom dashed into the kitchen to get her phone. She waved her free hand, trying to shush my moaning so she could hear. She walked away into another part of the house for what felt like an unbearably long time, then finally ran back into the den. "They said to take you to the E.R."

Panting, I tried to pull myself up on the couch, but slid back down in pain. "Can you go get my purse? It's on my bedroom floor. We're going to need my insurance card and medication list."

My mother ran off, taking the stairs two at a time. She raced back through the den with my bag in hand and flung open the

door to the garage. "Oh no. Oh no!"

"What?"

"The car's not here. Oh my God, I forgot, Elizabeth has the car. She went to Mackenzie's house." My sixteen-year-old sister had just gotten her license, and borrowed my mother's car whenever she could to go to a friend's house.

Pain and fear seized me again. I pushed them aside to say, as calmly as I could, "Okay, well Mackenzie only lives five minutes away. Call Elizabeth and tell her to come right home."

For an excruciating five or maybe even ten minutes, I thrashed and howled while my mother paced in front of me, wringing her hands and peering out the window. "She'll be here any minute," she kept saying.

Finally, we heard the engine in the garage and car doors slam. Elizabeth and Mackenzie tumbled into the house. They both stopped short when they saw me. Mackenzie's eyes grew wide. She backed away, as if whatever I had might be catching. "Oh my God, Jen."

My mom grabbed the keys out of Elizabeth's hands. "Give Jen your flip flops. Help me get her into the car."

I screamed as my mother drove. When we got to a crucial turn at the edge of town, she said, "Maybe I should take you to a hospital in Hartford." If we turned right, we could get on the highway and be there in twenty minutes. But I couldn't hold out that long.

"No," I whimpered. "It hurts too much. Just go to the local one." Another hospital was a few blocks away. It didn't have as good a reputation, but this was an emergency. How bad could it really be?

After my mom slammed the car into park in the ambulance bay of the closer hospital, I stumbled after her into the E.R.,

hunched over at almost a ninety-degree angle.

The triage nurse sat us in office chairs across from her desk, as if we were here to open a bank account or discuss our taxes. I clutched my abdomen as I rocked back and forth on the seat.

"Insurance card?"

I reached into my purse and handed the nurse my insurance card, my license, and my medication list. "Here, everything you need is right here. Can I please just see a doctor? I'm in so much pain. My mom can go over all this stuff with you."

The nurse peered at me over her wire rim glasses, sizing me up. "On a scale of one to ten, how bad is the pain?"

"Eleven!" I hugged myself harder. "Please, can't you just get a doctor?"

The nurse sighed. "I have to assess the situation first."

"What's to assess? I feel like I'm being stabbed in the gut. Look, I have a PICC line in." I showed her my left arm, where a peripherally inserted catheter ran from my elbow to my heart, pumping antibiotics to kill the Lyme disease bacteria. "I'm afraid it might be related to that."

"Why do you have a PICC line?"

"Intravenous antibiotics for late-stage neurological Lyme Disease."

The nurse raised her eyebrows. I realized this might be one of the hospitals that followed certain protocols that didn't approve of the use of long-term antibiotics. I did not have it in me to fight about Lyme right now. I needed my acute issue treated, stat.

My mother chimed in, "Look, she's really in pain. Please can't

we just get her to a doctor?"

The nurse sighed again. "Ma'am, I'm just doing my job."

Holding my head in my hands, I started sobbing. The nurse gave me an exasperated glare.

I screeched, "It hurts. It hurts. It hurts so much." *Dear God, I am screaming in their faces and still no one hears me. Please help me. I don't want to die.*

Finally, I was brought to an exam room, but still there was no doctor in sight.

"Can't you give her something for the pain?" My mother pleaded with whoever was in the room, someone in pink scrubs.

"We can't give her anything until a doctor sees her."

"Then, please get a doctor," my mother cried.

"They're all busy with other patients," the woman replied. "There are several people in more serious condition than your daughter."

I grabbed my mother's arm. "Oh my God, Mom, I can't take the pain. Please do something." It felt like whatever I'd been stabbed with was now stuck in my stomach, cutting deeper each time I moved or breathed.

My mother brushed my hair off my sweaty forehead. "She said they can't give you anything until the doctor comes."

"That's not how it worked on *E.R.* People came in screaming and Dr. Ross immediately ordered a liter of Lidocaine."

The sides of my mother's mouth twitched in what would have been a smile if this were a different situation. She continued to rub her hand across my forehead. "This isn't TV. George Clooney isn't going to walk in here."

"Believe me, I know. He would never leave me lying here in pain."

"We should have gone to the other hospital."

I knew my mother was right, but I was too distressed for should-haves. I whined, "Just get the pain out of me. Get it out of me!"

The woman in pink scrubs turned around in alarm. "Are you pregnant?"

"Are you kidding me? No, I'm not pregnant. I'm in pain. My stomach hurts. I don't know what's wrong with me, but I'm definitely not pregnant. I meant get the *pain* out of me. Not a baby."

"Are you sure? Maybe we should do a urine test."

"OH, FOR FUCK'S SAKE!" Instinctively, I sat up, which only made it hurt more. "Look, I've been bedridden for almost two years, okay? Two years. Alone. There is no way I am pregnant. Please go get a doctor!"

The woman hurried out of the room, and miraculously, a doctor appeared.

"What seems to be the problem?" he asked. He was thin and young with cropped dark hair and a few days' worth of stubble. I wondered how long he'd been awake.

Holding my stomach, I told him what had happened. He nodded and looked at my chart, but never at me. Then he pressed on my abdomen. I yelped.

"That hurts?"

"Yes, that hurts! All around that area. The pain has not let up."

"Hmm. Well, let's get an x-ray. A nurse will come in shortly

to take you.”

“Just try to breathe,” my mother soothed as she rubbed my head. “Let’s do some Lamaze.”

I wanted to laugh, but it hurt too much. “Mom, I really am not pregnant.”

“I know. But you’re screaming like you’re in labor. So maybe labor breathing will help.” My mom demonstrated by taking a big inhale and then slowly blowing out her breath in spurts. “Breathe with the pain.”

I sucked in my breath each time the pain gripped me, then tried to blow it out slowly. The technique didn’t seem to do much since my pain was so constant, but by the time a nurse came to wheel me to x-ray, the intensity had lessened.

“Feeling better?” the nurse asked as she positioned me in front of the x-ray machine.

“The pain has decreased.”

“Well, you’re still all clammy,” she said. “Somethin’s definitely cookin’.”

What the doctor decided was cooking turned out to be a huge pile of shit.

“I read your x-ray and I see a lot of...um...stool, in your colon,” he said to my stomach, refusing to meet my eye.

“I’m not constipated. I have a lot of medical issues, but constipation has never been one of them.”

“Well, that’s what this is,” he said matter-of-factly. “I’m going to send you home with a laxative. That should help. You can follow up with your doctor tomorrow.”

"That's not stool," my doctor said when I got him on the phone later. "I've got your x-ray in front of me. Those are gallstones."

"Gallstones? Like in my gallbladder?"

"Exactly. I don't know how they missed this," my doctor continued. "These gallstones are huge. The pain you felt was one of them trying to squeeze through the bile duct. Once it did, the pain stopped. Were you eating something fatty?"

"Yes, peanut butter."

"Oh, that'll do it. The gallbladder processes fat. You basically set off an attack."

Vaguely, I remembered that when my doctor had offered me the option of the PICC line, he'd mentioned the rare risk of the medicine causing gallstones. "Rare" hadn't seemed a likely scenario, then. I ran my free hand through my hair, twirling it around my finger. "So, what do I do now?"

"I'm going to call in some medication that might shrink the stones. Take that tonight, but then I want you to go see a specialist tomorrow and get an ultrasound. You can't play around with this."

The next day I drove to see a specialist at a hospital about an hour away, near my dad and stepmom Janet's house. During the time that I was sick, I often migrated between my two childhood homes. "These stones are the size of rolls of duct tape. Your gallbladder needs to come out immediately," the specialist said. He scheduled me for surgery the following morning.

"I'll come," my mom offered when I called to update her.

"It's okay. Janet can take me."

"What about when you wake up from surgery? When you have the

shakes and throw up?" My mom had been with me after four eye surgeries as a child, and after knee surgery as a young adult when I'd been a die-hard skier, before being sidelined tick-borne illness. No one knew how to care for me afterwards like she did. Janet would do her best, but my mom was the one who had always held my hand, rubbed my head, and told me it was going to be okay.

Still, all those surgeries had happened when I was younger. I was twenty-seven years old. I felt like I should be able to get through this on my own. "I can handle it," I told my mom. "You have school. You can't take a day off during the first week."

"Of course I can. I'll take a personal day."

I hesitated. I really wanted my mom there.

"Besides," my mom cut into my thoughts, "I have Cubby."

Cubby was a stuffed bear cub that my mom had given me before my first eye surgery. I was only nine years old at the time, so the nurses had let me keep him in the bed with me right up to the operating room doors and had given him back to me when they woke me in recovery. Cubby had been with me for all my surgeries. It started to feel silly bringing a stuffed animal to the hospital as I got older, but he'd become a good luck charm.

"Gotcha there, don't I," my mom said.

I sighed. "Are you sure?"

"I already put Cubby by the door."

That night in my room at my dad and Janet's, I slept on my stomach, which was difficult because of the PICC line. I woke up every few minutes either worried that the port had come

loose or that a gallbladder attack was about to happen. I prayed each time I awoke. Someone must have heard me because I made it through the night without incident.

In the morning I infused my antibiotics, then put on a button-down shirt, knowing from experience that I would be too out of it later to pull a regular shirt over my head. I French braided my hair, which would keep it off my face but still allow it to lie flat under the surgical cap. I had both hands tangled behind my head, halfway through the braid, when Janet called up to me, "Jen, please come downstairs."

I dropped my hands. My hair tumbled loose as the braid fell apart. I walked down to the kitchen, where Janet greeted me with a somber face. "Your mom just called. She's been in a car accident. She's fine, but she's going to be late. She'll meet us at the hospital."

My heart started to race. "Is she really okay? How bad was the accident?" I studied Janet's stoic face.

"Just a fender bender. She's fine."

I wanted to believe Janet but wondered if she was just telling me that because I had to focus on the surgery. She didn't say anything more as we drove to the hospital. Terrible scenarios ran through my head as we checked in, went through pre-op, and waited for the anesthesiologist. The clock on the wall ticked off several hours as we waited, but there was still no sign of my mom.

"She's fine," Janet kept saying.

My mom was still not there by the time they wheeled me into surgery.

"I'm nervous," I told the anesthesiologist.

"That's normal." He fiddled with my IV. "This first dose I'm going to give you is like a glass of wine. You're going to

feel great in a few minutes.”

“But it’s not just about the surgery. My mom got in a car accident and she’s not here. I don’t know if she’s going to be okay...”

The next thing I remember, a nurse was calling my name. “Jennifer...Jennifer...” People rarely called me by my full name, and it felt strange to hear it.

Something else felt different, too. I didn’t feel shaky. I didn’t feel like I was out of control from the medicine coursing through my body. There was a dull ache in my abdomen, but otherwise, I felt completely calm. In my head, a voice softly said, “You’re stronger than you think, Jen Crystal.” Maybe it was my own subconscious. Maybe it was God. Maybe it was George Clooney. Whoever it was, I knew, in that moment, that I’d survived the surgery and I was going to survive whatever else was coming, too.

“My mom,” I said to the nurse. “Is my mom alright? Is she here?”

“I don’t know,” the nurse replied. “I’m not sure who your mom is. But someone gave me this and told me to give it to you as soon as you woke up.” She held out Cubby.

Only then did I start to cry.