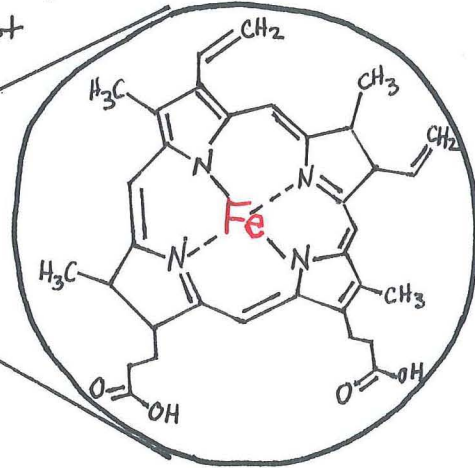
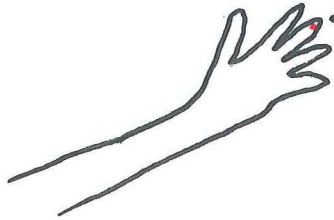


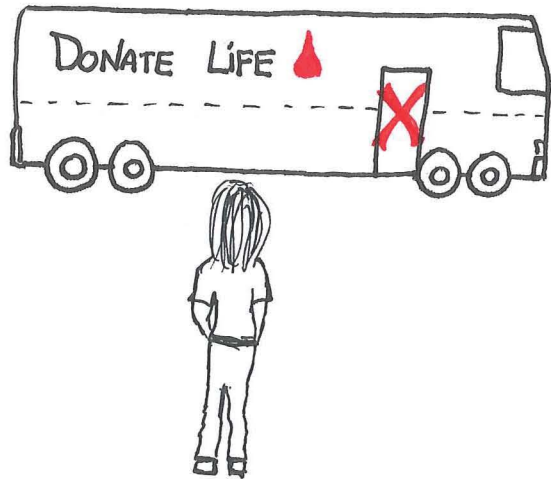
When you go in to give blood,
the first step is a finger-prick
test to measure your hemoglobin.
In order to donate, you must have at least
12.5 grams of hemoglobin per deciliter
of your blood.



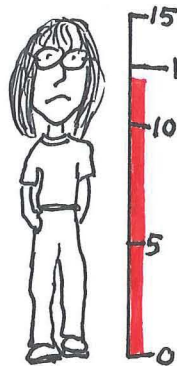
Hemoglobin is the protein that carries oxygen
around your body - and hemoglobin requires iron,
which makes your blood red. The finger-prick test
looks to see if you have enough for people in trauma,

Who will receive your **blood**.

The first time I tried to donate blood was in 1998, when a Blood Mobile came to my college campus. After the finger prick, I was turned away because I didn't meet the hemoglobin threshold. Not enough iron in my veins.



In the years since, I tried to donate blood maybe six times, but always failed this first test. Women and vegetarians are commonly slightly anemic, and since I am both, finding out I had low iron wasn't shocking.



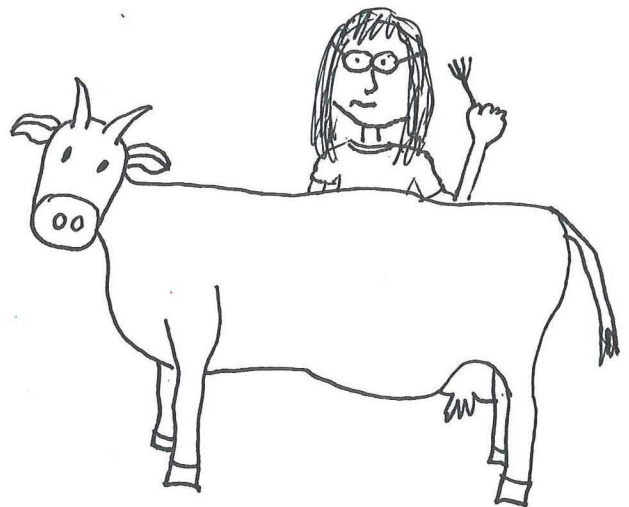
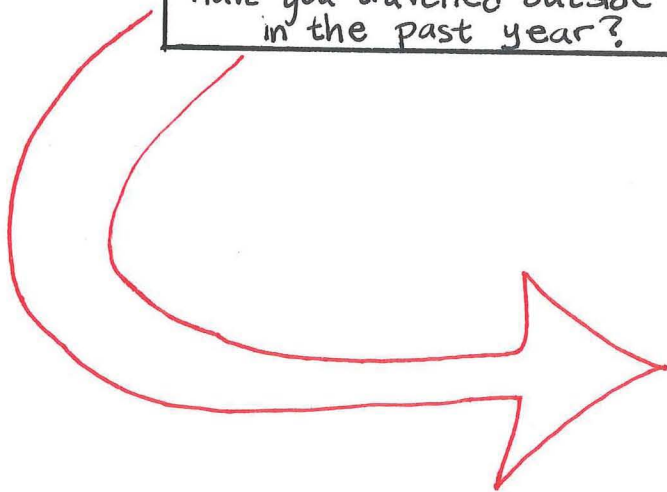
But it kept me from even trying to donate blood again for another decade.

I figured, why waste everyone's time?
No need to strain blood bank resources
by making them do my intake, ask me
all of the eligibility questions, prick
my finger, and then have to send
me away with advice to eat more **red meat**.



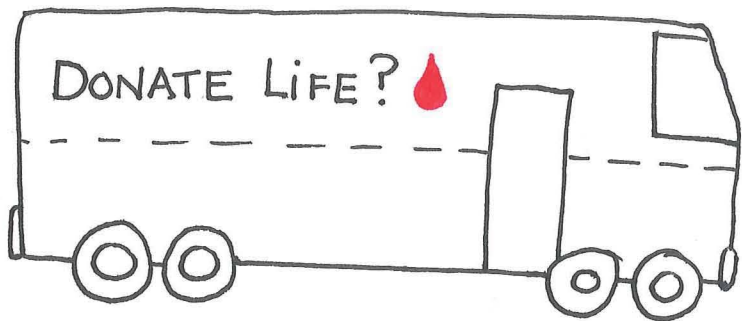
BLOOD DONOR ELIGIBILITY

	Yes	No
Are you taking antibiotics?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Are you pregnant or breastfeeding?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Do you have a cold or flu-like symptoms?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Have you been in prison in the past year?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Have you ever injected a recreational drug?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Did you live in the UK for a total of six months or more between 1980-1996?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Have you gotten a tattoo in the past 6 months?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Have you been cancer-free for at least 12 months?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you had surgery in the past 12 months?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Are you a man who has sex with men?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Have you travelled outside the US or Canada? in the past year?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>



And secretly, but more importantly...

Are you afraid of us putting a big damn
needle in your arm and taking your blood? Yes No



With my cozy "slightly anemic" label, I could honorably walk on by whenever the Blood Mobile came, assuring myself that even if I went in they would turn me away due to low iron.



Don't even try.

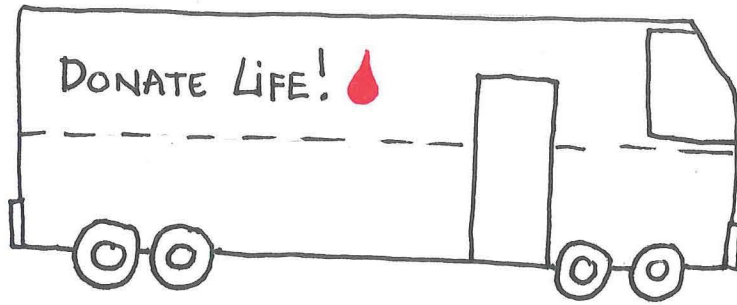
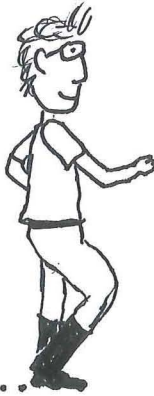


No needles necessary.

...Not even the teeny finger-prick.



New decade!
New hair!
Same style!



It wasn't due to my years of guilt about hiding from the blood drive people.

It wasn't about saving lives.

It wasn't even wanting to get out of the office for half an hour.

It was because of comics.

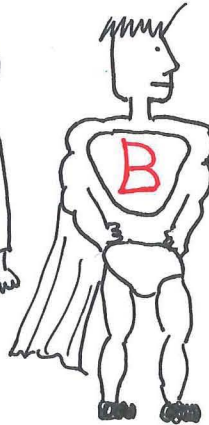
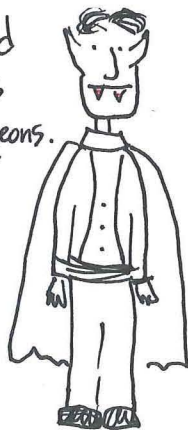
The reason I made an appointment was a coworker who sent daily blood donations comics in the weeks leading up to the Blood Mobile's visit, in emails encouraging us all to donate.

The characters ranged from vampires & bats to superheroes & surgeons.

They weren't profound or moving.

Most weren't even particularly funny.

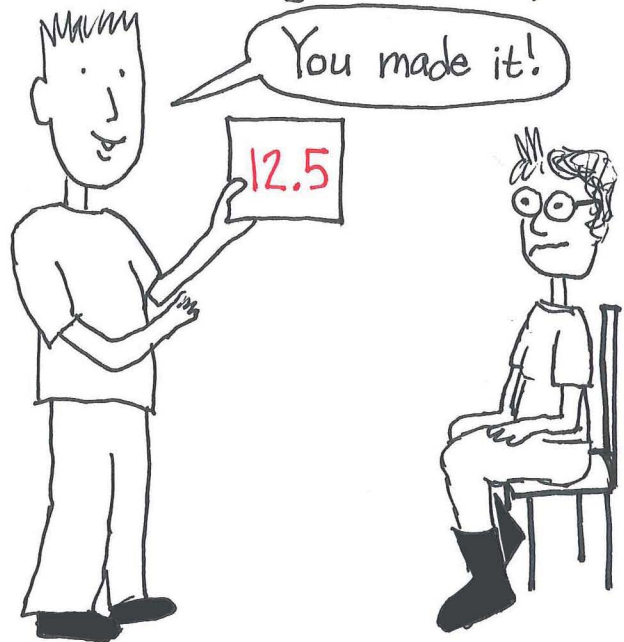
But comics are my bag.



And the daily reminder that blood saves lives (yawn) combined with line drawings & punch lines were what it took

to get me out the door.

On April 29, 2015, when they pricked my finger and measured my hemoglobin, the tech exclaimed:

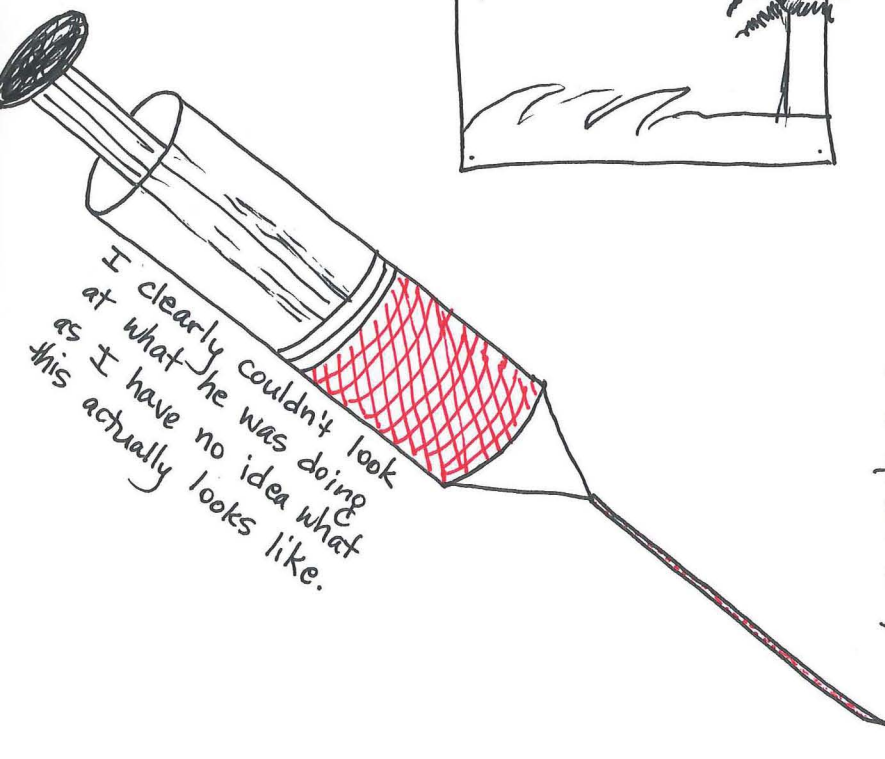
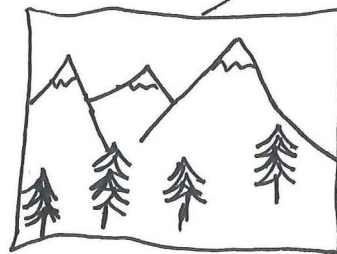
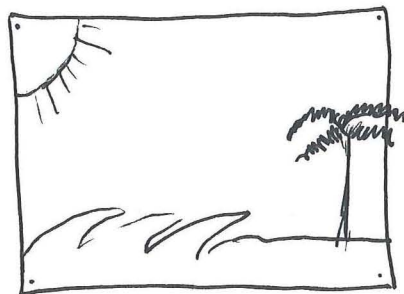


My blood that day had the exact minimum 12.5 grams of hemoglobin per deciliter allowed for donation.

I was finally eligible to give one pint of whole blood.

I fake celebrated with the tech as needle fear set in.

No getting out of it this time.

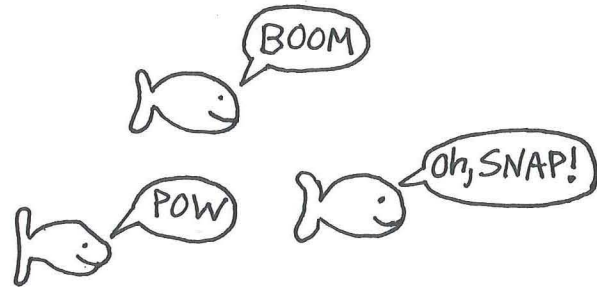


I clearly couldn't look at what he was doing as I have no idea what this actually looks like.

As he put the needle in my arm, I did everything I could to distract myself from the horror. I lay on my back, staring at the landscape photos taped to the ceiling and at the real sunshine coming in the blinds and quietly **hoped that I wouldn't die.**

The poke of the donation needle turned out to be about as minimal as the finger-prick. The tech was excellent. I barely felt a thing. Eight minutes later, I was done.

They gave me goldfish crackers and orange juice. I felt like a superhero. Saving lives, no bigs. More impressive, I survived a big damn needle.

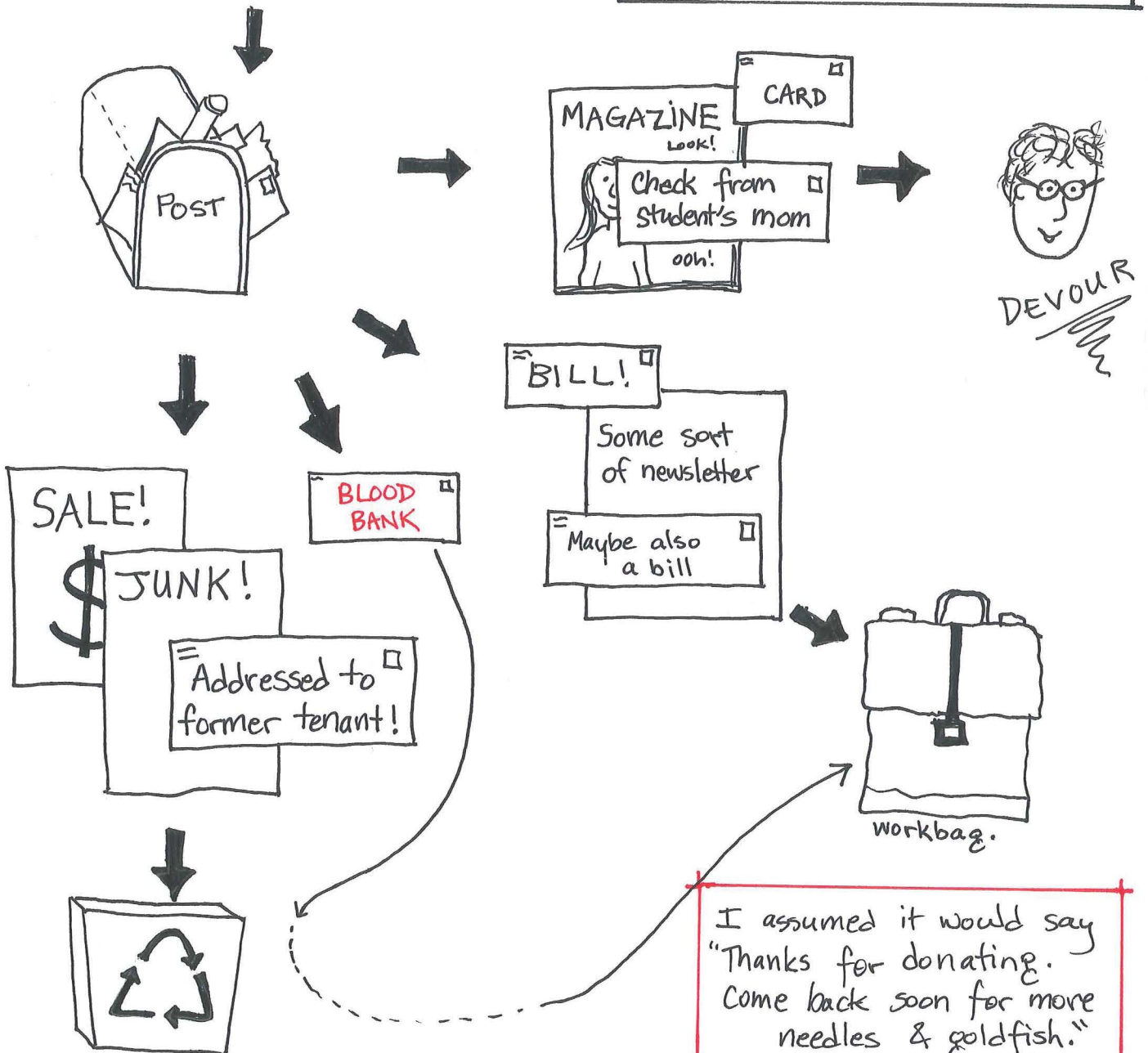


Afterward, I emailed my colleague to thank him for inspiring me to try again. Now I planned to go down every time the Blood Mobile came by. I wanted him to know how much I appreciated his motivation via humor.

I felt like a million bucks, joining the ranks of blood donors. I would never have bothered without his comics. Cartoons made me into a big damn hero.



On May 24, I returned home after a week in Texas for my brother's wedding. Among my ads, magazines, and real mail was a letter from the Blood Bank. I started to put in in the recycling, but at the last second diverted it to the "open eventually" pile.



Two days later,
I got around to opening
all of the "eventually" envelopes.

Blood Bank

May 18, 2015

Dear Donor:

As you know, the Blood Bank routinely performs a number of laboratory tests on all donated blood. The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information about the test results and to recommend that you show this letter to your physician.

At the time of your 04/29/15 donation, the first test was positive for the presence of hepatitis C antibody (anti-HCV). The second test, a nucleic acid test (NAT) for the presence of hepatitis C virus (HCV) genetic material, was also positive. These tests most likely indicate that you are infected with hepatitis C.



First Thought.

This is a mistake.

Second thought.

I almost threw this letter away without opening it.

Third thought.

It MUST be a mistake.

Fourth thought.

I am going to die.

Small, sharp phrases jumped from the letter to my head and wedged there on repeat, along with my brain's helpful running commentary.

Your blood proved reactive for the following tests
your blood your blood your blood my blood

Most people with HCV have no symptoms and feel well.
But I have no symptoms! I feel well!

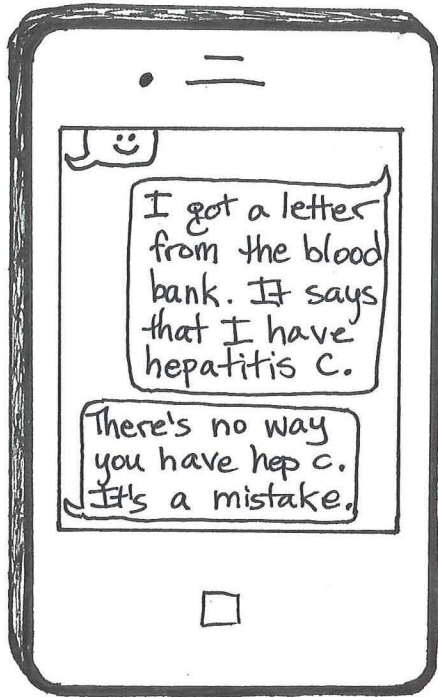
Treatment is effective in up to 50% of patients
My glass is half full of virus particles

Your sexual partner may still be eligible to donate.
... hooray

We deeply regret losing you as a donor.
Because you are going to die.

I don't know how long I stood frozen before taking the next obvious step:
I texted my ^{then-}girlfriend so she could tell me that the test results were wrong.

FORESHADOWING!

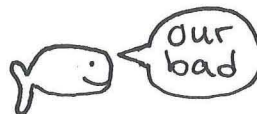


I KNEW IT.

What a relief.

Good thing we are both doctors and also omniscient.

We agreed the next step was to go in & get re-tested so I could tell the Blood Bank their tests had failed & they owed me a big apology. Maybe they'd send goldfish without my having to donate again.



Normally, this is something you might visit your doctor for. But -- I had never met my doctor.

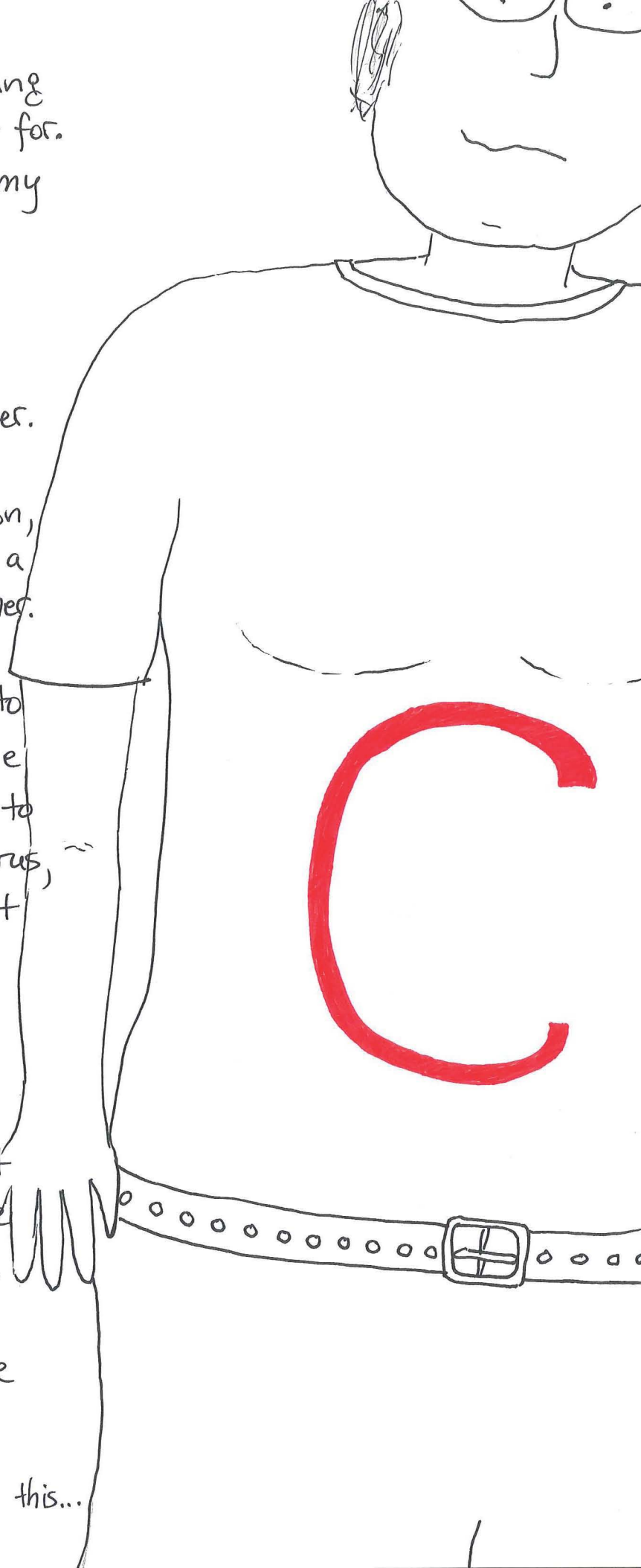
I had had a doctor I really liked for 8 years, but she retired in November. They assigned me to a new primary care person, but I had not yet had a reason to go in & see her.

Instead of heading in to meet a stranger for the first time and ask her to test me for a deadly virus, I made an appointment with the walk-in clinic close to work.

I'd gone there in March for a cold that wouldn't let up, and I liked the nurse practitioner there.

Plus, they could see me that afternoon.

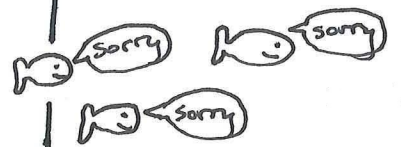
I imagined the visit like this...





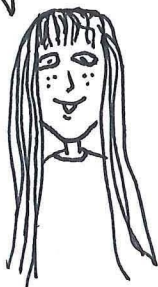
I just knew it had to be a mistake. Silly, really.

I made it through the workday and headed to the clinic. I was upbeat and in incredulous mode. I knew the NP would be as baffled and shocked as I was at the Blood Bank's incompetence. I smiled as she came into the exam room, but that evaporated when I saw her face. The look she gave me already said what she'd say next...



I had expected disbelief equal to my own, and a breezy:

Let's get this all cleared up! You're a perfectly normal, good person who can't possibly have hep c.



Instead, I got sympathy, tissues, and fact sheets.

- What is Hep C?
- How is it spread?
- How expensive is treatment?
- How long until you develop liver disease, cirrhosis, and cancer?



Do you have any idea how you might have acquired this?

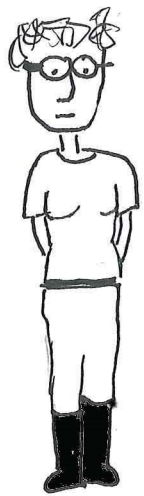
... None.

[Reading from "Risk Factors" fact sheet]

Approximately 60% of HCV infected people have injected street drugs at some time in their lives.

[eyes search my face]

how
how
how
how
how



No. I have never injected street drugs. I can't even stand for trained medical professionals to put a needle in my arm, much less myself.

what
what
what
what
what

Even one time is enough.

... Not even one time.

Could I have accidentally done a street drug somehow and not remember?

People who come in direct contact with the blood of an infected person are at risk of getting the virus. Other ways that people have been infected include:
Blood transfusion before 1992

preemie, NICU, blood, baby, birth

... I don't know, I was born 2 months premature in 1981 but I don't know if I got blood.

Treatment with hemophilia clotting factor concentrates before 1987.

... No

Wait...
Do I have hemophilia?
Could I have forgotten?

Hemodialysis.

... No.

What is hemodialysis?
Did I get it accidentally?

Sex with an infected partner. Though the risk of sexual transmission of HCV is extremely low, depending on your sex practices.

... I don't know. How would I know?

I've had unprotected sex with 2 people. Did one of them have it? Did I give it to them? Exactly how low are we talking?

Sex with an IV street drug user?

... No.

Not even one time.

Healthcare workers and children born to HCV infected mothers also have a small risk.

Did I get it from pushing paper?

I don't work anywhere near a clinical setting. My mom is healthy.

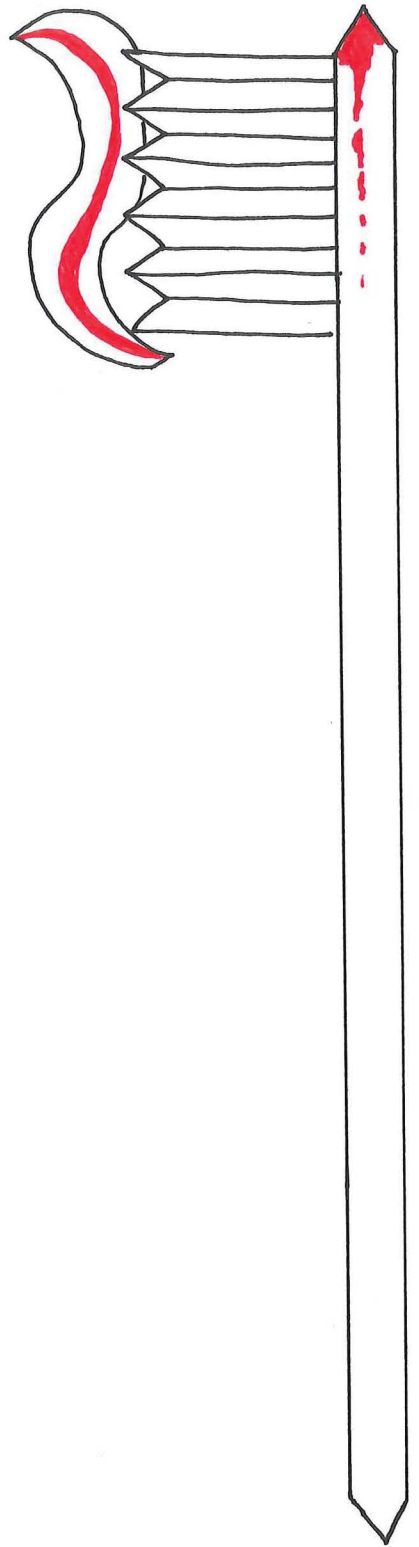
Ten percent of people who test positive cannot identify any source of infection.

As of now, I am the ten percent.

Oh.

I cry. She sympathizes.

Am I giving this to other people?
Are my friends and family and
colleagues and acquaintances and
strangers at risk?



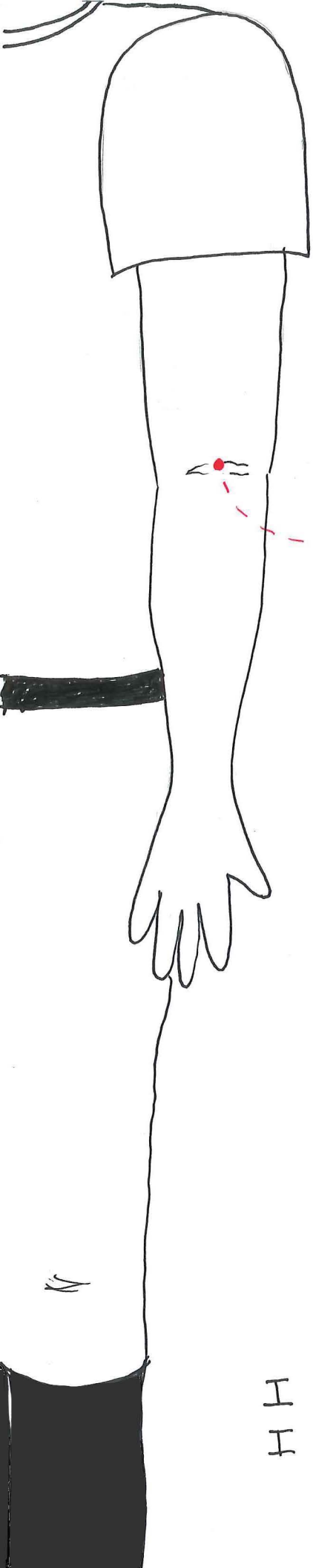
She assures me it is very
difficult to pass along
(except for street drug users).
It has to be **blood to blood**.

To pass it sexually, both
people have to be **bleeding**
- **blood into blood**.

I am told not to share my
toothbrush, fingernail clippers,
razors - just in case there
could be **blood** on them.

I think of childhood sleepovers
where I borrowed or shared my
toothbrush. Did I get this from
dental hygiene? Whose toothbrush
was it? Is my toothbrush a deadly weapon?

she leaves me with one reassurance:
the chances of me giving it to anyone are vanishingly small.



The medical assistant returns.
To stick more needles in me.
To take more blood.

But now it's just to confirm
the findings and identify
what strain of HCV I'm
carrying around. To
determine if treatment
is possible.

I leave into the sunshine of a
beautiful day and feel like I'm
no longer part of the world.
I'm floating just a few inches
above it. An infected person.

A carrier.

A patient.

A case.

I head off to meet my ^{then-} girlfriend for sushi.
I need to hear her tell me again
the one thing I used to know for sure.

There's no way you have hep c.