

The Wrong Stuff

BY MARY ANN WALSH

If you've seen the movie *The Right Stuff*, you may remember the scene involving two would-be astronauts holding enema bags on a crowded elevator. When I first saw the movie, I thought this scene was a scream, but I didn't for a minute think it was based on fact. No way could something like that actually happen. How wrong I was.

Not too long ago, I went to a thoroughly modern, state-of-the-art hospital to have upper and lower gastrointestinal examinations. My physician had recommended the tests because of the high incidence of stomach and colon cancer in my family. The "upper" test was done first and was unremarkable. The "lower" was scheduled for another day.

It was a chill, gray morning in January when I returned to outpatient radiology. It was so early that few people were around, a fact I would later be grateful for. A nurse sitting at a desk in the main waiting area instructed me to select a hospital gown from a nearby cabinet, go into a dressing room, remove my clothes from the waist down, put on the gown (with the opening in the back), and return to the reception area to wait. I did as I was told, clutching the back of the gown to keep it together as best I could. I waited, watching a light snow fly past the sixth-floor window on its way to the sodden ground below. A few more people arrived and went through the routine, returning to the reception area to sit self-consciously and leaf through magazines.

Finally, someone called my name, and I looked up to see a white-uniformed woman (a nurse?) standing in a doorway

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halfway down the hall and looking our way. I rose, clutching my gown, indicated that I was Mary Walsh, and headed for the examining room. Inside were a tilt-top examining table with a bulky electronic gizmo (a camera, I was soon to discover) suspended above it. At the foot of the table was a metal stand holding a plastic bag filled with a white fluid. A white-coated man, whom I took to be a technician, explained the procedure and showed me how the table worked. Then they helped me up on the table and told me to relax.

After they got me hooked up to the bag at the end of the table, they secured the tube with two or three wide pieces of tape and tilted the head of the table slightly down so the fluid would flow through my bowel. *Then* they checked the camera. Several attempts to take a picture failed. The woman left through a back door to check on something while the man continued to fiddle with the camera and make small talk. The woman came back and said the camera in another room was fine and the room was available.

I lay there listening to the discussion, which
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Scott Matthews

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concluded with the decision to move to the other room. "Mrs. Walsh," the man said, "I'm really sorry, but this camera isn't working, so we're going to have to go to another room. Is that OK with you?"

"Sure," I replied, uncertain what was expected of me, but never in my wildest imaginings thinking I would have to walk down the hall in my current condition.

Getting off the table was a delicate process, given the tubes and all in my sitter, but eventually I got to my feet and looked around apprehensively at the stand I was attached to. "You go ahead, slowly," the man said, indicating the open back door through which the woman had apparently fled. "I'll take care of this [the bag]."

Cautiously, I ventured into the blessedly deserted hallway, which must have been a service hallway for staff. "It's the third door on the left," I was told. Acutely aware of my ignominy, I dutifully set off down the hall, with the technician bringing up the rear. He carried my tubal train, clutching the bag like a bridesmaid's bouquet.

"You're a real sport," he said when we reached our destination.

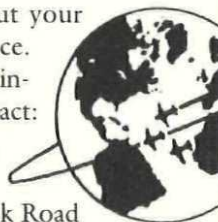
Yeah, but do I get to be an astronaut? □

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