

**The Leg and I**  
**(Boston, Massachusetts, 2004)**

When you are a performer, you are remembered only for a brief moment – commonly, for your most recent public performance. It was 2004. I was recently retired from 32 years of teaching at Roosevelt. Other than occasional workshops and local performances, it had been years since I had last planned a storytelling tour. While I was still organizing the annual Multicultural Storytelling Festival, the Troupe of Tellers had ended 10 years before, and I was ready to reenter the active storyteller community once again.

I had decided to begin this new stage of my career in the city of my birth – both physically, and, as a storyteller – Boston.

So, I began to arrange performances with the Boston public library system, as well as with other libraries throughout Massachusetts. Trying to plan a storytelling tour during the months of May and June, when many of the decision-making people at the libraries and schools are already preparing for summer vacation, is not easy! When I called the South Library Branch of the Boston Library, they put me in touch with the children’s librarian, who, as it turned out, had been an aide in the library when I was there over forty years ago!

Looking back, there might have been some subtle hints that this tour was not going to go that well. I decided to travel to Portland the day before my flight in order to visit my good friends, Eric and Doris Kimmel. I have driven to Portland hundreds of times over the past fifty years of living in Oregon. The hotel that I was staying at, the Radisson Motel, was one that I had stayed at several times before. Maybe it was the darkness of the night. Maybe it was the lack of the not-yet-invented GPS application for my phone. Maybe it was some cosmic force advising me to return to Eugene. Whatever it was, I spent over two hours driving around

trying to find my motel, finally abandoning my quest, as I was already late to my dinner date with Eric and Doris. However, as I searched for their home, a place I also had frequently visited over the years, I realized that I had become lost in the maze NW Portland streets, and spent over an hour trying to receive directions from both Eric and Doris on my cellphone.

And so began “The Terrible Tour of 2004!”

I arrived at the South Boston Holiday Inn after a red-eye flight Friday morning, and was surprisingly able to take a quick nap for a few hours. When I awoke, I felt full of energy and excitement. I decided to explore Boston – searching for memories, and also searching for new stories. I walked for over seven hours all throughout the city. Exhausted, I returned to my motel.

About an hour or so after returning to the motel, I came down with chills, fever, sweats, and dizziness. I searched my recollection for some type of an explanation for my condition. I remembered eating some spicy food at an Indonesian restaurant in the city center. I had told them that I didn’t want anything spicy, and that dish sure did push the limits, rivulets of sweat dripping down from my baldness onto the table. Maybe it was that? Maybe it was food poisoning?

A few hours later, I found myself collapsed on the bathroom floor.

It felt like I had sprained my right groin area. I hobbled back to bed to try to sleep some more.

At noon, a taxi came to pick me up and take me to my performance at the South Boston Library Branch. Despite my state of health, the performance went well. The library looked more or less the same after forty years. Things don’t change much at Southie.

The emotion from this experience boosted my spirits, and with my groin area still in excruciating pain, I convinced myself that I felt better, and hobbled to a bus stop to spend some more time in Boston.

Later that evening, the pain returned with thunderous discomfort.

But I was on my revival storytelling tour! The show must go on!

The next day, I went off to perform downtown at the Boston Public Library's Central Children's Library. It was a great turn out. Our cousins from Southborough (near Framingham) met me there. I had arranged to stay at their home for the next three days, as I was performing not far from where they live.

That Sunday night, I looked at my right foot, and there was a large black patch running across two of my toes, and another, much larger black patch on my ankle. It didn't look good. So, we decided that I should go to the doctor the next morning.

When I awoke, my foot, ankle, and leg had blown up to three times its regular size, covered with red pustules all over. This was no longer a visit to the doctor's office. I ended up spending the next six days on IV drips and receiving injection after injection at the Emergency Room of the Metro-West Medical Center in Framingham. My revival tour was canceled.

Instead of telling stories to families throughout Massachusetts, I told my tales to the hospital community I had formed inside my room at Metro-West.

My roommate, on the other side of the large, shadowy four-bed unit, was a sixty-nine-year-old Irishman. He had pneumonia as a result of smoker's lung cancer, which had now spread throughout his body. He was on oxygen, and, several times a day the nurse would come to give him an oxygen boost. Each day, someone would come to give him last rites, but I never saw a friend or family member visit. I felt guilty when my friend, Libby, would come to visit and bring me snacks each day. A sad, lonely life he lived. What type of exit from this world was this?

One day, a very quiet, shy, priest, maybe in his early thirties, came to give my roommate his last rites again. As he was leaving, he stopped by my bed and asked me, “Do you believe in Jesus?”

“No, I don’t. I’m Jewish. I don’t believe in Jesus.”

We proceeded to have a very nice conversation about the different types of Jewish beliefs. When my Christian fundamentalist nurse came in to check on me, I asked both her and the priest if they knew of the Biblical origin of her name, “Lilith?” She said that she did, that Lilith was the leader of the night demons, the one who causes nightmares, and is known for killing newborns and their mothers, and, for this reason, she had decided to rewrite her name as “Lilieth.” Seemingly agitated by the conversation, I decided not to tell her my story, “Lilith, Leader of the Night Demons.”

With her thick Jamaican accent, Lilieth changed the subject, signaling to the TV in the corner of the room. “Who will win this championship - the Red Sox or the Yankees?”

“I hope the Red Sox win.” I replied

She stood in front of me, eyes focused on my face. “The Red Sox WILL win! You must say it: ‘The Red Sox WILL win!’ Now say that with conviction. ‘THE RED SOX WILL WIN!’”

Feeling a new sense of faith run through my veins, as well as a strange sensation of guilt for years of also attending the Church of the Seattle Mariners, I repeated, “THE RED SOX WILL WIN!”

She smiled and nodded with satisfaction. “Good.”

The next day, I gave her my CD, “Strange Tales from Biblical Times.” It seemed suitable.

Latinos, African-Americans, Irish nurses and aides attended me. Very nice and caring people.

After my sixth day, the doctor told me that I had a choice of either remaining in the hospital, or getting discharged with oral antibiotics. Despite his warning that the antibiotics could be less effective, without hesitation, I announced my desire to leave the claustrophobic, and expensive, confinements of the hospital.

The nurse came to put a special salve on my leg and foot. She then wrapped my leg several times over in a bandage, and put my foot into an enormous block shoe. She had done all of this before I realized that I was still in my hospital pajamas, with the right leg slit open to above my crotch. There was no way that my pants would fit over all of this.

When Shmuel and his girlfriend arrived from New York City to pick me up, I asked them to take me to a store so I could buy some sweat pants to go over the bandages.

The doctor had given me a pair of crutches to use, but I was not very good with my coordination. I kept feeling like I was going to fall and break something – most likely myself – and tried to become accustomed to the synchronized steps required with this new apparatus.

As I searched the aisles of Sears for a pair of cheap sweatpants, I saw Shmuel's face become flush with embarrassment, rushing up to my side to urgently whisper in my ear. "Dad! You're exposed!"

I looked down to see that the pajamas I was wearing had conveniently separated at the slit, putting on a show for a few random elderly shoppers at Sears.

Luckily, Shmuel's girlfriend had a safety pin on her – otherwise, I might have gone from the hospital to the jail very quickly!

Still drugged from the cocktail of medications the hospital had given me, and flirting with a new hobby as a flasher, Shmuel thought it was a good idea to take me to eat dinner at the Olive Garden before taking me to my cousin's home.

The host at the entrance to the Olive Garden restaurant seemed frozen in a state of shock to see me hobble in the front door, as if I had escaped from my stay at the hospital just so that I could eat one final piece of their delicious garlic bread.

He guided us to a secluded table in the back corner of the restaurant. I double checked to ensure that my safety pin was still holding my pajamas together as I wobbled past the other patrons of the restaurant.

“How soon can I fly home to Eugene?” I asked the doctor.

“I’d love to get rid of you and have the doctors on the West Coast deal with this, but you still have one UGLY leg! You can’t fly until the infection goes down and you have no fever or dizziness. The changing air pressure on a plane could cause your leg to blow up.”

“Well, if I did decide to return home, and my leg did swell up midflight, what would I do?”

With a twinkle of Irish humor, he smiled. “You could always jump out.”

Our cousins, Peter and Kate, had been wonderful. They opened their home to me, fed and cared for me. I was fortunate.

Five days later, I felt strong enough to make the trip back home. After a long trip to San Francisco, and another flight to Eugene, I concluded my adventure out east.

What did I learn from this experience? I was VERY lucky! I could have lost my leg, or had the infection spread throughout my body. The emotion, joy, and relief of having my son, Shmuel, there – even for a few hours. I had friends and cousins who cared for me and provided incredible support in my time of need. How happy I was to be back home, in Eugene, Oregon. I may have grown up on the east coast, but the south hills of Eugene are where my heart lays.