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THE NURSEMAID AND THE ELBOW

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Over the years I've seen perhaps thirty of them. Oh the tendency I know is to exaggerate one's personal experience but I think thirty is close enough to the truth – whatever that is in clinical medicine – that it will serve our purposes today. They sit there tearful usually on Mother's lap spavined arm unmoving (except of course we hope to the reader) carefully pinioned to side not so much in pain as in protective custody – a house arrest as it were – lest unintended unwanted movement ruffle the subluxed radial head – the out of sorts culprit.

The history? The story is much the same from limb to limb and kid to kid and nursemaid to nursemaid (the usual suspect when this elbow first assumed syndromic shape): a sudden distracting upwards JOLT of hand-held-hand and POP! goes the radial head. Curbs and their stepping off seem a good place for this to happen. Near-falls of all varieties lend themselves to such protective yanks as well.

But here's the wonderful part, the mirabile dictu. After subluxed radial head number one a marvelous transformation occurs. The doctor gets magic. Fore-armed with just the nurse's story on the chart I walk in with enough

confidence to sell a bridge
gently grasp said limb in two of mine and –
with the sleight of hand
I might have had near three millennia ago
when I was Greek and lived on Kos –
I flex pronate extend supinate –
all the while feeling for the
tell-tale click as errant head of the
radius nostalgically rejoins
its di-arthric home
in the humerus.

The child were she older
might register surprise
(but two is too young).
I abruptly stop: Miracle Accomplished.
Mother and Father, still mystified
that a miracle might have
been in the works at all
with such benign handling,
reach a peak of wonder that
gives one to understand the appeal of
flim-flam. She's fine now, I say.
I'll be back in five minutes
She'll be using it by then.
Prediction, not prognosis,
distinguishes magic from medicine.

Off I go to attend to less
simple cures, less likely miracles. I return
as promised to a happier threesome
converted to the ritual of laying on of hands.

And confess all.