Bradley's MRI Adventure



by Rebekka Smith

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Learn all about the technology and what it's actually like as you follow Bradley, a school-aged boy with tethered cord syndrome, through his MRI journey from start to finish.

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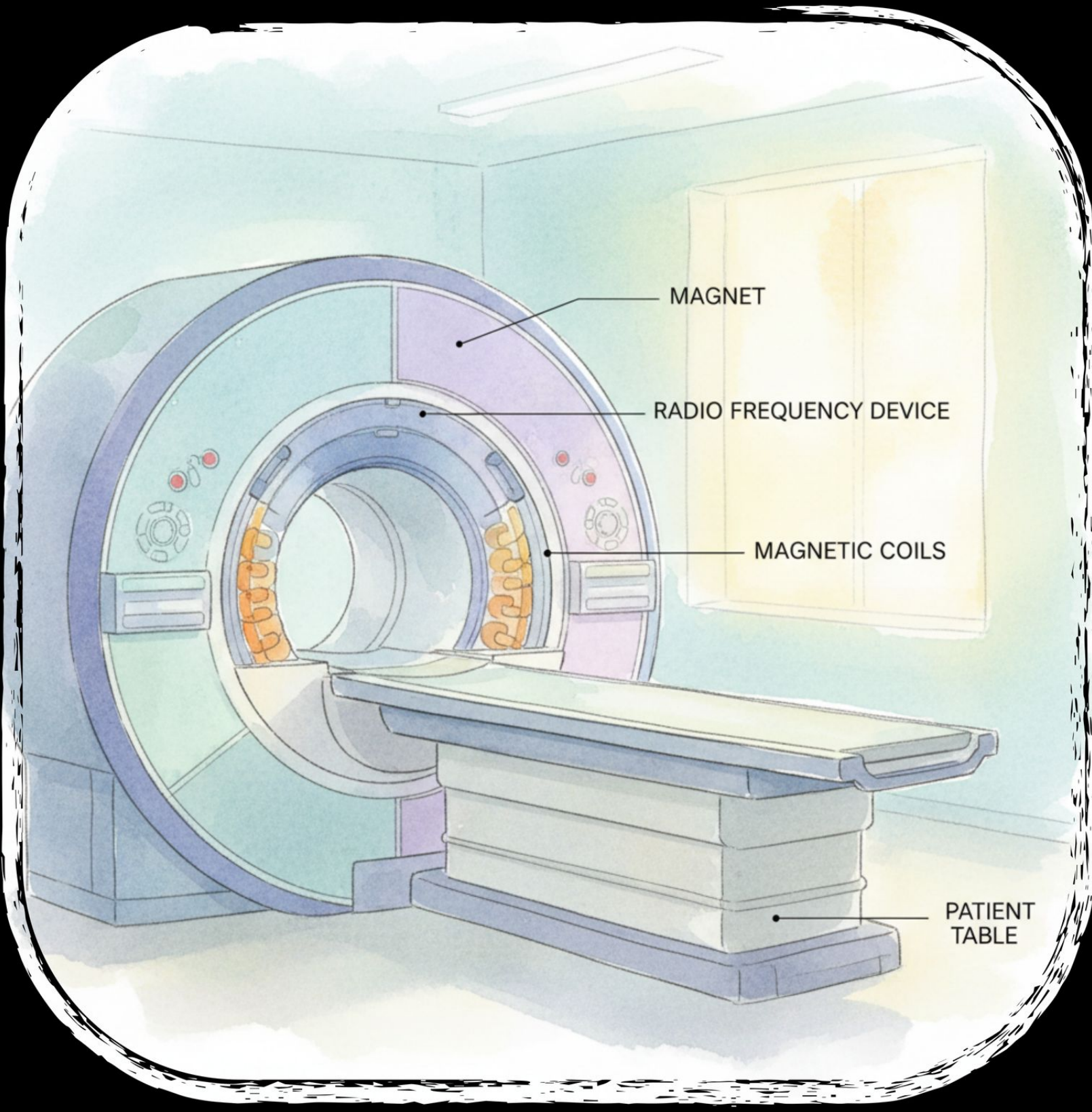


Bradley pressed his hands forward and stared at the shiny white ring of the MRI machine. He had tethered cord syndrome, which means his spinal cord was pulled too tight inside his back. That made it difficult for the nerves there to communicate with the rest of his body. His doctor needed special pictures of his spine using a technique called Magnetic Resonance Imaging, or MRI. He felt nervous about the loud noises and the idea of not being able to wiggle around inside the machine.



"How does it work?" He asked Tom, the MRI technician. Tom smiled and opened the door wider. “Want to walk all the way around it?”

Bradley nodded.


MAGNET
RADIO FREQUENCY DEVICE
MAGNETIC COILS
PATIENT TABLE

"This ring has a giant magnet inside, along with several coils of wire and a radio frequency device," Tom said. "The magnet and coils work together to create a super-strong magnetic field going in all directions so we can measure the protons inside your body. Then the radio frequency device records that information to make a picture we can use."



For a minute, Bradley felt serious. "Will it hurt me?"

"Definitely not," said Tom with a shake of his head, "the magnet can only pull on things made of metal. In fact, you won't be able to feel what the machine is doing at all. You will be able to hear it, though!"



Walking around the big machine helped Bradley see every angle. "What's your favorite part about the MRI machine?" he asked after running his hand along the bottom of the ring. Tom was excited to answer this question. "My favorite part is that deep inside the machine, super-cold liquid helium keeps the wire coils around 452 degrees below zero (-261 C)!" "Wow," said Bradley as he looked around again, "It really is like I'm part of an exciting space adventure!"

"Are you ready, then?" Tom asked.



"I think so," said Bradley as his mother sat down on the bench nearby. He was glad she could stay there during his ride through the MRI machine.

“You can pick out any music you'd like,” Tom said. Bradley chose a playlist with calm songs and a few silly ones.

Tom explained that he would need two kinds of pictures: prone (on his stomach) and supine (on his back). The prone pictures don't take as much time, but they are a little harder because Bradley would have to breathe as softly as possible and hold very still. “Do you want to do that one first?” Tom asked.

Bradley took a breath. He nodded. “Yes, I'm ready."

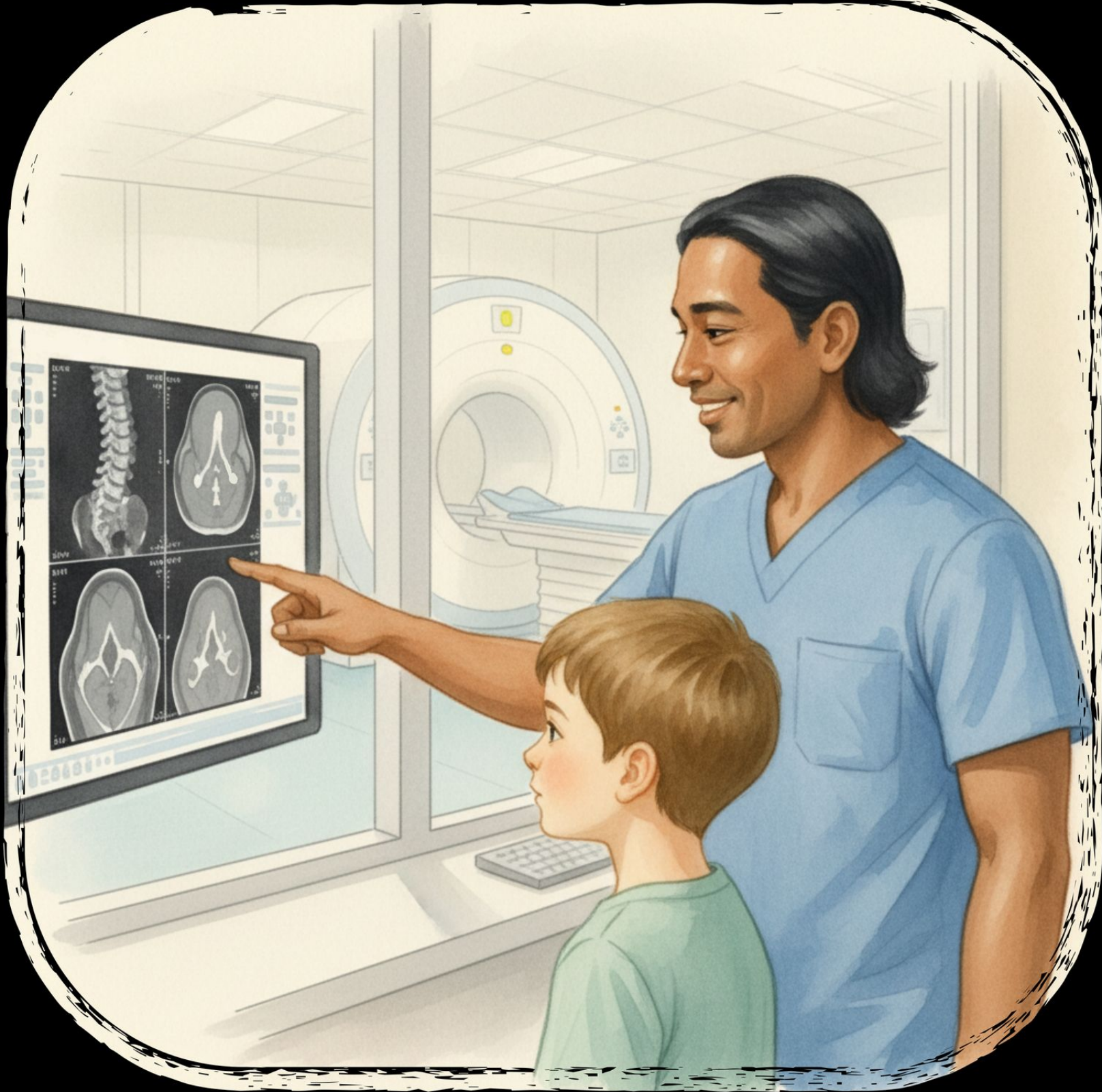


Bradley climbed onto the table, and Tom tucked a pillow under his chest. He got to hold a little button in case he got scared or needed to stop the machine for any reason. All he had to do was push it and Tom would come right away to help. The MRI began to make loud clanks and thumps, but Bradley listened to his music and breathed quietly. He imagined floating through space on the adventure of a lifetime!



Tom checked the pictures. “One is a bit blurry. We'll need to run it again.” Bradley squeezed his eyes shut and they tried again. This time, the picture looked great!

Next, Bradley turned over onto his back for the supine images. He felt his muscles loosen and his eyes close softly. He drifted into sleep as the machine hummed around him and music played in his ears. Soon, his mother leaned over and whispered, “You're all finished! It's time to go home now.”



"Can I see the pictures?" Bradly asked.

Tom showed him on the computer screen, pointing to a black-and-white line that ran up and down the image. "That's your spinal column," he said, "and this darker line is your spinal cord inside. We'll send all these pictures over to the doctors, who will look at your spinal cord and nerves to help you make a plan for what to do next."

Bradley smiled. He had been brave for his adventure, and getting an MRI wasn't quite as scary as he'd expected after all!



Talking Points:

Bradley felt nervous about having to lie still inside the noisy MRI machine. What makes you nervous about an MRI? What helps you feel better?

Some people like to know as much as possible about a medical procedure, and others prefer keep it quick and simple. What is your preference? Does it change depending on the situation?

What kind of music do you like to listen to? What would you choose during an MRI?

Taking it Further:

Make a list of all the things that help you feel better about a procedure. Rank them for most helpful to least helpful, then talk with your caregiver and hospital staff about how to make sure at least 2-3 of those things can be part of your experience next time.