

Another Long Day

By Leslie Lewis

I don't remember her name or even what she looked like. It happened one night or day in the intensive care unit of the hospital where my husband was a patient. Four years later the month-long ordeal is still a blur. But I do remember the event and how it penetrated the fog of fear and exhaustion. It was after Roger had been taken to the cardiac surgical wing to determine if a heart valve replacement was feasible. The doctors never answered my questions: How long could he live with an artificial valve, given his other ailments? And what would his quality of life be after the surgery?

"He'll be gone for a while," the orderly said to me as he and an assistant lifted Roger out of the hospital bed and onto a gurney. "They're backed up down there." I nodded and smiled reassuringly to Roger as they trundled the rolling platform out of the room and down the hall.

Fifteen years ago, when Roger's hospitalizations began, I'd have followed him on the journey across the hospital to the surgical wing. Now I knew that it was better to stay in his room where the nurses could keep me updated. As uncomfortable as the chair was in the ICU, it was still better than sitting for hours on a straight-back molded plastic chair in a hallway outside of a surgical suite watching doctors and nurses race by as I waited for scraps of information.

Hospitals operate in their own time zone: days are marked by nurses' shift changes every twelve hours. Hours-long anxiety-laden vigils are kept waiting for the doctor to give updates. Patients fitfully doze while nurses check their vital signs and the machines that keep them alive. Tests and procedures are completed long after their scheduled times.

I'd pulled several twelve-hour shifts and sometimes two in a row. I wore the familiar cloak of hospital-induced fatigue, but this one was particularly heavy. The last traces of energy seeped out of my body and spirit. I increasingly saw the world through a thick layer of Vaseline. On my drive home the previous night or maybe it was early morning, I'd gotten lost, despite my familiarity with the area and the crisp British-accented commands of my GPS. I stopped in a parking lot and walked around coatless in the bitterly cold February weather to revive myself enough to drive the last few miles home.

After that day's consultation with the doctors, I called the boarding kennel to tell them that our two dogs needed to stay longer but I couldn't give them a pick-up date because I couldn't recall what day it was and didn't know what would happen with Roger.

I positioned myself in the dimly lit room's oversized faux leather beige chair and leaned my head against the hard headrest trying to block out the whispers of the nurses in the hallway and the asynchronous humming and beeping machines in the other rooms. My body vibrated

with uneasiness as I mentally replayed this day's medical report threaded with the thought that this time Roger might go over the cliff.

From nearby I heard someone say, "Another long day?" I opened my eyes as a nurse grabbed one corner of Roger's bed linens and rolled them into a neat bundle that she dropped into a bin. She snapped a new crisp white sheet on top of the mattress's padding and with precision pulled it taut, and then folded its edges, and tucked them under the mattress.

I nodded, too tired to say anything. As I watched her make the bed a longing overwhelmed me for the comfort of Roger's and my bed at home with our two dogs sprawled between us. I wanted to hold our dachshunds and feel their warmth and love. *How long had it been since I'd had a good night's sleep? Two, maybe three, weeks? Maybe a year. Or had it been years? When was it that we lost any semblance of a normal life – passion, laughter, work, friends, and travel?*

I stepped out of my thoughts when I heard the nurse speak. "Come here," she said, patting the bed. "Get in." Like an obedient child, I slipped out of my shoes and quietly climbed in. She pulled the fresh top sheet and blanket up to my chin. "I'll be right back," she said. My body sank into the mattress which felt like one at an expensive resort. *God, I am so tired.*

My eyes began to close, when a distant voice said, "Now let's take care of those feet." The heated blanket's warmth gradually embraced my body. I'm not sure if I thought or said it as my eyes closed, "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Leslie Lewis grew up in Southern California and now resides in Arlington, Virginia. Lewis's career spans twenty-one years at a well-known think tank where she researched and wrote extensively on national security issues. Later, she established a consulting firm and works with the US government and industry. For the last several years her life has focused on creative writing, spending time with friends and two dachshunds, reading and some consulting.

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