July 17, 2022

**MICU** February 9, 2014.

It all started with a sore throat. My husband and I both were feeling badly, sore throats, achy, flu-type symptoms. We both had been taking it easy for a few days, thinking we would feel better in a few days. I was taking Nyquil. I had recently retired, but David was still working, he would retire in the next year. He didn’t feel as badly as I did, so he was still going to work. I had slept on the sofa that night. In the morning when David got up, he realized I had a high fever. It was a Sunday, and he took me to Velosity Care. I was so sick, I only put on a pair of shoes and went in to the doctor’s office in my pajamas. Since it was a weekend, I had to wait my turn, no appointment. I could barely sit up. My memory is still foggy of that day. Once I got back to the exam room, I do remember the doctor putting an oxygen nasal cannula on me, but it wasn’t enough. He then put a full oxygen mask on me. He immediately called for an ambulance. I would hear him say over and over in a concerned voice, “Where is that ambulance?” I knew I was really sick. I didn’t know what was wrong with me. I was too sick to even ask. That was February 9, 2014.

I remember hearing the ambulance coming. The attendants were kind. As soon as I was loaded in the ambulance, it took off and FAST! The siren was blaring! David would later tell me he couldn’t keep up with it (unlike him). The attendant asked me if he could start an IV, and I said yes. He asked what medications I was on. I was able to tell him. I was relatively healthy up until a few days before. I did take blood pressure meds, migraine prevention meds, but that was it. Not too bad for someone 62 years old. I was a hiker, amateur wildlife photographer, and Lifetime Girl Scout volunteer of 30 years. I enjoyed the outdoors and was lucky to live on edge of a wildlife preserve. I was often on the trails near my house, or the Appalachian Trail also near my home in Botetourt County VA. I didn’t smoke, or drink alcohol.

To this day, I do not remember getting to the hospital. I would lose consciousness before the ambulance arrived. I would be intubated in the ER and admitted directed to the ICU. I wouldn’t leave the hospital for 55 days.

My initial diagnosis was H1N1flu and double pneumonia. Over the next few weeks, I would have many complications. At first I was in a medically induced coma for a few days, but when they tried to wake me up, I wouldn’t wake up. My coma was classified as a GS3 coma. A GCS score of 3 is **the lowest possible score** and is associated with an extremely high mortality rate, with some researchers suggesting that there is no chance of survival. My husband told the doctors that I often had trouble waking up from anesthesia. I had had several surgeries before this illness, although nothing as serious as this illness. I have had gall bladder surgery, GYN surgeries, surgery on both shoulders (one from falling down stairs & one from breaking my arm in 3 places requiring a plate & 9 pins after my dog knocked me down). As a teenager, I had a bicycle accident and fractured my jaw. Over the years, I developed severe TMJ and had to have 6 jaw surgeries – 4 arthroscopies, and 2 open joint surgeries including having my jaw wired. I was no stranger to hospitals. I even worked in hospitals in different offices.

I’m still unsure of the order of my complications. I’ll do my best to relay them here.

On February 28, I received a tracheostomy. I was still in a coma. I also received blood transfusions several times. I had a bleed in my abdomen that they couldn’t figure out what was going on. I became paralyzed for unknown reasons in all four limbs. The use of my left arm returned first, but when I woke up from the coma, I could not move my legs nor could I move my right arm.

Around the middle of February, I crashed. I had a pulmonary embolism. I was taken to the operating room where a Greenfield Filter was placed. That was to help break up any other blood clots that may form. While in the OR, I had to be shocked twice. My kidneys shut down, and I had to go on dialysis. Another trip was made to the operating room for a port for kidney dialysis.

My family was told I was not going to make it, and they said their good-byes. The staff pressured my husband to sign a DNR (Do Not Resuscitate), but he refused. He said he would be asked several times to sign, but each time he refused. He was also asked what he wanted to do with my body once I was gone. He would refuse to answer that question as well. Organ donation was called, and they were on standby waiting for me to die. But then…..I didn’t die. I was still critical, but I was alive.

I’m not quite sure the day I was aware – awake, but I knew I was in a hospital, but I didn’t know where I was. I thought I was in El Paso, TX, a city I have never been to. In fact, I have only been to TX once when I was seven, and that was just passing through. I was in more pain than I had ever been in my life - more than childbirth, more than my jaw surgeries, or breaking my arm in three places. I told myself, I must have been in a car accident. I couldn’t be in this much pain unless I had been in a car accident. I couldn’t speak and I couldn’t move, except I could move my head from side to side, and I could move my left arm somewhat even though it was very weak and painful. I looked down and I had tubes coming out of both arms and my leg. I was naked from the waist down. I had no one in the room with me. Where was a nurse?! What was going on?! I must have faded out for a while. I would do that for several weeks. Fade in and out.

I had some hallucinations, but not scary ones like many critically ill patients. The one that upset me the most was two deer that had jumped into the wall at the foot of my bed. They had sleigh bells around their necks. I couldn’t see their heads. It was as if they had run into the wall and embedded themselves into the wall. They were alive and kicking their hind legs. I couldn’t see their heads or front legs. I didn’t understand why no one was helping them. They were clearly injured.

One day, Elton John and Shaquille O’Neal came to visit me. Shaquille O’Neal never said anything, but Elton told me he was a fan of mine. He was dressed from head to toe in a pink sequined suit, even his top hat was pink sequins. I can still see it today. He told me I wasn’t going to die. From that moment on, I knew I wasn’t going to die, even though the doctors would say “this patient is going to die” ….. They said it …….over and over.

I could see into the hallway. Often they rolled dead bodies down the hallway. I knew what they were doing having worked in a hospital. They didn’t bother to close the curtains to the room. I grew up around funeral homes. Several family members are in the funeral home business in West Virginia. I knew what a body bag looked like. During my hospitalization, I would be told over and over, “Everyone else your age in ICU, died.” What was the purpose of that statement? Were they trying to give me survivor’s guilt? Once I could speak, I would tell them, it wasn’t helpful to tell a patient that. But they still would repeat that statement over and over. I didn’t feel guilty surviving though. I fought like hell for my survival against all odds.

The nurses would play religious music in my room, and tell me to prepare to meet my maker. They also would turn the ‘screaming preachers’ on the TV. I thought I was in a funeral home. I knew I had to try to make the staff realize that I was alive! I was paralyzed and couldn’t speak, but I would move my head from side to side, or try to cry tears or open my eyes. One cannot imagine how difficult it was to just open my eyes. I would try to make eye contact, but they never looked me in the eye. Never called me by my name. I was a cadaver to them.

I had one nurse, name Dustin, who would call me his favorite patient. He was so kind. He would make eye contact, and talked to me like I was still a person. He would try to get me to write on a white board. It was so difficult. He had talked to my family who told him I had made film shorts. He asked me about them. I tried to tell him in writing. One day he asked me about my films. I wrote LST, and he would say, “that doesn’t make sense.” It was difficult and painful to write with my left non-dominant hand. But I was adamant that I knew what I meant. After I was sent to PCU and my trache had been removed, Dustin stopped by my room, I was able to tell him that my film was about my father’s World War II D-Day experience on LST-504.

LST stood for landing ship tank. That type of ship delivered all types of supplies to Omaha Beach, including men, ammunition, medical supplies, ambulances, and tanks. On the return trip to England, the ship carried wounded men back to England, and later German prisoners to England. The ship had made 13 crossings on the English Channel. My dad was in the initial battle that day. He had been a gun captain on the ship’s bow, and was in the first wave that day. Dustin told me he knew I must have known what I was talking about, I was adamant, but he just didn’t understand. I was able to give to him the youtube link. If anyone is interested, the link is below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdGwRK2O-nk&t=22s>

Our town used to have local film festivals (before Covid), mostly for fun. Later a bicycle film festival was started for small cash prizes, and I entered every year. One year, I won $100 Audience Choice.

I remember one day in ICU when my doctor and his residents circled my bed, he was teaching them about my case. I opened my eyes, but no one addressed me. I was the cadaver. The doctor listed my diagnoses: H1N1 flu, double pneumonia, pulmonary embolism, sepsis. kidney failure, coma, paralysis, and then he says, “and she’s probably going to die.”

I thought, “Bet me!”

Another day, the entourage surrounded my bed and uncovered my feet. They were always looking at my feet. I knew why they were looking at my feet. I had sat with my mother for six weeks after she had had a massive stroke. She had been in a hospice house, and they would check her feet for the necrotizing progress. In my mother’s case, they were looking to see how quickly was she was dying. In my case, the doctor never said a word to me. On this day, he asked me to wiggle my toes, and I did. I thought ‘good, that means I’m not going to be paralyzed forever. Tell me that’s a good sign.’ But not one person said a word, not the doctor nor any of his residents. At that moment, I told myself, “you will have to be your own cheerleader”, and that proved to be true throughout the entire 55 day hospitalization. I never got one word of encouragement from a doctor, a nurse, any of my therapists (respiratory, physical, occupational, speech, CNAs, etc), even when I pointed out that it might be helpful to encourage me. Thankfully, my family was encouraging. They wanted me home, no matter what.

I opened my eyes one day to see my daughter’s face, who told me, “Mom, you have been really, really sick, but you are going to be OK.” Later, she would tell me my husband, David, was standing beside her, but I don’t remember. She also told me, she had said those words, “Mom, you’ve been really sick, but you’re going to be ok.” over and over for weeks.

I do remember a physical therapist coming in and getting me into a sitting position. She would call me Gigi and that irritated me. Gigi is the name my grandchildren call me. So to me, she was rudely calling me “Grandma”. I couldn’t speak because of the tracheostomy, but I would shake my head no. I didn’t want to cooperate with her since she was calling me “Grandma”. Why was she calling me by that name? She was the only staff person during my stay who called me Gigi. I never saw her again once I left ICU, so I never got to tell her I didn’t appreciate it.

Just before I was discharged from ICU, I had an MRI. I had had several MRIs while I was in the coma, but this was the first one I could remember. I had had MRIs before when I had my jaw surgeries, so I told myself not to be afraid. One of the nice ICU nurses was going with me to MRI. However, once she turned me over the MRI staff, things changed. The MRI staff said, “Here comes that old woman with the rag.” I had a cold washcloth I was using to wipe my face. I was roughly placed on the table and a cage placed over my face. Looking back, my guess is that they were scanning my brain. Because I had been in a coma without medical assistance for so long, the doctors suspected I may have had a stroke (as it turned out I didn’t). Then, the staff person placed the panic button in my paralyzed hand! My right hand at that time was completely paralyzed! Where was my nurse?! I tried to calm myself, but I started to panic inside the machine. I started to sweat profusely. I tried to push the panic button, but my hand wouldn’t work. I was crying. I tried to scream, but the trache wouldn’t let me make a sound. Finally, they let me out of the tube, but they left the cage over my face. No one addressed me. I balled up my fist as best I could and beat on the cage that was over my face. The staff laughed at me, and mockingly said, “You’re going to hurt your hand.” I kept banging and banging. It was torture to have that cage over my face, and the staff laughed and laughed. I was crying, and sweating profusely. I couldn’t speak, I was paralyzed, except for my left hand, and now they placed a cage over my face?! No one was explaining the procedure. They were laughing at me, calling me Old Woman! I was in a torture chamber. I cried and cried. When they finally came to me to remove the cage over my face, the staff person said in a concerned voice, “Get her nurse! Get her nurse!” Then, I heard my nurse’s voice say, “I’ll take over from here.” I wanted to be able to tell her what had happened, but I couldn’t I was able to tell my doctor what happened via paper and marker, and nearly refused another MRI. He had to sedate me for my final MRI. My daughter was there when I told my doctor, she was livid. I fear MRIs now.

I had another MRI a few years later and the doctor gave me a Xanax which didn’t help much. I panicked while inside and almost didn’t make it through the test. The intake person was rude when I told her I was terrified of MRIs. She said, “You need to not sweat the small stuff.” I reported her. When I went to take the test, the staff tried to be especially nice, but I was still reeling from her comment. I doubt if I will ever be comfortable with an MRI again. Not like I once was.

Towards the end of my ICU stay, I remember two doctors standing on either side of my bed. They were discussing my case. One said I had an ovarian cyst. The other said I wouldn’t survive surgery. I clearly remember thinking, “Shit! What else is wrong with me?!!” it turned out to be good thing that I remembered this encounter, because my ovarian cyst was never discussed again nor was it listed on my discharge papers. When I was in inpatient rehab (relearning to walk, relearning use my hands, & relearning to swallow), I would bring the subject up to my rehab doctor who would never answer my question (which I hate when they do that). As it got closer to my discharge date, I finally asked, “I need to know what to do about the ovarian cyst?! I sure would hate to have gone through all of this only to die from ovarian cancer!!!” I said it with a straight face. He started to chuckle, but then he realized I wasn’t kidding, I was dead serious. He said, “When you see your PCP, talk to her, and she can set you up with the GYN oncologist.” I replied, “Was that so hard to tell me?” More on that later,

On March 8. I was moved to PCU – Progressive Care Unit. The room was tiny. My window looked out to a brick wall where the building had been built on to. At least on ICU, I could see the side of a mountain and on occasion I could see deer. My PCU room was in the flight path of the medical helicopters. I heard them day and night. To this day, I cringe when I hear the helicopters. They fly over my house sometimes on the way to the interstate when there is a bad wreck.

Three months before I was hospitalized, my husband, David, had had a heart catheterization. He had the blockage that is commonly known as the widow maker. He was immediately hospitalized and had triple bypass three days later. I sat in his hospital room every day from breakfast until after visiting hours, same hospital. The doctors didn’t give me much hope that David would survive the surgery. My younger son sat with me through the 6 ½ hour surgery. He stayed home from work for a month. He returned to work too soon, in my opinion, but he had a desk job, a computer programmer. He was so weak though. He often came home and went to sleep. When I got sick, I worried about him. I knew he wasn’t well either.

One last note until the next installment: Even in critical times, there are humorous things that happen. My daughter would tell me later. She had had a baby girl two months before I became ill. They wouldn’t let the baby into ICU. So she was often trying to find someone to watch the baby for an hour or two while she visited me. She was still on maternity leave for the first few weeks I was hospitalized. One of the worse days I was having, she was scrambling to find a sitter, and a friend’s husband offered. He is an EMT/firefighter. He met my daughter at the hospital and watched the baby in the waiting room while she visited me in ICU. My daughter had known him since middle school, so she knew the baby was in good hands. He has even delivered a couple of babies when the ambulance didn’t get to the hospital in time. He was sitting in the waiting room with the baby and someone came up to him and cooed over the baby.

They asked him, “What’s her name?”

“I don’t know.” He replied.

*Next installment: PCU Progressive Care Unit*

*By Jane Garnett*