

Not Even Forty...

Category: My Aching Back

written by Sara Ann Conkling | December 2, 2019

His wife left him that morning. That's what he told the police officer who arrived on the scene after his large truck plowed into the back of my little red car. "I wasn't paying attention. I was speeding up as I hit her."

Ahead of us, an elderly woman had disobeyed her doctor's orders not to drive while on pain medication. She decided to make a left turn by cutting off multiple lanes of traffic. My brakes held as all my weight went into them. I had less than a second to be thankful for missing her.

As I was loaded onto the ambulance, my neck and lower back were already in pain. And my knee—my beautifully ACL-reconstructed right knee, scrupulously brought back to strength over months of rehabilitation—had slammed into the dashboard of my car. It was throbbing.

Three MRI's later, I learned that all three body parts were "surgical candidates." I elected to defer the spine surgery but I wanted my knee fixed. I had a good orthopedic surgeon. He knew how hard I had worked to get my knee back the first time. He wanted me to have it restored again.

I explained to the anesthesiologist what I wanted: an epidural, no sedation, no narcotics. Just a plain, wide-awake epidural. I had been overdosed on morphine during a previous surgery. It made me so sick that I prayed I would die. I was done with narcotics. I was pleased that this anesthesiologist was congenial and willing to honor my wishes.

But after the third epidural attempt I was screaming for him to stop. He was screaming for me to shut up. He never placed the epidural, but a sheared-off shard of the catheter showed up on X-ray later. I was sent home that day with no instructions and no aftercare. I had suffered a severe hypotensive episode (abnormally low blood pressure), and what I learned later was a puncture of my dura, the membrane surrounding the spinal cord. My surgery was canceled after the anesthesia failure. Four days later, I was a hospital emergency. The dural leak almost killed me.

Not long after that, urinary incontinence and bowel problems sent me to a neurologist. My back pain was unbearable, the tests to diagnose it barbaric, the diagnosis heartbreaking: arachnoiditis from epidural trauma and injection of lidocaine into my spinal nerves. Arachnoiditis: chronic pain caused by inflammation of the spinal canal. Incurable. Progressive. Never going away.

I was not even forty.

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