

I Confess

Category: Drinking

written by Cynthia Stock | November 3, 2019

I confess. I would drive drunk on nights I went clubbing. I'd dance until my knees hurt and drink until the brand of gin in my drinks didn't matter. With my windows rolled down, I hoped fresh air conjured some semblance of sobriety, in case I encountered a cop. I'd bellow my favorite songs, head hanging out the window. Me. An R.N.

In December 1996, I walked into my urban ICU, before color-coded uniforms, wearing my home-made Santa Claus scrub top, and found myself assigned to T.J. Dalton, a 30-year old victim of a drunk driver. The driver was a recidivist. His small pick-up had hit the bumper of T.J.'s Expedition, touted as being the safest car on the road. T.J.'s car had flipped end over end, shoving T.J. back into the second row of seats.

My unit engaged in cutting-edge practices. T.J. had been transferred to us from a satellite hospital, because we were trialing a new pulmonary therapy, nitric oxide. Via computer, I accessed his pretransfer nurses' notes and learned what I could. Prior to being medically paralyzed, T.J. had been unrepsonsive.

For sixty-four days, T.J. endured. Most days I worked, I cared for him. After he awakened, I was one of the only nurses he allowed to shave him. We shared episodes of sepsis, ventilator changes, and his family. I learned that T.J.'s eight-week-old son had been thrown from his car seat and had suffered a catastrophic brain injury. I listened to T.J.'s wife sit at the bedside and read sci-fi or the Bible aloud. I met T.J.'s father, a polio survivor, who prayed for a way to trade places with his son.

The MD tried oscillating ventilation on T.J. The noise jackhammered down the halls of the unit. At his bedside, I tuned the noise out.

In February, after a few days off, I walked into the unit. The ear-shattering absence of the oscillating ventilator slammed me. I ran to T.J.'s room. A colleague intercepted me. "No one called you because he died in the middle of the night. There's a viewing tonight."

T.J.'s father greeted me at the funeral home. "I'm so glad you came. It will be the first time you've seen him at peace."

I believe T.J. was smiling, comfortable in a football jersey, jeans, and sneakers.

I never drove impaired again.

*Cynthia Stock
Garland, Texas*