

MY LIFE IN STITCHES by Darla A. Calvet

EXCERPT

EXACTLY SIXTY-TWO DAYS after I had fainted in the Scripps Green hospital room, I woke up in complete darkness. My heart raced. I had no idea where I was or what happened to me since I passed out on the day I was admitted. I was unable to see without my contacts or glasses and tried to speak but could not emit a sound. For those first few moments, I thought perhaps maybe I was in some kind of purgatory and that this was my eternal bus stop. I felt a distinct heaviness as I tried to move my legs. I reached down around my abdomen and detected the LVAD unit, with a drive line going through my abdomen and its two large lithium batteries attached to my body. The LVAD surgery had occurred. But when, why, and how had it happened? I sat in darkness, vainly searching for the remote control and the button to call the night shift nurse.

I felt a weird combination of relief and confusion. I could decipher from the blurry digits on the clock that it was about 4:00 a.m. I had no idea what day, month, or year it was. I knew from the LVAD installation that some time must have passed, but how much? I must have woken up during a skeletal night shift with very few nurses in the hospital unit. I swung my head as far around as I could, only to see the outlines and lights of seventeen machines in the room, all helping to keep me alive. I immediately started to panic. I seemed to be more machine than human with all of the leads and tubes running in and out of my body. I was also intubated and unable to speak, which was terrifying. I could discern from the many machines attached to me that I was also in the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit, known as the CICU. This was where the gravely ill cardiac patients were sent by their teams.

“Stay calm,” I told myself. Someone had to be around . . . somewhere. The heavy blackout curtains were drawn around my glass cube room, making me feel claustrophobic. After a long wait, the curtains were flung open by Patricia, my morning nurse, who was starting her shift. She smiled sweetly, saying, “Oh, good. You are awake. We have been waiting for you to wake up.” I was confused and had no idea how I had arrived at my current state in the hospital bed. At that time, the CICU was located in the basement of the Scripps Green Hospital Facility, next to the

morgue. It was not exactly a cheery place. I heard some orderlies joking to each other that it was “death’s waiting room.”

Realizing that I could not speak, Patricia took my hand and spoke softly, “You are okay. You have been in a medically induced coma for over two months. During that time, we needed to perform emergency open heart surgery and save your life by installing the LVAD, which you have probably noticed is attached to your body.” I shuddered and pulled the sheets up around my neck. God only knew how close I had come to death. I was about to find out.

While I was very grateful and relieved to be alive, I thought of my family. How had my husband coped during my absence with our two young adult girls? How had they dealt with this horrible situation? My eldest, Claire, was a high school senior. My youngest, Annie, was now a high school freshman. It made me sad to think about missing the important events that were going on in their young lives.

My next thought was my job. What had happened to it? Had someone finally disclosed how sick I had been while continuing to work? It gave me pause to consider that this had happened during my absence. I did not know that my husband had requested a one-year leave of absence after I fainted at the hospital. I was grateful he did this on my behalf. During my last days at my job, my ego kept me from seeking support even as I struggled to walk a few hundred feet from the parking lot to the elevator up to my office.

A few moments later, Nurse Patricia returned with my “breakfast.” It was a peach colored container of liquid protein that looked like cement. I watched in awe as she said, “Down the hatch” and poured it into my feeding tube. “Can you taste anything?” she asked. I shook my head “no.” The only sensation I felt was the cold sludge making its way down the feeding tube in the back of my throat. I had lost quite a bit of weight during my two-month nap. Thirty-four pounds to be exact. My body, which had always been very muscular, was now atrophied and weak.

The LVAD was the third device to be surgically placed into my body after the AICD defibrillator and pacemaker. It cost over a million dollars to install. Now, my job of learning to live with it began. There would be no swimming in the near future. The eight pounds of life-saving state-of-the-art medical equipment that was now part of my body would require ongoing care. I had no idea at that time the battles that had taken place to get the LVAD device installed. I would have certainly died without it.

The next lesson I learned as a transplant patient is: Your medical team must fight to save your life. Even with your insurance company. You do not have the luxury of time on your side.