

## Never Say Die (*Jacqueline Jacques*)

Who knew that bending to pull my pyjama trousers over my foot would be so catastrophic? I was looking forward to my shower and the last thing I'd expected, that Saturday morning, was to dislocate my hip. As I leant over, I felt this rolling, sliding sensation across my groin, locking me into excruciating pain. I simply could not move and I realised that, for the first time in my life, I was completely helpless. I have lived alone since my husband died. I do have an elderly person's alarm pendant but it was now out of reach on my dressing table. I knew I had to summon help somehow or I would still be there, sitting on the end of the bed, with my pyjama trousers round my ankles, in weeks to come.

I had to find my mobile phone. Had I taken it downstairs when I got up to put the washing on? Please don't let it be on the draining board! Hadn't I been checking for messages in bed? Might it not still be here, on the bed somewhere? With a little bit of luck? I couldn't turn around to look but I could stretch my arm back, and back and back, my fingers working their way up the duvet. Until there, unbelievably, it was. God didn't want me to die today, after all.

I called 111 and while I waited for a call back, phoned Janice, my neighbour, and told her where I had hidden the key in the front garden so she could let the paramedics in. I texted my children. *'In trouble here. Twisted my hip trying to get undressed. Can't move. Called 111. Waiting for call back.'*

Tamsin was sleeping off a night shift at the maternity hospital. She called around 6pm.. I missed Jon's return voice call, as a doctor phoned, trying to establish what exactly I'd done to myself. 'Which way is your foot facing?' I told her it had turned inwards at right angles to my leg, and I couldn't move it. 'The paramedics will be up to 3 hours,' she said.

Jon's text came through. *'I've just left Harrow heading East – I'll skip West Ham and come to you.'* What a hero!

Janice phoned. 'Where exactly is the key? I've looked under the flower pots.' I redirected her and I heard her letting herself in, coming up the stairs. Thank God for good neighbours. 'What can I do?' she demanded. Well, the most important thing for me at that moment was to get my pants pulled up! She did her best, poor woman, but it was hard as I couldn't move my legs or lift my bum off the bed. Next job, take the washing out of the machine and hang it to dry, and after that, shut the bedroom window. Afterwards, we both settled down to wait for Jon and the paramedics who seemed to arrive together about an hour later.

With me yelping and panting in pain, they hauled me from sitting to standing, into a wheelchair, and got me to the loo in time (a tricky balancing act but first things first!) – then from the wheelchair onto the stair lift. Could he have known, my lovely husband, when he had the stair lift installed to aid his own mobility all those years ago, that it would, one day, save a pair of young female paramedics the task of negotiating those stairs with me in a wheelchair? In the ambulance I was somehow transferred to a trolley cum bed and Jon tried to distract me as we sped through the streets to A and E at Whipps Cross to be triaged and begin the LONG WAIT for treatment. Afternoon bled into evening alleviated periodically by mysterious visits from nurses and doctors. There were CT scans, blood tests, X-rays, blood pressure checks and people wanting to know my medical history.

A woman with a trolley of refreshments came by. 'Would you like something to eat?' Would I? I'd had no breakfast and it was way past lunchtime. But this was a BIG MISTAKE. Apparently, someone should have written 'Nil by Mouth' on my notes. Because I'd had half a tuna sandwich and a cup of tea they couldn't give me a general anaesthetic to manipulate my hip back in place until the next day.

However... there was something they'd like to try if I was up for it. I would hardly feel the pain, they said. 'Anything,' I said. So, they handed me what looked like a green plastic bazooka, filled with brown powder. I noticed there was smoke coming from it.. 'Breathe in,' they said. Well... it tasted wonderful, spicy and sweet. Three puffs and I was away, high as a kite. I was aware of Jon standing beside me, in his mohair jumper, holding my hand, but his face kept changing to that of a much younger man, a teenager, a boy. He recalls trying to take the drugs away from me and me hanging onto them for dear life! What I was seeing was brilliantly coloured glass tiles behind which my pain was moving like a shadow as the surgeon tried to manipulate the ball of the hip joint back into its socket.

Sadly, they were unsuccessful and, when I came down, nice men pushed me along corridors away from the mayhem of A-and E, through swing doors, into lifts, up to a dark ward to wait out the night. Jon was sent home and I was divested of my pyjamas (I was still wearing them) – and popped into one of those chic little numbers, guaranteed to make you feel at your best– a glamorous, one size fits all, rear opening, hospital nightie, and pumped full of pain killers. I asked for a bedpan, but they insisted on putting me into a nappy. So much more convenient and so-oooo humiliating. And thus began my descent from adult to babyhood, from a human being with rights to sheer desperate dependency, punctuated at regular intervals by nurses doing OBS.

Hello, my name is Remi, Mellow, Kamil, Mo, Joseph, Anna, each of whom paused halfway through the routine to enquire if my BP was normally so high. Relax, they said, Breathe deep, they said and tried again, and again, until they could record a more acceptable figure. As soon as I took my BP pill the figure dropped, sometimes alarmingly and, on one of Jon's later visits, he was taking bets with the nurses, on whether it would be high or low.

By 11.30 am the next day, I was out of theatre and the pain had gone. Replaced by a dull ache. The ball was back in the socket, where it should be. Hurrah, I thought, now I can go home. Not so fast, young Josephine! They had to take precautions. The tissue was torn. Suppose the hip were to dislocate again? You have to be fitted with a brace, Josephine. Who? What? I dared to correct them. Told them my name, the one on my wrist and round my ankle, and, oh, on the wall above my bed. Ah, yes, Jacqueline, they assured me, they were giving the right person the correct treatment.

The brace turned out to be a mediaeval form of torture – a tight strapping made of tough black plastic, Velcro and steel that wrapped round your middle, squashing your boobs, with more Velcro to wrap around your leg and impede normal movement. It was clearly invented by a man, and one without vision. Yes, it works in hospital, with a hospital nightie, but, when you get back into civvies and strap it over your clothes, how do you go to the toilet without having to dismantle the entire edifice? Men have it so easy, in so many ways. I was told I had to wear the brace for six weeks at least.

So, can I go home NOW?

You're joking. Now you we have to get you ambulant. I had to prove that I could walk unaided in my ton weight of callipers with a wheelie Zimmer frame, to the loo and back.

No problem. I was determined to pass every test and get out of there. In just a few days other patients were calling me Speedy Gonzalez as I sailed through the ward, my nightie flying. Such fun! Until I discovered, from watching others, that my aging backside was on view for all to see, including the men in the adjoining ward.

Now can I go? Please...

'No, not yet. There has to be a care package in place in the home'. There was nothing I could do but wait while the hospital and the aftercare service tried to reach decisions without consulting me, or my children who were actually, living in my home for the duration.

Hospital was bearable – just – during the day. Visitors came, family, friends who played me at Rummikub and dominoes, brought me nice things to eat, to read, brought me gossip, cheered me up. Some of the other patients were chatty and pleasant. Vera, aged 80, a single woman living alone in her ground floor flat in Woodford, had gone to a meeting in Ladbroke Grove and woken up in Conifer Ward with no recollection of how she came to be there and having had a hip replacement. Theresa, an American, had fallen down in her Dog Grooming Parlour and broken almost every bone from the waist down. She'd been there for three months and was just learning to walk again. Jolanthe ran a German language group for the U3A and blessed the day she'd discovered the organisation. Her back pain made her cry out involuntarily whenever she moved; Barbara was a refined Indian woman who loved to cook and flirt with a male nurse, Kamil, who buttered her up and called her Auntie. He wanted to be the most memorable nurse ever so we'd give him a high rating when we went home. I didn't trust him.

Oh, and about the pappy mush that passed as food, served lukewarm on paper plates... Least said. The best meal of the day was the breakfast porridge. The nurses preferred to swipe the toast and a banana.

Most of the nurses were brisk and efficient – cogs in the wheel – and, for the most part, impersonal. We, the patients, were simply cases. The staff lived behind their computers and came out routinely to take our temperatures, check our pulses, our blood pressure and change our beds when we disgraced ourselves. They only relaxed with each other. Loudly. There were one or two with a good bedside manner but, in general, familiarity seemed to be frowned on. Kamil liked to use our phone chargers.

Physically, Conifer ward (Orthopaedic, lower limbs) was divided in two, one half containing 8 beds for women, and just beyond mine – number 4 – another 8 beds containing men, all elderly, most bedridden and prone to snoring and, at least 4 poor, demented souls, who came into their own at night, calling for help, spouting filth, claiming they hadn't asked for this or that and wouldn't put up with it, you stinking bastard black... On and on and on.

Oh, those awful nights. Bed number 4 was right next to the Nurses' station. Pedal bins clanged in my ear, drawers opened and shut with a bang, taps ran, curtains swished back and forth, lights flashed on and off, trolleys clattered and, apart from one exemplary weekend team, the staff seemed to be having a ball, laughing, joking, arguing and swapping sandwiches.

I tried to sleep. I had eye shades and earplugs but they made little difference. To add to my discomfort, I had to sleep on my back with a triangular wedge between my legs to prevent my twisting and crossing my legs and dislocating the hip again.

They made promises they didn't keep, those nurses. You can have a shower tomorrow; you can have the hairdresser pay you a visit. By the time I went home I hadn't washed my hair for ten days! How can you get better when you feel itchy and you know you look as dreadful as you feel. Twice they packed up my toiletries, clothes and pills, plus a Zimmer frame and the wedge, with a cheery, 'You're going home today!' And twice I was disappointed... My toilet seats at home had to be made higher and carers had to be booked to come in twice a day. I explained that either my son or my daughter would be living with me, at least for the first two weeks, but that cut no ice. Regs were regs. I was a single elderly woman living alone and they had a duty of care.

When the time came eventually for my release I couldn't get out of there fast enough. I was determined to be good, to wear the brace and obey the rules. No twisting, bending, sitting in low chairs, picking things up off the floor. Accept kindness graciously, Jac, I told myself, and allow others to spoil you. You can't have the hip popping again. Above all else, do the exercises – the ones I asked for before I left, and which they promised to look up, print out and give me, but didn't. The physiotherapist who came to the house 3 weeks later, says they are essential to rebuild the tissue to hold the joint in place.

Thank God for Google.

Jacqueline Jacques.