

TWENTY-TWO INDIA

By Katharine Decker Johnson

Ka-pow! There are foggy drifts of mental pictures, piling up and shifting freely like clouds on pillows of air and vapor. My awareness is only that of focusing closely on voices; and seeing or sensing only vague features—a beard, dark eyebrows, someone's blue eyes, a familiar fragrance of lotion.

There is a lump on the back of my head. It moves around a bit, but it won't go away. It is a wad of matted hair that the nurses cannot shampoo out and are unwilling to cut out. It's driving me to distraction. I have to get it out.

Funny how a small thing like that can force me into the real world. I have been in the trauma center for nearly a month.

I do remember Father Bob bringing Communion to my bedside. I do remember the shampoo session. And I do remember Gary being there, just talking to me in his reassuring tone of voice. No sense of time...all is the present moment. Gary has brought me my little red Swiss Army knife with the tiny folding scissors. I ask him to keep snipping away at that painful knot of hair. Finally my head rests smoothly on the pillow. If I could just sleep for a little while. Why doesn't someone turn off the lights?

My "organ recital" rivals an all Bach night at a cathedral. I have drawn medical illustrations of all the broken bones...neck, clavicle, scapula, pelvis (five places), sacrum, all right side ribs, sternum, both patellas, right tibia (two places), right fibula.

My major problem, which makes most of the doctors very cautious about my survival, is a transected aorta. This is the heart injury that claimed the life of Diana Spencer.

Other problematic injuries: collapsed lungs, and subsequent pneumonia, liver displaced into my chest cavity, ruptured diaphragm, and bruised kidneys. Don't even mention the allergic reactions to standard pain medications given to trauma patients.

There is so much to unravel...what had happened was that I was hit by a 20 ton truck at a busy intersection in a rural area on a busy Monday morning at 8 AM. This, while I was fitting in a cross-training bike ride to spare my knees from overuse in running my normal five mile workout.

I have had two helicopter flights. The first was from the accident site to the nearest trauma center, where my condition was correctly diagnosed. But that facility had neither the personnel, nor the expertise to "fix" my heart. So, I, a.k.a. "Trauma Apple # 9892-0184," was re-loaded onto the Cal-Star helicopter and flown to Stanford's trauma center— still an unknown person, but re-named "Twenty-two India # 99330292."

Fast forward a year. I am able to wrap my mind around the fact that I had flat-lined once at Eden, and twice at Stanford. It is at my one year anniversary trip to meet some of the flight crew on that helicopter and thank them for their efforts to keep me safe during the rescue's Golden Hour, that it hits me full force. Me—a total stranger. They, and the trauma teams, do this each day. God bless them all!

Medical professionals are called to put their lives aside and to put their skills, training and expertise to the test, and for total strangers every day. Perhaps many people saw this during some of the recent tragedies— September 11th in the U.S. and the tsunami in Asia. For me, personally, it has made a huge impression. It is a noble calling from my perspective...someone who usually feels a bit queasy at anyone's minor injury.

It is now a year and five months with this accident behind me. Best of all is realizing the grand privilege of returning to life. My soul and my mind have stayed with this broken body. I see each moment as a new step forward on a path that God has given to me with a blessing.

As I lay bed-ridden in those first months after having led a life of high-level physical activity, I had ample opportunity to meditate, cogitate and ruminate. There were times, finally at home from all those hospitals, when I didn't know if I was alive or in a kind of purgatory between life and the hereafter. A large part of my awareness did revolve around a scene of many people coming together in a loving spirit of doing something right, something good, something helpful.

It has not been about me.

I may never know why I was not taken in death. I may never feel called to a grand cause or purpose.

It is a truth I have come to know, that people really want the best for each other as human beings. Whether the catastrophe is global or personal, most humans, I think would choose life over death, offering goodness in a loving spirit of giving.

The complexity of how that plays out in this life may be beyond us, but the experience of giving and receiving love is the essence of what life is really all about. And that is what is valuable in life—spending every minute of our God-given time making choices motivated by love.

THIS IS NOT THE END