



'Please stand clear of the closing doors' by Julie Stephenson

"Put this on when you get out." Max reached to the back seat as we careered around a corner on the six minute journey which was to mark the beginning of a nightmare and a change in our lives for ever. "It's 35 degrees, why do I want put your bloody thick coat on?" "James might want you to be a bit more respectable" ... "James isn't going to give a shit whether anyone sees my bosoms through my pyjamas."

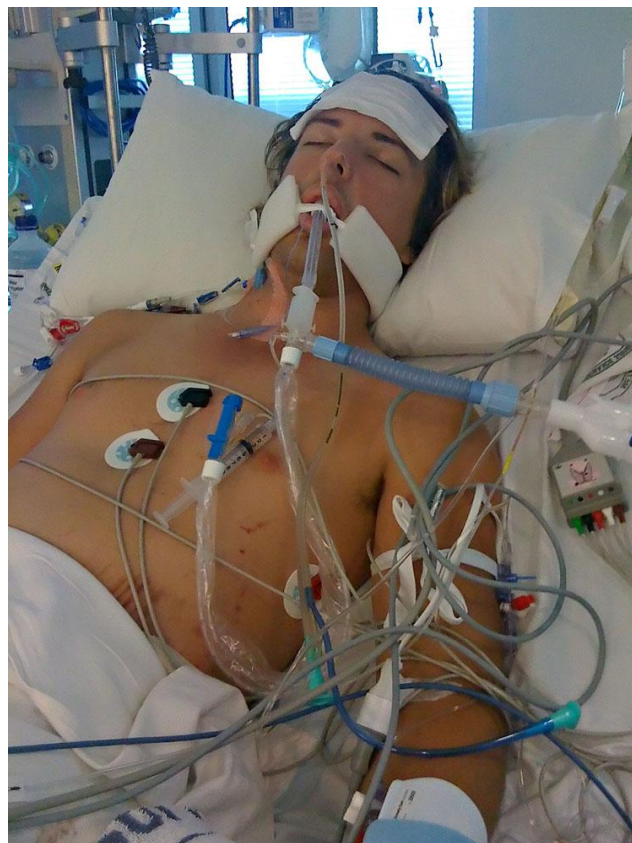
On November 22nd 2009, three sentences; controlled and direct; sounds uttered through the phone that every parent dreads to hear. "Are you James' mum? He has been in an accident. You need to come quickly..." This is the moment when our hope and optimism began to be challenged, yet we clung on to them like a raft in a wild ocean.

My forearms were grasped as my fists punched into an unknown chest, and my feet burned on the bitumen as I was held back from my son. James was lying on the ground waiting to be told he was dreaming. Those words never came. Trying to restrain me was futile and with a huge inhale, knelt beside our 19 year-olds head, held him until the ambulance and helicopter arrived and supported him while his condition was stabilised enough for him to be airlifted to hospital.

Every minute waiting in the family room of Intensive Care was a torment that no human should endure, yet every moment waiting, ironically meant there was a greater possibility that he had survived.

After six hours, three surgeons in their blue surgical slippers, caps and gowns, wet circles from their underarms and their backs damp with sweat, walked along the hallway with only glass windows between them and our fear filled questions. "Is he alive? Is he ok?" I uttered desperately. "James has survived. He is in a coma, but unfortunately we couldn't save his leg. We are very sorry."

I knew his femoral artery had been severed and as his twisted thigh swelled on the hot bitumen, his chances of survival lessened. His words came from an ashen yet conscious head; Ketamine induced hallucinations of Wookies and flying, and pain and heat. I was sure that spinal injuries had not been sustained. "He will be in a coma for a couple of days, and the next two to three days will be important for him." ".....Please keep the shade on me. The sun is in my eyes..." "Put this line in here. How long will the chopper be?" "Thank you so much for saving his life." ".....he just turned in front of me..." "Thank you, thank you so much for spending so long saving him." "Hey Dad, is that Pete with the umbrella?" "...Mum, please phone Ed because I don't think I will be at work tomorrow...." "Thank you. Please do what you need to do to save his life..." "Here is a list of motels which are close." ".....You can come into ICU 24 hours a day, but you need to get some sleep now....."



I will never forget those surgeon's eyes. Loving, with compassion; and sad; and with weariness of having to tell family members distressing news about their loved ones. I think telling parents about their children must be the most horrible thing to have to do.

'Please stand clear of the closing doors' – a monotone directive floated out of the lift as we entered it, as we extracted ourselves from a place on Level 4 where relief and reassurance was pierced and severed by fear. We were instructed to find a motel to attempt to sleep. Our son was clinging to life with the assistance of doctors, others' blood, pumps, and prayer.

Tubes and machines sustained his life whilst he was in Intensive Care - the best in the world. He could not speak because he was intubated but tried to write questions in drug and sleep induced hieroglyphics. Tears from nurses trickled as he gave 'thumbs-up' to them when they asked him something or did something to help him to survive. Temperatures and infection crippled optimism yet did not extinguish it.

The surgeons were superhuman in their efforts to keep James alive, and continued to work diligently over the months to retain as much tissue as possible and reduce infection in his residual thigh. James had lost his lower leg and was fighting to save the rest. 'Dilution is the Solution to Pollution'. 'Debride and Wash out' headed the Consent Form for operations every few days. The Doctors efforts were not supported however by a groaning medical system, where theatre time shortages resulted in multiple cancellations, twelve days in total, and James' outcome was compromised because of this. If it were not for cancellations in the early days, I am certain James would not have experienced the complications he did, and would have been home weeks sooner. Ironically, this has consequently been a greater cost to the community than an increase in theatre hours available for Orthopaedic surgery.

Eight weeks , 56 bags of red blood cells, 40 plasma, 7 clotting factors later, James' first attempts at standing using a rollator were accompanied by the ricocheting of "James is up...James is up" from the nurses along the hallway and then into the other rooms of the ward.



"He is such an inspiration"... "He has such a wonderful attitude"... "He has put the wind up my ass. Here I am a whinging bastard and your kid just says he has been dealt a new deck of cards." The words helped during this excruciating time.

"I can't change things..." would be his reply to those who asked him how he is coping, "...life goes on." he would reply. He wasn't being flippant, or in denial of his injuries; he just really meant what he said.

The most gut wrenching words came one Sunday afternoon in December when we both needed to escape the pale blue walls of the four-bed room, and I wheeled him along a glass corridor on the floor below into a concrete courtyard with fake plastic grass and some palm trees in concrete planter boxes. I untied his gown and exposed his back and chest to the hot wind to take away the sweaty, stale smell of the sheepskin under-blanket. I felt like my words of advice as he was growing up had betrayed him when he said to me with his face pained with confusion, fear and tears, "Mum, I have always been a good person, I didn't think anything bad like this would happen to me." Now was not the time to speak about new opportunities, or rationalise the philosophy of a Soul's learning. "I know darling....it sucks. Sometimes it's just the roll of the dice."

Apart from this one time, his attitude was usually one of optimism and hope. As he became less fragile and he wasn't so camouflaged into the white of pillow and sheet, when his pink colour returned so did his fabulous sense of humour and playfulness. He knew the value and importance of thinking

positively, which was just his way, yet this was challenged as he returned to bed 39, operation after operation, when his right leg was not bandaged, with no donor skin taken, meaning possible infection and the chance that his amputated leg may have to be reviewed shorter. His personality and passion for life kept him in such a wonderful place though and guided him through this uncertain time, and without doubt allowed his body to heal far more quickly than if he had been resentful and self-pitying.

Three months of; 'Please stand clear of the closing doors,' echoed amongst the thoughts of medical terms, treatment plans, granulated tissue, vac-dressings, list for Woolies, bed pans, antibiotics, 'what can I find for dinner', transfusions, 'when will we get out of this place?' These thoughts were as cramped in my mind as the bodies exuding stale breath beside me in the lift. Family members with flowers, soiled bandages, yellow bags of urine on poles attached to tubes coming out of green hospital issue pyjamas, young trainee doctors discussing their supervising Consultants, comparing their days rounds - "I'm glad I'm not a patient today because there are a few teething problems on the first week of my rotation. I felt totally inadequate and clueless in my unsupervised consultations today."

One could always take the internal stairs, which I did more often on the way down than on the way up...well actually only twice on the way up seven floors, because I was just so physically exhausted. The stair crowd consisted of those with hospital authorisation tags which hung around their neck on a wide blue chord; or thin pharmacists; or Doctors who cared about their own health as well as their patients.

Seeing Doctors lined up in the café, queued for Greek yoghurt with mixed berries...or muesli...or passion fruit, reminded me that we were all humans, working together to help each other. I feel sadness when the intentions of all those who care, get stifled by ego or policy.

Three months in hospital, with 20 operations, and such generous support from friends; and my family was amazing. Max and I met in the car park early to ensure we were there for the morning Doctor rounds. Max would pop in also during the day amidst trying to continue running our business which needed to keep rolling long. Intimacy between us seemed to be left somewhere back on that hot November day, as I was so immersed in being James' advocate whilst he was so vulnerable. Lawrence, although deeply affected always ensured Max had dinner. Lawrence organised all the IT stuff for James; a DX and a laptop, and filled a hard drive with games for him to play. Lawrence also sat for hours with James – often in brotherly silence. Mum made lunches and brought them up to the hospital and we always managed to find 'our spot' under the awning in the outside courtyard; and my sister rode a bike then caught a bus for hours to give me a break on week-ends from my 14 hour a day vigil.

James' mates and friends came and although their own grief and shock was palpable in the beginning, they all kept visiting with food, girly magazines and laughter. His boss came to ICU and visited regularly, which was so important in reassuring James that he had support to continue with his apprenticeship if he chose to. There was a constant stream of beautiful girls - his friends who will never realise how important their visits were in reassuring his sexuality regardless of his disfigured 'cryovaced leg of ham'. Movies were watched, toenails painted, stir-fry noodles and biscuits were munched. James quite liked the fact that he wasn't wearing any pants... well any clothes actually, and this became a source of laughter with him, the nurses and his friends. He had a lightweight gown which he used to cover his penis and scrotum, and because he was so comfortable with his own body would sometimes forget to keep in place to cover himself. A quick adjustment and an "oops" rectified matters.

"Looks like you are ready to be discharged." was a sentence we had been waiting so long to hear, but came as such a surprise; and we were unprepared for it. James' goal for the whole time was to 'start rehab' in the amputee gym. He was told he could be discharged, without yet even a visit to the amputee gym. This was very unsettling, yet through expression and negotiation a flurry of appointments were made for the Monday, and then told he could go home Tuesday. Communication was not one of the strong points in this ward and was in contrast to the expertise of nearly all of the surgeons.

Follow up review appointments were made and we both stood and heard, 'Please stand clear of the closing doors,' as we took the lift to Level 1 access to the car park. James could come home for a few weeks before the last operation which is a bone graft.

Although overjoyed that we were home, for a short while, I felt paralysed and felt a sense of displacement and grief that I had not allowed to creep in before.

There is a new beginning for all of us. James is finding a new way of being in the world and embracing getting stronger and working toward preparation for a prosthetic leg. He is such a physical boy; athletic, sexual, robust and filled with fun and energy. During this time of recovery he is dealing with the shards of his dreams. He desperately wants to return to work and complete his Carpentry Apprenticeship, something which he has loved since he was a child; and fulfill his dreams to travel the world using his trade, then return to establish his own business. I'm certain with his courage he will do so. I see in his eyes a pang of loss and thoughts that he may never scurry across roof rafters again, nor snowboard the 'black runs' in the US again, but I also see

his passion for living, and I have no doubts that he will strive to live an exciting, happy, fulfilled life.

As James says..“Life goes on”, and I will always have in the back of my mind the echo of “Please stand clear of the closing doors,” as I step from one day of my life to another.

