

The PRN Wife

By Cynthia Stock

When nurses still wore white dresses and thick-soled cinderblocks for shoes, I stood as maid-of-honor in my best friend, Rose's, wedding. A narrow ICU bed served as both altar and matrimonial bed. The groom, not the bride, wore the veil, a sheet worn thin from industrial washing, draped over what was left of a disintegrating body. Wedged between panels of fluorescent light, a cosmic shine of yellow and lavender illuminated the bed. To a new nurse, powerless while watching life slip away for the first time, I saw a sacred glow.

In his mid-forties, Jerry Lundquist was tall, a wiry, yet muscled, man with white hair long enough to cause some in our small college town to turn and stare, but too short for him to be part of the college itself. He performed some sort of manual labor. A combination of sun and cigarette smoke carved his face with intricate designs. Jerry had no body fat. Every time he moved his well-defined muscles revealed the artistry of the human body.

Jerry had never married. He listed a Husky named Astrid as his only family. His charm and intellect defied the image of a loner. He read more than many of the college students I knew. When he wasn't in pain, he discussed Stegner, Castaneda, and Welty. He loved jazz and cultivated calla lilies in clay pots in the two-room house he shared with Astrid.

Rose, my best friend and co-worker, and I, both in our mid-twenties, elevated Jerry to guru status, certain he'd share the real meaning of life. He knew no boundaries, compared to the rigid restraints of our profession. At our age, our work comprised our identities. His stories infused us with hope for lives where freedom and rules blended.

Jerry was admitted after vascular surgery complicated by what the surgeon described as a clotting disorder

Nothing prepared me for the reality of nursing. Jerry's body ignored the things my education taught me to trust. For Rose and me, our job evolved into a quest to prove the combined power of medicine and nursing.

I checked the pulses in Jerry's feet every hour, the temperature and texture of his skin, and the color of his nail beds. His feet pressed against the footboard. Rose and I discussed the danger of pressure ulcers along the bottom of Jerry's bony feet, nasty flowers of necrosis that bloomed once pressure and a lack of oxygen killed the tissues. We removed Jerry's footboard. His heels extended half an inch beyond the mattress.

Even in the garish hospital light, Jerry's right foot shone baby-butt pink. When I slid the tips of my second and third finger across the instep to find the pulse, I discovered a pleasant warmth. My fingertips moved to the inside of the ankle. I found a matching rhythm.

On the left, the foot looked white-yellow with lacy mottling. Blue-white replaced the pink that should have been under his toenails. In search of a pulse, my fingers slid over the iciness of a foot without circulation. I shivered and remembered the child's game of "dead man's finger."

I performed my nursing duties like a sacred ritual. Rose would take over for me on my day off. I knew she would give Jerry the same diligent attention.

Jerry favored Rose. Her voice sounded high-pitched and a bit nasal. She wore her hair short. It curled without frizzing and was an odd mix of premature gray and light brown. When she blinked, it was slow and deliberate. Her lids were reptilian, the skin around her eyes seamless. The color, an ordinary blue, contrasted with her complex personality.

Rose and Jerry talked and laughed during his bath, his shave, his oral care. Rose's presence transformed his laughter from a shallow imitation of joy to deep rumbling outbursts of pleasure.

For a few days, Jerry seemed stable. Rose and Jerry bantered and teased. I joined in but felt like the third person on a date. Until the day Rose washed Jerry's hair, we never suspected anything was wrong.

I watched Rose. She lifted his head and made a barrier of towels and plastic bags to protect the bed. After getting the tap water warm, she lowered his head into a plastic basin to test the temperature. "Too hot?"

Jerry never complained about anything Rose did. "Juuuuuuuusstt right."

Rose scooped and poured water from the basin over Jerry's head. She combed his hair with her fingers. The run off cascaded down the sluice of plastic and splashed into a garbage can. She massaged the soap into his scalp, rinsed, and patted his head dry. They exchanged nothing but her touch and Jerry's sighs from the simple joy of clean hair. Rose combed it and spread it out to cover the pillow. When light hit the strands of white, they became a radiant headress. She leaned across him to reach one last section of hair. Out of his line of vision, she bunched the clumps of hair that had fallen out and become clotted in the comb and dropped them into the garbage can where they floated on the filthy gray water.

"When are you going to marry me, Rose?" Jerry asked.

Rose and I laughed. How many patients proposed after a pain shot, a massage, or the first ice chip after surgery? "How about after we brush your teeth?"

"You're my wife." Jerry spoke with a calm born of certainty.

Rose stepped back. Her face changed from a look of ease to vigilance. She blinked rapid-fire. Her eyes said it all. I knew those eyes as well as I knew Jerry's feet.

"He's really confused. I need to get the surgeon to look at that foot. See what you think," she said. She trusted my judgment; I trusted hers.

I knew cell death at any level allowed toxins as mind altering as any psychotropic drug to build up. We passed a light across Jerry's eyes, asked him when he was born. "I was born the day I met Rose," he smiled. We asked him to move his arms and legs. He reached for Rose with one hand. He moved the right leg. To move the left, he had to take his hands, hold his left thigh, and pull. His lower leg did nothing.

I pressed my stethoscope to his chest. Air moved through his lungs with a small rattle. We folded the sheet back and examined each extremity. On the right, everything looked textbook-pink, warm, and dry. The left leg shocked us. The arctic condition of his skin caused by poor circulation extended below the knee. A line marked Jerry's leg just like the timberline of a mountain marks where trees stop growing.

Rose called the surgeon. "He's going back to surgery. Help me get him ready," she said as she hung up the phone.

The end of our shift neared. We gathered our things to go home, but lingered. Neither of us felt we could leave.

“Come on and walk down to the OR with him.” The anesthesiologist, an OR nurse, Rose, and I surrounded Jerry’s bed and pushed it into the elevator. Rose and I gasped when the bed shook going over the rough track of the elevator. Jerry moaned.

Rose and I watched until the OR doors closed.

Rose was off the next day.

In report I learned Jerry underwent an above-the-knee amputation. His clotting disorder prevented the surgeon from creating a viable skin flap over the stump. A dressing of white gauze, stockinette, and an ace wrap covered what remained of his leg. A circle stained the bottom of the dressing, dark red in the center, with fading shades near the perimeter of the stump.

Jerry’s face was bloated. Sweat left his hair in clumps. Transfer from the bed, to the OR table, and back to the bed, left it tangled. Black stubble was the only color in his face.

“Where’s Rose? Where’s my wife?”

In nursing school, I was taught it was not “therapeutic” to support a patient’s delusions. It felt cruel to destroy a fantasy that provided Jerry so much comfort, a man who left his room whole and came back more than just a soul divided.

“Rose can’t come today. She had some business to take care of.”

After assessing Jerry, checking his vital signs, giving him pain medication, I shaved him. I knew Rose would never forgive me if I didn’t and felt like a go-between carrying unwritten messages of love by performing Rose’s rituals in her absence.

When I changed the dressing, the site of ragged, loose flesh unnerved me. The burn marks of cautery dotted yellow fat tissue with black. Dark tissue, not created by any instrument, outlined uneven edges of skin. There was little or no odor.

“Rose, where are you?” Jerry cried out.

Every time I touched him, Jerry asked for Rose. “Tomorrow. She’ll be here tomorrow.”

After some more pain medication, Jerry settled down.

I called Rose to prepare her. I had never known her to cry. She spoke in soft, hollow tones, the sounds of sorrow. I wanted to wrap my arm around her, remind her of the patients who went home, tease her about Darryl Hill, the respiratory therapist she demolished when she dumped him. Rose, at home, alone, imagined the very worst of what Jerry was experiencing, because that was what being a nurse enabled her to see. The curse and blessing of the profession: to know.

The next day Rose and I worked together. We entered the unit and pulled back the curtain around Jerry’s bed to an empty space. During the night, Jerry had become more confused. His blood pressure fell. He stopped making urine. The surgeon had whisked Jerry off to the operating room with two units of blood hanging.

Every time the phone at the nurse’s station rang, Rose and I wavered between dread and hope. Finally, the OR called and prepared us for Jerry to be admitted directly to the unit, bypassing the recovery room.

Jerry’s bed rolled through the door. The bed hit the door frame and jarred Jerry, waking him from the world of leftover anesthesia and pain medication. He choked, coughed, and spit out the airway that kept his tongue clear of his windpipe. While Rose took report, I pressed a mask of humidified air over his face. The elastic strap pressed into his cheeks. With the mask and the swelling in his face, Jerry looked alien, unrecognizable to us as nurses and as

his two closest friends. I thought of Astrid, wondered if she would recognize her master. Then, it hit me. Who was feeding Astrid?

I did an initial set of vital signs. Looking at Jerry, I recognized he had lost weight, lost parts of his body, yet he still seemed to overflow the bed with courage and strength.

The anesthesiologist recited: "Left Hemipelvectomy. Four units of blood. Tolerated the procedure well, considering. Confused mentation before surgery. Will one of you sign my waste?" The man who just induced sleep so Jerry could, essentially, be cut in half, still worried about documenting drug disposal.

He became the target of my frustration. I wanted to slap him, kick him, push his face down into the place where Jerry's hip used to be. I wanted someone to explain why none of what I had been taught was enough to fix Jerry.

When I saw Rose's face twisted with grief, I knew we shared the same feelings. The chart saved her. She gripped it until her fingers trembled.

"What do you think his chances are?" she asked the anesthesiologist.

"He doesn't have a chance. Wherever we cut, he started clotting. What's left of his hip looks like ground meat that's starting to turn. Keep him comfortable." The anesthesiologist signed his paperwork, dropped it on the chart, and left.

After a few hours, Jerry awakened. The dressing over the left hip saturated with a serous tan drainage. This time it smelled sweet, oddly pungent. I helped Rose change the dressing. Jerry looked like he had been ravaged by a wild animal, not operated on in sterile room. Blood oozed in some places. Other places were dry, black, odiferous. All the bony structures of his hip had been removed.

We changed the dressing and the bed, then tilted Jerry with his operative side up. We stuffed pillows behind his back and under his buttock, now little more than a hollow crater. When Rose asked if he wanted something for pain, he stunned us.

"No. If I take something, I can't marry Rose. And we have to do it today."

"Jerry, please take something," Rose wiped his face with her hand, stroked the greasy, mess of his hair.

"Marry me."

When I looked at Jerry, I realized I cared for Jerry beyond the purview of his being a patient. When I looked at Rose, I saw her pain as she experienced love, admiration, and profound loss. A man with no guile, with wit, and autonomy broke down Rose's unusually rigid boundaries and gained entry into the sacristy of her heart.

She stood by Jerry's side, a study in white, a uniform with a belted waist that flattered her thinness and accented voluptuous hips. White hose and White Swan shoes finished her ensemble. Across from Rose, I held not the bridal bouquet, but a clump of dirty linens, stained with Jerry's blood.

I sponged Jerry's face while Rose stepped into the storeroom. When she came back, she turned on the overhead light used for bedside procedures. It cast a circle around us excluding all else. It sheltered us. Rose carried a single packet of cat gut suture. She pulled it out of the packet and dug a bandage scissors out of her hip pocket.

"Jerry." He opened his eyes. "Stay awake just a little longer. Don't worry about Astrid. I fed her before I came to work." Heavy weights seemed to burden his eyes. "Jerry, I've never asked much of you before, but I'm asking now. Open your eyes. One more minute and then I'll let you sleep."

Rose wrapped the cat gut around the ring finger of Jerry's left hand, tied a double knot, and clipped the ends close to his skin.

"Jerry, just a little more." Rose handed me what was left. "Now me. Jerry, are you watching?"

I knotted the ring on Rose's finger as she did for Jerry and felt as if I really was presiding over a wedding.

Rose took Jerry's hand and held it over her heart. "Jerry Lundquist, I do."

Jerry closed his eyes, his breathing peaceful.

The next day Jerry died on the same altar where he was married.

I was never a bridesmaid in another wedding. I don't know if Rose remarried. I believe Rose and Jerry lived a marriage over the course of two weeks in a small-town ICU. To that I bear witness.

Cynthia Stock retired after forty-three-years in Critical Care Nursing. During her career she pursued creative writing through various institutions and mentors and now enjoys being a seventy-one-year-old who writes fiction and non-fiction gleaned from fragments of an ordinary life. Short works have appeared in *Memoryhouse*, *Shark Reef*, *The Manifest-Station*, *Lunch Ticket a-la-carte*, *HerStry*, as well as several anthologies. *The Final Harvest of Judah Woodbine* was published in 2014; it told the story of a survivor of the polio epidemic before PTSD was identified. Her work in progress is autofiction, *Clocked Out: A Nurse's Life After Hours*.

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