

My Stroke
in the Fast Lane

A Memoir

By

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*Dedicated to my mother,
Who gave me life not once, but twice.*

Chapter 1

Easter Sunday Morning

The day began like any other. I splashed my face four times with cold water, a good-luck ritual. That morning, though, I thought of the pings – little blips of pain in my head that I had felt the night before. They’d been coming on for the past few weeks: brief twitching sensations floating through my brain and vanishing. I hadn’t mentioned it to my husband and I didn’t think to call my doctor. “You can’t run to the doctor for every little thing,” I told myself.

I dressed quickly, took one last look in the mirror, and decided to change my shoes to something with a lower heel; more comfortable. After all, I was only going to pick up my mother, we’d have an early Easter dinner, and then I’d drive her back to Westport.

The table was set in a seasonal pastel theme. In the middle was a porcelain bunny sitting on a patch of fake grass amidst chocolate eggs and jellybeans. And the night before, I baked a lemon-blueberry cake, which I, admittedly, took a shortcut by baking a lemon cake (from a box) and throwing a few handfuls of blueberries into the batter. The cream cheese frosting (I admit, I made from scratch) would hopefully mask the haste with which I put together the cake. A ham was diagonally scored, each diamond studded with a clove, and put in the refrigerator under a crown of aluminum foil. All we needed to do was put it in the oven when I got back.

Something by Verdi was playing in the kitchen. “Good morning, sweetheart,” I said.

“Do we have any more milk?” Andrew asked. The carton was near empty after he’d used it for his coffee and a bowl of cereal. He’d saved just enough for my tea, another morning ritual: fill an extra-large teacup with water and a bag of

Earl Grey, put it in the microwave for three minutes, take it out, and transfer it to a travel mug.

“I’ll get some on my way back,” I said as the tea bag splashed onto the counter. My hand reached for a dishtowel to wipe up the mess. If I could only learn to wake up fifteen minutes earlier, I wouldn’t always be in such a rush.

It was one of the first times I was picking up my mother, instead of her driving to us. Seeing a new scratch on her car every time we visited her made my brother, sister, and I decide to put the kibosh on Mom’s driving. At 86, she was vision-impaired and, after an acoustic neuroma brain tumor, also deaf in the right ear. If she *did* get in a major accident now and, God forbid, kill someone, my family wouldn’t be able to bear the trauma. Especially with Andrew’s and my son David getting married this year.

As I was leaving, I passed the dining room table, and noticed the bowtie on the bunny was askew. I should have cut the ribbon longer. The bowtie was too tight.

“Looks wimpy,” I said to Andrew as I walked over and kissed him on the cheek. He grabbed me in a full embrace. It felt good to be in his arms.

“See you later,” he whispered.

“Stellar” was the word I used to describe how my life was at that point. My dream project of working on a documentary film saw us getting accepted into film festivals around the country and lots of press. I had decades of experience in journalism, communications, and media. Starting of as an editorial staffer at Condé Nast’s *Glamour* and *House & Garden*, and doing media relations for film, television, and Broadway, there was a sidestep into private school communications. With recognition for two national awards, I was also the editor of two academic journals. In addition, I wrote a book (*Pound Ridge Past: Remembrances of Our Townsfolk*) and had a weekly newspaper column.

My marriage had just entered a new zone. Our two children went to the same Ivy League college (which made visiting them on Parent’s Day easy), graduated, and were now on their own. David (twenty-nine), lived in Brooklyn with Libby, his girlfriend of five years. He was in finance, and with a wedding in only eight weeks, on his way to a wonderful life.

After graduating. Annaclaire (twenty-seven) went to Oahu, Hawaii, for two years with Teach for America. We visited her often, and the sound of ukuleles or slide guitars transported us to the Land of the Hula, and Mai Tais on Waikiki Beach. (Thus, our affinity to Hawaiian music,) Annaclaire was now in her second year of medical school in Grenada, which by the way, if you don’t want to sound like a rube, is pronounced “Gren-AY’-dah.” “Gren-AH’-dah,” is in Spain

My husband’s practice in real estate law was flourishing. His years of toil finally paid off. And we had just downsized from a house in the country, where

we lived for twenty-two years while raising the children, to a townhouse in a more suburban town.

This is all to say that everything in our lives was finally in its place, personally and professionally. After thirty-two years of marriage, we had mellowed into two Baby Boomers enjoying the ride.

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When I got to my mother's apartment building, about half an hour away, the garden in front was awash with color. The daffodils were waning just as the pansies took their cue to flower. I always marveled at how precise were the rhythms of the seasons in the Northeast. It was brilliant when I could master control the rhythm of blooming in my own garden. Achieving it was always a victory as if I could actually control life itself.

"Hi, Mom," I said into the lobby phone. "I'm here." I imagined her sitting by the phone for at least an hour, waiting for my buzz.

My mother looked like a movie star in her younger years. She had a beautiful silhouette, a great smile, and charmed men wherever we went. I hated going to the town supermarket with her because it always took so long. She knew *everyone*, and flirting took us longer. But she had a long and happy marriage of thirty-eight years before my father died while playing tennis. He had a heart attack right there on the court. (Perhaps, in hindsight, this is where my heart trouble began. We seemed to share an incorrigible genetic link.)

Mom was energetic (people called her "Ever-ready Betty") and she was always up for adventure. Though involvement in her community had slowed in the past years, at one point, she was president of the historical society, the local symphony, and the PTA.

Besides all of this, she was kind, generous, thoughtful, and smart. Another attribute was *quick thinking*. You will see soon that it was not affected by her advanced years.

“Hi, darling,” Mom said. “Be right there.”

She came down in the elevator and gave me a longer-than-usual hug. “Here, take this.”

The small Nordstrom’s bag was filled with random things she wanted to discuss on the ride home and from the look of it, we had a lot of ground to cover: an upcoming spring book fair happening at the library, an opening exhibit at a local museum, an article on “How Table Manners as We Know Them Were a Renaissance Invention” in *National Geographic*, and various ideas for back-splashes in *House Beautiful*.

David’s upcoming wedding was our main topic, though. The family was preparing for the mid-June marriage on Martha’s Vineyard, where we had a vacation home. We’d go up whenever the children had vacation in grammar school, like Thanksgiving, Christmas/New Year’s, and February breaks. Everyone in the family shared a few weeks in the early and mid-summer, and we rented it out for August, which helped cover the bills.

In the car, Mom sat up in her seat, her eyes sparkling, ready to discuss or learn about any and all wedding details. I told her about my outfit: the quintessential dress for a June afternoon country wedding. Designed by British designer L.K. Bennett, it was as if it was created for just this kind of event. It was ivory with blue and yellow flowers draped diagonally from the waist to the shoulder. Shoes, also by L.K. Bennett, matched the dress perfectly: sling-back with a two-inch kitten heel, with the same blue and yellow flowers printed on the dress on the leather (*How do they do that?*), and rhinestones and pearls on the

vamp. They weren't too high. And as it turned out, it was a perfect height for what would come next.

“Stunning!” my mother said. This was a word she used a lot whenever we discussed fashion. She worked in merchandising and fashion at well-known department stores and often used this bold one-word adjective with confidence. My sister and I had a joke: when we showed our mother something one of us had just bought, Pamela and I would look at each other and mouth, “STUNNING.”

“How are the invitations going for the rehearsal dinner?” my mother asked. I told her about the elegant love-theme design I found. The delightful mother-daughter wedding banter continued.

Then, only ten minutes into the ride, and from a distance, I heard my mother shriek.

“Bonni!”

I was mesmerized by my right hand shaking on top of the console. The car barreled down the interstate highway at sixty-five miles per hour. My mother began to panic.

“Bonni! Bonni!” She snapped her fingers and waved her arms in front of my face as the car continued swerving in the southbound lane. In the background, I heard my mother scream again.

“Bonni, pull over! Pull over!”

Our speed decreased as my right foot, now out of my control, let up from the gas pedal. My gaze remained fixated on my trembling hand. And then, everything went blank.

My mother rolled down her window, now flailing both arms outside of it. *“Help us!”*

No one stopped.

She reached toward me and made one of the most daring and courageous moves of her life: my mother grabbed the steering wheel and veered hard to the right, sweeping us off the highway. The CRV bounced a few times off a guard rail before coming to a stop.

We were still in full gear. The holiday traffic streamed past us at racer pace. Perhaps drivers were in a rush to get to their Easter destinations? But if you saw someone frantically waving both arms out the window and colliding against the guard rail on the side of the highway, wouldn't you know that something was wrong?

Two hours after awakening on that beautiful spring morning, something happened that would change my life forever. I wasn't light-headed. I wasn't dizzy. I wasn't nauseous. I didn't say, "Mom, something strange is happening to me. I think we need to pull over and call 911."

The fact is: *I felt nothing.*

In the United States, I was one of the more than 795,000 people a year to suffer a stroke.



