



When I was 22 years old, I died.... Let me explain...

I had just graduated from Rutgers, and thought I'd take off a year: I had plans to travel, meet new people, see new things, go on adventures... The world was at my fingertips. Then I realized I needed money to do that. So, I took on a job at an animal hospital and quickly fell in love it. All of it. I had signed up to clean cages – I ended up learning to do much more than that, even assist in surgery.

In college, I studied forensics; I wanted to speak for the dead. At the animal hospital, I was able to help... the living. It was tremendously gratifying to go home and know that someone was alive because of you. The veterinarian, Doctor Bill Paulus, convinced me to go sign up for a few classes and try for veterinary medicine. I found out that Bergen Community College had a vet tech program, and I thought I'd go check it out.

At Bergen, I was introduced to the line at Registration. And then the line at counseling. And then line at the Bursar... And then back to the line at Registration... I think my blood might have actually boiled. I decided later that standing in these lines is rite of passage at BCC. After what seemed like an eternity, arguing with the people at the windows, I finally convinced them that I probably didn't need English Basic Skills or Remedial Math to take Chemistry. But there wasn't any convincing them I didn't have to go take a physical first.

Seriously? I was just in school three months ago! I was just getting one hard time after another. Then, it got worse! I had just turned 22, and my insurance told me that I couldn't see my pediatrician anymore, and I had to go to the "real doctor." He took my blood pressure, it was... 135/85. I thought that sounded high. The nurse told me that it is actually in the higher range of "normal," and really nothing to worry about. He also gave me a PPD test, for tuberculosis. 2 days later, I had a rash.

They couldn't figure out what kind of rash it was. Sometimes, the rash is simply the result of an allergy to the protein. Usually a rash indicates exposure to Tuberculosis. Evidence was leaning towards the latter – I had spent a few months in Kenya when I was in college, on a field assignment. I was mostly agitated. This was going to delay my chemistry class. You can't go to college if you have tuberculosis. Dammit!

They sent me for a chest x-ray, STAT. It was five days before I got any news. It turns out, I didn't have tuberculosis. Must have been an allergy after all. However, what they did say was that "something is amiss." ... What? "Well, there seems to be a mass." I spent the next week convinced that I was dying from some kind of cancer. The next step was a CAT scan. My entire cardiovascular system was injected with an iodine dye so that the team could get a detailed view of what was going on.

Unfortunately, it also turns out that I'm allergic to iodine contrast. The next thing I knew, I was waking up in the emergency room, and a stranger was telling me that I had an aneurysm on the portion of my aorta near my heart. - That was the only time I have ever wished that I wished I wasn't so good at science.

The aorta is the major artery that takes all of the blood from your heart and directs it where to go, everywhere in your body – running from the heart all the way down through the abdomen. It has thick muscular walls to maintain the high pressure that the heart exerts in order to push blood to the far ends of your body and back again. It is singularly the largest and most important artery in your entire body, and mine was broken.

The aorta at that particular region is typically about 1 to 1.5 centimeters wide. When an aneurysm reaches 3 centimeters, doctors begin to pay close attention. At 4 centimeters, they start organizing a team and beginning testing, and arranging for surgery. At 5 centimeters, it's time for emergency surgery. Mine was stretched in two different directions, 5.8 centimeters one way, and 6.3 centimeters in the other. Furthermore, the nearer the aneurysm is to the heart, the more dangerous it becomes, and more likely to rupture. Whereas most aneurysms occur in the abdominal region, mine was in the aortic arch, mere inches from my heart.

The part of the aorta in my chest had ballooned to over 6x its normal size. This means that those muscular walls were now only 15% as strong as they should be. Think about a balloon, being stretched to its maximum limit. My aorta no longer had the flexibility for normal, day-to-day increased blood pressure, such as jogging... taking the stairs... stress... laughing... Imagine that, death by laughing.

Mind you, I had just spent several hours standing in a very long and frustrating line for an hour... only to get re-directed to the back of the line AGAIN...

If my pressure were to be elevated, my aorta could burst, my heart would begin pumping blood to... nowhere. I'd have been dead by the time I hit the floor, and there wouldn't be anything that anyone, anywhere could do to help me. My doctors told me not to stress out too much about it. Because if my blood pressure spiked, I could die.

I pulled out of Bergen. I'd have taken on Tuberculosis in a... heartbeat. I didn't know how many of those I had left. My insurance company called. If I was 22 and not in school, I wasn't approved for health care insurance. And that was when I stopped answering the phone.

It was three more weeks before I could find a surgeon who would help me. You see... some doctors care more about their statistics than their patients. None of them wanted to take such a risky case. Finally, I got one of the best teams on the east coast – Mount Sinai Hospital. At the time, I was so thankful to have found someone to help me, that I didn't notice that the top specialist in the area had gone out of his way to find me.

There were two weeks of 4 or 5 more CAT scans, and catheterizations, and other tests. The odds of surviving the surgery alone were only 50%. Fifty. Fifty? That's... a flip of a coin. Heads – you live – tails – you die. Those weren't the kind of chances you give someone's life. That's the sort of method you use for deciding which team runs the ball first.

In September of 2006, I underwent a 10 hour surgery to graft the aneurysm. They surgically implanted a mesh lining to the inside of my aortic wall. But... in order to do so, they had to stop the flow of blood through the aorta to begin with. The majority of the time was actually spent in preparation for the heart lung bypass.

A four inch incision was made in my pelvis, and a catheter was inserted all the way up to my aneurysm. If my body moved, or the doctor jerked his hand, it would puncture through my aorta, and I would die. All of the blood in my body was to be rerouted to a machine instead of my heart and lungs. This machine was going to cool my blood to 55 degrees Fahrenheit, re-oxygenate and pump this cold blood through every inch of my body during the most critical minutes of my life. Another two incisions were made into my neck - one into each carotid artery. One was a large port IV, the other was a three way probe, to send sensors simultaneously to my brain, lungs and heart. Another three or four inch slice was made into my left side, so that four drain tubes could be inserted into my chest cavity, to relieve the pressure that would undoubtedly eventually build up from extra fluid rushing around my lungs.

The major incision was made on my back, extending to the side of my body. This was no four inch cut. This was a 16 inch hack job, so that my surgeon could fit both of his hands between my ribs to graft one of the largest aneurysms he's admittedly ever seen in the chest cavity. The body can only tolerate this kind of stress from surgery for about 25 minutes. It took him 27 minutes.

So, for 27 minutes, my lungs didn't fill with air, and my heart didn't beat. For 27 minutes, I was clinically dead. 27 minutes is 27 minutes too long for a 22 year old to be dead...

When you're 22, you're supposed be invincible. Maybe somebody else would go through that ordeal. Not me... right?

It took me almost 36 hours to wake up. I woke up with my hands tied to the bed railing, a ventilator tube down my throat to my lungs, another tube to my stomach to drain gastric juice. I wasn't able to speak, or even see my hands to write legibly. We only knew that I hadn't suffered any brain damage because I flipped my nurse the bird when she couldn't figure out I was left handed.

It was a whole other day before I was able to breathe again on my own. Two days before I could lift a glass of water. It was three more days before I took my first steps. Another day before I had my first bite of solid food in over two weeks. It was about a week before I could go to the bathroom by myself. A month before I could shower, six weeks before I could reach up and wash my hair without agonizing pain.

Regardless and despite all of this, by December, I joined an ambulance corps, and in January, I was in EMT school. The best part – is that while in the hospital, I met a "PA," a Physician Assistant. In May, I'll be leaving to go get my own Master's degree in Physician Assistant studies. I'll be focusing on cardiothoracic surgery.

I wasn't obese. I worked 50 hour weeks chasing cats and wrestling dogs. I was a figure skater until high school. My cholesterol was... perfect. I didn't smoke. I rarely drink. I'm not diabetic... What we didn't know, was that my normal blood pressure is 105/68. That's a far cry from 135/85 – which was still normal... Turns out, I'm just one of 67% of women who have no clinical signs or symptoms of cardiovascular disease.

I owe my life to extraordinary circumstances. My pediatrician knew that I had the allergy to PPD. If I hadn't been 22, I'd have seen him instead of a new medical team, and he'd have ignored the rash. If I hadn't gone to Kenya, my new medical team would have assumed the rash was an allergy. If I hadn't pulled over on the turnpike at a particular rest stop at a particular time, I'd never have found the kitten that brought me to the veterinary world. A call to 411 led me to Paulus Animal Hospital in New Brunswick. Veterinary bills were so expensive on my student's income that I applied for a position on a whim, as a joke. Two years later, they found my application and offered me a job. If I hadn't ended up working for Doctor Bill Paulus, in particular, who suggested I take a vet tech class, and most convenient community college with veterinary classes, wouldn't transfer my health exam... If. If. If.

Even ignoring the remarkable coincidences that are responsible for my life, from when this whole thing began until now, I have had a 5% chance of survival. Those aren't odds. That's a damn accident. That's a 95% improbability. You actually have better odds with Russian Roulette. Five times. Doctor Bill Paulus? He died in January of 2007 from a sudden heart attack. He was a man of few words, but he called me while I was in the hospital.

I was healthy, and my odds were still against me. If my blood pressure fell within the normal range... or if I was hypertensive... my pressure would have risen too high for me to even stand as little chance as I did. I make a conscientious effort to know my numbers: my weight, blood pressure, pulse and cholesterol. I've lost twenty five pounds. Last year, I even participated in the American Heart Association Start Heart Walk, to show my support. I have become a fierce advocate for everyone, old or young, to know your own numbers, even the numbers of those you love. Know what's "normal" for you, because you just might not be within the 'normal' range.

One in three American Women will die from cardiovascular disease. Look around you. How many women do you see? If one woman dies every minute from cardiovascular disease, we need to say something, do something. The American Heart Association recommends 30 minutes a day of exercise . This is more than standing up for yourself. This is taking a stand for your life.

So many people say that they don't have the time, it's too hard. Too hard? I just told you what 'hard' is. 'Hard' is having to work to open your eyes the next morning. 'Hard' is learning to breathe again after your respiration muscles have been severed. 'Hard' is swallowing your pride, and having to ask for help with the most mundane tasks. 'Hard' is having to recognize, at 22 years old, that life is fragile and fleeting. And... how much time do you think you have?