

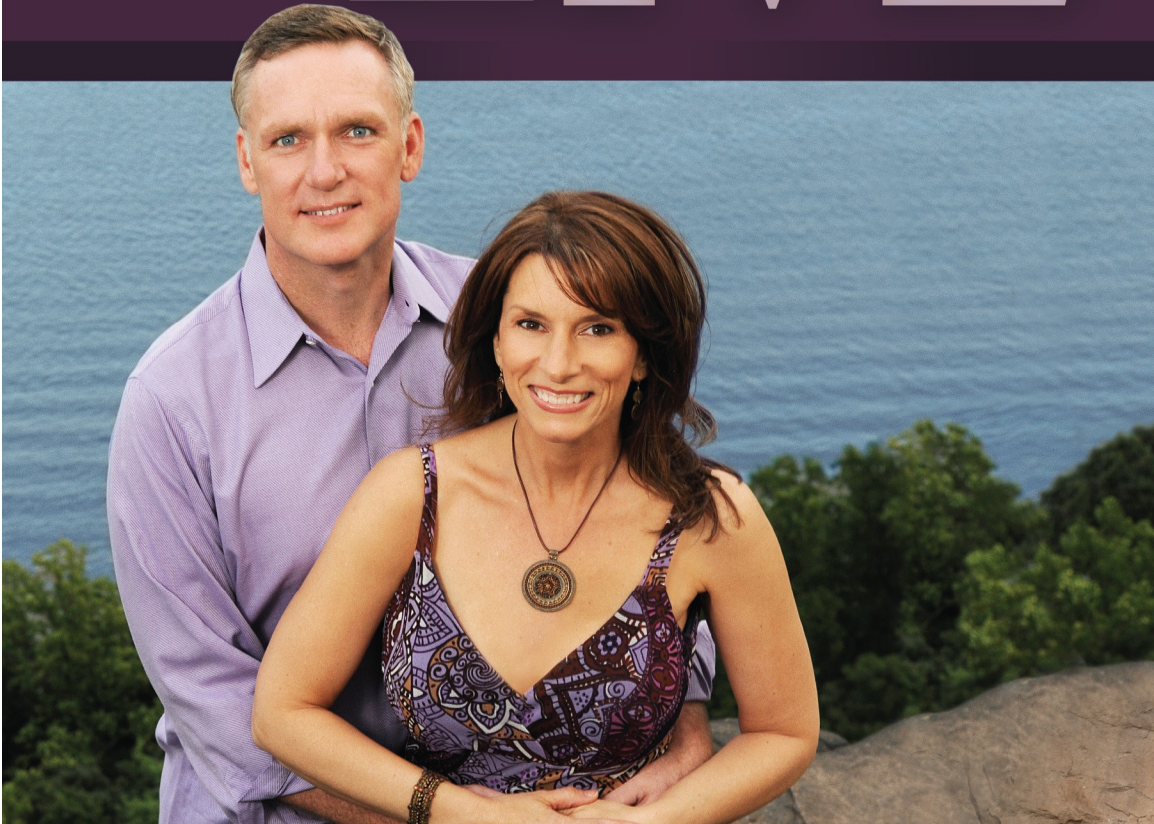
JOYCE O'BRIEN

FOREWORD *by* BERNIE SIEGEL, MD

author of *365 Prescriptions For The Soul and Faith, Hope & Healing*

OUR JOURNEY FROM  
LATE STAGE CANCERS  
TO VIBRANT HEALTH

Choose  
TO LIVE



# Choose To LIVE

Our Journey From  
Late Stage Cancers  
to Vibrant Health

JOYCE  
O'BRIEN

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# Choose TO LIVE

## OUR JOURNEY FROM LATE STAGE CANCERS TO VIBRANT HEALTH

by Joyce O'Brien

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**Cover photo by:** Jules

Helm  
[juleshelm@juleshelm.com](mailto:juleshelm@juleshelm.com)

**Cover Design by:**

Rachel Lopez  
[rachel@r2cdesign.com](mailto:rachel@r2cdesign.com)

**Interior Design by:**

Bonnie Bushman  
[bbushman@bresnan.net](mailto:bbushman@bresnan.net)



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## DEDICATION

*For my mom, our  
angel,  
who carried us through on her  
wings.*

# RAVE REVIEWS

*Like many charming young couples, Joyce and Kevin O'Brien apparently "had it all"—successful careers and a loving marriage—until that dream took on the quality of a nightmare when they were both, almost simultaneously, diagnosed with life-threatening conditions. Abruptly, their lives were filled with such despair that most people would have given up.*

*For Joyce and Kevin, however, this was not the end of their journey but the beginning. By recognizing their own power and the miracles that bless each and every one of us (if only we open our eyes to see them), Joyce and Kevin began the process of recovery. Often heartbreaking and frequently exhilarating, this remarkable story reminds each of us just what is possible in our own life—through determination, love, faith, and perseverance.*

*Having produced many stories over the years for Diane Sawyer, Charlie Rose, and Charles Kuralt, I've been associated with countless inspiring tales of individuals who overcame adversity in many forms, but I've never encountered a story quite like this. Without exaggeration, this is one of the most moving and inspiring books I've ever read.*

—Tom Martin

President, Tom Martin Media,  
LLC

*"Miracles happen when you know their secrets, Joyce and Kevin have a message everyone needs to hear. Read on to discover their secrets."*

—Steven

Sadleir Director of the Self Awareness Institute, Best-selling author

*Choose* TO LIVE

*O'Brien's journey from living the dream life of a thirty-something successful professional to the nightmare of her and her husband having advanced cancer is a roller coaster ride packed with emotions. Her passion for life jumps off the pages, and even in her darkest hour, her sense of humor shines through!*

—JJ Virgin PHD,  
CNS Celebrity Wellness Expert, Author of *Six Weeks to Sleeveless and Sexy*, President of the National Association of Nutrition Professionals

*It's not a book, but a black hole that sucks you in, wreaks havoc with your emotions, and then lets you out on the other side satisfied, inspired, and in awe of the human potential.*

—Alex Lubarsky,  
CEO Health Media Group, Inc.

*O'Brien's path to becoming cancer free was not an easy one—she was diligent and unrelenting in her commitment to get well. She did everything she was told and more: she bravely ventured into an unconventional new world and never let go of hope, and as a reward for her determination, she and her husband beat all the odds.*

—Richard Linchitz, MD  
Board of Directors, International Organization of IPT Physicians (IOIP),  
Board of Directors, International College of Integrative Medicine, (ICIM)  
Board of Directors, American College for Advancement in Medicine (ACAM)

*Truly one of the most inspirational books I have read. Joyce and Kevin O'Brien's remarkable story is told with humor and heart and stands as a testament to the triumph of human spirit. Nearly everyone has been touched by cancer in some way. *choose to Live!* provides a very real insight to the disease and, more importantly, serves as a valuable resource for anyone facing a life challenge—or can be passed on to someone who is. A must-read.*

—Dottie Galliano, President, Renaissance Media

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## *Chapter One*

# It's Getting Cloudy: Brain Hemorrhage

**W**here did it all begin? Oh, yeah, that's right: life was great.

Kevin was a boilermaker. Not the drink, but the guy who builds huge power plants. I was working my tush off and had just gotten promoted to senior vice president of an investment firm in Manhattan's financial district. No kids yet. We lived in Queens, in the home where I grew up. My parents lived in Florida, so we were living in their house while our dream home was going up on Long Island.

The avalanche began on March 1, 1996. It was a gorgeous spring morning, not a cloud in the sky, and I left for work around six, as usual. Your typical Wall Street workaholic, I wanted to get some work done in the calm before the craziness hit.

Then I got the call. It took me a moment to recognize the slurred voice. It was Kevin—thirty-one and healthy as a horse. Out with coworkers last night for a meeting and a few drinks, he got in a little late and slept on the couch so he wouldn't wake me. He sounded tired and hungover.

"I feel a little funny," he slurred. "Think I pinched a nerve or something—I'm a little numb down my arm and leg."

I would soon see how much Kevin downplayed things. Seems he'd gone up to the bedroom after I left, then woke up feeling funny.

"Okay," I said. "Let me call my parents and I'll call you back."

I mean, what else do you do when you don't know what else to do? Don't parents know everything? That's part of their job, right? (Unless, of course, you're between the ages of twelve and twenty—but after that, it's amazing how much they learn.) My parents said we should call the doctor—a logical suggestion, especially since they were 1,500 miles away. So I called Kevin back and set up a conference call with our doctor. He confirmed the likelihood of a pinched nerve but said call back if it wasn't better in fifteen minutes.

I went back to work, figuring it would unkink on its own. But fifteen minutes later, Kevin called again to say it wasn't better. Nothing could have prepared me for the magnitude of what was to come.

His doctor said, "He might have a pinched nerve or maybe a TIA." Wait—wasn't TIA when your jaw was out of whack and you had to wear one of those mouth thingies while you slept?

The doc said, "Since it hasn't gotten better and he's having trouble walking, you might want to call an ambulance."

*What!* An ambulance? *It's a pinched nerve*, I thought. No one was raising any alarms. Nothing was registering. I asked, "What's a TIA?"

"It's like a mini stroke."

This definitely wasn't registering. My mind raced. Kevin was way too young and fit for a stroke, mini or any other kind. In my bewilderment, childhood memories flooded over me. My grandmother had suffered a stroke. It paralyzed her, and she could never speak another word. She lived with us and just made these catlike sounds and grunts and groans and had to have a portable toilet next to her bed.

That didn't sound at all like what was going on with Kevin. Kevin could talk. It *must* just be a pinched nerve—the very idea of a "mini stroke" was absurd. He couldn't actually be talking to me and not be basically okay.

But I didn't yet realize how Kevin downplayed everything. "A little numb," meant *he was paralyzed!*

Since I didn't know he was paralyzed, my mind was on mundane thoughts of how to get back home, which was at least an hour away. I would have to order a car to get from Manhattan to Queens.

"I don't want you to call the ambulance until you're closer," Kevin said. "Why?"

"I'd rather you were here. I don't want the ambulance to come and all the neighbors to see me leave the house like that. I want you to be here."

I thought I understood his embarrassment. After all, didn't you have to be bleeding or unconscious before doing anything as extreme as calling an ambulance? Still, this was my *husband*.

"I don't think we should wait," I said. "I should call them now."

Then he switched to his stern, I've-made-my-decision-and-don't-piss-me-off voice. "No. I don't want you to call the ambulance until you're almost here."

I was naive. Besides, when he used that voice, everything was final.

I had the car company send someone right away. I stayed calm because this was all still just "a little numb" and "feeling a little funny" and "a pinched nerve"—nothing more.

Once I got into the car, my head began swirling. I called for the ambulance when I was fifteen minutes away. I arrived just as the ambulance did. What a scary sight! The flashing lights reflected off the brick row houses. When I was a kid, one of the older neighbors had been taken away in an ambulance. He never came back.

Inside my head, a little voice said, *Excuse me, but do we really need all this attention? It's a bit much for a pinched nerve, don't you think?* Then that feeling of sickness came over me. It *was* just a pinched nerve, right?

I unlocked the door for the paramedics, and we all walked in together. "Where is he, ma'am?" one of the paramedics asked.

*Excuse me, aren't I a little young to be called "ma'am"?* "He's upstairs," I said.

They asked me to wait downstairs so I wouldn't be in their way. In retrospect, I realize that since they didn't know what they were going to find, they didn't need to deal with me if I freaked out. But I'm not a freak-out kind of person—not until after the immediate emergency is over, anyway.

Those few minutes seemed an eternity. When they finally let me come upstairs, Kevin was already being strapped into a stretcher, which had been propped up so he could sit upright. Big orange straps pinned his arms so the EMTs could navigate the stairs more easily.

"What do you think is wrong?" I asked.

"We aren't sure," one said. "He might have had a TIA."

That word again. My face looked as if I'd just bitten down on a sour cherry. Kevin looked a little scared. It was awful to see my strong, healthy husband in that stretcher, but he managed to joke with the guys.

The paramedics carried all 190 pounds of him plus the stretcher down those narrow stairs. After that, they still had to manage the front stoop. My next-door neighbor was just coming home. The look of shock on her face really stood out. I must have looked just as shocked and terrified, like a deer in headlights.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

The word “mini-stroke” came out of my mouth. Then reality hit. I gagged as tears welled up and I began shaking. But I couldn't let my husband see how scared I was, so I blinked back the tears and acted calm and in control.

They took him to the hospital. I think I drove myself there—I actually don't remember, but since my car was in the lot, I must have. When I arrived, the nurses wouldn't let me in.

“They're getting him settled in,” one explained. “You'll have to wait.

*Wait?* I didn't want to wait. I wanted to know what was going on! The agony began as I watched every minute on the clock crawl by. My best friend, Diane, worked at the hospital and met me there.

“It's probably nothing,” she said, but she looked more scared than I did. Since she was very intuitive, that freaked me out.

I waited and waited, but they still wouldn't let me see him. Finally, the doctor came out.

“We need to run some scans,” he said. “We need to see if he's bleeding in the brain.”

*What?* Another sour-cherry look. Bleeding in the brain? But he was only thirty-one.

What seemed like hours later, they finally let me see him, but only for a minute. He was clearly scared. I tried to remain optimistic, but I was terrified. They shooed me out until they were ready to do the scans.

They let me go with him through the endless maze of corridors and down to the basement, where a different doctor asked the same questions I had already heard half a dozen times: “Did you have any headaches recently? Any dizziness or numbness?”

Nope, nope, and nope

Then he asked a new one. “Do you smoke?” “Um, yes,” Kevin said.

“No,” I chimed indignantly, “he doesn’t smoke.” “Do you smoke?” the doctor asked Kevin again. “Yes.

“How much?” the doctor asked.

“About a pack a day,” Kevin answered, trying not to look at me.

“No, he doesn’t.” I was very firm. I was, after all, the knowing, informed, caring wife. “He’s just confused because of the brain bleeding.”

Diane gently put her hand on my arm. “Joyce,” she said, “I think you should let him answer.”

I assumed Kevin didn’t know what he was talking about. After all, smoking had been a big factor in our marriage. The night we first met, I had walked into a local bar and restaurant. Although the place was packed, I spotted him right away. He was a little way down the bar; wearing a bright blue button-down shirt that highlighted the brightest blue eyes I’d ever seen.

Wow! And he was staring at me! I had the urge to turn around and look behind me to see who he was looking at. I felt a little awkward, but he didn’t take his eyes off me as I walked past. My friend Suzanne, whom I hadn’t seen in a couple of years, had called me out of the blue and we decided to go out that night. It must be destiny when a friend suddenly reappears and, next thing you know, you’re out on a Saturday night and spot a really cute guy!

As Suzanne and I talked and caught up, I glanced back at him a few times, remaining cool. Each time I looked back, he turned toward me and smiled. I had that feeling of butterflies. Then he took out a cigarette.

My father was a three-pack-a-day smoker. Smoke literally gave me a headache and made me feel nauseated. Aside from that, I just couldn't stand the smell.

As Kevin lit up, I dropped my sweet smile and shot him a look of disgust. He instantly broke the cigarette in half, dropped it, and stomped it out. When I laughed, he came over. The rest is history. Kevin quit smoking. We got engaged the next year and were married a year after that.

We'd been together eight years. He had always said he didn't smoke anymore, so I got the eight-year-old news flash there in the hospital.

The doctor, meanwhile, shook his head. He couldn't understand how a healthy thirty-one-year-old could be free of any aneurism symptoms yet bleeding in his brain. They ran endless hours of testing. The angiogram was very painful. A catheter holding a tiny camera was threaded into a vein in his groin and runway up inside his body.

Diane finally left to return to work. We waited. Then the awful news came: it wasn't a TIA. That would have been the better scenario. Instead, Kevin had an AVM: an arteriovenous malformation. An AVM is similar to a brain aneurism in that they both involve bleeding in the brain. Kevin had a brain hemorrhage. He also had suffered *three* strokes. He would need brain surgery. He would be admitted to intensive care immediately. If the bleeding didn't stop on its own, he might not survive the night.

Kevin remained extremely calm. He did have that *Oh, shit* look, though. He reminded me of a scared little boy putting on a good front. He was as sweet as could be, trying to joke with everyone to make them more at ease—until a guy tried to put an A-line (a small plastic catheter) into the artery in his left arm ... and tried, and tried.

Kevin hated the guy and let him know it. Sticking a tube into a vein is not the easiest thing to do, and it's supposed to be done by highly trained personnel. This guy was new at it. So were we, for that matter. At one point, he climbed on top of the bed and straddled Kevin. Although my husband handles pain well and doesn't usually complain, he finally screamed, then told the guy to get someone who knew what they were doing.

It had been a really long day. The ordeal had started around seven in the morning, and it was now six p.m. I maintained my calm exterior, but inside, the anxiety was spinning out of control. My stomach and head felt it the most, while my heart pounded like a jackhammer. Maybe they should be running some tests on me while they were at it. My heart wasn't supposed to be doing this.

As we went to intensive care, family and friends had already started to arrive. Thank God for them. The support was a real godsend. Kevin's brothers, my brother and sister, our friends, and his mother came. His sister patty was already on her way in from Michigan, and my mom was making arrangements to fly up from Florida. Even my assistant showed up, toting my Rolodex. At least twenty people milled around outside the ICU. Prayer chains were started as those who could handle it were granted a couple of minutes to see him, knowing that it might be the last time.

Seeing everyone was a nice distraction. It helped keep me from thinking of the horrible alternatives: Would he survive the night? Survive the surgery? Would he ever feed himself again? Ever walk again?

That was one of the longest days and nights of my life. The others were yet to come.

After a time, visiting hours were over, and the family left. I couldn't leave—didn't want to leave. How could I, knowing he might not make it through the night? The nurses were so kind, they didn't force me to go home. I fought sleep, and when I caught myself falling off, I quickly opened my eyes, tuning in to make sure all the machines were beeping along at their usual rhythm.

\* \* \*

Thankfully, Kevin was still alive in the morning—the first thing to be grateful for. The next afternoon, my mom arrived. Everything felt better once she came. I always called her “mom,” not “mommy,” but that's how I felt: like a little girl who needed her mommy. There's no replacement for a mother's hug when you're terrified.

Once our family returned that afternoon, the nurses assured me I could make a quick trip to the house. Besides, Kevin wanted me to take a break. I wanted to pack some things to bring back for him. I also needed to get cleaned up and change my clothes—after two days in the hospital, I was pretty skanky. I hadn't even brushed my teeth.

I was also still maintaining control as best I could. I was afraid to cry, as if crying would confirm that it all was actually happening. But then I walked into the darkened house and went upstairs. In our room, I saw the mess that had been left behind. The comforter and sheets had been pulled off the bed; the phone was on the floor; the smell of urine from when Kevin couldn't be knocked over.

That's when it hit me, when the enormity of what had happened became real: his struggle, his pain, and his sheer panic. I broke down. racking sobs shook me until I fell to my knees. Oh, dear God, the poor guy! He went through such hell. He must have been so terrified lying there on the floor. And even then he had made me wait to call the ambulance. He could have died right here!

He still could die.

“Oh, dear God,” I prayed, “please let him be okay.”

Feeling physically, mentally, and emotionally drained and fearful of what was to come, I dragged myself over to the tissue box and sat on the bed, pulling out tissue after tissue and sobbing uncontrollably.

Then something unimaginable happened. I'd never experienced anything like it before and never have since. yet there was no doubt: someone sat on the bed next to me. Not a flesh-and-blood person, but a being. I actually felt the bed sag under its weight. something touched my shoulders, as if I were being comforted.

For a split second there was another kind of fear—that “scary movie” feeling. I was alone in a big, dark house. Immediately behind that, a sense of peace came over me. It was Kevin's father, who had passed away a few years earlier. I was certain of it. He was telling me he was here and that Kevin was going to be fine.

I realized that there was a much more powerful force out there than anything we can comprehend. About the most uncanny thing that had ever happened to me before were having streetlights black out when I passed them in the car or walked under them. I never really paid much attention to that, though. This was far more powerful.

\* \* \*

Back at the hospital, I quickly fell into what would be my routine for the next month. since the bleeding in Kevin's brain had slowed, the doctors wanted to wait four weeks to do the surgery, hoping to improve the chances of regaining some movement. since performing the surgery immediately could cause further permanent paralysis, waiting was actually safer.

For the next month, I went between work and the hospital every day. It was agonizing to watch Kevin. He began physical therapy in the hospital, but nothing was happening. When he was finally released, he started an intense physical therapy regimen. He should have gone into an inpatient treatment center, but he just wanted to go home. This was another one of those times when there was just no convincing him.

Eventually, he regained some movement in his right arm and was able to use it more. His right side, though, was completely paralyzed from the waist down. dead. Nothing. *Nada*. Zippo. so the physical therapy tried to teach his brain how to tell his leg to move again. Neither was in the mood to cooperate. The determination he exerted would have moved a building, but nothing happened. It was torture to see this strong man grunting and groaning and turning purple, veins popping out on his forehead, yet unable to move one toe.

By this time, my mom had pretty much moved back from Florida. to this day, I thank God she was there. she took care of Kevin so I could work. I don't know how I would have been able to do it without her. The people at work—my partners and the president as well as my staff—gave me such great support. Because of them, I was able to work the early part of the day and then come home for the late afternoon to care for Kevin.

Every day, a handicap van took Kevin to physical therapy. He was going through so much just to be able to walk again. He was so determined, he would lean on a walker and use his upper body to swing the leg around.

I'll never forget the first time he moved his big toe. It was as though a miracle had happened—no, it *was* a miracle.

At this point, we hadn't known if he would ever walk again. Now at least we had hope. No guarantees, of course, but hope. How beautiful a toe can be, and what an utter miracle that we can wiggle them!

Even more amazing was the day he first took a step. We drove down to a lake near our house, and he shuffled along with his walker. At one point, the path narrowed, so I took the lead.

“Hey, Joyce,” he said, “look!”

I turned. He hoisted the walker off the ground and took a single tiny step. He was clumsy, and the walker slapped back down, but it was as if he had just walked on the moon! The look on his face was priceless. He had such a boyish grin and was so excited. I'll never forget that day. He had a long way to go, and it still didn't mean he would ever walk on his own, but it sure was a good sign.

\* \* \*

The surgery was terrifying. After hours of torturous waiting—hours of not knowing whether he would make it—I was allowed to see him. seeing someone after brain surgery is pretty gruesome. Kevin looked like a mummy, with tubes full of blood coming out of his skull. I'm a strong person, but it did me in—I fainted.

In the end, it was successful. They were able to repair the AVM and put in a metal plate. Now he just has a hole in his head. Well, it's more like a gully actually, so we hope he never goes bald. And we're a little nervous walking through metal detectors at the airport.

During the course of many months of intense physical therapy, Kevin regained about 90 percent of the movement in his right leg. It's still obvious that he has to consciously tell his leg to move, and the foot sort of flops down. Even though his construction job takes him 180 feet up in the air across skinny beams, he went back to work. No one thought he would be able to return to his job, but Kevin would not give up.

He still works hard at walking. The effect becomes very noticeable when he's tired or has had a drink. He also has difficulty running, walking fast, taking the stairs, and walking in loafers. But given that his "pinched nerve" could easily have killed or permanently paralyzed him, he's truly a walking miracle.

This was the first of several miracles. There was no mistaking that divine intervention, combined with the power of prayer and personal determination, made all the difference. We have many angels that look over us, surround us, and offer guidance and comfort.

some things we still laugh about. When Kevin tried to feed himself, I would watch him try to get the spoon near his mouth. It would have been so much easier for me to feed him, but, of course, I wasn't allowed—by the doctors or by him. turns out that watching him was much more fun. All I could think about was feeding a baby and zooming the spoon around like an airplane. Kevin did the same thing, getting it near his mouth without necessarily getting it inside.

They say laughter is the best medicine. . . .

## It's Raining: Spina Bifida

Things were getting back to normal. Kevin was back to work and making adjustments to compensate for the loss of movement in his leg. Oh, did I mention that during his AVM, we were having a house built forty-five minutes from my parents' home? so there were all kinds of decisions and paperwork and similar things that demanded our attention

And the builders were not the nicest people. In fact, they were pretty cold and heartless during Kevin's hospitalization. during that first month, they told us we would lose the house and the down payment if we didn't make our selections and come up with more money. countertops, cabinets, and flooring were the furthest things from our minds. This was not the easiest thing, what with the medical bills, Kevin's being unable to work—possibly *never* being able to work again—and the lack of sleep.

It all worked out, and eight months after Kevin's episode, we moved into our dream home. No furniture to speak of, other than my parents' twenty- year-old hand-me-downs, but four beautiful walls, and a lot of dirt around the outside. since life is short, we decided not to wait any longer to start a family. I got pregnant with our first child.

During this time, my company was being bought out, so things were a little stressful at work, with a lot of demands that had to be met as we prepared for the buyout.

But I was thrilled with my pregnancy. I don't think I'd ever been so excited in all my life. I just loved the feeling of having a little person

growing inside me. I just knew it was going to be someone amazing. We were excited, but I waited patiently for the traditional three months to pass before telling anyone.

Then the next little hurdle appeared. did I say “little hurdle”? It was more like the Berlin Wall. during some routine testing, I heard the shocking news: the doctors believed our baby had Spina Bifida, and wanted us to consider aborting.

From my nonmedical perspective, I would describe Spina Bifida as an incompletely formed spinal column. The spinal cord can protrude through the opening in the bones, leaving it open and vulnerable to damage. Anencephaly—the absence of a major portion of the brain and skull—was also possible.

Talk about a punch in the gut. I went from being a deliriously happy expectant mother to a terrified person facing the decision whether to take a life. I pray to God that no one else ever has to make the same decision. This was a whole different category of stress—floating on air one second, completely distraught the next.

\* \* \*

I continued keeping silent about the pregnancy in case the baby didn't survive. my stomach got bigger and bigger ... and bigger! I tried to keep wearing the same suits to make the changes less obvious. I used lots of safety pins to hold my zippers together.

I wasn't fooling anyone. come on! I probably ate twice as much and really started to pack on the pounds. No, I was not one of those graceful pregnant women with a tight basketball for a tummy. Instead, I had several basketballs: one in my stomach, one on my left hip, one my right hip, and two soccer balls on my chest. I could have been a Harlem Globetrotter, hanging onto all those balls!

Then came test after test after test. This doctor's visit, that counseling session, another test. I was beginning to have a real aversion to hospitals. By my fifth month, people were beginning to ask questions. We had to choose.

It didn't matter whether our child had Spina Bifida. God had given this child to us, and we would deal with whatever came our way. We started telling people I was pregnant. I continued to feel good—really, really good. I just loved having that baby in my belly. I was certain it was a boy. We could even see his little peeshie on the sonogram, and being the expert sonographers that all expectant parents assume themselves to be, we just knew it was a boy. Although I had that nagging concern about my child's health, things seemed to be progressing as expected.

Work was so crazy, I didn't have any time to spend preparing to have the baby—I was too busy preparing to be away from work and to work from home. I didn't even give my mother the registry list early enough. The shower was scheduled early, but I really wasn't prepared. The baby's room wasn't even done.

We did make it to one Lamaze class. The first day was really cool. We were uptight, so we made some jokes—you know, the “I'm nervous so I'll laugh, but I'm really trying to act cool, but, oh, no, is this really happening?” kind of jokes. We laughed a lot. Besides, everybody else had already done this, so we figured they'd tell us what to do when we got to the hospital.

We didn't really pay close attention. We figured the instructors would give us a summary at the last class. I still had lots to get done. We didn't do all that last-month stuff like buying diapers and baby wipes, or setting up a changing table and a baby bath. There was still that hesitation, that nervousness, the superstition and the what-ifs.

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That first Lamaze class came at the beginning of my eighth month. The next day, I had my first internal exam. I was running late because we had scheduled the first big meeting with the buyers of our company for the next morning. It was also the beginning of the month, so we were finishing up last month's deal closings.

I felt great, though. I was so excited—our first internal! The doctor would give me a much better idea of how the baby was doing, if it was dropping into position, and an overall “How ya doin’ down there?”

So he begins the exam. All talking and laughing, then he probes a little more. A little less laughing, and he probes some more.

It's really starting to hurt. No more laughing. Now I'm getting nervous. He's really digging in. I think his whole fist is gone. *Jeez, doc, can you take it a little easier?*

It all rushed over me. *Oh, no, what's wrong? It's the Spina Bifida.* The baby wasn't responding. Thinking back, it hadn't moved in the past several days. It was usually really active—so active it never slept. I was panic-stricken. deer- in-the-headlights time again. *Oh, my God, the baby's dead!* A hiccup of a sob escaped me.

“What's wrong?” I managed.

He popped his head up and ripped off his gloves. “Nothing. Everything's great.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“This baby isn't coming anytime soon. you still have lots of time. your due date should be around October sixth—at least a month away.”

I was dumbfounded. Was he joking? He just about gave me a heart attack! After all the time he spent down there, I was *sure* something was wrong. *Jeez Louise, Doc.* And off he bounced to his next patient, leaving me to catch my breath. Well, at least the pregnancy was moving along the way it should.

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Several hours later, around 2 a.m., I woke up feeling really weird. As the pregnancy progressed, I was forever getting up at night to pee. I must have been having one of those dreams where I thought I was peeing. Normally I didn't lose it, but all kinds of crazy things happen when you're pregnant. so I woke up, and, oh, my God! I really *had* peed during my dream.

How embarrassing! But that's pregnancy for you. I went to the bathroom, changed my wet clothes, and went back to bed. Then I woke up a second time. I peed in my dream again! What the heck? Why couldn't I control that? It just came out without my even realizing it.

I went to the bathroom and put a pad and some towels on. I had to get up in a few hours to get ready for the meeting, and this was getting ridiculous. It couldn't be that my water broke—the doctor said I still had a lot more time. something wasn't right, but I felt stupid calling the doctor at three a.m. to ask such a ridiculous question.

About an hour later, I decided I should ask Kevin what he thought. I felt bad waking him up, because he had to get up early, too. I woke him up anyway.

"Honey," I said, "you remember what they said at the first Lamaze class about the water breaking? Was there supposed to be a plug or something?"

"Huh? Whah ...? I don't know ..."

*Snore*—right back to sleep. The question hadn't even fazed him. I guess I should have started with some simpler questions like, "What's your name? When's your birthday?" I had a better chance of getting an answer out of a rock.

So I changed the towels, stared at the ceiling, changed the towels again, stared at the ceiling some more. I was just trying to make it to a more decent hour when I could call the doctor and get this straightened out and go to the meeting. I couldn't count sheep any longer, so I just tapped my finger and figured my water couldn't have broken. No plug had come out, and I didn't have contractions. so what the heck was going on?

As I called the doctor's answering service, I felt unbelievably stupid. someone rang right back. It was my gynecologist's cute partner, the doctor whom I hadn't really spent any quality time with yet. I explained what was going on.

"Are you having contractions?" he asked.

"No."

"yYou need to come right in."

"I can't. I have a big meeting this morning."

"You need to come right in. It sounds like your water broke." "But it couldn't have. The doctor told me I had plenty of time."

"It sounds like your water broke and you're not having contractions. The baby could be in distress. you need to come right in."

"I'm soaking wet, doc," I said. "can I at least take a shower?"

"No. You're thirty minutes to an hour away, and its rush hour. you need to get here right away."

I knew he was right—I needed to go in. But I was sure it was nothing. Well, because I wasn't really prepared and still hadn't done the things on my last-month checklist, I didn't even have a hospital bag packed. Looking back, I see I was either in denial or just oblivious. Either way, I wasn't really ready to have this baby.

*I'll just go get it checked out, I thought. The baby will check out fine; then I'll come home, shower, and head in to the office.* I woke my husband and told him what was going on.

“Wow, you're kidding!” he said. “Why didn't you wake me?” Oh, what a gift to be able to sleep through anything!

So we raced to the hospital. We took back roads, wondering if we would need a police escort. But the angels and the good Lord were with us that day, because we hit only one red light the whole way. Our doctor's partner, the very cute, very young guy, was there. I couldn't believe he was a doctor. As he ran all kinds of tests and did an internal exam, I joked, “should you really be doing this on our first date, doc? I mean, I hardly know you and you're getting awfully personal.”

“Yup,” he said, “Your water broke.”

God, I wish I'd paid better attention in that Lamaze class. But they probably hadn't even covered that part yet.

“Can you just stop it?” I asked. “I can come right back after work. maybe by then the contractions will have begun.”

“Unfortunately, you can't just stop it,” he chuckled.

I hoped he wouldn't ask me if I'd bothered to attend Lamaze class. “The baby isn't ready to come out yet,” he said.

“Okay, great, so I'll just come back when it is.”

“Nope. you’ll have to stay. If the contractions don’t start in a couple of hours, we’ll have to induce labor. so long as the baby remains stable, we won’t have to do an emergency C-section.”

“This can’t be happening. The doctor said I had plenty of time.”  
“When was that?”

“Last night.”

“What did he do when he saw you?” “I had my first internal.”

Then the grin appeared. He’d just gotten one over on the older, more experienced partner. “He did an internal, huh?”

“Yes. He had to dig pretty deep, but he finally found the baby and said I had plenty of time.”

“He did, did he?” Then he laughed. “He broke your water.” “What?”

“When he was probing, he broke your water with that hook finger of his.” He chuckled as he curled his finger.

“You have got to be kidding me!” I hollered. “I need to talk to him. Now!”

I was a pissed, decidedly premature pregnant woman who was not at all prepared for any of this. I had way too much to do before the baby was born. I had lots to do at work, I didn’t have a changing table set up— I didn’t even have diapers yet!

The baby remained stable, thank God, and the contractions started and then stopped. so they began inducing, but no dice on the baby making an appearance. He was having fun playing hide-and-seek. I was about to spend the next thirty-six hours in labor. so they put me in a room, and some of my friends and family visited while we waited. It was like slow torture.

I spent the next twenty-four hours watching coverage of princess Diana's funeral. There wasn't a single other thing on TV, and this was before portable DVD players. It was a horrible day. I was devastated by Diana's death, in labor, feeling about as miserable as one could feel, and just wanting to move things along. But there would be nothing of the sort. This baby was not ready, and it didn't care that it no longer had a big, warm bath to swim around in.

Well, none of that mattered—all that mattered was that the baby was healthy. But I really didn't want to wait forever to find out if it had Spina Bifida. They induced labor and gave me a crazy drug that made me hallucinate without doing a thing for the pain. About the worst high you could possibly imagine.

Still nothing. my parents flew up from Florida. my mom came in and out of the room while I was drugged. I asked the same question each time: "Hi, mom. When did you get here?"

Now I really wanted to kill "the hook." No epidural, and I still wasn't dilating. He'd broken my water, and this chicken wasn't even close to cooked. I hadn't been ready last night, but by now I was past ready. I wanted the pain to stop, and "the hook" was nowhere to be found.

After thirty-six hours of excruciating labor, my beautiful child made its debut in this world—but wasn't breathing. After an eternity of panic on my part, they managed to get it breathing, and I nearly fainted from relief. A team of five specialists was called in to check the baby out since we had both the Spina Bifida issue and it's being a preemie. two of them turned to us and gave a thumbs-up. Our perfectly healthy, perfectly normal (if a little jaundiced) five-pound daughter was here.

That's right. I said "Daughter." That was the next shock. We didn't even have a name for a little girl. We had two for a little boy because we were certain we were having a boy. Being doctors, we had seen it on the sonogram, remember? We saw the peeshie.

Oh, who cared? she was alive and healthy and didn't have Spina Bifida! We welcomed Kelsey O'Brien into the world. I had to admit that she did look a lot like a scrawny, undercooked Perdue chicken. Which reminded me, I was really hungry. *Anybody got a Whopper?* I needed some sleep.