

# A New Life Clock Begins

Category: Watching the Clock

written by Elizabeth Mostrom | September 7, 2022

10:15 a.m.

We return from a routine morning on the dock—me with a good book and an empty coffee cup, my husband refreshed from a 1-mile swim—and trek up our steep driveway.

10:20 a.m.

My husband emerges from the bathroom. “I don’t feel *right*.” An unlikely admission from him. He walks to a chair in the living room. I tick off signs and symptoms: chest tightness, shortness of breath, sweating, mid-thoracic back pain, shallow pulse.

“Shall I call 911?”

“Yes.”

Trembling, I do.

10:25 a.m.

The ambulance arrives. We’re both health professionals, so we anticipate the flurry of questions and tests. ECG normal. Symptoms persist.

10:35 a.m.

“Would you like to take him to the ER? Or us?”

“You!”

The ambulance heads for the ER. I let our border collie puppy out for a quick break, then follow in my car.

4:15 p.m.

Numerous tests later, heart and labs look good, but back pain is more prominent. I try to stay out of the way but wonder, *Aorta?*

CT scan confirms: massive aortic dissection and aortic arch aneurysm. Off to surgery—STAT. I hustle behind the gurney to the OR.

4:30 p.m.

We say goodbyes as anesthesiology preps my husband. I move to the nearly empty surgical waiting area.

I hear the surgeon talking in the hall. “Is that the wife?”

"Yes."

He enters and sits next to me. He's honest. People with this diagnosis have a 1 in 4 or 5 chance they won't make it. Also, there is the possibility of stroke, major organ damage/failure, and other sequelae. The surgery will take 8 hours or more.

"Do you have any questions for me?"

Tears welling, all I can say is "Please, just do a good job." And then I sit, numb, hoping for the best, dreading the worst.

Unbeknownst to me, the aneurysm ruptures as they go into surgery.

5:00 p.m.

Time for phone calls. No reason to call earlier without any definitive news. I have no capacity to call many—just two of our sons and one of my husband's sisters who is nearby—and assign the rest out.

Our puppy, Loki? A call to a dog-loving neighbor ensures he'll be let out and looked after for the evening.

5:30-11:00 p.m.

The surgery waiting room screen keeps scrolling: Surgeon last name; Patient last name; Status: in OR.

I wonder, *What would life be like without...*

By 11:00, two of our sons arrive. One goes to care for Loki, the other sits with me. The screen keeps scrolling "in OR." Only one patient and surgeon now.

1:00 a.m.

The screen scrolls: "in recovery." A nurse says that when they "land" him in the ICU we may see him briefly.

2:00 a.m.

He has "landed." Ventilator, tubes, monitors—an image none of us ever imagined. We say "We love you," knowing he is unaware of our presence. We are comforted by his nurse's competence and compassion.

Home for a brief rest before facing a new and uncertain day.

A new life clock begins.

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