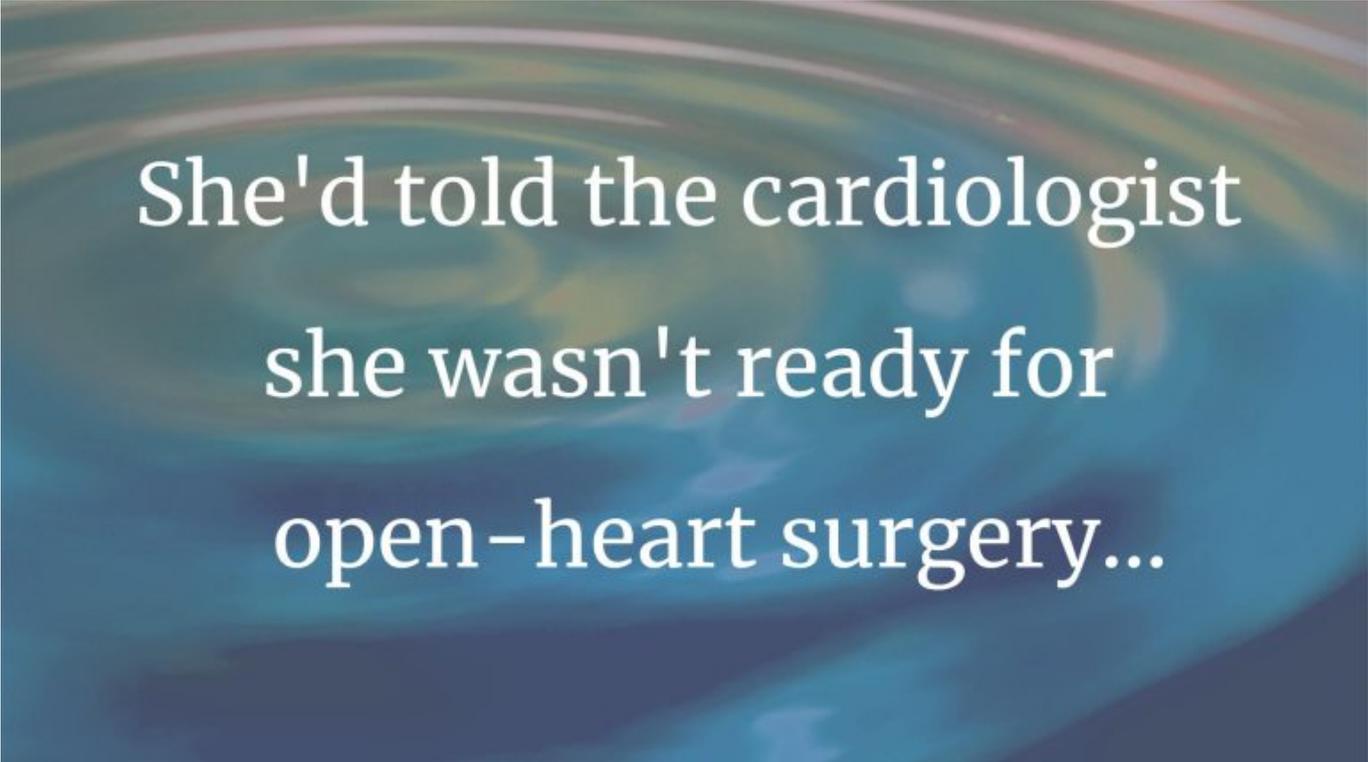


# Bea and Me

Category: Stories

written by Katherine Roth | December 17, 2024



She'd told the cardiologist  
she wasn't ready for  
open-heart surgery...

*Editor's Note: This piece was a finalist in the Pulse writing contest, "On Being Different."*

On the night Bea's chest pain began—when the heaviness like a fist took her breath away, the beads of sweat gathering on her forehead—it frightened her, as it did not stop. She was alone, and as she reached for the phone, she paused. Who should she call?

The pain increased. She reluctantly dialed 911. She mumbled the answers to the operator and remembered to open her door before collapsing on the couch.

Everything happened as if in a dream. The loud knocking and the strong men entering the room. How they knew just what to do—lifting her onto the stretcher, placing the oxygen prongs in her nose and strapping the white belts across her body. To her surprise, she felt protected in the closeness, the way they held her. The pain was lifting as they lifted her body. When the ambulance doors slammed shut, she closed her eyes and sighed. She later told me how it was strange—that this was the first time she'd felt safe in a long time.

Under the bright lights of the emergency room, the doctor reassured her that she'd done the right thing. Her heart condition was serious. She needed a cardiologist, possibly a surgeon. As they explained all the small risks and horrible mistakes that could happen, she suddenly felt full of doubt. She knew that her vessels were blocked, but couldn't they just let her rest? Last year she'd told the cardiologist that that she wasn't ready for open-heart

surgery. Tonight she wasn't sure. They interpreted her silence as agreement. She nodded to give herself time.

The nurse placed the paper bonnet over her thin hair. Blood was drawn from her tiny veins, and the IV curled on her arm.

In desperation, she thought again, *Who should I call?*

At last, she spoke. "Please call Dr. Roth. Tell her that I want her to know where I am, and what is happening."

It was Sunday after dinner, and as I washed the dishes my pager went off, buzzing like an angry insect. The hospital's number appeared, and I reached for the wall phone and dialed.

"Hello, Dr. Roth. This is Patricia, the nurse in the cardiac unit. Bea Thompson has been admitted for unstable angina. They are preparing her for surgery. Bea asked me to call. She wants to know what you think she should do."

"Oh, dear. Is this emergency surgery? Is she stable?"

"Yes, her pain is better, and she appears comfortable, but the surgeon thinks she should go in tonight, as the schedule is full for the next two days. Now is the only opening."

My memory flashed to Bea. We had met months ago, when she interviewed for the Healing Heart program I'd started at the hospital. The latest research coming out, contrary to what I'd been taught in med school, showed that coronary-artery disease was reversible. The program, offering group support, nutrition, exercise and meditation, was radical in its departure from the status quo. The specialists thought it was far-fetched, maybe crazy.

Bea, eighty-two, was petite; perhaps "fragile" was more honest. She lived alone with her two cats. She was genuinely interested in the program, and I had agreed that she was a good candidate. Emphatic about not wanting surgery, she'd confided that her main concern was what would become of her cats if something should happen to her.

And now something had.

I took a deep breath, then told the nurse, "Cancel the surgery."

I continued, "I'll be there first thing in the morning. Bea needs to give informed consent and have a real conversation to make sure that this is what she wants in the light of day."

"Did you say 'Cancel the surgery'?" the nurse repeated.

"Yes."

I replaced the phone in the receiver. I imagined my words going through the hospital, across the hall, over the intercom, into the operating room. The

whole thing grinding to a halt like a locomotive screeching on the tracks.

I couldn't believe what I'd just done. Me, a family physician, stopping major heart surgery—over the phone, no less. But then I imagined Bea, barely one hundred pounds, her delicate hands taking off the surgery bonnet, reaching for a cup of hot tea, calling her niece. As it turned out, she called her neighbor and asked him to feed the cats. She was happy, in her quiet way. She was safe, and there was still time.

We met early the next morning. I didn't need to talk, I needed to listen. Listen to what was *really* in her heart. I honestly didn't know what Bea should do; I only knew that she was the one who could decide. Indeed, she chose to go forward with surgery. She was doing what felt right—not because she was afraid, not because she'd been told to do it. She had her cats, and they needed her.

I didn't hear from Bea for over a year. Then the pager buzzed again.

"Hello, Dr. Roth, this is Diane, the nurse taking care of Beatrice Thompson. She's in critical condition and has a Do Not Resuscitate order. She listed you as her primary doc, and I thought you should know that she's here."

"Excuse me, but what hospital are you calling from? How long as she been there?"

She explained that she was calling from the hospital across town—where, unfortunately, I didn't have privileges. Bea had been found unconscious by her neighbor two days ago.

As I drove across town, I thought of Bea. She was spunky in a hidden kind of way. She was open to new ideas about things like how she ate and how she ventured on walks around her apartment. Yet she was private about her feelings, her disappointments, her dreams. I think that she was looking for a way to belong as she approached the end of her life. I realized that she trusted me, and that, in this oblique way, we belonged to each other.

I entered the room and moved silently to her bedside. The late afternoon sunlight filled the room. I reached for her hand beneath the hospital sheets; it was still warm.

"Hello, Bea, It's me, Dr. Roth. I'm here."

No answer.

I squeezed her hand.

No response.

In almost a whisper, I told her she was loved, and I wanted her to remember that even after everything she'd gone through, she had a good heart after all.

I looked at her silent face and her closed eyes. Then I saw it. A single tear

appeared and traced its path down her pale cheek. I reached again and found her hand. I sat with her as the sun set and the room darkened. I stood to leave and softly said,

“Goodbye, Bea.”

That was the last time I saw her. She passed from this life just before dawn.

I've wondered about our unique relationship, yet struggled to put it into words. I respected her intelligence, her courage and her ability to direct her life, and now, how she died. She mattered. That simple fact bestowed something on her life. Funny, but she had given me that same thing: *I* mattered.

Each of us had dared to be strengthened by the other. To be known. To be different. To do the difficult thing.