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**TEDY BRUSCHI,
LINEBACKER**

I've been a pro football player for twelve years, and my end-of-season story hasn't changed in a decade: it's always been tough for me to fall asleep when there are no more games to play. You get used to the frantic NFL schedule, one that's akin to cramming for sixteen different tests in sixteen weeks. There are workouts and meetings in the mornings, practices in the afternoons, and extra film study in the evenings. There is a lot of information to absorb in a short amount of time, all leading to the ultimate high of playing in a game once a week. It usually takes my body a few weeks to adjust to the off-season schedule. This explains why, one day after I returned from the 2005 Pro Bowl, the late-night glow from a television could be seen in the master bedroom at 21 Red Oak Road. It was one o'clock in the morning, and as Heidi slept, I sat in bed watching a repeat. Not only was it a repeat that many fans in America had recently seen, it was a program in which I had been one of the characters.

The NFL Network was showing a replay of our conference championship win over the Pittsburgh Steelers. The game replay reminded me how punishing parts of that afternoon were, especially one collision that I had with Jerome Bettis. My playing weight is about 245 pounds, and Bettis is one of the few running backs who actually outweighs me—by at least 10 pounds and most likely 15. There was a play when he rumbled through the hole and I met him there. It was force against force; we both fell to the ground, and we both bounced up promising to be in the other's face all day.

The play was so vivid that I dreamed about it when I finally dozed off. In my dream, Bettis was running toward me. And there I was getting ready to wrap him up and make the sure tackle. This time there was no playful trash talking at the end of the play. This time my muscles contracted and there was tightness in my neck. My fists were clenched and my arms were in the air, as if I were bracing for something big. That's how I awoke at 4 A.M. It was no longer a dream; there certainly was something odd about my left arm and left leg. When you play pro football, you get used to playing in pain and waking up sore. You really do develop a threshold for pain, and when you're on the field you tell yourself that it will go away in twenty seconds. So I stayed in bed for a few minutes, trying to make a fist and regain the strength in my arm. It never occurred to me that something was really wrong.

That night, as usual, I slept to Heidi's right, the side of the bed closest to two windows in our bedroom. As I got up to use the bathroom, I noticed that the numbness in my leg was more problematic than I had thought. The "walk" to the bathroom

never happened. I tried to stand and lost my balance. I grabbed a post at the foot of the bed, saving me from crashing into the windows. But the sudden grabbing of the bed and the commotion to keep myself standing was enough to awaken a confused Heidi.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I think I slept on my arm wrong or something,” I answered.

Neither of us was processing what the other was saying. It was too early, and we were both disoriented. Heidi told me to get back in bed, and I told her I would after I went to the bathroom. But my sleeping left leg and left arm wouldn’t cooperate, so I got down on my hands and knees and crawled to the bathroom. Once there, I obviously couldn’t stand. I sat on the toilet for a few seconds. I had to hold myself there until I was finished, and then I sat there trying to figure out how I was going to get back to bed. It seems so clear telling the story now. Now I know that I should have been more concerned earlier. All the symptoms were there: no balance, numbness, muscle weakness, and the early stages of a headache. But that night, I just sat on the toilet, wondering if all of it had happened because I had slept awkwardly. I must have been in there for ten or fifteen minutes, because Heidi woke up again.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I think I slept on my arm or something, and now I’ve got a headache,” I replied, still sitting in the bathroom.

“Maybe you were sleepwalking,” she said. “Come back to bed.”

I did go back to bed—through the air. I wasn’t confident that I could make the short walk from the bathroom, so I took a step

out and leaped. I dived in, landed sideways, and slept that way for the next hour before waking up again. This time the headache was stronger than before, and I couldn't get comfortable. Heidi got some Tylenol, and after I took it I decided to sleep downstairs on the couch. But I had to make it downstairs. I sat on the edge of the stairs, like a small child who hasn't quite mastered walking, and slid to the bottom. I made another dive, this time for the couch, and slept there. Briefly.

There have been many rough, sleepless nights in my NFL career. There are times when a shoulder is so tender that even rolling over brings a great deal of pain. But the early-morning hours of February 15 were different because there were so many moving parts: the inexplicable headache, the lack of balance and coordination, numbness on the left side of my body. I took an Aleve and, surprisingly, had a much easier time walking up the stairs and getting into bed. I fell asleep, and ninety minutes later Heidi let me rest when the boys awoke at six-thirty.

Heidi may have closed the door so I could sleep uninterrupted, but the incidents at 4 and 5 A.M. stayed with her as she fed the boys. She often says that she knows me better than I know myself, and she's right. She has watched me play football since my days at the University of Arizona, so she knows the difference between football discomfort and something else. This was clearly something else, so Heidi was eager to talk to her father, Bill Bomberger, who is a physician's assistant in Tucson. We're always asking Bill for medical advice, and he's always willing to help. Much later, Bill would scold us for waiting until 10 A.M. on the East Coast—seven in Arizona—before calling him. Heidi explained that she didn't want to wake him up too

early. Besides, neither of us ever imagined that February 15 would be one of our longest days of 2005, one that we'd never forget for the rest of our lives. Heidi told her father that some strange things had been going on with me in the middle of the night. She described my symptoms, and Bill came to a swift conclusion: I needed to be seen immediately.

While Heidi was downstairs on the phone, I was in the bedroom waking up. I moved to the edge of the bed and just sat there, staring. For the first time that morning, I was scared. I didn't know what was happening to me, but I knew it had nothing to do with football. The thrashing headache was still there, and I was starting to have problems with my vision. Heidi entered the room to tell me that I needed to go to the hospital. I didn't need to be convinced. By then, I was so shaken by what was going on that I wanted to go. I called the Patriots' head trainer, Jim Whalen. He heard what I had to say and told me to call 911 while he contacted some people at Massachusetts General Hospital. In the meantime, our oldest son ran into the room with his usual enthusiasm and said, "Good morning, Daddy." I could hear TJ, but I couldn't see him. And then—*boom*—there he was on my right side. I saw him so suddenly that he startled me. That's when I looked at Heidi and said, "Call 911."

I've known Heidi since she was a freshman volleyball player at Arizona and I was a redshirt sophomore playing defensive line on the football team. We know how to read each other's emotions without saying much at all, so I know she was screaming inside when she somehow managed to make a composed 911 call and then follow it with a call to close friends who could take care of the kids. She contacted Tracie Pond, one of our North

Attleboro neighbors. Tracie has three kids of her own, but she was quickly at our house. Fortunately for us, her mother was visiting, and that allowed her to help us. And we needed it. Dante was just an infant at the time and was still being nursed. Heidi considered taking him with us to the hospital, but Tracie said it wasn't necessary. She told us not to worry; she had stayed with the boys before and it wouldn't be a problem this time.

The day already felt full and it was well before noon. I couldn't even speculate on what my issue was. As far as I knew I was a healthy thirty-one-year-old middle linebacker. I had played in the Super Bowl ten days earlier and in the Pro Bowl in the previous thirty-six hours. And just like that there was an ambulance at my house, waiting to take me to the hospital. I was given a vision test, and it was quickly apparent that my results were poor. I remember the EMT saying, "Let me know when you can see my finger." He moved his index finger from left to right and then right to left. Whenever he moved it to the left, I saw nothing but blackness.

I was placed in a chair, which became a stretcher, and carried outside. It was midmorning on a weekday, so there weren't many people around. It was mostly quiet on the street, but you could hear the pavement echoing with the footsteps of two running boys—my sons. The boys had been with Tracie, who told them that Mommy and Daddy were going away for a little trip. We might have been preparing to go to the hospital, but we never mentioned the word to them. But when TJ saw the red and white lights flashing and me on a stretcher, he ran outside.

On an ordinary day, we'd all go to the end of the cul-de-sac

and the boys would play and ride their bikes. I'm sure my sons were too young to grasp that something was wrong and that I was starting to worry. Heidi was trying her best to be upbeat. She told TJ and Rex, who had run out after TJ, that Daddy was going for a ride. They really are wonderful boys, and they brought some levity to the situation by saying, "Good-bye, Daddy. Have fun." I'm an emotional guy who rarely shows it through tears, but I was crying when I saw my boys. I picked them up and pulled them close to me. I kissed them both and told them, over and over, how much I loved them. And then the doors closed for the thirty-five-minute trip to Boston.

Heidi was in the back of the ambulance with me and tried to be positive as she held my hand. I had my cell phone and called Jim Whalen twice more. "What's wrong with me, Jim?" I asked. "What's going on?" He didn't know, but he had already spoken with people who had a good idea. I was a few minutes away from meeting David Greer, a neurologist at Mass General. An emergency room physician had called Dr. Greer and told him a Patriots player was on his way to the hospital. It was fitting, because Dr. Greer was in the process of completing the paperwork that would make him the chief neurologist for the Patriots and the Red Sox. He cleared his schedule for the next three days and focused on trying to get me back to health.

My arrival at the hospital overwhelmed me. It may sound silly, but after seeing all of the sick people in the ER, it began to register that I was sick, too. It seemed so improbable. I remember being rushed to a room with a sliding glass door, and as I lay there on a gurney, I was surrounded by what seemed like dozens of men in white coats.

“What’s going on here?” I asked no one in particular. “Who are all of you?”

There were residents from neurology and emergency medicine. There was a stroke fellow. There was a cardiologist. As they examined me and asked questions, Heidi moved around the table, trying to answer the questions that I couldn’t. She also had the presence of mind to ask who they were and to write down all of the important things they had to say. Things were happening very quickly, so much so that in the emergency room I actually had an echocardiogram and an ultrasound of my heart. Dr. Greer told me later that those things rarely happen so fast. But it wasn’t what he told me months later that stunned me. It’s what he said in the eleven o’clock hour on the fifteenth that took me aback. He stood next to my stretcher, put his hand on my shoulder, and said, “Tedy, you’ve had a stroke.”

A stroke? I was shocked. How could I have had a stroke? I actually asked this decorated neurologist—who comes from a family of doctors and even has a master’s in English—if he was sure. Heidi put her face in her hands and began to cry. When she heard the word *stroke*, she immediately thought “debilitating.” Naturally, we both wondered if I would ever be the same. By the time I was seen by Dr. Greer, the symptoms were obvious. There was drooping on the left side of my face, and I had sensory and coordination problems on the left side of my body. When I looked to the left out of either eye, there was darkness. And there was that pounding headache, much more intense than it had been at any point at home. The headache was so strong that I slowly stopped responding to the doctors’ questions. I was in the fetal position, just hoping for relief.

For Dr. Greer and the medical team, the focus was on finding answers. All of the terms they used that day were unfamiliar to me then but are part of my vocabulary today. The first question was simple: was my stroke bleeding or not? A CAT scan determined that it wasn't. Since my first symptoms had taken place well over three hours before I arrived at the hospital, I couldn't be given a clot-busting medicine called TPA (tissue plasminogen activator) that can sometimes open the blood vessels. The drug is not given to those who have had hemorrhagic (bleeding) strokes because it can induce further bleeding.

Heidi and I were getting a crash course on stroke as I was experiencing one. We would learn that a stroke is caused by the blockage of a blood vessel, sometimes by a clot and sometimes by the narrowing of a vessel. What concerned the doctors about me was the weakness on the left side of my body. To them, it meant that there was a circulation problem in the back of my head. They were sensitive to that because there is one main blood vessel—the basilar artery—that leads to the back of the brain. If it is clogged, the results are fatal 80 percent of the time. So I was given a CT angiogram, which is when dye is injected into the veins and travels to the brain. Pictures are then taken of the brain to see if all the vessels are open and if there are any residual clots ready to do some damage. I didn't have any problems there, nor did I have a dissection, which is when there is a tear in a blood vessel. But there was more surprising news to come: I had a hole in my heart.

The hole had been there since birth, and it was allowing blood to travel freely between the ventricles. It was the cause of my stroke. A clot had formed and gone toward the back of the

right side of my brain. Looking back on it now, I was lucky. The stroke could have been larger, and the trouble area in my brain could have been farther back. If that had been the case, some of my motor skills and vision would not have returned. I feel blessed now, but I didn't have that perspective at the time. I had been told that I had a stroke and that there was a hole in my heart that might require surgery at another time. I also couldn't see and had to be observed closely because there was the likelihood of another stroke over the next two weeks.

"Is there anything else?" I asked my doctors.

I wanted to make sure they weren't leaving anything out, that they weren't trying to craft a diplomatic way to give me more alarming news. I remember Heidi saying that it seemed like we were in a movie, and I felt the same way. Long before the stroke, I had supported Mass General and the Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital. When I talk to people now, I tell them that the hospital they see as someone else's can be theirs tomorrow. That's what happened to me. I never expected to be in Boston on that Wednesday morning. I know it was tough for my wife to watch me take all those tests and, in a few cases, watch me struggle with them. My speech wasn't slurred, but my handwriting tests weren't very good. My personality hadn't changed—which often happens with stroke survivors—but I wasn't walking like myself. And I know it took a lot of strength for Heidi not to panic when she saw all the things I was missing on my vision tests. I didn't think of football the first two days. Long term, I wanted to know what it was going to take to recover. Short term, honestly, I just wanted to get rid of the headache.

We were fortunate to be in the care of a doctor who was as

charismatic as he was competent. I would learn later that the old joke about neurologists is that they are so serious and protective that they want you to wear a helmet while driving a car. That was far from Dr. Greer's profile. His terrific sense of humor was apparent early, even in a moment of crisis. As he pushed me around in a wheelchair, going from test to test, he told me that he had to get me out of the hospital as soon as possible because "I'm used to being the biggest person on this floor and you're bigger than me. I don't like that." You want excellent care when you're sick and you want someone whose personality can put you at ease. Dr. Greer provided that for Heidi and me. We looked forward to seeing this young, athletic doctor—he was in his late thirties—walk in the door, even when he was coming to give a test. Somehow, he was able to bring humor to those occasions as well.

To test my short-term memory, Dr. Greer told me to remember three words: "yellow," "mailman," and "honesty." He would talk for a few minutes and say, "Tedy, do you remember those words I gave you?" I said I did. Later, Dr. Greer would say that he always uses the same three words with patients because he'd have problems remembering them himself. He was clearly the best man for a bad situation, a man who gained our trust and made us smile.

By dinnertime on day one, I told Heidi to go home. There was nothing more she could do at the hospital, and Jim Whalen and Dave Granito of the Patriots offered to be there if anything went wrong. So Heidi left. But after some great friends of ours helped put TJ and Rex to bed and Heidi nursed Dante in the middle of the night, she returned to the hospital at three the next morning. Dave had told Heidi to call him on his cell if she

needed anything. True to his word, he was there to take her to the hospital at an hour when most people sleep through their ringing cell phones or turn them off.

I was in physical pain at the hospital, but the emotional hurt began to sink in as well. When I saw Jim, I verbalized what seemed to be obvious: “Jim, you’ll probably never tape my ankles again.”

He heard what I had to say, but he was in no hurry to agree with me. He paused and said, “You might be right, Tedy. We don’t know that yet.”

The story had long gone public by then, with several news outlets guessing what the problem was. There were some reports that I had an aneurysm, and some said I had a bleeding stroke. Stacey James, the Patriots’ media relations director, asked if I wanted to release a statement confirming that I had had a stroke.

“Write something up, let me look at it, and then I’ll okay it,” I told him.

I wasn’t ashamed of anything. I had had a stroke, and I understood that a lot of people—including myself in February 2005—were uneducated about what that meant. I wasn’t sure what the public had to say, but I do know that the people closest to me immediately offered their support. My brother, Tony, and his wife, Linda, live in Las Vegas, and they flew to New England as soon as they heard the news. Heidi’s mother and sister—Vicki and Kati—flew out from Tucson. There were so many visitors from the Patriots that, on the second day, my floor was locked down because the doctors said I couldn’t possibly get any rest with all the people who wanted to see me. I was able to

see the owner of the team, Robert Kraft, and his wife, Myra. Scott Pioli, the team's top personnel man, was there early. A lot of players—Jarvis Green, Rodney Bailey, Deion Branch—stopped by and saw me, while others were turned away. Heidi was in control of my cell phone and hers, and both phones rang constantly. I think I scared Jarvis the first time he saw me: he walked in during a time when IVs were being put into me, and I think it hit him that I was in bad shape.

The first time I saw my brother, I was in a wheelchair. We both broke down and hugged. He kept telling me that I was going to be all right, and I repeated the words to him. I was still in pain; doctors had to be very discriminating with what they gave me for my headache because they didn't want the stroke to bleed. I say I had a headache, but that's because I don't have another word for the thrashing and pounding that was going on inside my head. When the pain was at its strongest, I didn't care about food and I couldn't engage in an extended conversation. It was a pain unlike any I had experienced, a headache so intense that even whispers seemed like screams.

A lot of things in the hospital were a blur my first thirty-six hours there, but I remember in great detail a moment when I wanted to punch a cardiologist in the face. I hadn't been in the hospital more than a few hours when Dr. Adolph Hutter, the Patriots' cardiologist and a man whom I like, came up to me and said, "Don't worry, Tedy, we'll get you back on the field in no time." I couldn't believe it. Being on the field was the last thing on my mind, and here he was practically slapping me on my butt. I would tease Dr. Hutter about it later, but it was a comment that annoyed me at the time.

Was I going to be all right? I believed that I would be able to get better, well enough to live a normal life with my wife and children. I didn't believe that playing football again was a reasonable option; I had had a stroke—how was I supposed to play football? And if my eyes weren't going to be the same—and there was no guarantee that they would—there was no way anyone would allow me to play in the NFL. I was in a different place now, far from Gillette Stadium where the types of tests I usually take are conditioning tests in July. For those, linebackers have to perform two sets of ten 50-yard sprints, with each sprint completed in seven seconds or fewer. When I was in the hospital, my tests would have seemed basic to the typical pro football player and challenging to the typical stroke survivor. I would take walks with physical and occupational therapists, down the hall and back. The contrast between what my life used to be and what it was going to be was amazing. I was used to working with my hands, being coordinated enough to “shed” blocks and pluck stray footballs out of the air. In the hospital, I would try to do something as simple as writing, but my fingers wouldn't do what my brain told them to. It was humbling, frustrating, and, at times, depressing.

Dr. Greer had several things to be concerned about in those first few days. While he wanted me to be seen quickly, he also wanted to slow down the process. His philosophy is that when people get special care, they sometimes get inappropriate care. He wanted to be decisive without being rash. In fact, he waited two days before agreeing that the proper way to fix the hole in my heart was through a catheterization procedure that would take place in March. And while Heidi commented early

on that it seemed like we were in a movie, her words were proving to be prophetic. The hospital scene was chaotic. It seemed that my door was opening every few seconds for another test or exercise. My major pain pill my second day there was Percocet, but I was just beginning to scratch the surface with shots and medications.

Things weren't normal for Dr. Greer, either. He has been around doctors his entire life—his father was the University of Florida's chairman of neurology for thirty-eight years—so he has an extremely strong sense of how things should go and patients should be treated; he doesn't believe that one person's health is more important than another's. So while he was great to me, he was great to his other patients as well. His beeper went off every fifteen minutes the first two days I was in the hospital. His attention to me took him away from other patients, and he gave me a hard time, tongue in cheek, about that as well.

I didn't realize it then, but in the next few months I was going to learn about prescriptions that had never crossed my mind. And Dr. Greer was going to become more than a doctor for us. He would be a friend, a confidant, and an adviser. Just before I left the hospital, he also tried to cheer me up. He told me I would gradually get better, that the younger the patient is, the better chance he or she has of a full recovery. He was honest. He said he would make no promises about football, because he didn't know if my coordination level would be the same. I listened, but I was unrealistic: I wanted the improvement to happen immediately, and when it didn't, it got to me. One of my flaws is that I'm impatient. I don't always let things run their course, when in many cases, that's exactly what needs to happen.

Heidi had a cot next to my bed, and both of us found it difficult to sleep in the three days we were at Mass General. On day three, the day of my release, I knew there was a lot of work to be done. Yes, I was going home. But I was going to be visited there every day for two weeks by a nurse. On some days I was going to have to take three pills, and on others it would be as many as ten. I was going to need surgery soon, and there were going to be physical and psychological changes that would not only provide individual challenges, they would set forth the most serious challenge to my marriage. There were some business decisions to be made once I got home. Who was I going to be beyond Tedy Bruschi, linebacker? What kind of physical restrictions would I have to accept after the stroke? What was I going to do next?

When I was released from the hospital, television cameras and news photographers stood outside waiting for me. I had been told that I could go out of a back entrance and avoid the media, or I could leave out front and acknowledge the cameras. I was in a wheelchair until I reached the front, and then I walked out with Heidi. I squeezed her hand and told her not to let me fall. I tried my best to walk normally, but I was far from myself. Anne McCarthy Jacobson, who would become my physical therapist a few weeks later, was watching my exit from the hospital on TV. She told me later that she jotted down some notes after watching me walk: *He's lost visual field in both of his eyes and he's not rotating his head. He's not bending his hips and knees, and he's walking robotically. He's holding his wife's hand because he does not have control. He is very hesitant and he is not scanning visually*

all the way to his left. His wife is guiding him to the car, and I suspect it's a combination of balance and vision.

I wasn't the same man, and I knew it as soon as I headed to the car. Tony was driving and Linda was already in the front seat. But when I first went to the car, I didn't see Linda sitting there. I opened the passenger door expecting an empty seat, but Linda was there and I hadn't seen anyone before. I gingerly sat in the back with Heidi.

"Tony, drive the best that you can, man," I said to my brother as he pulled away from the crowd. "Be smooth, please."

The motion of the car was killing me. I felt every small bump in the road. I had a long way to go before I could think about the way I used to be. But as we drove home, I was grateful for so many things, starting with the health that I did have. I had been told that I would have to be maintained on Coumadin, a blood thinner, until at least June. I would have to start physical therapy immediately to attempt to bring my body back. And I knew that I would be returning to the hospital in about three weeks for the patent foramen ovale (PFO) procedure to fix the hole in my heart.

I was also appreciative of all the help and support I'd received in the past three days. Tracie Pond stayed with our kids the first day, and our neighbors Sharon and Bill Roberts relieved her when they got home in the evening. In addition to the hospital visits, we received several phone calls from teammates, friends, and family members. The North Attleboro post office was great: there were hundreds of letters simply marked "Tedy Bruschi, North Attleboro, MA," yet they were still delivered to me.

At home, I was moved that Tony, Linda, Vicki, and Kati had come to town in the middle of the week on such short notice. After I rested for a few hours, I walked into our kitchen and sat at a small yellow table, a classic table for two that Heidi and I used for our family of five. I was the only one sitting as my brother and his wife, my in-laws, and Heidi stood around me. In our intimate circle, I tried my best to recap what had happened over the previous three days, put things in perspective, and thank them all. I told them that they were like angels to Heidi and me, and that's when emotion took over. It was hard for me to say it, but through the tears I was able to tell them that my football career was over.

We all cried, and they told me that they didn't care about football. They talked about the career I had enjoyed and how I had been blessed to play in a Pro Bowl and be part of three Super Bowl championship teams. We all agreed that I should be thankful that I had my faculties and was projected to get better, because there are many stroke survivors who couldn't say that.

Some people, really wise people, have the ability to see the big picture even when they are in the middle of a crisis. I've never been like that. If I'm seeing that big picture, it's a black-and-white photo; I don't seek out gray areas. Or, I should say, I didn't seek out shades of gray until the stroke forced me to.

In the first few weeks after the stroke, I would make what I thought were clear-cut decisions—and have them unfold nothing like I thought they would. I would soon inspire people and be inspired by people I hadn't known. I would also have days in which I wandered about, an emotionally fragile man who needed encouragement by the hour. It was a life-changing

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sequence that brought new meaning to that sports cliché “A lot of fans are counting on you.”

A lot of fans were counting on me and relying on me, but not because of anything that took place on a field. They were stroke survivors who needed my answers because they needed to make sense of what was happening to them. These were people who needed answers to survive, people who would ask over and over, “How did you do it, Tedy? How did you get through?” The stroke was a marker on my personal timeline, an event that taught me new things about myself, and something that made me think deeply about my future and my past.

