

The silver lining of a tough year

A dad's will to live to help his daughter finish her first book

June 24, 2012|By Rachel Eddey

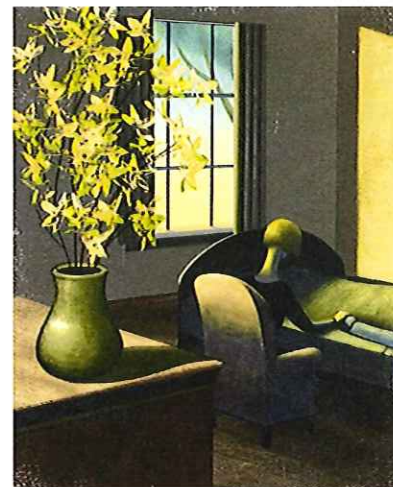
In May 2011, I had a good reason to be in Dublin: I was mad about life in New York and trying to escape. I had written a memoir three years earlier and couldn't find a publisher. Four agents, a handful of opportunities inches away from my grasping hand and countless margaritas later, I was burnt out. At 29, I contemplated retirement.

I wasn't only disappointing myself. My dad, Lawrence J. Epstein, has always been my mentor and biggest cheerleader. A retired English professor who has published 10 books on subjects from comedy teams to folk singers to Jewish affairs, he and I often spent hours talking shop. Though I'd had some success with newspaper and magazine publishing, a book contract for me was our shared goal. We had been waiting for this moment my entire adult life. I felt like I was disappointing him too.

Five days into my soul-searching trip, my mother-in-law called my hotel room — at 3 a.m. — to say that my then-64-year-old, previously healthy father had suffered a heart attack and needed emergency sextuple bypass surgery. Ireland was 3,150 miles from my dad's Long Island hospital bed. I changed my flight, packed my bags and cried the entire seven-hour trip home. It didn't help that when the plane landed, the only message I had was from a friend announcing her brother's death.

I stopped at my parents' house on the way to the hospital to drop off my suitcase. The car was still rumbling in the driveway when my BlackBerry pinged. I was annoyed at the interruption — a far preferable mood, admittedly, to the sheer, unequivocal terror that had been gripping my insides since I'd left the hotel. Cue a this-never-happens-in-real-life moment: It was from my dream editor. And he was offering a book contract.

An internal cloud covered me. Selling a book was the first step in a much longer process. I would have to go through rounds of edits and get magazines to review it and write a stump speech and schedule myself on radio shows and take countless other measures I couldn't yet define. This wasn't a battle I had entered alone, and it wasn't one I wanted to finish alone. But here I was, about to head to the hospital, unsure whether my father was even alive. I did the only thing I could think to do. I got back in the car.



The intensive care unit frightened me. So did my dad. I pretended like the oxygen mask over his mouth didn't exist. His arms were black and blue from countless needles that had prodded his veins before the surgery. I pretended those marks weren't there, either. I focused instead on his short, gray hair, the only part of him that seemed untouched. He wouldn't be able to speak, the nurse told me. But he could hear. I fussed with his pillows as he stirred awake.

I could only have a few lines after a "hello." I knew just what they were going to be.

"Dad, I've got exciting news," I told him, gently squeezing his hand. "I sold my book!" My long-standing idea of how this moment would go down — screams and laughter and a Carvel ice-cream cake — gave way to a new reality. My dad's eyes bulged, the only movement his groggy body allowed. They stayed wide as I relayed the details of the contract and expected publication date, then slowly faded into slits and disappeared behind closed lids. I'm positive it took all his energy, but he squeezed my hand back before falling asleep.

The doctors released him to me and my mom 10 days later. The depression they had warned us about in hushed tones never came, but complications did. Two months after the surgery, still frail and cloudy, my father fainted twice — both attributable to rapid atrial fibrillation (increased heart rate) and pleural effusion (fluid around the lungs). An ambulance brought him back to the hospital.

I came to his room once he was stable. Short of sneaking him an extra Vicodin (don't arrest me — I refrained), there was only one way I knew to help. I pulled out the newest version of my manuscript.

My dad reached for it the moment he was well enough to sit up. He juggled a carton of applesauce and a red pen, inking notes in the margins as he interacted with nurses and swallowed pills. His five-day stay went by in spurts of talking with me about my contract, scrolling through the publisher's website, and compiling — from memory — a list of marketing books he wanted me to read.

Two more pleural effusions followed, and my dad was readmitted each time. The hospital became our office; our work day, the visiting hours. He ordained his top dresser drawer, in which we stored pens and notebooks and Post-it notes, as "book supplies." We used medical tape to secure diagrams and spreadsheets to the wall. Him on his bed and me in a worn wooden chair, we worked together on a publicity plan, drafted talking points and designed business cards. He coached me on how to decode reviews, the best approaches to a launch party, and why I needed to revamp my social media approach. (Seriously. The man has more Facebook friends than I do.) Eventually, the nurses began bringing me applesauce too.

My father turned to look at me as he signed the release papers on what would become his last (we hope) surgery-related hospital stay.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you for needing me."

Helping him walk to the waiting car, I understood. Illness is a time when people consciously consider what is important in their lives. He saw a purpose he had not finished fulfilling, and he used that as a safety rope. I know, of course, that it wasn't my book itself that saved him; it was his will to let the book save him. My dependency stood as a microcosm for all he still wanted to do and all the hope he had for doing it.

I sat him in the passenger seat and shut the door. Though I'd had a good reason to be in Dublin, I had an even better reason to be home.

Rachel Eddey is the author of "Running of the Bride: My Frenzied Quest to Tie the Knot, Tear Up the Dance Floor, and Figure Out Why My 15 Minutes of Fame Included Commercial Breaks."