

*Emotional journey through the aftermath
of a kidney transplant failure.*

GARY'S FIGHT: The Story of a Failed Transplant

by Lois Labanoski

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Gary's Fight

The Story
of a Failed Transplant



Lois Labanoski

GARY'S FIGHT:

THE STORY OF A
FAILED TRANSPLANT

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First Edition

Dedicated to my family and friends who helped get me
through the most difficult of times.

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Chapter 1

Operation Day

August 2003

Now that I look back on it all, I think we were both trying to fool ourselves. We had the misconception that if we didn't make a big deal about it, it wouldn't **be** a big deal. I mean really, both of us going in for a major operation, and somehow we managed to convince ourselves that it was just a walk in the park. But, there we were, just the two of us, my husband of 28 years, Gary, and I, exiting the taxi in the very early morning hours of a warm August day and entering the lobby of the Hershey Medical Center. Hand in hand, facing the world together, the way it had been since we were seventeen years old. Somehow we always felt that together, we could handle whatever came our way. We had no idea what life was about to throw at us.

My brother, Rick, had volunteered to take us to the hospital in Hershey, Pennsylvania, which was about an hour and a half drive from our Mountain Top home. Rick lives in Poughkeepsie, New York and neither Gary nor I wanted to make things inconvenient for anyone. Still, we did need a ride there, and Rick insisted that he was going to come into town for the operation. We decided that Rick and my dad could take us to Hershey the day before the operation, and then we could call a taxi

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to pick us up at the hotel in the early morning. This way no one would have to wake up super early for the trip to the hospital. Rick and my dad took us to the Medical Center where we had to get some pre-registration paperwork completed. Then we all headed over to lunch at The Hershey Grille, a landmark restaurant across from the Hershey Medical Center. It was nice to spend time with my family and relax and enjoy each others' company, the calm before the storm, so to speak. Afterwards, they took us to the motel where we had made reservations to spend the night. We stayed at a motel close by the Medical Center, and walked to a nearby restaurant for dinner that night. We strolled hand-in-hand through a K-Mart parking lot and across the street heading back to the hotel.

"I can't believe we're doing this," Gary said in disbelief, his apprehension apparent on his face. "I just don't know about this," he added worriedly.

"I know, Gary, but what else can we do? You either have to have a transplant or go on dialysis. Those are your only options. You're getting weaker and weaker. You can see how hard it's getting for you to do things. What else can we do?" I felt like my heart was about to burst. Everything was just so sad. But I was determined to have a positive attitude about our impossible situation, so I just shook all those negative feelings away and said, "You'll see, honey, it will all work out for us. Just remember, I love you."

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Gary smiled tentatively, bent his head and kissed me. "Love you too."

I don't remember if we slept very much that night, but morning came awfully fast.

Gary and I entered the rather dimly lit lobby of the Medical Center rolling our small suitcases behind us, thinking how eerily silent everything seemed. When we had been to the hospital at other times during regular daytime hours, it was a thriving, busy, beehive of activity. Now, before six o'clock in the morning, everything and everyone seemed subdued. The lighting, the movement, even the air itself seemed hushed. The few people that we encountered even seemed to be speaking in lowered voices. We moved with apprehension, but also with hope, to the elevators that we had been directed to the day before during our hospital pre-registration. Pushing the button for the designated floor, we silently ascended, lost in our own thoughts about the upcoming ordeal. We reported to the pre-op desk, handing all our paperwork to the receptionist in charge, and soon we were taken to our assigned area, separated by sea-green hospital curtains.

The nurse who greeted us was pleasant and easy-going and tried to alleviate the fears and apprehensions that always accompany major surgery.

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"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Labanoski," our nurse greeted us and told us her name.

"Are you Lois?" she asked me.

"Yes," I said. "And this is my husband, Gary"

"And you're here to have a kidney removed to donate to Gary?" she clarified.

"Yep, that's right," I agreed.

"Why that's wonderful! How great that you were a match for him!" the nurse responded enthusiastically.

"It's really amazing that it happened that way," replied Gary still shaking his head in disbelief.

Our nurse then went on to explain what was going to happen. She took my suitcase and put it underneath the gurney that was in my curtained room. I would be going first, obviously, since they had to take the kidney out of me before they could put it in Gary. So my operation would begin before Gary's. However, he would be able to stay with me until I went into the operating room. First, though, I was to take everything off and don one of the required hospital gowns. While I was undressing, she took Gary to another curtained area with his suitcase. He was shown where he would be going as soon as I was wheeled to the operating room, and his suitcase was placed underneath his gurney, and he was also asked to change into the requisite hospital gown.

By the time he returned, I was attired in my less-than- lovely hospital gown and was lying on the gurney. The quiet of the early morning seemed

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to be disappearing as things started to happen pretty quickly now. Temperature and blood pressure were taken. IV lines were inserted. A chart was started and vitals recorded. Other patients were also arriving, and the nurses were bustling about getting us all ready, nervously awaiting our fate behind our sea of green. Before long, the nurses were all done with their tasks, and we were told that the anesthesiologist would be in shortly.

"Well, this is it," Gary said holding my hand and squeezing it gently.

"It's going to be o.k. It'll be o.k.," I repeated almost like a mantra of prayer.

Gary kissed me. "I still can't believe you're doing this for me."

"Anything to help make you better," I said, fighting back tears.

"I'm really scared about all this," admitted Gary. I don't like this one bit.

"It'll be o.k., Gary. You'll be alright. I'll see you after the operation." I was still trying to maintain that positive vibe.

"I just don't have a good feeling about this whole thing," Gary sighed looking dejected.

"We're going to be o.k. It's all going to be fine. You'll see." Gary had never had any surgery before, and I wanted to try to allay his fears, even though I, too, was facing the scalpel, and quite frightened by that idea.

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The green curtain parted and a man in hospital scrubs came towards us. He introduced himself as the anesthesiologist who would be handling my operation. He explained that I would be given some medication through the port line that was already inserted in my arm. It would start to make me sleepy. I would then be taken into the operating room, where I would be given the anesthesia. After my kidney was removed, Gary would then be brought into a different operating room after being prepped the same way. My kidney would be inserted into Gary, but we probably wouldn't know if things would work right away. We had been told it might take a little while before the kidney would become operational. In the meantime, I would be taken to recovery, as would Gary when he was done. The anesthesiologist asked if we had any questions. We didn't. He gave me the medication in the port. The orderlies came in and started wheeling me towards the exit doors. Gary was told he could accompany me as far as the operating room, so he held my hand, and we left the room together and headed down the hallway toward our fate.

The orderlies paused the gurney at the entrance doors to the operating room.

"Good luck," Gary said kissing me on the lips, the worry so apparent in his eyes.

"I'll see you when it's all over," I whispered. "Good luck to you, too. Everything is going to work out. You'll see. I'll see you soon. Love you."

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“Love you. See you soon.” Gary replied anxiously.

I was wheeled through the doors and into the operating room. The anesthesiologist said something about counting backwards from 100. “100, 99, 98,…”

And that’s the last thing I remembered until I woke up in recovery.

Chapter 2

The Beginning... And Beyond

July 4, 1976 – July 4, 2002

What rotten luck! Our car had died, and there we were stuck in a parking lot a half hour away from home, on the 4th of July. This was supposed to be a fun outing. We had picked up friends of ours, Harry and Gina, and headed to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, a city near us, that was having a fireworks display at their town park. We had stopped for something to eat, and when we got back in the car, it wouldn't start. We looked in the trunk, but couldn't find our jumper cables. We tried to find a service station, but of course, nothing was open on the Fourth of July. We tried a convenient mart/gas station, but the attendant wouldn't leave. We went into the restaurant to see if anyone there could tell us where we might find an open service station. Gary, my husband of 11 months, opened his mouth to ask the waitress the question. I watched in horror as his tongue seem to stick to the top of his mouth.

"Ith there a thervith thation cloth by?" Gary tried to ask.

The words that came out were impossible to understand because Gary couldn't articulate them.

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I stepped up and asked, "Are there any service stations around that might be open? We need to get our car jumped."

The waitress answered that she didn't know of any place. We walked back outside to the car. I kept looking at Gary in alarm, but we were in the middle of the car crisis, so he didn't want to think about the other problem. Luckily, some kind souls saw that we were having difficulty, and had jumper cables. They jumped the car, and we were able to drive it home.

The reason I call this the beginning, is because Gary finally had to face the fact that there was a problem with him medically. It was impossible to ignore what had happened that night. It couldn't easily be explained away or thought of as insignificant. Gary now had to deal with his problem.

There had been other unusual symptoms. We couldn't make the 25 minute drive to Wilkes-Barre without Gary stopping to pee. He was always excessively thirsty, even downing a full can of Hawaiian punch in a few gulps. He also seemed to be losing weight, and he was a skinny 23 year-old kid to begin with. My mother, who liked to check symptoms in her *People's Pharmacy* book, urged him to see a doctor. "It could be diabetes, you know. It fits the symptoms," she cautioned.

But it's hard enough to get a guy to see a doctor, and especially a twenty-three year old. He was at that age when guys think they're invincible,

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and Gary was no exception. But when he couldn't talk that night, he finally had to admit there was something seriously wrong, and would have to go to a doctor.

We made an appointment to see my family doctor. Gary's doctor had passed away a while ago, and he had never gotten another one. He had gotten sick in April with a very high fever, something that Gary had been prone to all his childhood. I had had to call my doctor, Dr. Wesley Stish, to make a house call to see Gary. (Doctors still made house calls then, though it was starting to not be the norm anymore.) His temperature had gone up to near 105 degrees, so he was too sick for me to get him to the doctor's office. Dr. Stish came to our apartment in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, gave Gary a shot of penicillin, and prescribed a course of treatment that required a nurse to give him subsequent shots the following week. Thankfully, Gary's fever went down and he seemed to recover. But then, in the subsequent months, we started noticing the excessive thirst and peeing, and finally the weight loss.

During the appointment, the first thing Dr. Stish did was order blood tests, but he did say he suspected diabetes. We couldn't understand how that could be. Gary didn't have any family members that had it, and generally it does run in families. The thinking is that one must be genetically predisposed to the disease.

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Dr. Stish insisted that there must have been somebody in the family that Gary didn't know about. We thought that highly unlikely, since we were in touch with all the direct relatives, and nobody had it or remembered anyone from the previous generation that had it. If it was in Gary's family history, we couldn't find it. Gary's great-grand parents were immigrants, so if there was any disease history back that far, there was no way to find out.

As we did some research on the disease, we found that there were cases documented of people who had diabetes with no family history. One of the scenarios that caused it was a high fever that "burned out" the pancreatic cells. When these cells were incapacitated, the result was an inability to metabolize carbohydrates and sugar for use in the body. That, in effect, is diabetes. That certainly fit with what had happened to Gary in April. He never really had gotten well after that. The subsequent months had brought the symptoms of excessive thirst and urination. He had also become pretty grouchy and temperamental. Not a good combo for the first year of a marriage. But we had been together for five years, since our high school days, so I knew there had been a personality change. I just didn't know why.

The blood tests confirmed what we all suspected by now – Type-1 diabetes. Gary needed to check in to our local hospital, and get

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himself straightened out. He was not happy. On the way to the hospital he kept worrying that they were going to make him eat “yucky” foods like Brussels sprouts. With all his problems, that was his concern! As I looked at him in the car, I kept thinking how terrible he had started to look. He had lost a lot of weight, and his legs were like two sticks. His pants hung on him, big and baggy. This was the 70’s, and baggy wasn’t in yet. His face looked drawn and skinny. I just wanted to cry!

Gary was put into intensive care at the hospital. I know he had IV’s put in, but I don’t even remember everything that was done. The whole experience was surreal. We were both so young and hadn’t had to deal with a major illness before. Gary did start feeling better, though. Almost immediately, they sent someone into his room to teach him how to give himself a shot of insulin. First, he practiced on an orange. Soon after, he began to give himself the shots. I marveled at how quickly he learned what he needed to know and just did it. He didn’t cry or complain; he accepted what was now to be his new lifestyle and went on with his life, albeit a changed one. I don’t know how he did that. I couldn’t stand the thought of giving myself a needle, and I know Gary wasn’t too thrilled about what had to be done. But he did it.

Before too long, Gary was out of the hospital and back to everyday living. He had learned what

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he needed to know about the diabetic lifestyle, and made some changes in his diet. We bought diet soda instead of regular, but other than that, Gary ate a normal diet and watched his diabetic exchanges, a sort of point system for foods. He never was into a lot of desserts, so he didn't really miss eating them, although he did have the occasional cookie when he needed to get some sugar into his system. He didn't really have to increase his exercise either. He was always on the go, either playing tennis or racquetball, or working on some type of home construction project. He was slim, with toned muscles. Unlike adult onset diabetes or Type -II, people who develop Type- 1 diabetes don't generally have problems with weight issues. This type mostly strikes younger people and can be known as juvenile diabetes. It can't be treated with a pill, but one needs to take insulin. This is the form that Gary had developed.

And so life continued. We bought an Old English Sheepdog and called him Chaucer. He sired pups and we kept one, calling him Squire. We loved playing "Mommy and Daddy" to our furry children! We traveled to Mexico, Jamaica, and to different destinations in the USA. Gary had been substitute teaching, which he continued for a while, trying to get a full time job. I was teaching in our home district, so we decided to stay in the area. Unfortunately, there were not a lot of teaching vacancies available for an English teacher at this time. So Gary looked around for

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other opportunities. We decided to open our own pet store with another couple and Gary worked at that for several years trying to manage a fledgling business in a difficult economy. We ended up having to close that after a few years.

After that, Gary got a job as a computer salesman, became a computer store manager, and finally changed companies to become a marketing director for a computer custom programming company. The home computer industry was new, and proved a real opportunity for Gary. He had taken some computer programming courses in college, and he had been in retail sales since high school. Add to that a B.S. in English Education from Pennsylvania State University, and Gary demonstrated a lot of skills useful in the emerging home computer market.

Things were going well for us – we both had good jobs and had been married almost 9 years. It was time to think of starting a family.

We had our son, Drew in 1985, when we were both in our early 30's. Drew has proven to be Gary's and my best and greatest accomplishment, becoming the most important part of what we were and the focus of our love and life. As a family, we enjoyed trips to zoos and museums, beach vacations and amusement parks, showing our young son what the world had to offer. We cheered Drew on at his soccer matches and basketball games, and took him to birthday parties and movies.

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We had other successes along the way. Gary went on and completed his master's degree in organizational management. We even both learned to scuba dive, which was a real accomplishment for the two of us since we were both only adequate swimmers.

When Drew was two, we grieved through the loss of Gary's dad, Joe, who passed away after a fatal stroke. A few years later, my mother, Madelene, who had not been ill but did suffer from high blood pressure, died in her sleep one night. She was only 67 years old. Her death was a shock to all of us. There had been no warning or incident to forewarn us. Both Joe, my father-in-law, and my mother had been our main baby sitters. They were so good with Drew through his baby and toddler stages, and they really enjoyed spending time with him. Pap-pap Mike, my dad, and Grandma Irene, Gary's mom, now had to be the ones we depended on to help with Drew. They were always there for him as he moved through his early school years, middle school, and teens. Also around this time we lost both our loving pets, Chaucer and Squire, both succumbing to old age.

In the late 1980's, Gary and I bought property in an area close by our hometown of Hazleton, called Mountain Top. The land had a beautiful view, and we were so thrilled to be able to build our home on it, doing a lot of the work ourselves. Gary, always the do-it-yourselfer, wasn't afraid to tackle any kind of project so we undertook things

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like the plumbing, electricity, and landscaping of the house ourselves.

We bought a new puppy when Drew was ten. It was another Old English Sheepdog. We named this one Soccer because he was black and white like a soccer ball. He was such a cherished addition to our family.

We had a wonderful, rich, full life, without too many bumps in the road for over 25 years. Gary's diabetes didn't seem to slow him down. If he felt himself getting low, he would just eat something. He took his insulin every day, watched that he didn't eat too many carbs, and otherwise didn't worry about his illness. Early on he had taught me about how to give an insulin shot, but he really didn't want me anywhere near him with a needle. I don't blame him. The most I ever had to do in 25 years was help him put the insulin in the needle a few times when he was sick. Other than that, Gary "controlled" his disease, and there was little for me to do for him.

All that was soon to change.

We started to get a few "warnings", after so many years of being problem free. Apparently, after someone uses insulin for a while, they can't always tell when they're getting low. The first time it happened, Gary and I were returning from my cousin, Joanne, and her husband, Ray's home in New Jersey where we had stayed overnight. We

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ate breakfast, and Gary took his insulin shot before we left.

On the way back, we stopped at a plant nursery that we had seen along the highway that looked like they had some interesting plants for our garden. We were walking with a shopping cart, putting in plants that we thought would work well in our yard. We got separated as we both went off looking at different things. After a short while, I went back to Gary who was standing with two plants in his hands. I asked him some question; I don't remember now what it was. His answer to me was gibberish. It didn't make sense at all. As I started to question him, he continued to just stare at the plants. I soon realized that he must be having a low blood sugar incident, although this was the first incident for him, so I did not have experience recognizing that problem. We didn't have any food with us, and he didn't have any glucose tablets. After all, Gary had always had plenty of time to realize he was going low and could easily get somewhere for food. We had a cartful of plants that we still had to pay for. I managed to pay for the plants, get Gary to the car, and load the plants in the car. Then I had to find a spot that had something to eat. It was a Sunday morning, so there were not a lot of places open. We were on a highway in a section that was not heavily built up.

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I decided to drive back the way we came, racking my brain to see if I could remember any place where I would be able to stop. I couldn't see any place, and Gary was getting even more unresponsive. After going down the road for what seemed like miles, I spotted something like a Dairy Queen on the other side of the road. I turned into it, and saw they had a drive-through. Pulling up to the drive-through window, I could see the lone waitress taking an order from a customer at the front walk-up window. She was ignoring me. I wrapped on the drive-through window, and made frantic gestures for the waitress to come to speak to me. Luckily, she came, looking a little annoyed.

"My husband's diabetic. I need to get some sugar into him right away. He has low blood sugar. Please give me a chocolate milkshake," I blurted out all at once.

The waitress quickly brought my order. I paid for the milkshake, opened the straw, and held it out for Gary instructing him to drink. This was a new experience for me, for both of us. Later, unfortunately, this would all become familiar, and there would be certain ways to handle things. But I didn't know any of that right now. I wasn't sure if I needed to get him to a hospital, or if the milkshake would "bring him around". I started driving, west towards Pennsylvania, keeping a lookout for "hospital" signs, just in case Gary needed one.

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At the same time, I was trying to feed him the milkshake. I had to hold it, and command him to drink. Every few seconds I'd have to say, "O.K., Gary, have a little bit more." At least I had lucked out with having gotten him a chocolate milkshake. It was one of his favorite things, so he didn't give me too much of a hassle about drinking it. I didn't have to find out yet how belligerent a diabetic can become when their sugar goes low. They don't want to eat what you tell them to eat. Long minutes passed. I kept driving, and Gary kept drinking. Soon he was able to hold the milkshake himself. He started to talk to me and was making sense. I was so keyed up I could barely think straight. Gary asked me to stop the car at a restaurant that was along the highway, so he could get some food. At least by that time he was able to walk into the restaurant. But he still felt weak and shaken. So was I!

And that was our introduction into the scary and uncertain world of the problematic diabetic. Other incidents would occur, at first separated by several months, but later becoming more and more frequent. Gary would become silly in some instances, or worse yet, belligerent. He would giggle and not listen to me trying to get him to eat something, or he would get nasty and refuse to do what I asked. He sometimes called me names or made scathing remarks. I was often reduced to tears.

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Even our now teenage son got involved in learning how to handle his dad. I remember in particular one time we pulled up to a fast food joint to get Gary something quickly because his sugar was going low. I think I was driving at this point. Gary decided he didn't want what the restaurant had to offer, and began to yell at us. I started crying.

"But Gary, your sugar is low. You have to eat something". I was upset and insistent.

"No. I don't want this. You can't make me. What are you fuckin' doing? What the hell! I don't want anything!" Gary screamed at me.

I was so upset, and I was crying. I didn't know how I could get some food in him. By this time, I'm pretty sure we had glucose tablets in the glove compartment, but he wasn't having any of that either. Drew had me move to the back seat and took over the driving. He turned to his dad, stood up to him, and said:

"Look, Dad. You have to have something to eat. So decide right now what it is you want and tell me."

At first, Gary seemed angry and threatened to hit Drew.

Drew responded, "Fine. But you're still going to decide what you want to eat."

Something in my husband responded to the command in my son's voice and his lack of reaction to Gary's intimidation.

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“Go across the street to that mini-mart.” Gary snarled at him.

Drew drove across the highway. When we got there Gary requested a cupcake and milk. I ran in and purchased what he had asked us to get. He ate them without a problem, and was soon feeling better.

Gary really didn't apologize for his behavior, either. It made me feel awful. Some time after this incident, and waiting until he was in a good mood so that I was able to reason with him, I talked to him and told him how bad I felt when he was so nasty. I was only trying to help him, so I couldn't understand why he wasn't even sorry for his behavior. Gary explained that he didn't really remember what his behavior was. He had some recollection of not being himself, but he really had no idea that he was as vicious as he had become. He said he was sorry, but that he had no way of knowing what he was doing or how he was reacting. I pleaded with him to somehow plant the idea in his head that I was not the “bad guy” and I was trying to help him. It didn't work immediately, but after a few more talks, something seemed to sink in and he wasn't quite so nasty, even if he still was uncooperative.

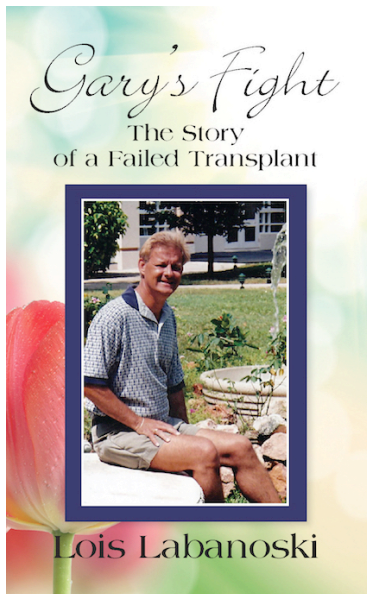
These incidents, though scary, were really the only indications that things were not going on as they had for years. Gary didn't feel sick, and led a very active life. He went to work every day, hardly taking any sick days. We did some skiing in the

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winter, and went swimming and played golf in the summer. We always had some house project going at our house, or his mother's, or my dad's house. We did our own gardening, and plowed our own driveway. We loved to visit amusement parks, beaches, and museums, and shopping malls. We loved zoos and exploring new places, and always went on one or two yearly vacations. We went to all our son's activities- plays and concerts, tennis matches and golf meets. We loved going out to eat, visiting with friends, and exploring new places.

I tell you this so you realize what came next came out of the blue. We really had no warning. I mean, we were just living. Enjoying life! We were in the process of making plans to start our own part-time business. We talked about our future retirement and being able to travel. We just had to see our son, now a high school junior, through his college years, and finish paying our mortgage which was just about completed. Then we could enjoy some free time and the "fruits of our labors". We loved and supported each other. We had a smart, charming, and absolutely wonderful son, who also loved and appreciated us. We had a beautiful home, helpful, caring parents and siblings, many great friends, and many blessings. We felt we truly had a rich life.

And then the bubble burst.



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