

What doesn't kill
you makes you
stronger

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Annelies Brems

A story about back problems, doctors, a Fusion, perseverance, training and new beginnings.

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Contents:

Contents:.....	5
Foreword.....	1
Preface	5
D-day!	7
Word of the week: Spondylodese (Spinal Fusion).....	17
The Day After.....	23
It runs in the Family	31
Upstairs, Downstairs.....	35
Let's give it some more time and see how it goes	49
Hurray, Home Time	55
A woman visits the doctor	63
At Home, Sent back to Bed	69
Het Rugcentrum, training, training and more training	75
Philosophy on Heels.....	83
Doctor, doctor....	89
Just having a moan	101
Het Rugcentrum: tears, tears, tears	109
The way the hedgehogs do it	117
Guarantee: none whatsoever	123
Full of anticipation.....	127
Count down can commence.....	135
The Set Back	139
I shall miss you	145
Looking back.....	149
The last hurdle.....	157
Psychology in a nut shell	161
The End	169
Thank You.....	171

Foreword

Back problems are never a standalone thing. During the past years I was continuously bone tired and frustrated to the end due to the pain in my back. In order to be able to continue to work and not having to call in sick, I had to increasingly cancel fun outings and clubs. I was either in too much pain or after a long day at work, was too worn out from the pain, to do anything else. Instead, I would take to bed really early hoping that I would be as fit as possible for work the next day. However, at some point, the back pain became so severe that I also started disappointing the people closest to me. Friends who wanted to go out on the town or shopping, the daughters of my husband Jeroen, who wanted me to turn their skipping rope or just wanted to be picked up for a cuddle. Last but not least Jeroen himself, as I was in bed way too early, alone once again because everything was hurting.

Besides my frustrations about the pain, the things I could no longer do and all the feeling that I was disappointing others, I felt that my symptoms were not taken seriously by several doctors. It would therefore be several years before I bothered to see a doctor again. Even though my symptoms got worse and worse over time. But this time I continued going to the doctor's until at last there would be a definite solution for my back problems.

Now, midway through 2013, more than three years after I continued to visit the doctor's for the first time and many, many more years since my symptoms started, I am nearly feeling my old self again. Why a book about back problems, the journey of visiting doctors, the operation and eighteen months of my convalescence?

Well, because I feel that there is too little information available. Before my Fusion (the back operation), I googled myself silly. I was looking for information but also to find out about the experiences from other people. Preferably not the negative stuff with too many short reactions which are not subject related whatsoever. I wanted to know what to expect. What does the operation entail but above all, did other people benefit from the operation and what can I expect during my rehabilitation. That information is nearly impossible to find, at least not the information that would be of use to me. What I was able to find were the technical details. Also of interest, but I wanted to know if other people had benefitted from the operation and who these people were. What are their experiences, what input did they have themselves, what did they learn from the experience? I therefore hope that anyone facing a similar operation may be able to get something out of this book. Besides that, writing this book is about closure. I prefer to portray myself as cheerful and happy person and am extremely good in hiding my pain, sadness and frustrations. Apart from a few small scars at the bottom of my back, you cannot tell what I

have been through, just by looking at me. During the whole process and especially at the time of my rehabilitation after the operation, I had to come to terms with a lot of my grief, frustrations, hopes and dreams and found that writing about it helped me a great deal. As it is a complete story, I thought it may be a good idea to publish it as a book. One story that provides a good picture of a very far reaching time in my life but above all, how I experienced that time. The good and the bad moments. My hopes, expectations and dreams. The book also pictures where I am now, eighteen months later.

Last but not least, I would be able to realize a childhood dream. A dream that I share with my sister, writing a book. We would start writing at the beginning of each summer holiday but never finalized writing a book. Until now, my first REAL book! Now 3 years later the book is translated by my sister.

Preface

It is Friday night, the weekend has started and I sit on the settee. Slouching on the settee is probably a better way of putting it. Anyway, who sits on the couch properly nowadays? Okay, I slouch on the settee, cuddled up to my loved one Jeroen. We have known each other for about three years now so we are still very much in love. I am sure you get the picture as it is not difficult to imagine, right? I look deep into his beautiful blue eyes, he takes hold of me and I can see in his eyes what this is leading up to. Yes, and I also want this! He positions me until I lie stretched out on the settee, but before I know it....

'Auwwww, stop, now' I shout. Daggers are attacking my back and won't stop. At least, that is how it feels to me. Gone is the romantic feeling, gone is moment of longing and the fun. I could cry with frustration and pain: Back problems!

D-day!

The date is 17th of January 2012: D-day! The day I have been looking forward to so much and which I have been equally dreading as well. The day of my back operation. My very first operation ever and a serious one. I will need to spend about five days in hospital. It is also the day of my 42nd birthday but instead of partying, I will be spending the day comatosed in hospital. To miss out on a birthday after your 30th is no problem at all and hopefully I will receive the best present ever: to be able to lead a normal life again and to be able to walk without pain. At present I don't walk any further than 200 meters and even that is done with clenched jaws and panting from the pain I am experiencing.

I long to be able to enjoy the simple things in life again, such as going to bed late for a change, a walk in the forest but also to join in with the games from my loved one and his children. Although these games will vary greatly from each other. The main thing is that I will be able to do everything again without the constant continuous awful pain, which I am unable to neglect!

It is frosty outside on the morning of the operation. Jeroen takes me to the hospital; the operation will be performed in Diakonessenhuis in Utrecht in The Netherlands. At 7 o'clock I have to report at the nurses' station and the plan is that I will be operated on an hour later. I am shown to the ward which I will be sharing with three other people. We put my

clothes away in the locker and I take time to organize my nightstand just how I want it as I won't be capable of doing any of these things after my operation. Although I have only one hour to go until I will be operated on but even in this one hour I somehow manage to fit in six visits to the toilet for one little nervous pee after the other.

Man, I am a nervous wreck. The nurse takes little or no notice and puts the needle in my hand in preparation for the drip later. She also gives me a handful of pills in preparation and draws a beautiful big arrow on my back where the operation should be performed. Obviously in the hope that the surgeon will indeed operate on my back and not accidentally amputates my leg or something like that. You hear these stories..... I am so happy that Jeroen is here with me. He oozes tranquillity although he also finds it very exciting. I hold his hand as if I will never let go again and although neither of us says a word, it is good to know he is here for me.

Although many things are happening the one hour waiting time still seems to take forever. Thanks to the super-efficient care I am given, I am ready for the operation within the hour and we are allowed to move to the theatre. As walking is the most painful thing for me I am relieved that I am excused on this occasion. I am going in style and am moved in my hospital bed to the theatre whilst Jeroen is allowed to walk alongside with us.

At the lift we meet Dr Van Gaalen, the orthopaedic surgeon who will perform my back operation. He looks happy and relaxed. At least he is not someone who is not at his best in the mornings. Not that a bad tempered surgeon would bother me, as I will be put out during the entire time that the procedure is taking place, but I like the idea that the surgeon is wide awake and mentally with it so to speak. I firmly believe this will minimize the risk of mistakes and am absolutely terrified of what lies ahead. Unfortunately, I now am no longer in the position to pay a visit to the ladies.

During the trip downstairs, I continue to look at Jeroen. I do not want to see any passers by giving me enquiring looks and I try to gain strength from the calmth that he radiates. But he looks absentmindedly ahead of himself which means that he is nervous too.

We have to say our goodbyes just outside the recovery room, where further prep will take place. Jeroen gives me a big kiss and then leaves through the door. I am no longer able to see him and I secretly wipe away a stray tear. Secretly, as I am pretending to be strong for the outside world, even though I feel helpless and now totally have to rely on the experience of Dr Van Gaalen and his team. It is like having been transported into a different world. I have forgotten about Jeroen as there are too many fascinating things going on around me. Before I have had enough time to take

everything in I am entering the operating theatre at eight on the dot.

In the operating theatre I meet a very kind anaesthetist who gives me a fluid to make me drowsy. I cannot remember this kind man's name, but he has a good sense of humour, is very relaxed and has a nice chat with me. Most likely to put me at ease and he does this very well. He asks me to count backwards from ten to one. I can do that; ten..., nine..., eight.... At eight I close my eyes and finally notice the nervous feeling leaving my body, I feel totally calm and relaxed. Seven... At seven I suddenly open my eyes, imagine that they will start to operate on me and don't notice that I haven't been put out completely yet. From the corner of my eyes I see with relief that the people around me are busy with other things. What a relief. I see Dr van Gaalen and then I need to let go. My eyes are dropping and I am no longer aware of anything else around me.

One minute I am counting backwards and the next moment I have come to again find myself back in the recovery room. It is afternoon already and I am waking up with unbearable pain. I cannot believe how much agony I am in and I am used to quite a bit of pain. I dose off repeatedly and whenever I wake up I see on a faint looking clock that another 15 minutes has passed since the last time I woke up. It feels as if I have even more pain than before. Within no time at all I have had all the morphine I am allowed to take. Unfortunately it doesn't give me a high, but at least I am not

able to focus either. The clock remains faint and the time creeps by.

Due to the amount of pain I am suffering and the fact that I continue to sink into some kind of coma I am not yet allowed to move back to the ward. At some point I have been in the recovery room for over an hour and am administered Ketamine. Apparently this is a drug which is also used to anaesthetize horses. It was not until much later that I saw a programme on National Geographic about people who use Ketamine as a social drug. This drug did not make them happy in the end. But I had used my allowed quota of morphine and the staff was trying to decrease the pain. Very sweet of them but it was nowhere near fast enough for me. I want to get rid off the pain, focus my view, especially when I see Jeroen. He and my mum are due to arrive later and by then I will know that the worst is over.

Before the operation I was certain that as soon as I would wake up I would wiggle my toes. Due to the pain I had totally forgotten about this. I do not even want to wiggle my toes right now, I can only focus on the unbearable pain in my back. Due to the pain I am going through, the nursing staff is keeping a very close eye on me and it takes at least three hours before I am allowed back to the ward. When I finally do see Jeroen and my Mum all stress is released via crying. They cannot even hug me or hold me tight as everything is hurting and I have to remain flat on my back. But I so do need to cry. To let out all the stress and the relief that at least

this part of it is over. Jeroen asks if I have tried to wiggle my toes. He knows my deepest fear that if they were to hit a nerve that I would never walk again.

I move my toes and feel straight away that the radiation I always felt in my leg was no longer there. I cannot even describe how this makes me feel. How marvellous not to feel anything. This is why I opted for the operation. No more radiation, no more pain in my legs. Secretly I can feel another small tear escape which I wipe away discretely as I do not wish to cry any longer. Relieved by this good news, Jeroen, spontaneous and welcoming as always, is making his round across the ward to share the homemade apple pie with the other patients.

Gosh, I totally forgot. It is still today and it is my birthday. Well, judging by the feeling in my legs, or rather the lack of certain feelings in my legs, my birthday is a perfect one. Once I am with it a little bit more I learn, with Jeroen's help, who my fellow patients are and get to know them a little. Due to the fact that I need to remain flat on my back, I cannot see the people around me. Diagonally opposite me is a man and next to me an elderly lady. She is 89 years old and has the onset of dementia. She does have moments that things are very clear as she tells everybody that I have just turned 28. Lucky for me, she sticks with this story for days on end.