

Nancy Jarecki: Head Strong

Photography by Jonathan Becker • February 2, 2011



After a life-threatening brain aneurysm, **Nancy Jarecki** opens up to **Hamish Bowles** about her spirited recovery—and her new fearlessness.

A lot of people have said that 2009 must have been a horrific year for me. It certainly changed me. I have short hair. I'm a little lankier now. I no longer have the taste for meat. Or Magnolia cupcakes. Or Twizzlers. And I've had four brain operations.

Such a small percentage of people make it through a brain aneurysm (my neurosurgeon told me that 50 percent typically die, and the rest either have permanent brain damage or some sort of deficit. Only 5 percent have an amazing outcome like mine). Everybody wants to know what led up to it. "Did you have bad headaches?" "Blurred vision?" "What were the symptoms?" Nobody really knows anything about the brain until something bad happens to it.

It started with a fainting episode that came out of the blue. It was a normal day—a workaholic day. My business Betty Beauty was doing so well that I was about to partner with another company, and I was very excited to see all my hard work pay off. In fact, my very last e-mails of that day were to a great potential partner. I remember I ate a banana, thinking I might not eat for a while. My husband, Andrew, was in California shooting his first feature film, *All Good Things*, so I went to the season premiere of a TV show at the Museum of Modern Art with my sons, Maxson, then seventeen, and Jasper, thirteen. The show was called *Head Case*. (You have to find the humor in trauma—it helps ease the fear in everyone around you.)

I was talking to my friend George at the premiere. Suddenly it got really hot—I thought they had shut the air conditioners off—and while I was talking to him, his entire body froze and turned into a still photograph, and I thought, Oh, a flashbulb must have gone off. I was stunned, but I wasn't scared. I

didn't think anything was wrong. I really believed it was the flash of a photographer's bulb. I tried blinking his image back into movement, but I couldn't get my eyes to refocus—I couldn't get him animated again.



Then I felt another surge of heat come over me and I thought to myself, I'm going to faint. I'd never fainted before. I thought, Well, I know I ate a banana, so it isn't low blood sugar. George said, "Let me get you a chair." And I said, "No, I'm going down now." It came on so quickly. Suddenly this weird thick liquid seemed to pour over his frozen image. I remember thinking, That's not right.

I woke up, and I heard my friends Jessica and Adam trying to calm me down. I recognized their voices, but I couldn't really see them. I remember their touch, and I had this sense of calmness. I was aware that I was lying on the ground. I kept hearing them say, "Nancy, we're going to stay with you; we'll stay with you." Someone said, "Do you think she has swine flu?" Everyone was kind of screaming, but I didn't mind. Everything looked very fragmented; the backdrop seemed like a black strobe light. Although I could hear everybody—my friend Holly was saying that an ambulance had been called—I could see only silhouettes.

One of my sons squeezed my arm and said, "Mommy, Mommy, it's Maxson.

They're telling me you're having a seizure." And I thought to myself, Oh, so this is what a seizure feels like? I always thought when people had seizures they were unconscious. Then I could smell these wonderful smells, and I kept thinking, What's with the perfume? They kept saying that the ambulance was coming, and Maxson and Jasper were saying, "Mommy, we're right here. We're right here with you."

I was telling my friends, "I'll go in the ambulance, but I have to pee." And I really had to pee. I tried to convince them that if I could just pee, I'd get on the gurney. But they restrained me, and I freaked out.

They put me in the ambulance, and then I lost everybody. All the voices; everything went quiet. I didn't know where anybody was. They were just gone. It was the most traumatic feeling, as though I could have been in the trunk of a car, anywhere. (I was kidnapped in a carjacking back in 1987, but that's another story.) And then all of a sudden, Maxson grabbed my free arm, and I knew he was there with me. And the paramedic. And I just thought, OK, I'm going to relax. I feel comfortable now. As I grew calmer a song came into my head, George Strait's "Amarillo by Morning." It had always been a great comfort, and it didn't fail me.

Somehow the stars were aligned that night. My trauma happened in a public place, surrounded by quick-thinking friends and calm kids, and within the 911 emergency zone of NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital. When I arrived, the doctor on call was Philip Stieg, M.D., the neurosurgeon-in-chief there, a world-renowned physician who is never on call.

They rushed me to the emergency room on a gurney. I remember feeling afraid because they kept saying, "We're going to have to do a CT scan." Then I started to see a little bit more clearly, and I saw the long tube that they were going to put me in, and I flipped. I kept saying to them, "If I could

just get comfortable, I don't mind going through the scan, but I have this routine I do to prep myself." And I remember thinking, They're not listening to me! Later I found out that, although I was aware of everything, the entire time I was unable to speak. I had left-side paralysis—that's how they knew it was not a normal seizure. In my head, I was speaking as normal Nancy, but I was like a fish flopping about with my eyes rolled back.

Then they tried to strap me down because I was becoming belligerent. One of the emergency guys wanted to put a catheter in. The only thing I could move was my legs, so I started kicking. I wasn't going to let that guy do that to me. It's funny because the doctors now attribute a lot of my recovery to my feistiness.

They finally restrained me—Holly had to crawl on top of me. I used to have long hair that I wore up—it was a bird's nest, with so many bobby pins—but with a CT scan you can't have anything metal on you. So one paramedic was trying to pull out all the bobby pins, which was quite an ordeal; they're yelling at him, "Get those out! Faster! We've got to get her in there!"

And I'm thinking to myself, He's having trouble getting the bobby pins in the back, so I decided to help him by moving my head a little. The paramedic must have thought I was trying to be adversarial because he grabbed his big old scissors and started shearing off my clothes—a new Vera Wang organza vest and a Zac Posen spring blouse that I'd just bought. I thought, Is it really necessary to shred those? And then the guy started cutting out the bobby pins, too. And Maxson said, "Oooh, she is not going to be happy about this!"

My vital signs were fine, but my brain was starting to shut down. That's when my mind went flying on a fragmented journey—first flashing on a song by Keith Urban ("I Could Fly"), and then taking me back to seventh grade when I was just a girl in Abilene, Kansas, at a concert by a hometown

Southern-rock band called Coyote. But soon I felt as though a roller shade was being pulled down; there was just a sliver of light. I don't remember anything after that.

From the scan they realized it was a pretty big bleed. My family was called to the hospital. Andrew, who was in California filming his movie, had been tracked down and was on his way. I could see lab coats and I could see the machines, but I was never scared. And then I saw a silhouette, and I realized it was Andrew. He'd been warned that a bleed as bad as mine would probably erase my memory. So of course he was cautious, thinking I might not recognize him. By now I could speak—in a slurry way—and I said, "Andrew? Is that you? How did you get here so fast?" He came close to me and whispered, "You're going into surgery." And I said to him, "What if I don't wake up?"

Every hour on the hour the neurosurgery team would ask me the same basic cognitive questions: "What's your name? What year is it?" I still didn't understand how serious it was, but I started to get a feeling from the nurses and the doctors. I thought to myself, They should lighten up a little bit because they're scaring everybody. I kept wanting to tell them, I'm having a great musical experience in my head. I wanted to make them smile. And then one asked, "Do you know why you are here?" And I said, "Umm, bad lipo?"

After my second brain surgery, I woke to the doctors' explaining that they'd had to do a craniotomy. My ICP [intercranial pressure] had started to rise, so they needed to remove a piece of my skull, or a "flap" as they called it. And I said, "Well, if you removed it, what did you do with it?" One of the doctors said, "We had to make an incision down below your bikini line into the abdominal wall, where we will keep the flap." And I said, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. You did what?" And he said, "Well, we made an

incision." And I said, "Wait, I have my skull in my stomach? I have a skull baby?"

So Dr. Stieg and his colleagues were looking at me—the brainiacs of this institution. I said, "The incision seems a little high." And Dr. Stieg said, "Excuse me, but are you giving us grief about where we made the incision to store your flap?" And I looked at him and said, "If you're going to cut into me, I can't believe that, number one, you didn't do a little liposuction while you were in there, and number two, you didn't do it down low where there are already three incisions from my C-sections." Everybody in ICU was laughing. That's when Andrew's e-mails to our friends started—his first reassuring everyone that my sons were "handling it very well because their mother is strong like a bull." And I loved the funny things people wrote back: "That's terrible that this happened, but at least we know she has a brain."

The day after I had a piece of my skull taken out, we had so many visitors that it was like a party. When I started to wake up, I saw that my friend Ashley had made wallpaper from pictures of my kids and my friends. She was told it might help trigger my memory. People who know me well would send iPods and little speakers. Music has always grounded me—it carries my woes and my fears. I had these little country-music playlists in my head: Keith Urban's "Live to Love Another Day"; Mindy Smith's "Fighting for It All"; George Strait's "You'll Be There." That's what comforted me, those tattered hillbilly sounds.

The ICU was very sad because a lot of people died there, but I wanted the nurses to have the sense that they wouldn't have to worry about me. They let me rule the ICU a little bit because that's what worked for me. (There was only one time when they kicked everyone out—we were getting a little loud.) One day my friend Laura looked at me and said, "Honey, dead or

alive, that hair on your legs—nobody wants to see that!" So she went out and bought shaving cream.

Breaking the rules was a big thing for me. I kept giving the hospital establishment a hard time because my own children couldn't visit me—the very thing I wanted to live for. Once, they snuck in my daughter, Jeremy, who was six, and she brought her artwork. They made a note in my records: "Saw kids, lifted her spirits." Now the hospital is rethinking its policy.

Then I started to hear rumblings of bad news. I was having something called vasospasms, and I needed a cerebral angiogram. With an angiogram, they go in through your groin with a catheter, then up into your head where it injects medicine that unspasms your arteries. After this third surgery, I was moved out of neuro-ICU to what they call a step-down neuro unit. Now I was free of all the brain tubes; the worst of it was behind me.

The final stage in my recovery would be the physiotherapy unit. But the doctors didn't know what to do with me, because I could walk, I could talk. I sounded just like Nancy. So they decided to skip that unit and send me home instead, until the surgery to replace the flap they'd taken out of my skull. It was a big shake-up for me, as though a huge safety net had been pulled from underneath me. My family was saying, "This is a joyous thing!" But I was frightened.

When I left the hospital, the nurses and doctors gathered to say goodbye. I have pictures of me hugging people and crying, and they were so happy for me. They forgave me for using obscenities in the emergency room. They said, "Feisty works for you!" But once I was at home, I was nervous. That's when the real physical and mental trauma set in. I had to wear a helmet—Tory Burch customized it for me! I started to sleep with the light on, but I couldn't go to sleep. I knew that I would be back in the hospital in 61 days for the surgery. During the day I was fine. I set my days in two-hour

increments. I wasn't ready to read, so I would either watch a movie or do a little channel surfing. But at night I would stay up, thinking. When I saw the doctors again, they knew I wasn't looking well. I hadn't been sleeping. I had an irrational fear that I wouldn't wake up. So they gave me anti-anxiety medication for the nighttime.

When I started going out again, friends who saw me became emotional—later I would get a note that said, "After I spoke to you, I felt like I could conquer almost anything." And I thought, If I am sending that kind of message, who am I to be scared? I loved having that community of friends and family—they carried me with their prayers and e-mails and support. In July I had my surgery. When I woke up, I felt awful. I couldn't figure out why I didn't have that life force. But the doctors told me I'd been in surgery almost seven hours. My body had taken a beating. I started to realize I would do anything to feel better, so I told myself I wouldn't let it get me down. It took a few days, but when I got home I started to feel like myself again. On top of it I lost a lot of weight. As a weight-loss option the Aneurysm Diet is extreme, but it worked for me! And I started to realize life is amazing. I had a physical sense of euphoria. I felt I was beginning a new chapter in life. Where would it take me?

Last summer Andrew and our friend Uma arranged a Wellness Party for me—I called it the Brain Bash. We wanted to do something for everybody at the hospital. The party turned into a big surprise for me. My friend Adam had tracked down the paparazzo photographer, Ted, who had been so helpful when I went into that seizure at MoMA. Andrew also arranged all this amazing music. There was Ben Taylor, and Randy Scruggs on the banjo, and Cory Chisel singing "Born Again," and my sons played Bob Dylan's "Wagon Wheel" with Andrew. Andrew presented funny awards and citations to everyone, to friends and nurses and doctors.

I really believe crisis creates opportunity. My aunt Beulah used to call it making an Oops into an Opportunity. In this case it was an opportunity to feel like you're doing something for somebody else, to feel a sense of purpose. I have shown people that you can make it through an ordeal like this—even my hospital room had such great energy that people around me wanted some for their own loved ones, and I could suggest putting photographs on the wall (the wallpaper of life!) or a playlist of songs. And definitely to keep talking to someone who has experienced this kind of trauma, because they can probably hear you. My kids now have a new experience of adversity—it has made them wiser at a young age.

The small things in life are now big things. Even a simple stroll down the beach, in the ethereal environment near our home in Guana Island, has taken on new meaning. When my feet hit the sand I can almost hear Kenny Chesney's lyrics ("No shoes, no shirt, no problems/Blues, what blues? Hey, I forgot 'em").

A lot of people who suffer brain trauma have a major depression, but I had an enhancement. I have euphoria, triggered by lights and music. You get lost in it; the doctors say it's the closest thing to doing drugs! Andrew calls it "the Rapture." I wish I could bottle that! I have a big scar on the side of my head, and it's one of those symbols: Here's my warrior wound from this traumatic experience. I have a new fearlessness. I've learned to embrace change.

And it's true: I am never going to be the same. I can visualize smell, but I can't read my own handwriting. As much as I love my business, I'm not as much of a workaholic; I've rearranged my priorities. I've learned to slow down and enjoy the downtime—and the community of inspirational people around me. I've realized that my aneurysm was a gift in many ways. I learned to live by almost dying. Even though I was always pretty outgoing, I

kept a lot inside, too. I've learned so many things about myself. I'm not sure whether I'm back to normal—it's a new normal, a different me. 2010 was the year of recovery and rediscovery. 2011 is about living.

Captions:

THE FAR SHORE

THE AUTHOR, AFTER HER RECOVERY, ON THE BEACH NEAR HER HOME
ON GUANA ISLAND, BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS.

TWO OF A KIND

PHOTOGRAPHED WITH DAUGHTER JEREMY BY JONATHAN BECKER FOR
VOGUE, 2006.