

**STRUCK:
A HUSBAND'S MEMOIR OF A MIRACLE**

By

Douglas Segal

the first part

the last day of normal

10.23.12
8:05 am.

The phone rings. I check the caller ID and don't recognize it; I'm not going to answer. I've got twenty-five minutes before I have to get on a conference call with Disney, and before that, I want to rewrite a couple of lines of a television pilot I'm delivering today. It's already going to be tight without having to deal with an incoming phone call.

But the phone continues to ring. I wait for the answering machine to get it, however, for some godforsaken reason, it's not picking up. I exhale annoyed because I know the call is either going to be for Susan (she's the only one who receives calls on the home line) or it's the latest of three hundred previous attempts to sell me something I have absolutely no interest in. I don't think I've received a phone call on the landline in what feels like years that didn't end with me saying, 'Please take me off your list,' but because of the persistent ringing and the fact that the answering machine has decided to malfunction and not pick up, I'm going to have to answer it.

"Hello," I say, an edge in my voice. The reply on the other end surprises me.

"Daddy, it's me." It's Alyce, my 12 year-old daughter's sweet yet scared voice on the other end. She and Susan had left for school about ten minutes earlier. But why is she calling from this strange number, and worse, why is she crying and why does she sound so frightened? A moment later, I get the answer.

"Mommy was just in a car accident."

My heart stops...and then immediately begins pounding.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes."

"Is mommy?"

Another deep sob.

"I don't know...I don't think so."

We're all familiar with the saying, 'There but for the grace of God go I.'

And on this one particular October morning, that grace was gone and it was I.

transcript from KTLA news report – 10.23.12 9:30am

On Air Reporter: Ginger, let's get back to that scene in Hollywood for just one second. Mark Kono, if you could just give us a locator. You said 7800 block of Hollywood Boulevard, but give us a cross street.

Mark Kono (from helicopter): Yeah, this is Hollywood Boulevard in West Hollywood, where you see the LA city fire department working to help out a patient who is still trapped in this car, possibly the driver, possibly a passenger. That MTA bus that you still see in the scene there, there was talk, as I mentioned before, about reversing that MTA bus and separating that bus from that car. It's essentially sitting on top of that car. And so, this was a fairly violent head-on collision from what we can tell at this point. The city fire department just using the jaws-of-life to cut the roof off of that sedan here, and hopefully they will be able to get to this patient quickly.

Ginger Chan: The injuries we're unsure of at this point, but they're getting to this person quickly. We don't know how violent this crash was, but Mark, you were talking...it was a head on crash.

On Air Reporter: And just so we...we sort of get ourselves oriented here, this bus...is it westbound or eastbound, and, and which way was – I mean the car appears to have gone, for whatever reason, into opposing traffic, right?

Mark Kono (from helicopter): Well...you know the bus is actually facing west and the car is facing east, and so...by this angle it actually looks like the *bus* is in opposing lanes of traffic.

Ginger Chan: Right... at first, you're thinking, okay, that the car is in the wrong, but you're right, the bus is on the wrong side of the road...

On Air Reporter: Right, and we're obviously not passing judgment here. We're not saying anyone's in the wrong, but we can say that bus is on the wrong side of the street. And what caused it to be on that side of the street...why did it go head on into this vehicle, we don't know. Obviously, these are all questions that'll be examined. Right now, the focus is on getting the driver out of that car.



Dear Congregants and Friends,

Our community sends its loving prayers to TIOH congregants, Susan, Doug, Michael & Alyce Segal. Susan and Alyce were involved in a traffic accident this morning. Alyce was released from the hospital. Susan is hospitalized and her family is with her. Rabbi Jocee Hudson and Chazzan Danny Maseng are in close contact with the family and join the congregation in prayer.

This was the original notification sent to our temple's congregation through an email blast. News of the accident had spread faster than the typical hyper speed of temple gossip. To be fair, this was, in truth, a far cry from gossip. This was the response of concern from our deeply caring community, and the fact that it involved one of 'theirs,' someone they knew, made it that much more potent. Everyone recognized the randomness of the event and because it happened so close to home, they also recognized how easily it could have been them.

Again, there but for the grace of God go I.

But what's inherent in that statement is something I have grappled with from the very beginning of all of this, borrowing a slightly modified Tina Turner line... 'What's *God* got to do with it?' But really, what role, if any, did some omnipotent being play in this accident? Which then leads to several other philosophical questions: Are there really any 'accidents?' Do things happen for a reason? Is this all some sort of life lesson that I or we should be garnering from a very 'bad' thing happening to 'good' people? In this circumstance, it's unrealistic to not at least contemplate the big question of 'why' even while simultaneously recognizing that trying to answer the question is a futile exercise.

Even still, it's impossible to not be slapped in the face by it all. And sitting there in the hospital, waiting and wondering and worrying, I was more than just whacked in the face. I had suffered a major beating.

Now the news was out there, in that initial email, as well as on TV. Beyond the temple's notification, I'm not sure I would have publically posted *anything* else, however because of the huge circle of friends Susan has built in her life, I almost immediately began receiving calls asking what was going on, what her condition was, was she going to be okay?

However, there was so much uncertainty, I didn't know what to say other than, 'It's not good.'

Things were far from stable, her condition as well as my emotional state. It wasn't so much what the doctors were telling me, but rather what they weren't, things they were leaving out, details and prognoses I still don't know and am probably better off never knowing. There was inside knowledge, that awful truth, and then there was me, blissfully ignorant to it all.

I don't blame the doctors. I already had enough to worry about that was *real*, never mind working myself into a state of panic over what were *possibilities* – yes, real possibilities, but nothing concrete. It would be too easy to spin myself crazy indulging in all the 'mights' (if she survives 'this,' she *might* then be faced with 'that' or 'that' or 'that'), so in this case, not knowing the various possibilities was a layer of protection necessary to deal with the immediate, to focus on the present. We can

become so obsessed with what might happen in the future, whether it's just in the seconds and minutes ahead, or in hours or years, that we become paralyzed in the present. There's a great lesson I learned right out of the gate from the emergency room doctors and nurses. They aren't concerned with the past or the future – not apprehensive about what might happen around the corner nor fixated on what could have been done differently in the past to change the course of where they are now. Their complete focus and attention is right there in the moment, on that body in front of them. Nothing else matters. And as I sat in the ICU waiting room, I tried to remain in that same state of present.

As mentioned, the accident was all over the news, and continued to remain there. I would occasionally get glimpses of the television that played in the background, repeating the footage, recapping it on 'special bulletins.' But I didn't really want to watch any of it. I had been there and seen it. I didn't need to see it again.

There were others in the waiting room as well, people I didn't know, who were related to other patients on the floor. My group had said some 'hellos' and offered to share some of the mountain of food that had been delivered to us from concerned friends. We had shared sympathetic, unspoken looks acknowledging that we'd all rather be anywhere else than where we were. But still, we were all strangers, bound only by unrelated illness or tragedy.

At one point, one of them caught a look at the accident on the TV and innocently remarked to me, "Wow, look at that accident on Hollywood Boulevard. Miracle if anyone survived that. You gotta take a look at this."

I politely declined.

The man's wife nudged him and whispered under her breath. I knew what she was saying without having to hear it.

His face turned pale before apologizing to me. "I didn't know. I'm sorry."

I told him not to worry about it, but what was interesting was that in that one quick moment, suddenly the sensational news story playing in the distant background about some random stranger had become personal for him. In that instant, he realized that in that car, behind this crazy news story, was a very real person with a husband, children, friends and family, who were all waiting, not just in a room like this, but in this very room, and like him, concerned whether their loved one was going to live or die. Like any accident or disaster, that awareness, that personal connection, makes the story a lot less *fascinating* to watch. It humanizes it.

At this point, for me and my group, the waiting room was like central operations for a major campaign headquarters. Obama's second term election was just a couple of weeks away, but his staff had nothing on mine. A circle of five or so women, all Susan's closest friends were gathered in a circle, laptops clacking away. Meal trains

were being formed, friends were being updated with the latest news, carpools were being organized. This was a progesterone-charged power machine. I looked around at them and commented, "God, if we could harness what's going on in this waiting room right now, I am quite confident we could solve all of the world's problems."

It was true. The amount of focus, care and energy was unstoppable.

I sat there, primarily in a daze, holding in my hand the hospital turkey sandwich a nurse had given me in the emergency to give to Alyce. At the time, she didn't want it and I didn't either. Every few minutes someone would remind me that I really should eat something (it's not like we had any shortage of food), but I had been trying to lose some weight over the past few months, doing the whole no carb lean protein thing, and so I hadn't consumed a piece of bread in some time.

I sat there looking at this sandwich. Should I eat it? I felt like maybe this was a test. Would the accident and this turkey sandwich break my resolve? Was this really just a sandwich or was it a parable for a bigger test God was putting me through? Did this turkey sandwich represent my strength, and if I gave in and ate it, was that giving up? It was now much bigger than just a sandwich; it was my ability to handle this crisis. It was absurd and ridiculous, but these are the kinds of things you think about, or at least I was thinking about.

As the day wore on, I was approached by a friend who gently suggested (again) that I really needed to put out some kind of statement, like The Diplomat following a horrific public event. The team was being overwhelmed with phone calls, emails, and texts. From the temple posting, the news stories and word of mouth, countless friends knew of the accident, but none knew the details of Susan's condition. The consensus was that I needed to reach out and provide some information. Visitors weren't allowed into the building, never mind our floor of the ICU, unless I put them on a list. As a result, there were so many who felt shut out, both literally and figuratively.

But I still felt strongly that I didn't want to provide any specific information about her injuries until I had a clear understanding of what they were myself. As far as I was concerned, no information was better than false information. I also didn't want to speculate, even from a place of optimism that she was going to be okay, partly because I didn't know, and partly because I didn't want to jinx it by making that declaration. I had already experienced this exact situation just hours earlier while I was in the ER with Alyce, and I could tell that this was the way it was going to be, good news followed by terrible followed by better...constantly changing. It was hard enough for me to go on this ride, and, whether right or wrong, I didn't want to drag everyone else onto this hellish rollercoaster.

Yet, there were too many people in our lives who were in the dark, and, trust me, I know that the dark can be a scary place to be, full of uncertainty and anxiety.

And it wasn't only *what* to say, but *where* to say it.

I ultimately chose Susan's Facebook site, figuring that would reach the majority of her friends, and if someone wasn't a Facebook friend, then they would hear it from someone who was. I also realized that there would be many around the country with no knowledge of the accident and would read the post and wonder what the hell was going on. There was no perfect way to say it either in words or format, but in this world of social networking, it seemed like the most efficient way to get information out as quickly as possible to as many as possible.

Early evening, albeit brief, this is what I posted on her Facebook page:

Susan Segal

October 23, 2012 near Los Angeles, CA

Hi, everyone, it's Doug. I just want to thank you all for your thoughts and prayers. I will try to keep you updated on the situation, but for now it's best that there be no visitors at the hospital. The hospital staff and Susan have a great challenge ahead of them and really need her room to be clear. I, and Susan, know she is surrounded by love, and we all so very much appreciate your thoughts and concern. With much love and gratitude to the amazing support and friends we both have. xxoo d

Even though I had written that Susan knows 'she is surrounded by love,' I wouldn't realize the full extent of that until much later on. There have been recent studies that show that this kind of energy, whether the 'giver' is present in the room of the 'receiver' or not, still translates to whomever it's intended. This love, support, compassion and prayer would soon become Susan's lifeblood, transferred through some cosmic transfusion.

The hours ticked by, and we all mostly sat, interminably waiting for news. Good news would be met with a surge of energy and relief, while no news (which was more often the case) was met with quiet frustration. As night began to fall, the number of calls, texts and emails continued to flood in, family and friends all providing their emails, asking to please be notified if there were any further updates. Our friend, Kabrel, became the gatekeeper of this list as the constant influx of people made it too much for me to keep track of.

And so at the close of the first day, I wrote the first of what became known as the 'updates.' They are how the story unfolded for everyone on that list, whether over morning coffee at their kitchen tables, in bed on their computers, or shared aloud with their families at night. At first, the updates began as a way to keep our family and friends informed about Susan's physical condition, but they quickly grew to

become much more than just a clinical recounting of her recovery. Yes, they told that story, but as she wrestled with her life, everyone who was receiving the updates also wrestled with the many life questions and issues that the accident raised – making sense of what ultimately makes no sense.

I could count up the email addresses on the master list, but that wouldn't come close to providing an accurate number of actual recipients, as there were many on the list who forwarded them on to others, those who just wanted to know 'how's that friend of yours doing?' – parents, friends, family, workmates, and countless others, many who didn't even know me or Susan, but were so moved by the events, by the randomness and the heartbreak that they just wanted to be kept abreast, to remain a part of it.

I never thought of anyone in this group as 'looky-loos,' slowing their car down to get a perverse look at a horrific accident. I always felt that everyone who wanted to continue to receive the updates truly cared, was moved, and in many cases later shared how they were inspired by them. For many who would read our story, we were like fictional characters in an ongoing serial, but at the same time, it was impossible to ignore that we were real people, people just like them, and that, too, is what I think ultimately connected and moved them.

Ultimately, I didn't need to know who they were. The real hope was that, since they were now plunged into this journey with us, hopefully they, too, would be sending their love and support.

I didn't need to know anything more than that.

What follows is the collection of those updates as well as other impressions and events that at the time I didn't share. The main difference in publishing them in this form vs. how they were originally sent is much like the difference between waiting each week for a favorite television show to air vs. being able to binge watch the entire series. At the time, even though most often it was just 24 hours between updates, when life hangs in the balance, those hours can feel interminable. Imagine if, as you read, that as you finished a particular day and turned the page, that next page was blank and the words wouldn't appear until 24 hours later. In our age of immediate gratification, it would be the equivalent of having to return to dial-up internet service.

The waiting was the hardest part.