



FEATURE STORY

When Life Trips You Up — Literally

A personal story of survival, stubbornness, and one very happy Border Collie.

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At 7:15 on a Friday morning, I would normally still be tucked in bed, waiting for my Border Collie, Maggie, to nudge me awake so I could let her outside. Coffee would follow, then a slow, peaceful welcome of the day. That was the plan, anyway.

Instead, a stick vacuum cleaner — propped innocently against the wall, minding its own business — had other ideas. One misstep, one split second, and my world turned completely upside down. In the time it takes to blink, screws, nuts, bolts, nails, metal plates, and a rod became my new best friends, holding both an arm and a leg back together. Lesson learned: never trust a stick vacuum.

I wish I could tell you I handled this with unshakeable grace. I did not. But I handled it — and that, dear reader, is the whole point.

A NAME TO LIVE UP TO

My father named me Deborah — a Scotch-Irish name meaning sparkling and lively in strength. At 73 years old, freshly broken and staring down a recovery that would reshape at least one third of my year, I had no choice but to live up to it.

I am grateful — truly, deeply grateful — that I did not hit my head when I fell. That single blessing became the spark that lit my determination. I held onto it on the hard days. I hold onto it still.

With a rose gold pen in hand — monogrammed with the word "unstoppable," a gift from a dear friend — I began writing my thoughts each morning as a warm cup of coffee kissed my lips. Truer words were never engraved on a pen. A warrior, it turns out, was holding it.

INSIDE
Companion PDF: Grab and Go — Your Emergency Hospital & Rehab Checklist.
Use the checklist on pages 4-6 to prepare before an unexpected hospital or rehab stay.

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THE HOSPITAL, THE REHAB, AND 200 ANGELS

A week in the hospital was followed by a full month in a rehabilitation facility — and I mean a full month of being humbled, challenged, poked, prodded, and ultimately rebuilt from the inside out. What I did not expect was the extraordinary kindness that met me at every single turn.

More than 200 caregivers crossed my path during this journey — from neighbors and EMS responders, to hospital staff, X-ray technicians, and radiologists. Every single one of them was nothing short of an angel. The phrase I heard again and again was this: "We care FOR people because we care ABOUT people." Imagine if we all carried that motto with us through every single day. I felt incredibly, overwhelmingly fortunate to be in their hands.

THE MOMENT I ALMOST LET MYSELF DOWN

Let me tell you about the day in physical therapy that I am not particularly proud of — but that changed everything.

The goal was simple enough: stand up from a wheelchair. Straightforward for most people. For me, it was a monumental challenge. I had shattered the arm on the same side as my broken leg, which meant I was under strict non-weight-bearing orders on that arm. I could not push or pull myself up with it. With help from behind, I managed it once — barely. When they asked for a second attempt, my body refused. My spirit wavered. I sat there, pouting and crying, convinced I was letting my therapists down. Worse, I felt I was letting myself down.

Then both of them got right in my face.

"Debbie, if you want to cry — you cry. If you want to scream — you scream. Because you are doing better than most people here. You are a superstar!"

I was ready to ride that compliment all the way home. Then came the second part.

"Now, here's the good news and the bad news. The good news — you're a superstar. The bad news? It will be a year before you are back to normal."

A year. One full year.

I needed to hear that truth. And the moment I did, something shifted inside me. The pity party ended. The warrior showed up. I made myself a promise right then and there: I was going to work so hard during my recovery at home that I would cut that year down by a few good months. Stubbornness, it turns out, is an excellent rehabilitation tool.

THE LEG THAT NEVER GOT ITS DUE

Here is something I wish I had paid more attention to decades ago. Back in the 8th grade — long before arthroscopic surgery was even an option — I dislocated my left knee. It was put in a cast and left to heal on its own. It healed, but it was never truly strong again. For years, I compensated by relying more heavily on my right leg without ever really thinking about it.

Fast forward to 73 years old, a broken right arm and leg, arthritis beginning to settle into that right knee, and suddenly I found myself entirely dependent on a leg that I had been silently neglecting for decades.

Balance and strength are not just nice to have in our later years — they are everything. I know that now in a way I never did before. If I could reach back and whisper one thing to my younger self, it would be this: strengthen that leg, sweetheart. You are going to need it.

LIFE AT HOME: THE COMEBACK IN PROGRESS

Recovery at home is no small undertaking. My days now revolve around physical and occupational therapy — each an hour, once a week — along with faithfully repeating those exercises every single day in between. My leg stays elevated as much as possible. My right arm works daily with a three-pound weight, slowly rebuilding the strength I lost. A half walker is my constant companion for every activity, requiring a rest between each one as I work to rebuild stamina I did not realize I had taken for granted.

Sleeping is its own adventure. I am a devoted side sleeper with knees bent — a position that is currently nothing short of aspirational. Rolling over requires an arm I cannot yet fully use. The nights are creative, to say the least.

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But here is the thing: I am making a remarkable recovery. My doctors are pleased, my therapists are encouraging, and my stubbornness remains fully intact. I suspect the stubbornness deserves at least partial credit.

MAGGIE CAME HOME

And then there is Maggie.

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My sweet Border Collie had been lovingly cared for by a close personal friend while I was, shall we say, incapacitated. The day I came home, Maggie wasted absolutely no time. She ran straight to her toy basket, grabbed her favorite toy, and brought it directly to me — tail spinning like a helicopter, eyes bright with pure joy — as if to say, "You're home! Now let's play!"

I cannot tell you how much I needed that moment. In an instant, all the hospital smells, the rehab struggles, the sleepless nights — they melted away. I was home. I was truly, finally home. And if a dog who weighs less than 50 pounds believed with her whole heart that everything was going to be fine, then who was I to argue?

Maggie reminded me of something important: recovery is not just physical. It is emotional. It is spiritual. It is coming home to the things — and the creatures — that make life worth fighting for.

WHAT THIS JOURNEY HAS TAUGHT ME

A fall, a surgery, a hospital, a rehab facility, a long road home. I went in thinking I was just fixing some broken bones. I came out with something I did not expect — a clearer vision of who I want to be in the next decade of my life.

I have learned to be a better listener. To be more compassionate — with others, yes, but also with myself. I have learned to walk in faith rather than in fear. And I have learned that when a tragic event lands on your doorstep, you have exactly two choices: throw yourself a pity party, or move forward.

This gal is moving forward. There was never really any other option.

Before this happened, I was always the caretaker — always focused on everyone else's needs before my own. Recovery forced me to flip that script entirely. For the first time in 73 years, I had to let others care for me. And the village that showed up — neighbors, friends, and connections near and far — visiting, calling, texting, and offering support in ways both big and small — left me breathless with gratitude. Even now that I am home, they continue to show up. Kindness, I have confirmed, absolutely makes a difference.

THE LESSON I MOST WANT YOU TO TAKE AWAY

I am sharing this story because I wish someone had told me — really told me — just how catastrophic and life-altering a fall can be. Not to frighten you. But to prepare you.

If you live alone, please — right now, before you finish reading this — start assembling an emergency Grab and Go bag. A bag with the essentials you would need for an unexpected hospital or rehabilitation stay. I discovered the hard way that you need one. We prepare for the loss of a loved one. We need to prepare for this as well.

See the companion Grab and Go checklist that accompanies this article.

And finally — pack a positive attitude alongside everything else. Pack an "I can do this" mantra. Start today to build a village of neighbors, friends, and connections who will surprise you with their kindness when you need it the most.

You are stronger than you know. Trust me — a warrior with a rose gold pen told me so.

Stay tuned for more stories and tips you will enjoy and want to share with others.

— Debbie Ables

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GRAB AND GO — YOUR EMERGENCY HOSPITAL & REHAB CHECKLIST

DON'T WAIT UNTIL YOU NEED IT — PACK IT NOW!

Prepared by Debbie Ables from personal experience

Nobody plans a hospital stay. That is precisely why you need to plan for one. After spending a week in the hospital and a month in rehab following a serious fall, I can tell you firsthand: having the right items on hand makes an enormous difference in your comfort, your dignity, and your sanity. Here is the list I wish I had packed before I ever needed it.

- ### PERSONAL CARE ESSENTIALS

 - ☐ Small travel kit: toothbrush and toothpaste
 - ☐ Oral rinse
 - ☐ Body lotion
 - ☐ Your favorite perfume or cologne (a little luxury goes a long way!)
 - ☐ Tweezers
 - ☐ Small scissors (invaluable for opening packaging)
 - ☐ Brush or comb
 - ☐ Wet wipes — baby size works perfectly, but bring a generous container

- ### COMFORT ITEMS

 - ☐ A favorite small blanket (hospitals are cold!)
 - ☐ Your favorite bed pillow (mark your initials on both with a marker)

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STAYING CONNECTED & OCCUPIED

- [] Laptop computer with charging cord if possible
- [] Phone charger with a long cord and wall adapter
- [] Books or magazines
- [] Notepad and journal
- [] 3 to 5 pens (you will use more than you think!)

PRACTICAL PAPERWORK

- [] Thank you cards and a list of addresses (you will want to send them — trust me!)
- [] Your list of passwords stored securely
- [] Any bills that may need to be paid during your stay (ask a trusted friend or family member to help)

LITTLE LUXURIES THAT MATTER MORE THAN YOU'D THINK

- [] A few plastic forks and spoons
- [] A few packets of salt, pepper, sugar, and creamer in a zip lock bag
- [] A few bags of chips or corn chips for snacking between meals
- [] Save every napkin that comes with your meals — you will need more than they provide!

A NOTE FOR FRIENDS AND FAMILY

- [] Ask them to bring your mail and help arrange care for your pets. Pro tip from personal experience: if your dog seems upset while you are away, send home one of the hospital gowns you have worn to place where they sleep. Your scent will ease their anxiety more than you know.

ONE MORE ITEM WORTH GRABBING

- [] A grabber tool — available at most dollar stores — is a total game changer. Dropping things is inevitable; being able to retrieve them independently is priceless.

THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS TO PACK — ABSOLUTELY FREE

- [] A bright smile
- [] A genuine thank you for every single person who provides you care
- [] An unshakeable belief that you are going to get through this
- [] They will notice. And they will give you extra attention. Guaranteed.
- [] © Debbie Ables — More stories and helpful tips coming soon!

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PACK THE ATTITUDE, TOO.

A bright smile, a genuine thank you for every person who provides care, and an unshakeable belief that you are going to get through this are just as important as anything in the bag.

© **Debbie Ables — More stories and helpful tips coming soon!**