

Chapter Four: Seven and a Half Hours of Open Heart Surgery

They say time flies when you're under anesthesia.

The surgery began at 8:30 a.m. on Tuesday, December 2, 2025, and ran seven and a half hours — not unusual, I'd later learn, given the number of procedures involved. Dr. Paulsen successfully repaired the growing aneurysm, corrected the aortic regurgitation, completed a triple bypass, and performed the ablation. I came out of surgery stable, with a strong prognosis for full recovery. When I woke up, I was greeted by smiling faces from the medical team and hugs from my wife and children.

It felt like success. What none of us could see yet was the danger still lurking beneath the surface — one that, five days later, would nearly kill me.

The Heart-Shaped Pillow to the Rescue

Recovery began immediately, and painfully. The first task was simply getting out of bed and taking a walk — with a walker, a spotter, and an IV tree in tow. One of my nurses came in with a gift that would become my constant companion: a black-and-white checkerboard heart-shaped pillow.

Every nurse and physical therapist gave me the same instruction: hug that pillow like your life depends on it. Every time I turned, sat up, walked, or shifted from bed to chair, the pillow kept my arms from reaching too far outside an invisible protective tube around my chest. I took the instruction seriously and held onto that pillow for dear life. Even so, the pain was unbearable at times, even with the smallest movements. Staying inside that tube was essential — one wrong reach could reopen the stitches running from my collarbone down to my belly button.

Things Take a Turn

Five days later, doctors discovered my intestines weren't functioning properly, and everything changed. I fell into extremely critical condition, underwent two emergency bowel surgeries, lost portions of both my large and small intestines, came away with an ostomy on my left side, and lost my appendix in the process. I was ready to give up — until Vicki convinced me to reconsider.

Two days after that, I was alive, but still miserable and in deep pain. I won't pretend I hadn't given more thought to giving up.

It was during that stretch — two days after the second emergency surgery, in a kind of half-sleep — that I was visited by my mother-in-law, Margaret. What made the visit remarkable was that she had been gone for two years, having passed in the early hours of Christmas morning, 2023.

Marge and I had always had a respectful relationship. I appreciated her motherly advice over the years, and we spoke regularly by phone. The one rocky patch had come during Christmas of 1988, when we stayed at her house in Irwin, Pennsylvania, during a family crisis. Vicki was twenty-three weeks pregnant with our second child on what was supposed to be a month-long trip back East before we returned home to San Diego. Instead, she gave birth at twenty-eight weeks to our miracle baby, Elijah — one pound, eight ounces, and fighting for his life from his very first day.

Somewhere in this stretch of recovery, the black-and-white heart-shaped pillow began to transform in my mind into a bright red mylar balloon, one I was squeezing gently in my hands. It made me happy to picture it that way — lighter, more joyful — a welcome relief between the groans and muffled cries of pain. It reminded me of the mood I fall into when I'm working on my cartoon characters, the Balloonatiks, which Vicki and I created together back in 1980, when she was still my girlfriend.

The original Balloonatiks began as a balloon delivery, singing telegram, and special-events company in San Diego. Over time, it grew into a cast of animated “ballooney-toony” characters, who eventually got their own Christmas special on Fox Kids — one that finished number one in its timeslot, beating Disney.

