

CHAPTER 1

How I Got Here: My Story

I remember the sound of breaking glass. I remember reaching down and wondering why my glasses were sitting in the street, outside my car. I remember pulling my cell phone out of the pocket of my hooded sweatshirt, hearing my husband on the other end of the line, and telling him that I thought I was in an accident and was not sure the car was drivable.

I remember hearing a policeman ask someone to note that I refused to go the hospital by ambulance—thinking that maybe that was a bad idea.

I am haunted by the piercing sound of that siren. I can see my husband pushing aside the curtain in the emergency room as I sat on a cold, metal table with my arm in a sling, grasping for something that felt real.

I remember the horrified look on my husband's face as he walked away from the computer after reading my summary of the accident—the one our lawyer asked me to write so he could fill in the time gaps in the police report after I'd had a hard time telling him the story. I wrote for a living, and he and my husband knew that words often flowed more freely and clearly when I wrote them down—especially things that felt raw.

I remember feeling like the tears were burning trails down my cheeks as I realized something was really wrong, something I could not easily change or understand—even when I tried hard to focus. My words made no sense. My sentences had no structure. I jumped from thought to thought without logic or continuity. There were huge holes in the timeline and no clear details within the sequence of events.



I remember telling my husband that it was the pain medicine messing with my head and that's why I could not communicate clearly. Yes, the pain medicine created this fog and soon it would lift. I just needed some rest.

And then my husband told me I had refused to take any pain medicine because I was afraid it would mess with my thoughts and make it difficult to think. I kept grabbing for something, anything that felt solid. But every time I reached out, I came up with nothing that made any sense.

Days passed. My shins were bruised and bleeding from running into things, and my hands, elbows, and knees were full of scrapes from falling. I couldn't judge where anything was. I didn't know the coffee table—the one that had been in the same spot in my living room for ten years—

was right in front of me until my shin slammed into it. Nor could I judge where the last stair was until I stepped for the landing only to find I was already there.

No balance. No depth perception. No sense of direction. No way to focus or hold a thought long enough to understand it. I was living my life stuck in a paper bag and working so hard to find the opening.

Just when I was pretty sure I was about to crawl out, it felt as though someone resealed the opening tightly and gave it a shake just for good measure.

I couldn't manage much and those things I tried to manage didn't go all that well. It took me four hours to go to the grocery store, weaving my way up and down the aisles, never really sure why I was there or what I needed. Even when I remembered to make and take a list, I followed it one item at a time no matter where each was located in the store, sometimes backtracking through the whole store five or six times. I knew I was at the grocery store, though, and that, itself meant progress.

I remember the undeniably defeated feeling that swept over me one day when I opened the freezer to put away five enchilada meals (they were five for \$4 that week) and found 15 enchilada meals neatly stacked on the shelf. I'd just plain forgotten the freezer was already full because they were "such a good deal" yesterday and the day before.



I had been working for a dynamic public relations agency at that time. My days were filled with meaningful work, responsibility, and pride. But my whole world shifted the day I left the parking lot after picking up grapefruit and a loaf of bread on my lunch hour.

A woman in a minivan with two children strapped in their car seats ran the red light, slammed into the side of my car, and pushed me into oncoming traffic. The multiple impacts caused what they call a coup-counter coup injury. In plain English, my brain played pinball inside my skull as my head pivoted back and forth on my brain stem, banging into my skull—first the left side, then the right side, with equal force.

I was told there wasn't a single shard of glass left in any pane of my car; the impact and my head took care of it all. I remember the piles of shattered tempered glass on my lap, at my feet, in the street, everywhere. I think that memory has stuck because it was the only way I could process the enormity of the accident.

From what we could put together, based on the time it took for the emergency vehicles to get there as listed on the police report and what happened at the time of my phone call just as they showed up, I lost, and never recovered, at least three-and-a-half minutes. That, in brain terms, is pretty significant. Some bits and pieces came back later on, but nothing about those first three-and-a-half-plus minutes.



Brain injuries are strange things and often don't act in predictable or even visible ways. Apparently, I held it together on the scene, so much so that no one even thought to check my brain. For weeks, not a soul understood the extent of my injuries. No one at the scene, at the emergency room, and certainly not at my local medical facility looked past the fact that I had walked away from an accident which turned my car into an hourglass, with only a big fat bump on the side of my head, lots of bruising on my arm and hip, and some really stiff muscles. No broken bones. No bleeding.

"Whiplash," they said. "Give it a few days and go to physical therapy. It will pass."



I knew my local doctor well. Several years before, we had worked together to start and fund a nonprofit, school-based health clinic. He knew I was smart and tough, so he didn't dig any deeper.

What was really strange to me at the time was that he seemed more frustrated about me not answering a question he asked than figuring out that I had no idea what he was saying. That memory, like most during that eighteen-month rebuilding period, is pretty fuzzy. In fact, I might be remembering it wrong because I often don't know if what I am telling is what I really remember, what I was told, or what I filled in from vague feelings.

I do remember, though, how things made me feel, especially when it came to people and their reactions to me. That doctor, that man who knew me, missed a huge clue to what was wrong with me and could have saved me months of confusion. I know how that makes me feel now.

In the beginning, I think the real problem was that I didn't know how to tell anyone that something was seriously wrong. I was struggling to figure out what was real and what wasn't, but I was also unable to find the right words to explain what I felt. So I simply did not talk.

"Depression," they said. "It will pass." I knew I was not depressed. I knew why I was quiet; I just didn't have the words to let anyone know. I was the one who held things together, the smart one, the one who was always there with a solution. Now I had pretty much nothing and knowing that mortified me.

I guess that was the first sign that my personality and my approach to life were going to have to change in very fundamental ways if I was going to survive, no less recover.

If only I had the brainpower to figure it out.

I remember the day our lawyer, in the middle of what I thought was a conversation about getting the insurance company to replace my car, looked at my husband and handed him a business card. "Ruth has a brain injury and it is going to be a long road back," he said. "This doctor can help."

Our lawyer set up the first appointment with a physical medicine doctor—the woman who walked with me, guided me, and helped me figure out that when I knocked the window out with my head, I lost pieces of *me*. I had to find a way to be *Okay* with that.

I know how lucky I am, and I am grateful every single day. My road to *Okay* has been lined with people whose encouragement did not waver, not once, ever. I've had so much support that many others in my position do not, starting, ending with and flanked by my husband and teenage son.

I had a supportive medical team that listened, reacted, and made changes based on what I said. For the most part, they looked beyond the fact that I seemed *normal*, and they really heard me when I told them I was not happy with how I was thinking, feeling, or getting through my day. They helped me figure out *compensatory strategies* to organize my life so that every moment of every day did not feel so overwhelming. They helped me understand that hitting my head had knocked every drop of cognitive reserve I'd built up over the years out of me.

At the end of the day—and sometimes in the middle—I hit the wall, usually at full speed, and just couldn't think one more thought. There was nothing to do but accept that as fact.



So I had to get to the point where I realized it was not only *Okay* to sit and stare at the wall but that that was my way of restoring. That staring at nothing and watching *The Fugitive* or *U.S. Marshalls* over and over and over actually helped me recover from the daily head-on collisions with the metaphorical wall. Yes, *The Fugitive* and *U.S. Marshalls*. They were familiar, and even though I didn't remember the plot or any particulars about the characters, it was comforting to recognize something and not have to figure out why or what to do with it. By about week six, Tommy Lee Jones was solidly part of my support team, and I appreciated that he kept showing up to help.

Looking back, I am not entirely sure why those two movies played so often, but I certainly needed them and am grateful that they did. I remember my husband and son, at different times, walking into the room and smiling when they saw I was glued to the chase through the cemetery or the rush through the swamp because they knew I was, at least for that moment, not struggling with anything. I really should send Tommy Lee Jones a thank-you note.

My doctor/savior sent me to another critical part of my recovery team—a compassionate neuropsychologist. He understood that I was focused like a laser beam on recovery and the road that would lead me out of the paper bag I had been living in for the past month. He got it that I was frustrated and driven enough to do the work needed to rebuild. So the testing, evaluating, planning, and daily brain work began.

In the grand scheme of things, I got to that point very quickly. It takes most people many months and sometimes years to get the right kind of help. Some never get adequate support, a fact

that breaks my heart. My team, one that empowered me, was in place, and I was insanely motivated to recover and rebuild.



I benefited greatly from therapies—cranial sacral therapy, acupuncture, behavioral optometry—but the real changes only happened when I pushed myself. My cognitive rehabilitation specialists gave me exercises such as reading out loud and endless paper-and-pencil challenges to spur activity in those areas of my brain that had shut down.

There is an interesting yet sobering little-known fact about the aftermath of a blow to the head. A brain injury caused by impact starts a progression of neuron death that *cascades*. One neuron dies, shutting off activity that feeds two more, so then they die. That forces a chain reaction which keeps going until it runs out of momentum or the pathways are reactivated. This cascading is not predictable nor is it preventable, primarily because the process starts and usually ends before anyone is aware that anything is happening at all.

You would think that kind of thing would show up on a scan. Because it occurs on the cellular level, though, the only way to figure out what happened and the path of cascading is to watch for changes in behavior, thinking process, emotional control, reaction to sensory information and people, and problem solving. Watch very closely. Right now, there is no readily available technology to detect cascading. Behavior change is the key, and that means someone needs to be paying attention.

My road to *Okay* was sprinkled with events—things that were significant enough for me to lock into my memory. The fact that I could remember very specific moments or pieces of conversations while the rest of my life just fell away as quickly as it happened frustrated me no end.

I discovered a funny thing about memory: The deeper the emotional value I gave a piece of information, the more likely I was to remember it. That strategy has a huge downside, though, especially for someone with nothing stored up in a reserve tank. The more I used this strategy, the quicker I depleted both my thinking and emotional power. I learned to do this very sparingly and replace it with other, less taxing (and less efficient) memory tools.

I was hypersensitive to sounds, smells, and often light. I got nervous when there were people behind me and was not at ease in public unless I was physically in a spot where no one could possibly come up behind me. Part of that was about controlling my environment. Because there was so little I could control, I fiercely hung on to those things that allowed me to feel in control.

I was uncomfortable talking to people—especially those who knew me before my accident. I looked so *normal* to the rest of the world, but the fact that nothing was normal and I had no idea of what normal was any more made me ill at ease outside my house. Those were tough things to work through.

My son was a junior in high school at the time of the accident. He was involved in sports, academic teams, and had just gotten his driver's license. I had always been involved in every community and school project and was a member of just about every steering/advisory committee. I was one of *those* people who did everything and was asked to be very public about it all. When I walked into a room, my reputation (however that was perceived) walked in with me.

What a conflict. After the accident, I frequently walked into events with a cell phone plastered to my ear pretending to be talking to someone until I found a safe spot in the bleachers, at the back of the room, or in the corner of the restaurant. Most of the time, there was no one on the other end; it was just a crutch to get me to safety without having to engage in any meaningful contact.

I lost some friends—those who just did not know how to deal with the changed me or who misinterpreted my discomfort living in the world as a change in attitude toward them. I got great support from others—a group that came over to play games with me and help me laugh at my daily quest to find my keys, my shoes, and my wallet. These were my trusted friends who made sure when we went out in public I was sitting in the corner of the restaurant or at the top of the bleachers with my back to the wall and that no one penetrated my safe zone and made me uncomfortable.

There are events that serve as pivot points in any process. Those I experienced in my foggy days were pivot points not just because they were changes in how I saw things, but also because they were big enough, emotionally connected enough, significant enough to stick with me.

For example, I remember sitting with my husband on the third floor of The Tattered Cover in Denver surrounded by books about brain injury. I picked one up and, in that moment, realized that someone got the fact that since the accident I was so different and life so foreign that sometimes I was not sure I could think my way through the muck – she lived it, she wrote about it, and I held the proof of that in my hand. The book confirmed that I was not the only one who forgot to put water in the pot when making noodles or turn the stove off after cooking. I wasn't alone in neglecting to sign the bottom of the form so our insurance wasn't cancelled or forgetting the order in which laundry needs to be done. It validated that when I knocked the glass out of the window with my head, something life altering happened below the surface where no one could see it, and I did not have the skill set to describe it. I could finally stop trying to find the right words because they were right there, in black and white.



Here's another pivot point: I was sitting with someone in a therapy office of some kind and we were talking about my frustration at not being able to move past something. The road to *Okay* with a brain injury is peppered with all kinds of plateaus, and it is frustrating when all the hard work doesn't lead to improvement. This therapist, not a part of my regular team, looked at me and in what I heard as a condescending tone said something like, "I don't know why you are so unhappy. You are smarter now than most people will ever be."

Excuse me? Did she ask me to settle for less and be happy about it?

Oh, I was angry and defiant and determined. I stormed out of her office and, without slowing down, walked directly and literally into the wall, face first, just outside the door.

More tears, more frustration, less light at the end of the tunnel because of yet another blow to my head. Plus, I was still insulted, still angry. I found my car in the spot I parked in every time I went to rehab, closed the door, and shook with anger over the indignity of it all.

On the way home, anger turned into an epiphany. I realized we all, myself included, thought it was okay to talk down to someone who, at that moment isn't firing on all cylinders. That is, after all, how we speak to *old people* and *sick people*—as though they are children and unable to fully understand. I also realized that the only way to change this was to do something, to move forward to a point where I could help somehow. I had to take some kind of action but first had to get past that wall just outside the door because throwing myself into it at full speed was not the answer.

That epiphany and the accompanying resolve made it through my brain fog and stuck. So when my rehabilitation specialist suggested I take a class to practice some new skills, I decided to get my master's degree and focus on helping return dignity to the healing process. Yes, I know she was telling me to take a cooking class or an art history class or something like that. But I needed to push further and harder if I was going to use my experience to help others.

Based on what I learned and what I did, I started on a path to rebuild my brain. Along the way, I learned some pretty key things.