

**WELCOME
TO THE
ZIPPER
CLUB**

Surviving
Heart Surgery
and Beyond

Bruce Ballister

SAMPLE CHAPTER



EMERALD LAKE
BOOKS

*Welcome to the Zipper Club:
Surviving Heart Surgery and Beyond*

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To my wife Christine and daughter Sarah
my support team who tended to my post-surgery
needs, researched how to solve problems, and were
attentive when I was very much in need of attention.

And to all the medical professionals,
doctors, nurses, EMS techs and support staff
who keep us alive and our hearts beating... Thank you.

Introduction

I MIGHT HAVE DIED THIS YEAR, or maybe the next. If I was lucky, perhaps not for a couple of years. The exact timing wasn't clear, but all the trend lines pointed to my imminent death from heart disease. I am fortunate—so extremely fortunate—that advice from an Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioner (ARNP) led me onto a path of testing and diagnoses that resulted in a triple bypass operation.

Having gone through that, I'm looking at ten to twenty more years I might not have otherwise enjoyed.

I had retired from full-time employment the year before and was just beginning to transition out of my 8-to-5 obligations into a retired frame of mind, asking myself what single thing I wanted to accomplish each day. It would have been a shame to die so young.

My parents did thirty-odd years ago, when preventive medicine was a new thing and heart surgery was rare. Then and now, a family history of heart disease has been the primary predicting factor for heart attacks.

Due to genetics, some of us are more likely than others to develop hardened or blocked arteries.

I was also more than 35 lbs overweight, which is another primary morbidity factor.

Generally, I felt pretty good—a little more prone to take a break between mowing the yard, a little more likely to lag behind my wife on a bike ride or hike—but I was active, did most of my own home improvements, and considered myself healthy. My cholesterol had been under control for over ten years on Pravastatin. Things were looking up, or so I thought.

But my heart was a beating time bomb that could have gone off at any moment. Several arteries were functioning at only about 20% of their capacity.

I hope this book finds you in seeming good health, before you've had the big one, or maybe after that first tickle scared the bejeezus out of you and sent you looking for more information on heart disease.

There are not a lot of first-person accounts out there. That's why I've written this short docudrama.

This is my story. I hope it informs yours.

Chapter I

November, the Saturday after Thanksgiving

I'M SHOUTING DOWN THE ATTIC STAIRS to the speech-swallowing void that is the garage. I'm hoping my wife is somewhere within hearing range because I need a little more specificity.

Did she want the boxes labeled “Mom’s Christmas China” or all of the boxes marked “Mom’s China?”

Either way, it means moving more boxes since they were stored expeditiously in the attic last spring when we moved in. Some of the boxes are on the heavy-ish side, and some are so well-packed in bubble wrap that they weigh very little for china boxes—but there are a lot of them.

I shout down again, “Which of the china boxes did you want?” Still no answer.

I turn and set down a box of indeterminate status. A bead of sweat falls from my nose, and I wipe at my

forehead one more time. Yes, it's late November, but Florida hasn't gotten the message, and it's hot up here.

Although there is some minimal decking in the attic storage area, I'm still conscious of stepping as close as possible to the trusses. I've gone through a garage ceiling before. The decking looks adequate to store fairly lightweight boxes and a family's miscellany, but is it up to my 235 lbs?

I find a Rubbermaid tub to sit on and pull the sweat rag from my neck to wipe my brow. Tired. I rub at the stiffness in my left shoulder; I might have pulled something. I shouldn't be this tired in the late morning, but then it's probably over 100°F up here. Listening toward the drop-down ladder for signs of my wife's movement, I realize I need a break, a tall glass of iced tea, and probably an argument to delay this seasonal unpacking event until the evening.

"Hon," I shout into the opening. "I'm coming down."

Rising, I feel a peculiar flash of woozy imbalance. I sit back down. *Wow, it's hotter than I thought.* I take a deep breath, which hurts. I press a palm against my chest. Why does it hurt to breathe deeply?

I try to stand again. My arm tingles—not a funny bone tingle, but a soreness that spreads down and outward from my armpit like the wake of a boat on calm water.

"Ow!" A sharp pain spreads across my chest, radiating outward. No, not radiating, just increasing. I'm suddenly aware of my now rank armpits in a rapid flush of new excretions. Sweat is rolling off my face.

My breathing has become labored. I'm huffing against a wall of muscle that doesn't seem to have the energy it needs. Why are my lungs rebelling?

The world turns sideways. Before I can stop my motion, I've rolled off the Rubbermaid tub and, from my new vantage point inches above the chipboard deck, I can see the outline of the escape route into the garage below. I roll onto my back to ease the pressure on my chest. Pressure? Where did that come from?

This is a heart attack!

I shout again, only no sound comes from the feeble puff of air I manage. Staring at the roof trusses above, I worm toward the opening. Correction: I try to worm toward the opening—to get closer to help, to be heard, to be saved.

My view of the trusses above narrows to a circle and dims. When my wife finds me twenty minutes later, it will be too late.

Not her fault. She had been sorting the decorations that had all known their places in our last house. Where should they be deployed in our new house? Our forever home?

When the EMS crew arrives a few gut-wrenching minutes later, they are fast and professional. They struggle to get my inert mass on a backboard down through the access stair, trying not to let their body language reveal anything. But the unspoken communication in their glances, their quiet reserve, tells my wife the worst.



Thankfully, this very likely scenario didn't happen. I am writing this while recovering from my triple bypass surgery. The remainder of this book will explain what actually did happen.

I'm not going to pull any punches here. This was all my fault. At least, all the factors that were not genetically related were my fault.

My mother died at sixty-seven, losing a long-term battle with angina.¹ My father, at the tender age of seventy-two, pulled to the side of the road and died of a heart attack.

I knew this. In fact, I had been compiling some of the family history and gathering information to rebuild a lost family tree. So, I knew the age at which they each had died of heart disease. And at sixty-eight, going on sixty-nine, I was in their sweet spot.

Good intentions coupled with a lack of follow-through resulted in the diagnoses of obesity and edema,² and possibly congestive heart failure.³ Each

1. Severe constricting pain or sensation of pressure in the chest, often radiating from the lower throat to a shoulder (usually left) and down the arm, resulting from inadequate circulation of blood to the middle layer of the heart, usually caused by coronary disease.

2. Edema is an accumulation of an excessive amount of watery fluid in cells or intercellular tissues, most often a limb.

3. A chronic progressive condition that affects the pumping power of heart muscles.

of these are morbidity factors pointing toward serious heart disease.

By the time of my appointment with my nurse practitioner, my profile—my physical profile—looked like those of a lot of the men around me: pear-shaped. My belly, like those of so many Americans of any age, has been described as a spare tire or, more specifically, a Dunlop—as in, my belly done lopped over my belt. I didn't take too much comfort in being in such a large cohort. I wore extra-large T-shirts at the beach, ostensibly to ward off sun damage, when actually I was ashamed of my gut. At the office or otherwise in public, I wore shirts outside of my belt to flatten my profile.

Despite knowing all the warning signs, possibly buying into a sense of immortality or a mindset of “it won't happen to me,” I usually managed to maintain a positive outlook on life. I worked toward and through retirement in a comfortable place with home and family. After all, my wife and I had just moved into our “forever” house. It had an attached apartment into which we had just installed my mother-in-law.

That was supposed to be the big new complication in our lives: caring and providing for a 96-year-old loved one with advancing memory loss. I'd replaced the single hollow core between our living spaces with a pair of solid core doors as sound proofing. At 96, my mom-in-law listens to television at decibel levels near to that of a fleet of semis. We were now contemplating the separation of the air handlers to allow her preferred

84°F from defeating our attempts at summertime temperatures of 74.

In contemplating what was to be my first full summer of retirement, I was looking forward to installing a shelf wall to house the next-size-up flat-screen TV, taking control of a yard that had been ignored for five years and, finally, creating a garage that was a true work space for a hobbyist and home manager. I had just purchased what might be my last vehicle, a top-of-the-line Honda Ridgeline—a truck worth waiting for. The kayaks in the yard were waiting for my wife's retirement a few more years down the road. Things were looking up.

Going in for a stress test was just another step in figuring out what congestive heart failure was all about.

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Praise for *Welcome to the Zipper Club*

BRUCE BALLISTER HAS WRITTEN an outstanding book. It chronicles one man's journey from finding out that he had a significant heart problem through the process of diagnosis, treatment and recovery. He does not withhold any details, but instead provides a very accurate and personal account of the entire cardiac surgery process, in an informative and entertaining way.

This book will be of great benefit to anyone who is facing heart surgery. Their family will also benefit from reading it and have a much greater understanding of what their loved one can expect to experience.

I highly recommend *Welcome to the Zipper Club* to any potential heart surgery patient and anyone else who wants a legitimate first-hand account of the cardiac surgery process.

— Jeffery S. Snyder, M.D., FACS
thoracic surgeon

I heartily endorse Bruce Ballister's book, *Welcome to the Zipper Club*. It is a breezy, succinct read of an increasingly common modern terror (heart disease) and what it's like to experience its devastation. His book also covers what it takes to address the disease medically. While the story may be uncomfortable, it is an accurate portrayal, and everyone should read it and then reflect upon how they live, work, eat, rest and play.

— Stephen Michael Hodges
heart surgery survivor

This book brought back a lot of memories. My situation was very similar to the author's in many ways. After my surgery, I was happy to wake up and went through the same things that he did. I enjoyed reading *Welcome to the Zipper Club* and wish it had been available before my operation. This story makes a clinical procedure very real.

— Don Lanham
heart surgery survivor

Welcome to the Zipper Club does a good job of capturing the range of emotions a patient goes through from initial diagnosis of coronary artery disease through the post-surgical rehab required after coronary bypass surgery. Honestly, I thought it was a humorous and thorough explanation of the process.

— Jeremy Fritzsche, FNP-BC
family nurse practitioner

Other Books by Bruce Ballister

Dreamland Diaries

Orion's Light

Room for Tomorrow