

by Philip Nolan

IT WAS the day before the funeral of Pope Francis in April, and the month was living up to its reputation, wet without warning. I got up, had a shower in my hotel room, and checked for the rain that had surprised me the previous evening as I walked up the Via Condotti to the Spanish Steps. I set out for the Vatican and the majesty of St Peter's Basilica, where I was to collect my accreditation for the solemn proceedings the next day.

I stopped to buy Gillette Mach 3 razors, and remember thinking with a smile that they were as expensive everywhere as I tucked them into my blue knapsack. Just then, the heavens opened but, after a quick scuttle, I found some scaffolding that offered cover, and ducked in out of the rain.

Almost immediately, though, I felt strange, in a way that to this day I find hard to describe. It was weird, as if I was outside my body looking in, as the world spun out of control.

I decided the best course of action was to take refuge in a nearby café and ride out the rain, and the dizziness, and the odd metallic taste in my mouth. 'Un americano e un croissant, per favore,' I asked in my hesitant Italian, but no sooner had I heard the whoosh of the machine than I blurted out, 'No, dottore, dottore'. I needed a doctor, now.

Behind the counter, someone clearly sprang into action and dialled 112. The server dashed out and, rubbing my shoulders, he beseeched me to stay awake, when all I wanted to do was slump against the wall and sleep.

Within minutes, an ambulance arrived and I was lifted onto a stretcher and carried out, before being sped through the streets to the Umberto I hospital. I didn't know it at the time, but what started out so regularly was the last normal day of my life.

In a second, under a nondescript scaffold a long way from home, I had a stroke.

I HAD got the call from the editor the previous Tuesday as I wandered around Woodie's in Bray, looking at bedding plants. Pope Francis had died on the Monday, the Easter bank holiday, and given that I had written his obituary, and worked at his election in the Vatican in 2013, I wasn't surprised. A few consultations on timings later with the office administrator, I had my airline ticket – Aer Lingus out Thursday, Ryanair back Sunday – and a hotel sorted.

I had been a national newspaper journalist for nearly 44 years, since I was 17, and you might think I was jaded by now. Far from it. I still get a thrill from the big story, from being a witness to history, and though I wasn't as nimble as I used to be, I was excited to be asked to go.

I arrived in Rome on the Thursday, and took the Leonardo Express train from the airport to Termini, the massive train station – among the busiest in Europe. I bought an extra battery pack there (above all else, a journalist worries about permanent connectivity!) I took a taxi to my hotel (everyone was gouging, I remember, because the city was full after the Pope's death), dumped my luggage, and found a nearby café bar where I had a panini, a pint of Peroni, and a Negroni, that Italian cocktail made of gin, red vermouth, Campari, and a slice of

The siren cleared all before it and we arrived at the huge Policlinico



ETERNAL CITY: Mourners on the eve of Pope Francis's funeral, left, and the Umberto I hospital

In Rome to cover the funeral of Pope Francis for the Mail, Philip Nolan suffered a massive stroke. The extraordinary speed of medics averted death but left him semi-paralysed... and so began a remarkable physical and mental battle to impose his will to live

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The last normal day of my life

orange. It was huge, much bigger than you'd get at home, freely poured and half the price. 'When in Rome...' – literally, I laughed.

I was in bed before 10, nine back home, which is very early for me. Since I was slated to write 2,000 words a day on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday before I flew back, and planned to be at St Peter's before the crack of dawn on Saturday for the funeral itself, I needed the rest.

All this was going through my head in the ambulance, a journey I later learned was a code red – the patient is very critical, maximum priority, and needs immediate access to treatment. Chillingly, one phrase stands out.

There is, it says, a danger of death.

Umberto I hospital, the largest in Italy by area and the third largest by number of beds, and were met by a team of nurses and a triage doctor. I was wheeled into a room where the polo shirt, a red one from Dunnes now covered in vomit, was cut off. Dignity went out the window as everything else was whipped off and I was completely naked as I was assessed.

Strokes, it turns out, are different. The less common haemorrhagic ones are in a way more serious, and involve a bleed on the brain. Mine was ischemic, which means no blood gets to part of the brain at all, leaving cells there to wither and die. The first couple of hours, as is the case with heart attack, are critical, and they need to know what they're dealing with. They found my phone in my pocket. 'Who should I call?' a nurse asked.

I heard a strange sound coming

from my mouth; already, I couldn't speak properly, but I could be understood. I told her to call my boss, who wasn't going to get the 2,000 words he expected, and to call my younger sister.

'Call Joyce,' I said with some urgency. 'Call Joyce...'

And with that, I slipped into unconsciousness.

IN THE background, a lot was going on. Joyce, understandably, was shocked. She didn't know what medication I was on – no one besides me did, in fairness – but she did understand the gravity of the situation. Our older sister, Annie, was on a golfing holiday in the United States, and our older brother, Mark, couldn't get to Rome straight away.

Joyce's office, and my own, were brilliant. Hers said she had to go

straight away, mine bought her airline ticket, and kept my hotel room free; just as well, since my entire family would take it in turns to stay there over the next two weeks.

As Joyce went home to pack, I was in theatre. I had woken again and was under local anaesthetic only. I recall being on tiered marble benching, but I think that bit is hallucinatory. Far from a Roman baths, a latter-day Caracalla, it is much more likely I was on bog-standard stainless steel.

I do remember one thing, though. The doctor, surgeon, whoever, had a very calming voice, though he repeated the same phrase over and over.

'Keep still,' he said. 'Keep still.' I won't bore you, because my medical notes go into detail about the size of needles and so forth, but I had a thrombectomy, which is the removal of the clot blocking blood flow to my brain. My right carotid

artery was completely blocked and attempts to put in a stent proved fruitless. On the left carotid artery, it was, thankfully, more successful.

A stent went in there all right, which is just as well, since they found 90 to 95 per cent stenosis. Effectively, that means it was almost completely blocked.

I had an angioplasty too on my basilar artery, which supplies blood to the brain; in other words, it was opened up by a tiny balloon

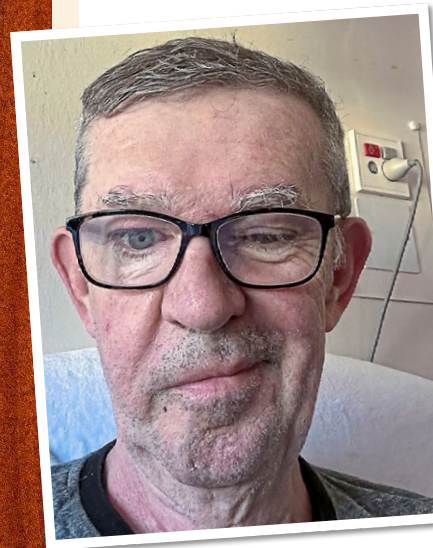
that went in on a wire through my groin, and I was taken to the high-dependency unit, what we used to call intensive care.

In the meantime, Joyce was flying to Rome, and I can only guess at the loneliness of that flight. She and I were the last two at home, laugh like drains at the same things and have always been close.

At 30,000 feet, without phone or wifi, she had no way of knowing how I was doing. On a Friday in

April, one that had started so normally, she had to face the unthinkable. When this plane lands, I could be told that Philip is dead.

WELL, I wasn't dead, but I wasn't in great shape. Joyce arrived too late to be allowed in to see me, and was told in fact she couldn't do so until Saturday evening. By then my niece Katy also flew in from



ON THE MEND: Philip sitting up in his hospital bed and, right, his dog Molly helps his recovery



Surrey, and both waited patiently outside. I was perplexed in the unit. How had two wall clocks stopped at exactly the same time? The truth dawned on me. Only one had, but double vision, thankfully temporary, is one of the most common stroke symptoms of all.

Come five o'clock, and after me wailing like a banshee for the staff to let Joyce in, she and Katy came to my bed and hugged me, although I was far from out of the woods.

In the first couple of days after a stroke, the swallowing mechanism can be impaired, so even water was thickened before I was allowed to drink it. More importantly, the threat of pneumonia is ever present. Death had been shown the door, but he was reluctant to go through it just yet.

ANNIE'S golfing holiday in the States had ended, and she flew onwards to Rome. My niece Katy, Annie's daughter, had gone home, but Joyce remained to overlap by a day. Pretty soon, my sisters learned at least one good thing: thanks to the speedy intervention of staff, there was no problem at all with my cognition, as I rattled off practical things, such as passwords for various online accounts, six-digit codes for banking apps and so on. I even read a novel.

There were issues though. A lump in my bed annoyed me and stopped me going to sleep, before I realised in shock it wasn't a lump at all. It was my right arm, the dominant one I use to sign, to type, to drive, even to wipe. Now, I had a catheter and nappies.

At 61, I was little more than a baby again because with two exceptions – a Romanian woman whose brother lived in Dublin, and Dr Mango, who showed up on rounds every day – no one spoke English either. For most of the time, it was difficult to be able even to ask to be put in a comfortable position in bed.

On the Wednesday, Joyce went home and Annie took her turn, staying for another week. I had been moved by that stage to a ward of four beds, with three patients.

One man was old, and his adult daughter smiled wanly at us when she visited; one day, he was gone. I

still don't know if he is alive or dead.

The other man played loud music late at night, and spoke loudly to himself. To amuse myself, I decided he was a priest.

On the second Wednesday, things started moving. Dr Mango arranged a transfer to a rehab hospital beside the Grande Raccordo Anulare, Rome's ring road which I have driven many times. Ironically, I had done so just months beforehand. Now I wasn't sure if I would ever drive again.

THAT was the Wednesday. More people spoke English, including the speech and language therapist, and I smiled when I saw a new Pope elected. In normal times, I would have gone home, done a week's work, and returned for the conclave.

Instead, things were in train. Mark was talking to the Mail's CEO, Paul Henderson, and they were liaising with the insurance company, which was liaising with Annie, and through them all, I was going home on Tuesday, May 13. In fact, and I'm not sure the doctor liked this, things moved a lot quicker than that.

On Saturday, May 10, I had been told to be ready for 10am. Instead, three hours later, an ambulance pulled in to the hospital grounds. Mark and I got in, and we were taken to Ciampino, Rome's second airport, where a small Lear jet awaited.

He went through all the formalities with passports while I was stretched to the tarmac, and then we both got on the plane for the three-hour flight.

With two pilots, a doctor and a nurse on board, we nosed onto the runway.

Lying fully flat across the backs of three sets of seats, I looked down as Rome receded from view. I couldn't walk. I couldn't stand. I was completely numb on the right side of my body.

I had a big, big hill to climb, one not on my radar a fortnight before.

One thing had gone right, though. I was going home. To Ireland anyway. My actual home? Well, that was going to take a little longer.

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NEXT WEEK: From Wexford General to rehab in Enniscorthy to home at last, and the reality of life after stroke