





THE BIG SLEEP

Six miles outside the village of Big Flat in the Ozark Mountains in Arkansas, a bridge runs over a pretty creek which carves its way through the mountains. The scene is serenity itself: the gently babbling water, statuesque white oak trees on the banks of the creek and the sheer mountain face rearing up on each side. But at one end of the bridge the railings are mangled and dented: it is the site of a crash 21 years ago that no one has bothered to repair. Here Terry Wallis, a part-time mechanic, was flung from a pick-up truck when it clipped the siding. Although he only needed three stitches to his head, his brain was so severely damaged that he fell into an instant coma which lasted for nearly two decades.

But two summers ago something extraordinary happened. Terry Wallis uttered his first word in 19 years. His mother Angilee describes the moment when she went to visit him at his nursing home. 'I walked into the lunchroom and Pam [one of Terry's carers] said, "Terry, who is that old woman?" and he said, "Mom." It just floored me. I looked at Terry: his eyes were big and he was grinning and it surprised him, too. We just kept hugging him and laughing and getting him to say it over and over.'

'It surprised me, too,' says Terry today in the family's small one-bedroom cottage. 'What surprised you, Terry?' asks Angilee, checking that he is really following our conversation. 'Me calling you Mom,' he replies. 'Cos that's what you are.'

Terry's 'reawakening', after so many years in a coma, is unprecedented. Of those patients who are unconscious for a year, only five per cent regain some sort of consciousness. After five years the chances drop to less than two per cent. The chances of even surviving, let alone speaking, beyond ten years are negligible.

'I know of no other case on record of someone recovering expressive language after 19 years,' says Dr Joe Giacino, associate director of neuropsychology at the JFK Johnson Center for Head Injuries, in Edison, New Jersey, who has examined Terry and collaborated in a forthcoming Channel 4 documentary about him. 'And what is most interesting about his case is that within a 72-hour period he went from not speaking at all to speaking fluently.'

From the day of the crash, when she was told her son had less than a five per cent chance of survival, Angilee refused to give up on Terry, visiting him for months in hospital and then, once his condition stabilised, twice a week at the Stone County Medical Center, in the town of Mountain View, where he lived for 18 years – a round trip of 50 miles. She would bring him home every other weekend and included him in everything; strapping Terry in the front seat of the car and taking him hunting, fishing, to family parties and chatting to him as though there were nothing wrong.

Since he started to speak again Terry has moved back home permanently. He is still severely disabled and his hospital bed dominates the family sitting-room. Because of his impaired motor skills, his eyes flit back and forth and his tongue lolls out of his mouth as he tries to speak. 'They told us he shouldn't even be physically able to talk,' grins his mother.

Angilee – an ebullient 56-year-old with a slight frame and an explosive laugh – looks after him around the clock, with the help of Amber, Terry's daughter. Amber, who was only six weeks old at the time of the crash, is now 20, the same age her father was when the accident took place.

Terry grew up in this house – which lies deep in the forest, isolated and surrounded by rusting cars – one of four siblings. 'I have two brothers and one sister,' he says slowly when I ask about his childhood. 'I'm the oldest, not the smartest or the dumbest, but the oldest.' He pauses and then adds, 'I was pretty much of a rebel. I did what I wanted to do.' Angilee laughs. 'That's just about right,' she says. I tell him I heard that he once drove a car backwards down the mountain. 'It had reverse, it didn't have a forward gear,' explains Terry.

Despite this recall of his life before the crash, Terry's short-term memory remains profoundly damaged and he still does not understand that 21 years have passed

Two decades after he fell into a coma – and against all the odds – Terry Wallis suddenly started to speak again. But, for him, it's still 1984. Helena de Bertodano meets a medical phenomenon

Terry Wallis with, from left, his father Jerry, his mother Angilee, his daughter Amber and her daughter Torie outside their house near Big Flat, Arkansas

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICK GILES

since the accident. Sometimes he thinks Amber is his estranged wife, Sandy, and that Torie, Amber's seven-month-old baby, is Amber herself. But the family has found ways to trigger his memory.

'Who's this?' asks Angilee, holding Torie up so Terry can see her.

'I don't know,' says Terry.

'Who do you think it might be?' coaxes Angilee.

'Her name sounds like Terry,' calls out his father Jerry, a bullish-looking farmer who is sitting near Terry's bed. Terry's face lights up.

'Torie!' he says.

'Right,' says Angilee, 'And who is Torie?'

'I don't know,' replies Terry. 'A slumbering baby.'

'She's your grandkid,' says Angilee.

'My grandkid,' replies Terry, bemused.

At the moment in which he hears a new piece of information, he is able to take it on board. For now he knows he has a grandchild, but in a few minutes he will have forgotten again. Most of the time he thinks that he is still 20, not 40, and that the year is 1984.

'Who is the President?' asks his mother.

'Ronald Reagan,' replies Terry.

'That was 20 years ago,' says his mother. 'Who is it now?'

Jerry tries to help him out. 'He's not a tree, he's a...'

'Bush!' cries Terry triumphantly.

Strangest of all, Terry thinks he can walk. 'I *can* walk,' he says when I mention this. 'And I can run.'

'Hmmm,' says Angilee. 'What's the first thing you've got to do to walk?'

'Get out of bed,' answers Terry, trying to draw his legs up as he says so and devoting every ounce of energy to the task. He collapses back into bed, defeated. 'I could get up if I wanted to,' he grumbles sulkily.

Terry knows something happened to him: 'I was away for a while.' And then? 'I just thought I'd go home'

One of the mysteries of the Terry Wallis case is whether or not he slipped from a coma into a persistent vegetative state (PVS). 'People who remain in a coma for more than one month are then judged to be in a vegetative state,' says Professor Rodger Llewellyn Wood, consultant neuropsychologist at the University of Wales, Swansea. 'Their eyes are usually open but they are not seeing anything. They may make random reflex movements with arms and legs but they do not make a psychologically meaningful response. The old parts of the brain are working, the vegetative parts, but they're not contacting the thinking centres of the brain. The light is on but nobody's in.'

This is the state that was ascribed to Terry Wallis by every doctor who met him. 'His condition was really static,' remembers Dr James Zini, director of the Stone County Medical Center. 'He would open his eyes, he would eat if fed, he would appear to have just blank stares most of the time.' But a study conducted several years ago by British scientists concluded that up to 43 per cent of PVS patients are misdiagnosed and are actually in a state of low arousal or minimal consciousness. Terry's mother is convinced he would recognise her when she walked into the room and noticed that he would react to certain words like 'shower'.

'Years ago he fell out of a chair in the shower and if anyone said anything about giving him a shower, he would throw a fit – even if you spelt the word "s-h-o-w-e-r",' says Angilee. 'The doctors always said it was an involuntary reaction but we knew better.'

Dr Zini agrees that in the last two years of his coma Terry's responses became more meaningful. 'We saw a change in him: he would tense his



body if he was uncomfortable and if a pretty nurse walked across the room, he would follow her with his eyes.'

Even if Terry was in a state of low arousal, doctors still have no idea why he suddenly regained full consciousness. Joy Hirsch, professor of psychology and functional neuroradiology at Columbia University, New York, has met Terry and scanned his brain. She remains baffled: 'It's the most amazing thing. Either there was a slow-moving neural rehabilitation process going on in his brain from the time of the injury up to when he could speak again. Or the other possibility – which the family denies – is that there was a significant catalytic event, like he fell out of bed.'

Another doctor, Caroline McCagg, medical director of the JFK Johnson Center For Head Injuries, believes that Angilee's unstinting devotion to Terry had much to do with his recovery. 'She was really quite heroic and so creative. She treated him with the assumption that he was in there. And her devotion and drive kept everyone else on their toes. They weren't allowed to pigeonhole him.'

Although she is not a churchgoer, Angilee puts her son's recovery down to the power of prayer. 'I do have the faith and I prayed every day,' she tells me. When I ask her how she kept going, she simply shrugs: 'There's no choice. It's your kid. You just try to do your best for them.'

For his part Terry rarely acknowledges the accident, but he knows that something happened to him. I ask him what he was doing while Amber was growing up. 'I was away for a while.' Where did he go? 'I don't know that.' What made him decide to come back again? 'I don't know... I just thought I'd go home.' Was it nice to see his family? 'It was nice to see my mom. It's always nice to see my mom.'

It is nearly Terry's lunchtime so Amber and Angilee manoeuvre him into his wheelchair. This is a difficult operation. To lift him out of bed they use a winch and a harness; Terry tries to co-operate as his mother tells him to straighten his legs, and passively lets them roll the harness under his body. A couple of minutes later he is dangling, foetus-like, in mid-air, before being lowered into the wheelchair. His head flops forward. 'Lift your head or it will go rolling off,' cautions Angilee. Terry lifts it up. Amber tucks a bib under his chin before spoon-feeding him a puréed stew followed by chocolate mousse.

One consequence of Terry's condition, common among people with head injuries, is a loss of propriety. He does not censor what he says. After lunch, when I ask him what he likes doing, his answer is explicit: 'F—ing.' Angilee, mortified, claps her hand over his mouth. Amber chides him: 'Daddy, you've got your mind in the gutter.'

Angilee begins straightening Terry's sheets and while she does this I ask Amber if she felt close to her father as she was growing up. 'The first prayer I can remember praying was for him to get better,' she says. 'Sometimes I'd feel real close to him because I always told him everything. He couldn't talk back and I didn't know if he'd remember or even

care. But at the same time, I didn't feel connected to him. I used to tell my friends, "My Daddy's never spanked me, he's never screamed at me." Of course I didn't let on that he wasn't a normal person.'

Terry, whose hearing is acute even though Amber is talking to me quietly on the other side of the room, interrupts. 'What do you mean, "let on that I wasn't normal"? Are you saying I'm not normal?'

'Oh Daddy, I'm sorry,' says Amber. 'I think you're normal.'

Later, Angilee shows me some pictures of Terry as a teenager. Although his face is puffier now, he is still recognisable. Tall and good-looking in the pictures, he has a jaunty grin and wears a black cowboy hat, which has a badge with the word **SEX** pinned to it. In another picture he has his arm slung nonchalantly around a girlfriend. A few months before the crash he married Sandy. Although she brought Amber to see him in the nursing home (and is still close to her daughter), she soon moved on with her life and has three children by another man – despite still being married to Terry. Recently, in a twist that has enraged the family, Terry's younger brother Perry moved into her home, less than a mile away. Terry is unaware of this turn of events.

The prognosis for further recovery is uncertain. Terry has regained limited movement; he can now extend a twisted hand to be shaken and can lift a spoon to his mouth. But the family long for Terry to be more independent. Although their health insurance covers basic medical costs, it will not pay for the physical and verbal therapy Terry

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desperately needs. And even with therapy, most doctors don't think he will ever walk again. 'It is unlikely that he is going to get enough motor recovery,' says Caroline McCagg. 'But if you'd asked me two years ago if he'd start talking, I would have said, "Very unlikely".'

Doctors hope Terry's case may throw light on other, similar patients. Scans show that much of his brain remains healthy although the frontal lobes and one of the temporal lobes are severely damaged. In a few months' time he will return to the JFK Johnson Center for Head Injuries for further analysis. 'I'm sure for many years that he had been following but had not been able to communicate,' says Dr McCagg. 'It's a very distressing thought. Are there other patients who are in this state where they really are quite conscious but can't communicate?'

Angilee does not think that Terry was uncomfortable or depressed during the years of silence. 'I've worried all these years,' says Angilee. 'I've always thought...' Amber takes over, 'Does he get lonely?' Angilee adds, 'Does he need to turn over? Has it been a long day for him?' They feel reassured now that they know he has no concept of time. 'I left for four days over Thanksgiving,' says Amber, 'and when I came back I said, "Did you miss me?" He said, "I didn't even know you were gone."'

I ask Angilee what advice she would give to other families with a relative in a similar state. 'Keep them involved. Don't give up.'

Terry's speech is slowing and he looks tired. Angilee and Amber slowly winch him back into bed. As he settles back on the pillows, clutching his toy monkey, Clyde, I ask him if he enjoys life. He looks me steadily in the eye and answers emphatically: 'I love to live.' ●

'BodyShock: The Man Who Slept for 19 Years' will be shown on Channel 4 this month. To donate to the Terry Wallis Trust Fund send a cheque made payable to the Terry Wallis Trust to First National Bank of Izard Co, 702 Sylamore Avenue, Mountain View, Arizona 72560, USA