

The Man Who Mends Broken Hearts

When Leslie Wilson suffered a stroke, the mother of three feared that her life was over. Then she met **TONY DAS**, a doctor whose revolutionary technique made her whole again.

THE SLOPES OF WINTER PARK, Colorado, received plenty of fresh powder this past January, and the Wilson family enjoyed a perfect family ski vacation. Now Bret and Leslie were preparing to make the long journey home to Rockwall, but the air was still filled with a sense of excitement. Their three children, Charlie, Molly, and Reese, had gotten up early to eat muffins and waffles at the Hampton Inn, where they had been staying. By 8 o'clock sharp that frosty Saturday morning, the Suburban was packed and ready for the drive back. Leslie is a stickler for keeping to schedules, and she hoped to pull into the long, narrow driveway of their Hill Country-style house by 10 p.m.

Leslie took her place in the Suburban's passenger's seat, and the kids piled in back, wrapped up in pillows and blankets brought from home. After Bret pulled onto Interstate 25 headed south toward New Mexico, Leslie turned and began reading aloud *These Happy Golden Years*, the last of the Little House on the Prairie series. Nellie Oleson was trying to break up the blossoming romance between Laura and her beau Almanzo, and everyone, including Bret, was listening intently to each word. They had been on the road for about 10 minutes.

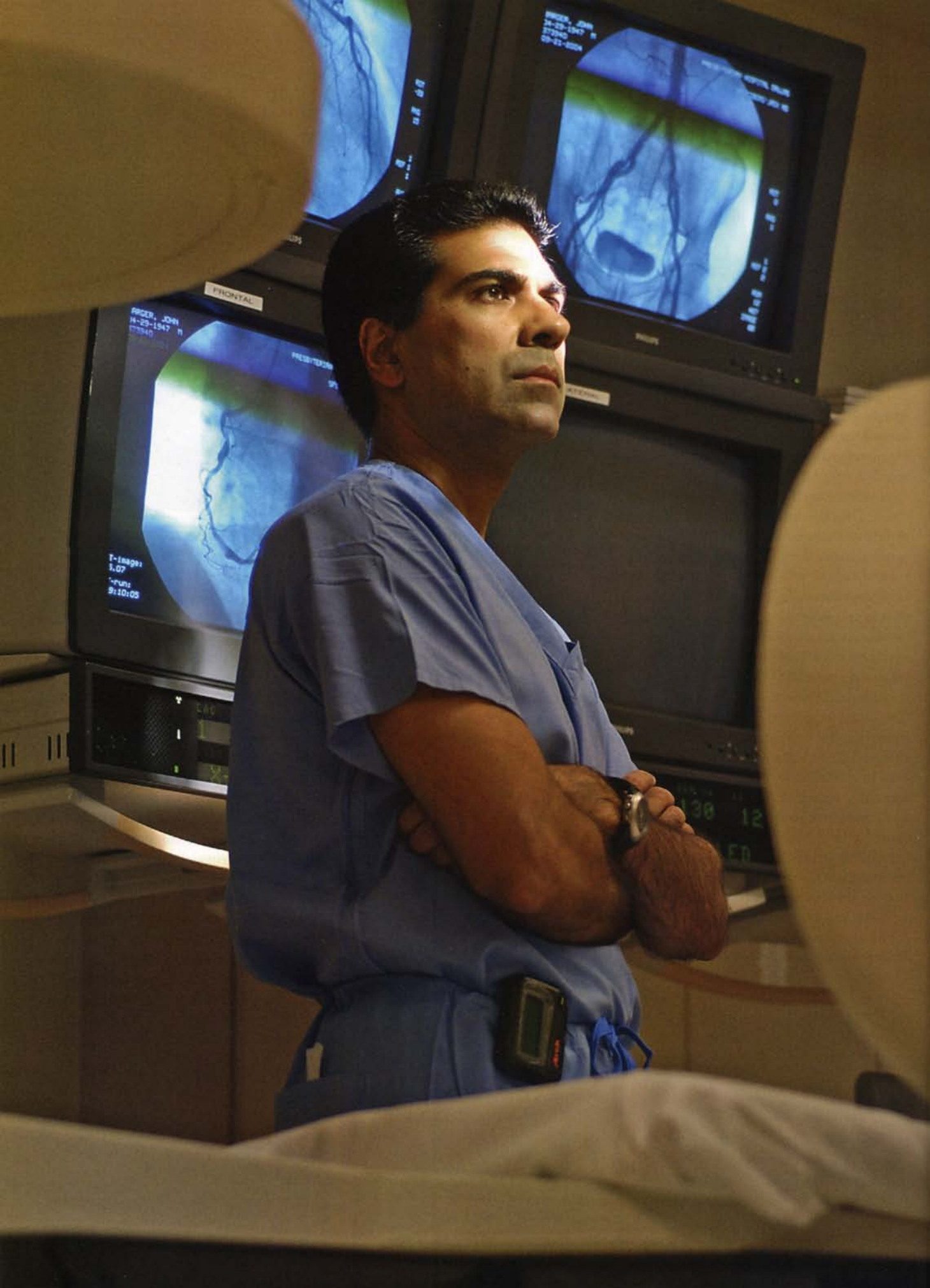
"Laura's head ached," Leslie read in an animated voice. "Her ears rang with [Nellie's] continuous babble, and she was furious. Almanzo seemed to be enjoying the drive. At least, he looked as though he were being amused."

Then, Leslie abruptly stopped. She began to feel disoriented. The words got bigger. Sections of the page started flying around and coming toward her. The 40-year-old, a freckled, fit blonde who normally walked about 3 miles a day around the outside of the auditorium of Lake Pointe Church in Rockwall, thought she was carsick. But she had never been carsick before.

Leslie put the book down without saying a word. The children were silent. "I'm like, 'Come on, let's go. Read,'" Bret said later. "I'm thinking, all right, we've got about a 14-hour drive today. We don't need to be pulling over and stopping."

Then he noticed that his wife was rubbing her right arm and leg. Bret pulled over, got out of the car, and opened Leslie's door. He figured that she had a cramp and needed to walk. "My arm feels funny. My leg feels funny," said Leslie, who had a worried look on her face. Her head dropped. Not knowing what to do, Bret started rubbing his wife's arm. Then she turned her head toward him. "Oh, my gosh, I can't feel you rubbing my arm," she said.

Bret buckled up his wife, got back in, whipped the car



around, and sped north. He followed the blue "H" signs along the highway, and by 8:30, the Wilsons had pulled into the tiny, two-story St. Mary-Corwin Hospital in Pueblo. Her world was like a Salvador Dalí painting. Everything—her doctor's face, the walls around her, her family—appeared to be melting. She still couldn't feel her right arm or leg.

Doctors gave her aspirin to thin her blood, then Heparin, another blood thinner, through an IV. She started to feel better. But an MRI showed a white spot the size of a quarter on the left side of her brain. It confirmed the worst: Leslie had had a stroke.

The little hospital that didn't look like a hospital was, in fact, the best place for Leslie to be. It was the Certified Stroke Center for that region of Colorado. She stayed overnight, and the next day the cardiologist did a bubble study, a procedure done in conjunction with an echocardiogram that uses ultrasound to let a doctor see how the two sides of the heart communicate. The test showed that Leslie, like 40 percent of the people under 60 who have strokes, had a hole in her atrial septum, the wall that separates the top two chambers of the heart. And at 10 millimeters, it was a big hole.

By sneaking through that hole, the body's normal clots can be

he arrives at work before the sun rises to do his rounds. He's a runner and is known for doing everything fast. He sometimes talks so rapidly that it seems like he is speaking his own language. He multitasks. He loves his Palm. His beeper goes off constantly.

Das was born in New Delhi, India, the younger of two boys, and before he was 2 years old, his parents, Lalita and Lachhman Das, moved to the United States. His father, an engineer, moved the family all over the country: San Francisco; Queens, New York; and Houston. Finally, by the time Tony was in the seventh grade, his family had settled down in Clearlake, Texas, after his father took a position at NASA. To make extra money to send their two boys to college, his parents owned a gas station, then a travel agency, which his mother oversaw for years.

Das graduated 11th in his class at Clearlake High School in 1982, with a 4.3 grade point average, but he had decided to become a doctor long before. After medical school at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, he was accepted to do his residency at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. While at Mass General, Das met the famous cardiologist Roman DeSanctis, a pioneer in identifying aortic disease; Valentin Fuster, who, like DeSanctis, was an intuitive

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deadly. In Leslie's case, a clot traveled to her brain and got stuck in a narrow section of the artery that supplied blood to the left side, causing a stroke.

Leslie checked out of the hospital on Wednesday, with a lifelong prescription for Coumadin, a blood thinner. She'd have to be monitored monthly. She couldn't eat too many leafy green vegetables, which would increase her vitamin K levels, the same compound that Coumadin was made from. A cut could cause her to bleed out. As an active mother and aspiring writer, with a passion for speaking to groups about parenting, Leslie worried that her old life was over and that her future was in danger. She had a 10 percent chance of suffering another stroke within the year.

It doesn't seem quite right to call it a stroke of luck, but because Leslie had survived an attack that could have killed her, she learned that she was eligible for a risky new procedure to patch the hole in her heart. It was a chance for her life to return to normal. Luckier still, one of the best doctors in the world who perform the operation works at Presbyterian Hospital of Dallas.

It seems natural that Dr. Tony Das, an interventional cardiologist who specializes in opening up arteries and veins and using tiny cameras, stents, and other heart-fixing devices, would be tall and wiry himself. He is 5 feet 10 and just 40 years old, though he looks much taller—and younger—in his baby blue scrubs and black clogs. He is slender and no doubt runs on adrenaline and lattes, as

clinician; and Igor Palacios, who was doing innovative work with catheters. All three influenced Das to go into the specialized field of interventional cardiology. Das liked the challenge of working with wires and catheters smaller than knitting yarn. "It was clear to me that all of these big surgical operations were going to turn into catheter procedures," Das says. "And that's exactly what happened. Almost every single procedure that I saw being done surgically is now done with a catheter."

In Leslie's case, other than taking blood thinners for the rest of her life, the only option was the highly risky open-heart surgery, in which the two pieces of her septum would be joined together with stitches. Until she met Das. "It was not a subtle stroke," he said later of Leslie's experience. "She could have had permanent loss of speech, inability to walk, and paralysis on one side." Das thought he could help her.

For the last year, Das had been performing a new procedure to fix the problem that Leslie has. The procedure is called a PFO, or patent foramen ovale. Although the technology has been used in Europe since 1996, it had been performed in the United States for only about four years. Das is one of only a handful of cardiologists who use this procedure in Texas; he is considered one of the best in his field. Instead of cracking open her chest, as a heart surgeon would, Das proposed putting a catheter up her right groin, along with a wire and a camera, and placing a 23-millimeter square

umbrella on each side of the hole in her septum, which her heart would cover with tissue within six months. He likes to call it "closed-heart surgery." As for Leslie, she wasn't thrilled about surgery, but she worried about having another stroke. She put her faith in Das and took the risk. He scheduled the procedure for Tuesday, February 28, less than two months after her episode.

Covered in nothing more than a blue hospital sheet with two holes the size of saucers on both of her upper thighs, Leslie was rolled into Cath Lab No. 4, a dimly lit beige room on the first floor of Presbyterian Hospital. Das slid an 18-gauge needle, 4 inches long, into her femoral vein at her right hip, near the groin. Leslie was conscious; the procedure was done with local anesthesia. It would take only a half-hour. But in the miniature world that Das was about to enter, every second counted. There could be no mistakes.

Wearing Latex gloves, Das guided a .035-inch wire, about the size of the tip of a ballpoint pen, into her vein, and carefully pushed it up to the right chamber of her heart. He led the wire through the hole in her septum and over to the top left chamber. The guide wire would act as a highway for the rest. Next came a fat, black catheter, as large as a pencil, with a tiny camera on the tip. As Das did this, the lower left television monitor—one of four—came alive and showed a black-and-white video of the procedure. A clear plastic tube—it was actually a balloon to measure the hole again—was inserted next. Dye was injected into the balloon, and it filled on each side of the hole in Leslie's heart. It looked like a cartoon dog bone, pinched in the middle. The original measurement was correct. Das carefully deflated and removed the balloon.

Then he inserted a long, blue catheter, the thickness of uncooked spaghetti, with two tiny unopened umbrellas stuffed inside. Das stood on Leslie's right. He looked past her body, directly into the monitor, to see what he was manipulating inside of her vein, and now deep into the chambers of her heart. It was like a high-stakes video game. If pushed too fast or the wrong way, the catheter could tear the vein. One of the tiny umbrellas could open prematurely and get stuck. An air bubble could be deadly. A clot could form, and she could have another stroke. A computer screen near the monitors showed skinny zigzags of purple, yellow, and red, illustrating the blood pressure inside of Leslie's heart. All appeared to be normal.

Das pulled the umbrella catheter back and released one umbrella over the left side of the hole. Then the right. The umbrella catheter was pulled from her femoral vein. So was the camera catheter and the guide wire. Das' work had been a success. Leslie went home the next day.

Today, Leslie is as active as ever. She writes a column for the *Rowlett-Lakeshore Times* and is working on three books. She's attending speaking engagements again. She's getting her miles in at the church, too. She's still dealing with some residual short-term memory loss caused by the stroke, but her memory, in time, will return. In the meantime, she organizes her day—and her family's life—on a Palm. Chances are, she'll never have another stroke.

"This is the way that it's supposed to be," she said one afternoon as she waited for her kids to get home from school. "It worked. It's a cure." **D**