That sure explains a lot, Mom,” my son quipped when he heard the news. MS. Who’d’ve thunk it?

After five years of stumbling, wobbling, tripping, shaking, dropping, spilling, leaking, oozing, spinning, fatiguing, salivating (?), forgetting, and just in general feeling lost, physically and mentally ... But all the while I had it figured out! There was no convincing me that I needed the advice of a physician.

The stumbling/wobbling/balance problems? They had to stem from the many ear infections I had as a pre-adolescent. The vertigo? It was obviously a side-effect of the two antidepressants I had been taking for what seemed to be forever.

And, of course, the fatigue was due to depression. And the depression? I had spent altogether too much time watching the events of September 11 unfold on TV. I watched those planes crash fast, I watched them crash slow. I watched them crash forward and backward. I watched every type of video from every vantage point in our home. It broke my heart as I know it did the hearts of millions of Americans. Depression seemed to be the “politically correct” response of the time. But mine continued on and on.
Next, peri-menopause hit me in a timely fashion. For those of you who aren’t familiar with this phenomenon, it is a hormonally induced state in which one feels somehow stuck in time until the real menopause sets in. It is reserved especially for women, for the sole purpose of reminding us that we are aging ... as if we need that. I think getting older is just about the only thing I haven’t forgotten at least once over the past couple of years. The peri-menopause filled the gap in my symptom filing system by providing the answer for nearly everything. Forgetting, losing things, and the general lost feelings all had to be a part of this mysterious time of life.

With rationalizations like these, who needs a doctor?

Then, three years ago, life began to get a little more interesting. I would be driving on streets I had traveled dozens of times and get the eerie feeling that I was a visitor in a foreign land. I would recognize nothing. Not a house, not a crossroad, nothing. It was an inconvenience, at most. There was no pain and there always seemed to be someone nearby to help me find myself, so these odd episodes were easy for me to back-burner. They happened at regular intervals for about six months.

Next I developed weakness and numbness in my left leg. I realized this when I stepped up the one step into my home and fell flat on my face. I had just test-driven a hot little sports car. Maybe it was a little too little for my not-so-little frame.
So I went to my chiropractor who adjusted my spine twice a week for a few months, and the strength in my legs returned.

Brain blinks. You won’t find them listed on the medical Web sites. It’s my terminology for my experience. For two days I had vertigo accompanied by an intermittent mental buzz when my consciousness “blinked.” Not my eyes, my consciousness. No pain, but quite disconcerting. But it only happened during those two days—so off to the back burner.

Somewhere along then I began getting up three to six times a night to urinate. That was a nuisance. But, after all, I am getting older. And since I have the ability to fall right back to sleep—back burner.

Each time I got up in the night, as I would push my body upright, the arm doing the pushing would shake violently. Again, there was no pain. As a matter of fact, it seemed almost humorous. After a year, these episodes subsided. Back burner.

I noticed that I would see double whenever I exerted myself in temperature extremes. One of my husband is cute. Two is interesting, but definitely not necessary. Hmmm?

As summer came, I noticed that my lower extremities would go stiff as a board for five to ten seconds as I tried to get out of bed in the morning. Then everything would slowly loosen and go back to normal.

Soon thereafter I developed the uncanny inability to complete any one task in a given eight-hour period. I couldn’t focus. I had to say things out loud to avoid forgetting (and sometimes that didn’t work). I was easily confused and would mentally circle for an hour or more before I found myself.

One morning, my stove finally ran out of back burners. I awakened to a voice in my head screaming, “You’ve had a stroke!”

I started with my family doctor. He ordered an MRI of my lower spine that proved “unremarkable.” That was good. Then he ordered an MRI of my brain. By this time, I had decided that the only thing that could be responsible was stroke. In fact, I believe I corrected him when he read me, “scarring consistent with MS,” from the radiologist’s report. “You mean stroke?” No, he meant MS.

It’s only been a short while since my official diagnosis. I have had two more MRIs, a visual evoked potentials test, plus more blood-testing, a lumbar puncture, and four different EMGs (electro-myograms), and there you have it! Or, I should say, “There I have it!” It’s MS.

Do I sound like anyone you know?

Most likely not, because MS is never the same for any two people. That is probably one reason why it can be so hard to diagnose. That, and people like me who think they have it all figured out.

Kathy Dolan lives in the hills of North Carolina with her husband Mike and Q-tip, a Bichon Frise. After diagnosis, she became well known on certain message boards as “Bobette.”