

The Serendipitous Dance between Life and Death

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Transplantation is personal for me. As a surgical resident, I still feel the pain in my hands from packing ice around life-saving organs in the middle of the night. As a daughter, I still see my father's joyful tears when the hospital called to say, "We have a liver for you."

My father had been unwell since before I was born, but it wasn't until our family trip to Disney World — when he suddenly began vomiting copious amounts of blood — that I understood the severity of his illness. That's when I first learned about variceal bleeds. The trip, meant as a gift for my 12th birthday, instead marked the beginning of a decade of heartache.

Over the years, we gradually became accustomed to my father's disoriented, glassy stares during episodes of encephalopathy and to sleepless nights spent in emergency departments. I was just a teenager then, unaware of the complexities surrounding transplantation. All I knew was that this was our last hope to keep my father with us a little longer.

I had cried at countless scenes of father-daughter dances in movies, preemptively mourning memories I feared we would never make. But I kept those tears to myself, determined to be the family's cheerful youngest child. Optimism was a necessity.

That night after receiving the call, we drove a few hours to the hospital. The car was filled with a loud silence, charged with excitement and, primarily, fear. True to himself, my father was dancing outside the hospital just a week after his transplantation, drains

and central lines be damned. It felt like a miracle. But I would soon learn that miracles can be short-lived.

I can't remember the doctor's exact words, but the gravity of her message was unmistakable: the graft was slowly failing, and my father would need to be listed again. The following months were painfully slow. His laughter faded, replaced by a frailty that made him unrecognizable. He became a shadow of himself, and a collection of bones draped by a thin layer of skin that a soft wind could have blown away. My mother drove my brother and me countless times to visit him in another city, where he was hospitalized for most of the subsequent year. We managed homework and school projects in waiting rooms or at his bedside, until one day another liver became available.

The second transplant was a success. This time, though, our hope was cautious and our joy fragile. We held our breath until he took his first step outside the hospital as a healthy man. My father was not just surviving anymore — he was living.

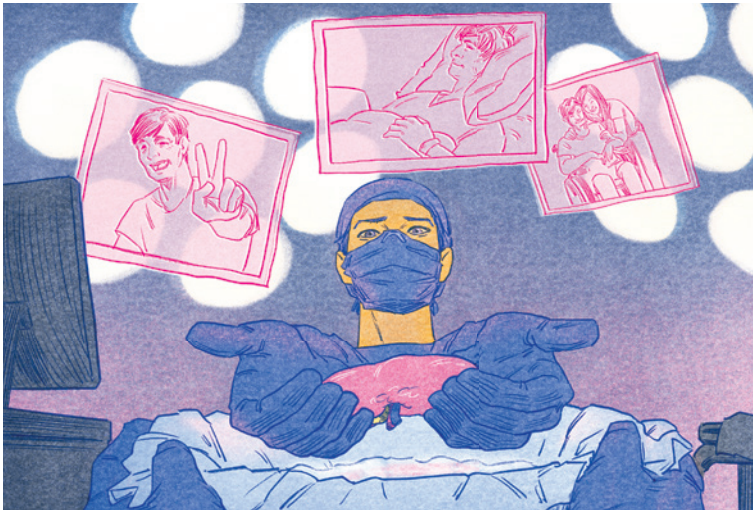
Now, as a surgical resident, I have the privilege of caring for transplant patients and participating in organ retrievals near and far. At those retrievals, before starting the surgery, everybody in the room pauses for a moment to honor the donor. In those moments, I close my eyes, bow my head, and whisper my thanks — not only to the donor before me but also to the donors who saved my father.

Before the minute of silence, we sometimes hear a few stories

about the donor. These glimpses of their lives bring much-needed warmth to the otherwise bare and sterile room. A transplant coordinator once shared that the donor was without a doubt "the biggest Maple Leafs fan ever." As a Quebecer and lifelong fan of *les Canadiens de Montréal*, I couldn't help but feel a connection, despite our teams' historic rivalry. We both probably grew up screaming at the television when our teams scored and trading hockey cards during recess. But before I could linger on these thoughts, the timer rang.

This organ retrieval was in many ways like the previous ones. We followed a set of steps and respected a certain timeline. Our hands ached from the ice, the anesthesiologist announced a flat-lined heart, and the coldness of the donor's body marked the finality of loss. As I looked at the donor before us, I kept thinking: he had been someone's child, parent, or friend. And in this case, a Leafs fan. In the past, we might have cheered for different teams, but in this moment, we were playing for the same one.

A year after my father's second liver transplant, I began medical school, and for the first time in my life, I didn't worry about him. That period didn't last long, since he became sick again during my second year. In an unforeseen development, he required another transplant, this time a kidney. Whereas I had been naive and relatively uninformed when he had his earlier transplantations, I now had the maturity and medical knowledge to truly understand the gravity of his situation. Every-



thing I was learning in school hinted that the odds of him surviving were grim.

I approached my father repeatedly to try to convince him to accept one of my kidneys. “I am young, athletic, and as healthy as one can be. I can live without one of my kidneys but not without a father,” I said, my voice breaking. But my resolve faltered each time he firmly refused, unwilling to risk my life, and chose to remain on dialysis instead.

A few minutes after we had finished the retrieval from the “biggest Leafs fan ever,” I discovered that my phone was flooded with missed calls from my mother. When I finally connected with her, fearing bad news, she informed me that my father had been called in for a kidney trans-

plant. It dawned on me: I had just retrieved a kidney — and my parents were now rushing to the very hospital where it was headed... Could it be the one for him? Could the kidney I had just held in my hands be going into my father’s body? Maybe, in a strange twist of fate, I was in fact giving him a kidney — just not my own.

I never tried to confirm whether he received that particular kidney, somehow afraid that certainty might shatter the delicate magic of it all. My overwhelming joy in the moment was tempered by the sorrow of seeing the donor’s lifeless body on the table. I couldn’t escape the thought that our family’s happiest day was another family’s darkest. The “biggest Leafs fan ever” and my father, as different as they might

have been, may have had an unexpectedly shared destiny. The donor adored hockey, while my father loved dancing; one worked with their hands, the other despised manual labor. Yet they shared a perhaps-unspoken longing: they wanted their stories to continue, in life or in legacy.

Transplantation, and our family’s journey with it, is a story of serendipity, of lives intertwined in ways both seen and unseen. The selflessness of those three donors and their families gave us the ultimate gift of time. Time to share a father–daughter dance at prom, like in the movies that once made me cry, and soon, time to dance at my wedding — a dream I had never dared to dream. These moments have shaped me, not only as a daughter but as a surgeon. Whether or not I ultimately become a transplant surgeon, I will be forever humbled by this serendipitous dance between loss and renewal, death and life.

Disclosure forms provided by the author are available at NEJM.org.

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