

I Carry Your Heart with Me

By Margaux Danby

They were strangers. I didn't know their names or the sounds of their voices, but within hours of our meeting, they shocked me into a new understanding.

When I first saw him, he was lying on a table, all his organs exposed. My father's deft hands carefully made the final cuts and tenderly removed the heart from his chest. I stood just above his head, staring down at his soft pink lungs and endless intestine.

Late on a Wednesday in mid-July, my dad, a cardiothoracic surgeon, had called and asked if I wanted to shadow him on a transplant: "After someone is pronounced brain dead," Dad explained, preparing me for what I was about to behold, "the heart can still beat on, making the body believe, even if just for a short time, that it is still alive." Hours later, I was standing in the operating room, pondering the phenomenon of simultaneously living and dying.

The boy on the operating table was eighteen years old, the same age I was at the time. He had just graduated from high school, top of his class. His parents had beamed with pride at the sight of him in cap and gown. He had friends and memories and a favorite song. He had laughed and smiled and loved. And on a Wednesday in mid-July, he had put a bullet in his head and taken his own life.

These thoughts lingered with me as I watched the organ procurement process, unsettled by my proximity to his bandaged head. While my brain was stimulated by the spectacle before my eyes, my heart ached over the tragedy of its causation. Looking at the organ that had once pumped life through his veins, I tried to imagine a scenario in which his life had become so unbearable that he was able to pull the trigger.

Along with the cooler marked 'Human Organ for Transplant,' I carried the permanence of death to the recipient's hospital. When I first saw her, another surgeon had removed her heart, which was still beating in a basin on the sterilized instrument table. I had to force my attention away from it as I turned to watch the process of suturing the healthy heart into her chest.

The recipient was fifty-seven years old. She had just become a grandmother. Her husband had squeezed her hand and kissed her before surgery. She had friends and memories and a favorite song. She laughed and smiled and loved. And early on a Thursday in mid-July, she received the greatest gift imaginable: her own life in the heart of a stranger.

"Off bypass," Dad said. The perfusionist executed the order, the donor heart beating on its own as its predecessor slowed to a stop in the basin nearby. I imagined the joy she would feel when she awoke to discover she had a healthy heart to pump life through her veins. I didn't have to imagine; I felt the joy in my own pulse, pumping life through my veins.

Wonderful and terrible are words that best describe the human condition; my encounter with these two people exemplified both. I hadn't realized how oblivious I was until death was lying on the table in front of me. I was numb, but in a matter of hours, I found my perspective on the value of life jolted into a heightened state of awareness and understanding.

Now, I notice wonderful moments in terrible days: a laugh with a friend, an act of kindness, a call from home. And I realize wonderful days are usually disguised as average ones: sunshine in the winter, my favorite song on the radio, the rhythm of my beating heart.

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