

## **The Resurrectionist**

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First published in *Tin House*. Reprinted in *Best American essays 2000* (Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

Here is what happened:

I was cut apart.

The liver of a dead person was placed inside me so I might live again.

This took twelve hours and thirty-three units of blood.

But who was I afterward?

I could still recall the body I'd had when I was ten, the body in which I carried what I called "myself," walking along the C & O Railroad tracks or crossing the divided highway that separated our house from the woods; a heavy, modest body, dressed in husky-size jeans from Monkey Ward and a brown corduroy car coat that my mother chose, identical to those my uncles wore back in the mining towns they lived in. I could recall the body I'd had, nervous and tentative, when I'd first made love at seventeen. But these bodies were gone, as was the body into which I'd been born; these bodies I'd called "mine" without hesitation, intact and separate and entire.

Six months after my liver transplant I flew to Nashville to visit my mother in the nursing home. She sat in a blue housecoat at a folding car table, spooning a Dixie Cup of ice cream to her mouth. "Marie, your son's here," the nurse kept telling her. But my mother wouldn't look up except to look through me. She'd begun her own metamorphosis

since the last time I'd seen her, withdrawing into the form of a bony old woman who only sometimes recognized my brother or me.

"Is this your son?" the nurse asked, a grade school teacher prompting a forgetful pupil. My mother shook her head—*no, no*.

At night I sat at her bedside. "I'm here," I whispered as she slept. "I made it through. I'm here."

I didn't know if she could hear me. For a while I tried to work on the letter of gratitude I was planning to send to the strangers the transplant coordinator referred to as my "donor family," though I knew nothing about them or their loved one whose liver I'd received. I couldn't figure what to write to them that seemed neither too rehearsed nor too intimate, though I planned to repeat some remarks I'd heard in a support group meeting, thanking them for "the gift of life" and assuring them that the highest form of giving occurred, as theirs had, when neither the donor nor the recipient was known to one another.

For a moment my mother shifted beneath her blanket, murmuring in her sleep. I put down the pencil and closed my eyes. *In just a second*, I thought, *she'll say my name*.

"Mother," I said, though she said nothing further. I wanted us back as we had been, restored to what I felt were our real and original bodies, my mother smoking a cigarette on the stoop of our old house in Silver Spring and me beside her with a bottle of Pepsi in my hand, though I knew if my mother were able to ask me what had happened to the liver I was born with—the one she'd given me, I sometimes imagined, for it had once been a part of her as well as me—I could have told her only what the surgeon had said: "It was sent to pathology and then burned."

I flew home the next morning. On the plane I noticed the man beside me staring at me one by one I swallowed the half-dozen immunosuppressants that kept my body from rejecting the organ as foreign, and for a moment I felt a sudden strangeness, even to myself, as if I were a distinct biological phenomenon, constructed in a manner different from that of my fellow passengers hurtling through space in a pressurized cabin, drinking coffee and reading their magazines.

“I’m a liver transplant recipient,” I told my seatmate.

He wanted to know if my new liver was male or female or white or black.

I said I didn’t know; he said that if it were him he’d sure want to find out.

But I didn’t, or at least I didn’t think so, and I was relieved when the plane began its descent. Somewhere over the Alleghenies my seatmate had asked if I’d heard about a man with AIDS who’d gotten a liver from a baboon.

No, I hadn’t.

But in my transplant support group I had heard of recipients who’d waived their rights to anonymity to arrange what they sometimes called “reunions,” inviting their donor families over for *Yahrzeit* rituals and barbecues, and I’d heard of donor families who’d secured the names of recipients, showing up unannounced on their doorsteps, bearing bouquets of mixed flowers and brightly colored Mylar balloons.

“Maybe it’s kind of like discovering you’re adopted or finding your birth mother,” one woman said, confiding to our support group her anxious plans for meeting the mother of the teenage boy whose lungs she had received.

No one dared the obvious: the mother was a mother of a child who was dead, even

if his lungs were still drawing breath on earth.

Sometimes I too fantasized that I had an alternate family that was eager to receive me as flesh and blood, especially as my mother retreated farther and farther into a world from which I was excluded, as when she imagined that I was her dead brother and called me by his name. But my fantasies of a happy meeting with a donor family were vague and unspecific, even less concrete than the fantasies I'd concocted as a child, waiting for George Maharis from *Route 66* to pull up to the house in his Corvette, ready to speed me away to what I felt sure was my real future.

My fantasies of a painful meeting, however, were explicit and detailed with dread. What would I say if my donor family asked to place their hands on my belly so they could feel the liver softly pulsing within?

How could I refuse them? I owed these people everything. I was alive because of a decision they'd made while standing in the bright fluorescence of a hospital corridor. Wasn't the liver more theirs than mine?

I imagined myself hesitating when they reached to touch me, and I imagined them demanding of me with what I would have agreed was a rightful anger, "Who do you think you are?"

We are made of the dust of old stars, our grade school teacher told us; we are made of leaves and sediment and the mulch of life. But I was made also of something rescued from the graveyard, I realized after the transplant, and if I was now among the resurrected,

I was also the resurrectionist—the name given in the nineteenth century to the grave robbers who sold corpses for dissection to physicians and anatomists, trafficking in bodies and parts.

I don't recall when I began to think of what is called "the non-heart-beating-cadaver donor" as neither a noble but faceless benefactor nor as a nonhuman organ source, but as someone particular and separate who'd lived his own life before he died. I don't know when I began to think of a donor organ as a bearer of its own set of cellular memories and not just as some sort of bloodied and perishable apparatus that one could airlift a great distance in an Igloo cooler marked HUMAN HEART or HUMAN EYES. In the thirteen months I spent waiting for a transplant, I could barely acknowledge what was happening to my own body as my liver rapidly failed: abdomen grossly distended from accumulated fluids; muscle wasting from my body cannibalizing itself for nutrients and proteins; pale stools streaked with bile; profound and constant exhaustion; brief spells of aphasia; cramps and sudden hemorrhages, blood puddling in my mouth from ruptured esophageal varices; skin the color of copper and eyes the color of urine.

I do recall a spring afternoon a month before my transplant, when I was lying on the grass in Rock Creek Park, back from the transplant clinic where I'd overheard a nurse telling someone in the next room—I couldn't see who—that a high number of teenage donors die not from car wrecks but from suicide.

I didn't want to know this, not as I myself was growing so desperate for a donor. As soon as I left the clinic, I asked a taxi driver to take me to the park—"Are you all right?" he kept asking, afraid of my appearance—where I'd often gone when I was well to

sunbathe with my friends, though now I was alone. I paid the fare; then I was lying on the unmowed grass, attempting to lose myself in a song I could hear playing on a far-off radio, pretending that my whole life consisted of just one word: *sunny, sunny...*

But it didn't work. My donor had begun to claim me, or so it seemed; I felt as if he'd somehow been constructing himself inside me without my knowledge as I was dying, though he was still alive and waiting for nothing unforeseen. *Perhaps he's here right now in this park, I thought, or perhaps he's in another part of the city, crossing a street against traffic or standing at a pay phone or waiting for the bus that will bear him home from work.* For a moment it seemed as if there were but the two of us left in the world, me and my blood brother, though one of us would soon be dying.

*Don't die,* I wanted to whisper, though I didn't know if I was speaking to him or myself.

I suppose I found out four weeks later: the hospital paged me past midnight to say they'd located a suitable donor.

My friend Sarah drove me to the ER. The whole way I kept checking and rechecking the contents of the small suitcase I'd packed six months before—silk dressing gown, twenty-dollar bill, packet of Dentyne, razor and toothbrush and comb. I couldn't stop touching these things, as if they were all that was left holding me to earth.

I knew what would happen when we got to the hospital—X-ray, EKG, and enema; introduction of IV lines, one in the left hand and another beneath the collarbone, for sedatives and cyclosporine and antibiotics. For months I'd been trying to prepare myself for the transplant surgery, studying the booklets the doctor had given me, one with

drawings of abdomens marked with dotted lines to represent incision sites and another with a diagram showing how a pump-driven system of external tubing would route my blood outside my body during the time when I would have no liver.

I was prepared to wake in the ICU, as in fact I did, unable to speak or move, brain buzzing like high voltage from prednisone.

But I was not prepared for what came the week after that: the impact of the realization that I had participated in the pain and violence and grief of a human death. *You have to face what you've done*, I kept telling myself as each day I watched myself in the mirror, growing healthier, until even my jaundiced eyes were white again: I had taken a liver from a brain-dead corpse that had been maintained on a ventilator during the removal of its organs, so that it looked like a regular surgical patient, prepped and draped, with an anesthesiologist standing by its head to monitor blood pressure and maintain homeostasis, its chest visibly rising and falling with regulated breath.

“It’s not like you killed him,” my friends kept telling me.

“I know, I know,” I said to quiet them, though I didn’t know, not really. But I did know, as perhaps my friends did not, that it isn’t just children who believe they can kill with the power of a thought or a word. After all, I had sat in the clinic waiting room with the other transplant candidates, joking that we should take a rifle up to the roof of the hospital to shoot some people whose organs we might like. “I wish we’d been at the Texas Book Depository with Oswald,” one man had said.

At night in bed I often thought of the person who’d died; when I was quiet, I could feel myself quietly grieving for him, just as I was grieving for my own body, so deeply

wounded and cut apart, though still alive.

“I’m sorry,” I wanted to tell him.

Sometimes I woke in the middle of the night, troubled to realize that I had taken a piece of him inside me, as if I had eaten him to stay alive. When this happened, I often forced myself to think of it longer, though I didn’t want to, as if I were a member of a tribe I’d read about a long time before in an old ethnographic text that described how the bereaved dripped the bodily fluids of the dead into their rice, which they then made themselves eat as an act of reverence and love.

In this state, I could not console myself. I got up and sat on the sofa. *So here I am*, I thought, *right on the edge of the unspeakable...*

Other nights I thought of the donor with a great tenderness, sometimes perceiving him as male and sometimes as female. These nights, I placed my hand over what seemed to be still her liver, not mine, and slowly massaged the right side of my body—a broken reliquary with a bit of flesh inside—all the way from my hip to the bottom of my rib cage. “It’s okay, it’s okay,” I whispered over and over, as if I were attempting to quiet a troubled spirit not my own.

*If I could, I would undo what I have done*, I thought, though I knew that if I had to, I would do it again.

I wasn’t new to survivor guilt. After all, I’d been living for a long time in the midst of the AIDS epidemic while so many of my close friends died: Larry, Ed, Darnell, Allen, Ricardo, Paul, George, Arcadio, Jaime, Wally, Billy, Victor, and David.

In this sense, it had been a relief to be diagnosed, to have a progressive disease that threatened my life, to be bivouacked with the others. “It’s like you’re one of us now,” my friend Kenny had told me. “It’s like you’ve got AIDS.”

But I couldn’t tell him it wasn’t true, at least not after the transplant; it wasn’t the same at all. I’d outlived everyone, even myself.

What did Lazarus want when he stumbled from the cave, tied hand and foot with graveclothes, his face bound about with a napkin? *Loose him*, Jesus said, and *Let him go*.

I survived. It’s years since the transplant. Here I am, in my new life.

I want to unfurl.

I want to become my gratitude.

I want to fly around the world.

I want to be a man with a suntan. The man in the Arrow shirt.

And above all, this: I want to complete what I’ve written here—these fragments, these sticky residues of trauma—by adding just one more line before the words THE END: “It’s a miracle.”

It is a miracle, of course. I know that. Just the other day, for instance, stopping at a sidewalk fruit stand and buying a blood orange: *Oh*, I thought, *this will replace the blood I lost*. I carried the orange to the park, where I sat in the sun, lazily devouring its juicy flesh, its piercing wine-red tartness. *There’s nothing more than this I need*, I thought. *I’m alive. I’m alive.*

But what happens after the miracle? What happens after the blinding light of change withdraws and the things of the earth resume their shadows?

What happened to Lazarus after his resurrection? On this, the Gospel according to Saint John is silent. Did Lazarus speak after he was commanded from the grave and his shroud was loosed? Did he thank the one who was his savior and then walk back into the house with his sisters Mary and Martha so they could wash him clean? Or did he turn in anger toward his savior, demanding to know why he had tarried so long with his apostles before coming? *If thou hadst been here, I had not died.*

Where did he go? Did he live a long life? Did he forget his time in the grave? Here is where I went after my resurrection: Miami Beach, Sarasota, Raleigh, Nashville, Peterborough, Madrid, Barcelona, New York City, and Provincetown.

And I went back as an inpatient to the hospital—five more times, at least to date. The hepatitis goes on the doctor tells me. The transplant doesn't cure it. It gives the virus a new liver to infect and feast upon. *(Dear donor, forgive me, I can't save your life...)*

A year after my transplant, just after the anniversary the social worker called my "first birthday," these things happened: low-grade fever; weight gain; edema; jaundice; sudden and unwanted elevations in alkaline phosphatase, bilirubin, and liver enzymes. *This can't be happening, I thought, not again.*

"We need to biopsy the liver," the doctor said. He said we needed to measure the progression of the disease by assessing the extent of new cirrhotic scarring. I knew what that meant: it meant the story wasn't over, as I so badly wanted it to be. It meant that things were uncertain.

“Don’t worry,” the doctor said as he sorted through my file. “We can always discuss retransplantation.”

*No*, I thought, *I can’t hear that word, not ever again, especially if it’s applied to me*. Where was the miracle now? I was supposed to have been restored. I was supposed to have been made whole. I wanted to loose the graveclothes; I wanted to unbind the napkin from my face; I wanted to be through with death forever.

Instead I was sitting in a windowless medical office, waiting for the phlebotomist to come and draw more blood. I wasn’t sure I had the heart for more miracles.

Did Lazarus believe he was done with death after his resurrection? There’s no record of whether Christ cured him of the sickness that killed him in the first place, before he rose again; there’s no record of the pain his body must have felt after having lain four days in its grave—long enough to have begun to decompose and (as the Gospel says) *to stinketh*.

As for me: for three weeks I got worse, then I slowly got better. A few months later the doctor said there’d be no need to discuss retransplantation, at least not yet, not in the immediate future.

It wasn’t a miracle that pulled me back, at least not then: I was saved not by a sudden and divine intervention but by the persistent and real efforts of physicians, some with Cartier watches and others wearing scuffed shoes. The story didn’t end with a tongue of flame or a blinding light. Each morning and evening I monitor myself for organ rejection, as I’ll do for the rest of my life: blood pressure, temperature, weight. I go to the clinic for blood draws. I await faxes detailing test results.

Here is what happens after the resurrection:

Your body hurts, because it's hard to come back to life again after lying so long in a grave, but you set goals and you labor to meet them, holding yourself up with your IV pole as you shuffle down the hospital corridor, slowly building back your strength. You learn your medications; you learn to pack your wounds with sterile gauze; you learn to piss into a bottle and shit into a pan. It's work, preparing yourself for sunlight.

Then the day comes when you are allowed to wash your hair and shower. A little while later you're walking down a street.

People you've not seen in ages stop to ask how you're doing; you say you're doing fine, you're doing great. It's life again, dear ordinary life! Life as you hungered for it, with its pleasures and requirements.

Yes, it's life again, your life, but it's not the same, not quite. Or so it seems, because you can't forget how it felt to lie in the close darkness of the grave; you can't forget the acrid smell of the earth or the stink of the moldering graveclothes, especially now that you know, as you never did before, that you're headed back to the grave again, as is everyone, and you know this with a clarity you cherish and despise.

The gift of life is saturated with the gift of death.

Sometimes, sleepless at night, I imagine I'm back in the hospital the night of my transplant, lying naked in a cubicle behind a thin curtain, waiting for a nurse to prep me for surgery. *This is how it feels to lie in a cold room*, I tell myself, because this might be my last night on earth and I want to feel everything, to feel once more how life feels, each breath in and each breath out.

The nurse comes in and instructs me to lie on my side. She administers an enema. *This is how it feels to be filled with warm water.* I go to the toilet and afterward I look at myself for a moment in the bathroom mirror. When I return to the cubicle and lie down, the nurse says she must shave the hair from my abdomen, all the way from my groin to my chest. “I hope my hands are warm enough,” she says, spreading the shaving soap across my stomach. She touches the cold razor to my belly, and I think, *This is how it feels to be alive.*

