

Exposition

I asked the transplant team to take a picture of my kidney before they tucked it away inside my friend’s abdomen. I keep the picture on the dresser I inherited from my dead grandmother, which sits in my living room because it won’t fit in my Brooklyn bedroom. I don’t have a frame for the picture, so I stuck it in the corner of the mirror like I’m a high-schooler with a crush. Most people don’t notice it, but I usually find a way to bring it into a conversation. “Ah, yes, speaking of your vacation in Turks and Caicos, did I mention I recently donated a kidney? Would you like to see a picture?”

I also keep a copy on my mobile phone. Just in case.

My surgeon would only use one of those old disposable cameras to take the picture, and because doctors are not good with details (that’s what nurses are for), he didn’t use the flash. Thankfully, the kidney is under a surgical light, so at least it can be seen, but it’s washed out in white. I’m told it was actually pink, which placates me a bit because really, how different are white and pink anyway?

My kidney was quite large. (I assume it still is.) When I first saw the picture, I thought my kidney rested in the hand of a woman, but I later learned the hand belonged to a man, and I thought, “I hope that man just has small hands.” It was *that* big.

In the picture, there is an instrument that looks to me like a stainless steel mallet. I’m still not clear on the function of this instrument in my operation. I’ve decided it’s best I never know.

Some people ask, “Why would you want a picture of your kidney?” which makes me wonder, *Why would you not?*

“You know,” I reply, “so I have something to remember it by.”

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Where is my kidney now, you ask? I'm told it's attached to the right side of my friend, Stephen, just beneath one of his two mostly-dead kidneys. I cannot independently verify this information since I was in a narcotic sleep, but I trust my doctor, and Stephen definitely has *someone's* kidney functioning inside of him, and anyway, I'm a literary writer, not a journalist. I don't have to independently verify anything. Memoirs aren't structured around verification, but *memory*. Lucky for my authorial integrity, I have a good memory.

For example, I remember the day I found out that Stephen needed a kidney. It was a Sunday afternoon in the early summer of 2014. My wife, Stephanie, and I stood around the sun-drenched kitchen table in our apartment on Graham Avenue. She'd just returned from church, and I'd just finished a chunk of my graduate thesis. She told me that our pastor had made an announcement that morning about Stephen's need for a kidney transplant. I'd known that Stephen had kidney problems, but I didn't really understand how close he was to renal failure. I'm not even sure that I knew what renal failure was.

"The church is connecting anyone who might be interested in donating with Stephen's transplant team," Stephanie said as I slurped down the last sludge of my second cup of coffee. "I'd do it," she continued, "but my blood type is wrong."

I'd never considered donating an organ before. I wasn't really considering donating then. Though my brain is normally overly analytical, pestering itself and my personal sense of peace with the what-ifs, what-fors, and why-the-fucks of every potential scenario on the face of the planet, for once, possibility eluded me. Or maybe it didn't elude me, but maybe that one time I simply replaced it with probability—in this case, the unlikelihood that I'd end up an organ donor even if I was willing. I didn't know if I was willing, but I didn't need to know just then. That moment, as the grainy dregs of coffee slithered down my throat, was nothing more than one of those strange and

unexpected conversations that crop up between two married people until my wife turned it on its head.

“What’s your blood type?” she asked.

This was my first moment of pause. It didn’t occur to me until that moment that while I’d never considered donation myself, my wife might consider it for me. Only after the words left her mouth did I understand where this conversation was about to go.

I swallowed hard. The air conditioner in the window clicked off as though it, too, wanted to hear my answer.

“Type O.”

“Doesn’t that make you a universal donor? You should go get tested!” She said this with an enthusiasm that might have been excitement or annoyance or both. On the one hand, she seemed encouraged by the idea that I might be an organ donor for our friend, but on the other, more notable hand, she seemed irritated that I’d withheld that information for the two or three minutes of conversation it took us to get there, like I could have already been halfway to the hospital by now for a blood test. But I wasn’t so eager. All my life I’ve made significant decisions without giving them much thought, but even I had my limits. When the hasty part of my brain urged me to acquiesce to my wife’s wishes, it was halted by an uncharacteristic acknowledgement of what exactly acquiescence would mean. This was not as simple as giving blood. If I became a living donor, it would be the most major surgery I’d ever had, and I’d had a few. Not only that, but there was something about the idea of literally losing a part of myself—something that would weigh more heavily on me later, but that teased my latent sense of mortality just enough in that moment to give me pause; if I donated a kidney, part of me would die.

Still, I felt uncomfortable refusing. Here was a friend of mine, just a little more than a year younger than I, and I was still young—just shy of thirty-two. What if I’d needed a kidney? Would I

have friends who were potentially able, but unwilling? Would they leave me to dialysis, maybe even death? And could I live with myself if I did that to Stephen? I knew I couldn't, but that didn't change the fact that I didn't want to go through kidney donation. I needed an excuse, an acceptable and irrefutable rationale that would let me off the hook without any accompaniment of guilt. Only one thing came to mind.

“What's Stephen's blood type?” I asked.

“What does it matter? You're type O.”

“But is he positive or negative?”

Her eyes fell on the table, and she pursed her lips, thinking. “I don't know if they said that. Maybe negative?”

“I can't donate, then. Only O negative is fully universal. O positive can only donate to other positives.”

“I've never heard that,” she said. “I suppose it makes sense. That's too bad.”

I was surprised how easily she let me off the hook. She was the scientist in our marriage; I was just a slick talker. I'm the sort of person who can hear a tidbit of information on the news or from someone on the subway and then attach a whole logical narrative to it, and people will usually believe me. The truth is, I *didn't* know if I could donate to Stephen or not, but the fact that I'd been convincing enough with my wife for her to let it go was enough for me to believe my own rationale.

The problem was, I still felt guilty. The bigger problem would turn out to be that I felt the need to alleviate myself of that guilt.

Maybe a week later, we were at Stephen's apartment for what had come to be known amongst our circle of friends as a “Gatsby party.” The summer before, Stephen's roommate, Matt, began hosting elaborate revels held on the obscene private terrace that stretched from the southwestern wall of their apartment into a pocket of forgotten land surrounded by aging and

broken residential properties. Despite the forlorn view, Stephen and Matt had turned the terrace into a Brooklyn paradise. Strands of softly-glowing bulbs hung between the outer rails and a post in the center that Matt had rigged, creating the effect of a tent made of lights. Wire patio furniture dotted the terrace, and in front of the single eyesore—the HVAC source—they’d set up a fully-functional bar that Matt had built himself. From the hours of dwindling sunlight sometimes until that dying star came back around for another day, people from all over the city poured in through the narrow confines of that apartment and out into the relatively vast expanse of the terrace. Word spread. People spoke of a mysterious party where the liquor was as free as the young people who came to forget the outside world even if only for a few hours. Friends told friends who told other friends until half the people in attendance were strangers to both of the hosts as well as to each other.

It was near the bar, under a patio umbrella, freshly after Stephen and I had collected drinks but before the majority of guests had arrived, when the blue of the sky still glowed faintly fluorescent and the heat of the sun still beckoned me to shade, that I walked, unexpectedly, into what seems to have been my destiny. Of course, my intention was the opposite; I’d intended to walk out.

Eager to alleviate myself of the guilt I’d carried since convincing myself of my donor incompatibility, I foolishly told myself that it would be a comfort to Stephen to know that there were people who wanted to help him, but couldn’t. So I told him, probably with a smile on my face, that I’d heard about his predicament, what a pisser, and I totally wanted to get tested, I intended to, but I’m the wrong blood type. I did what I could do, man, but science is fucked up, and I just don’t have a kidney for you. Sorry.

“What’s your blood type?” he asked.

I told him.

“You can donate,” he said. I’ve never seen a more matter-of-fact expression on someone’s face. This concerned me because I’m only a good bullshitter when I’m talking to people about something they know nothing about. Stephen, I was sure, knew a great deal more about blood type compatibility than I did. Still, I’d gone that far down the road—I might as well keep going.

“But I’m O positive.”

“The Rh factor doesn’t matter for organ donation, only for blood transfusions. With type O, you could be tested for a match regardless of the plus-minus.”

I took a long sip of my drink. “Oh,” I said. “Oh. Well. That’s...interesting. That’s good, though, right? I mean, more potential donors?”

The back of my neck burned. I took another drink.

With a smile that seemed oddly light-hearted and sad at the same time, Stephen said, “Bet you wish you hadn’t said anything.”

Who, me? Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous. I’m glad to know—

“It’s okay,” he said when I didn’t respond. “Don’t feel like you have to get tested. I understand. I don’t think I’d want to do it, either.”

We talk a lot about humility in the church. What we frequently don’t say is that humility is often tantamount to feeling like the most outstanding asshole on the face of the planet. Not only did Stephen not hold it against me that I wasn’t sure I wanted to get tested, but he even admitted that he, a man who knew what it was like to need a kidney to live, might not be so charitable if he were on the other side of the table. How the hell was I supposed to turn around and tell this humble, understanding, all-around upstanding individual that I wouldn’t even *see* if I could help him out? That would only be one step closer to the Outstanding Asshole award. It was one thing when I was living in the blissful security of ignorance, under the impression that I simply couldn’t help it because it was out of my control. But now, maybe I could help. It wasn’t yet out of my control.

The next day, back at home, I told Stephanie that I could potentially be a match after all. Without even a slight pause, she said, “Oh, good! So you can go get tested!”

Yes! Wheeeee! Let’s go get tested to see if I qualify to have some doctor sever a vital organ from my body and stick it into someone else’s! She made it sound like I’d told her we were going to Disney World.

“Maybe we should talk about this?” I said it more as a question than a statement because I once again felt guilty about having doubts.

“What’s there to talk about? Stephen needs a kidney.”

“But what if you need a kidney someday? Or what if we have kids, and one of them needs a kidney? With my blood type, I can donate to anybody.”

You might read this and think to yourself, “Good God, man, you’re talking about a human life here, not a used car lot.” That’s true. But what you don’t understand is that when you’re in the privacy of your home with your spouse or whoever might help you to make this kind of a decision, human life becomes very objective. It’s a thing, a commodity, something that has a value more or less than the life next to it. When you think about voluntarily laying down and letting a doctor cut you up, remove part of what keeps you alive, then sew you back together again when there’s nothing wrong with you, it’s only natural to have something of a consumer mindset. Yes, I’d be giving the gift of life to Stephen, but what about *my* life? And not just mine, but my family? What if my wife or my brother or the child I’ve not yet conceived needs a kidney? Will I regret having given mine away? Or what if my remaining kidney fails one day, and *I* need a kidney? Will I regret it then? How well do I know Stephen, and does that matter? What’s the likelihood of our continued friendship, and does *that* matter? What if I give him a kidney and then we never see each other again? Will that ever haunt me, riddle me with even more guilt than I had at the idea that, fully capable of doing so, I might not offer him this chance at life?

Overwhelmed with questions, I turned my analysis to some quick and probably inaccurate math. I figured that in nine years of living in New York City, which has a population of roughly eight million people, I've known three people who needed kidney transplants. That comes out to .000038% of the population, or practically no one. None of this takes into consideration the full span of my thirty-two years of life, the populations of other places that I've lived, the grand total of lives I've interacted with, or anything else a statistician would use to calculate a more accurate number, but since the number of kidney recipients I've met outside of New York over the course of my life equals zero, then whatever calculations a statistician might make would—according to my clumsy computation—only lower my original percentage to even less than practically no one, further supporting the notion that I'll probably never meet anyone else who needs a kidney, let alone someone close to me.

Beyond my bad math was plain and tangible logic: No one in my family nor my wife's family had any history of kidney disease. This meant that whatever else might be fucked up about our genetic codes, the idea that either one of us would need a kidney, or that we'd have a child who might need a kidney, was all but absurd.

In the end, though, it was neither bad math nor logic that brought me comfort about getting tested, but sheer probability; the chance that my kidney would be a suitable match for Stephen was simply not that good. I've had difficulty finding hard statistics on this, but when I considered all of the puzzle pieces that needed to fit together, I swelled with confidence that I'd have a better chance of winning a thousand dollars off a scratch ticket than being a donor match for Stephen, and I don't even play scratch tickets. Matching requires not only the correct blood type, but also a series of human leukocyte antigen—or "HLA"—tests, anatomical tests, and psychological evaluations. The odds of passing the physical tests alone were slim, but throwing in the psychological tests and lifestyle evaluations—I was all but destined for failure, at which point I could gleefully say, as I'd

hoped to in the beginning, that I'd done all I could do. I could have peace of mind that I hadn't overlooked a friend in need while retaining the comfort of knowing that I wouldn't have to part ways with one of my kidneys, all for the inconvenience of sacrificing a few vials of blood and maybe a ride through a CT-scan machine.

There was something else, too, that swayed me. Because I identified as a Christian at the time, I'm supposed to say that I decided to go through with the testing because Jesus gave his life for my sins, and because Jesus said that the greatest gift a person can give is to sacrifice one's life for a friend, and I wouldn't be sacrificing my life but only my kidney, thereby still leaving room for me to be a better person, give a better gift. That's what I'm supposed to say. And some of that was true. But it wasn't Jesus who swayed me.

To the likely chagrin of my pastors and every hipster in Brooklyn, my inspiration came from Phil Lesh of Grateful Dead stardom. I was too young to see the Grateful Dead perform live—I was only thirteen when Jerry Garcia died—but I've seen Phil Lesh on numerous occasions over the last ten or fifteen years, and every time I saw him perform, whether on his own or with a band, he unfailingly made a speech about organ donation towards the end of the shows. Lesh underwent a liver transplant in 1998, and whatever people may think of jam band personnel, he has the wisdom, humility, and gratitude to recognize that without the transplant, he wouldn't be here today, still performing well into his seventies. One donor speech in particular stuck in my mind, from a Bonaroo festival in Tennessee in 2004. "Think about it this way," he said, "if you'd take one—fair is fair, you've got to give one, too." Of course, Lesh was talking about cadaver donation, but I don't think that invalidates his point. It certainly doesn't invalidate the terrifying sound of his voice resonating in my memory. Coarse and groggy, Lesh sounds like a dynamic and articulate version of the undead, the dirt of the earth still in his mouth from when he crawled from the grave. "Fair is fair," he kept saying, like a nightmare that wouldn't end.

I don't have a kidney problem, but if I did, I'd take an organ. By God, I'd take an organ. And fair is fair.

I chose to keep my decision a secret from Stephen. One of my reasons for this was simply that in the event I ended up a match, I wanted an easy out should I get cold feet. If I did succumb to cowardice at any point during the process, I'd feel terrible enough about myself. If Stephen knew about what I'd done, that would only compound my shame. For the same reason, I also kept my testing a secret from everyone except for Stephanie and my best friend, Ryan. But keeping the rest of the world at bay wasn't just a safety net for potential shame; it was a way for me to exercise control. I don't like people meddling in big decisions in my life. I prefer to wait until I've convinced myself so thoroughly of whatever it is I'm going to do that by the time others find out about it, any attempts to talk me out of it are futile. It's the only way I can know for certain that my decisions—the big ones, anyway—are mine, and mine alone. Most people don't think that's a good idea, and they're probably right. The problem is that when I involve others in my decisions, if they disagree with me or try to make me see another side of something, I'm inclined—foolishly and without rationale—to feel judged, which then leads to me feeling embarrassed, which can then lead to me making decisions to please others rather than doing what I think is right. If that sounds neurotic—shut up about it. We're just getting warmed up here.

There's an additional problem with opinions about donating a kidney, which is that the average person isn't versed in what donation means or doesn't mean. This prevents them from helping you to make an informed decision. My father, for example, doesn't know Stephen. When I got around to including him in my decision, his vested interest was in preserving the life of his son over a complete stranger (though he never tried to talk me out of it and was extremely supportive once he got over the initial shock). Then there are the friends who know me, but not Stephen. "If

this guy isn't a close friend," they would say when they found out, "why would you donate a kidney to him?" (See? I'm not the only one who commodifies someone's life in passing conversation.) I also had Christian friends who merely championed my decision as a service to God without seeming to give it much thought at all, which I sometimes found more irritating than those who thought maybe I should reconsider.

Whether concerning or frustrating or simply not helpful, none of these were the worst opinions I received. No, the worst opinions were from the people who thought they knew something about kidney donation, but in reality, didn't know anything (or at least, not anything current.) "But you won't be able to drink for months!" "You know the recovery is something like three months, and your job won't pay you, right?" "There will definitely be things you can't eat, I just can't remember what they are." "You're never going to be able to smoke pot again!" These people meant well, but at the same time, they were probably more interested in being unnecessarily involved in the process. At first, I listened to them. After all, they were friends, people I trusted on some level. And the information they had wasn't necessarily *wrong*; in most cases, it was either referring to the recipient, whose life changes a bit more not because of the kidney but because of the anti-rejection medication, or it was referring to outdated or presupposed information. (Alcohol, for example, is handled primarily by the liver, so even with one kidney, my drinking habits—which are more aggressive than most people's—don't have to change. As far as marijuana use goes, that guidance still comes state-by-state and practitioner-by-practitioner, but in my case, there were no post-op restrictions.)

The one thing I wanted even less than people's opinions was the flattery. This had less to do with contrived humility and everything to do with selfish introversion. I hadn't *actually* done anything yet except agree to let a lab technician stick a needle in my arm and extract a few vials of blood. What if I got halfway through the process and then decided against it? Or what if I wasn't a match,

and I didn't have a choice anymore? Then I'd have received back-pats and compliments for nothing. More than that, the unsolicited praise would also make me feel pressure to do something I still wasn't sure I was ready to do. If I was going to be coerced into kidney donation, the coercion needed to be all my own, and if I was going to receive praise for it, I didn't want it to be until the kidney was already filtering blood in Stephen's body.

The one exception to my "decide it myself" attitude was Stephanie. I found much comfort and encouragement in my wife. From the very beginning, she approached kidney donation as though it weren't an option, but a duty. In my more cynical, jealous moments, I dismissed her enthusiasm as naïve idealism; no matter what she said about kidney donation, the fact was that in this particular instance, she was physically incapable of donating. She had the luxury of clarity to see the good that could come from donation without having to be personally hindered in her own body by the risks. But jealousy and cynicism are thin veils if we allow them to be. When I saw beyond my own arrogance, I recognized that she had the right idea. Giving a kidney to Stephen was a duty, and one I ought to see through with joy and confidence. I'm not much of a Christian, but I do try where I can, and hers was the Christian approach. Without my wife, I wonder if I would have remembered or latched onto that long enough for it to make a difference. I will always be thankful for that.

There was one other person who necessarily had to know that I was at least considering getting tested, and that was the pastor of our church, Vito. Since I didn't want to disclose my intentions to Stephen, Vito was the only person I knew who could put me in touch with Stephen's transplant team. I knew I could trust Vito with my request not because he was a pastor and therefore held my confidence, but because Vito was the sort of man who might forget his name from time to time. He once left his house without his wallet, keys, or mobile phone, yet somehow managed to make it all the way into another borough only to discover that he was relatively

stranded. I knew he wouldn't tell Stephen because he wouldn't remember my inquiry long enough to accidentally betray my confidence. I sent him a short e-mail, and two days later, he responded with information for a nurse practitioner named Pam at the NYU Langone Medical Center.

I'd planned to send Pam an e-mail straightaway, but now I hesitated. For the first of what would be many times, the idea of giving up an organ became more real than I'd expected it to be. I was able, I realized, to compartmentalize the intensity of what I was potentially signing up to do so that most of the time it didn't seem like a big deal. Now, as my fingers hovered over the keys but refused to type, it seemed one of the most significant decisions I would ever make.

Whether out of courage or cowardice, I reminded myself that the odds of being a match were slim. Very slim. All I had to do was to get my blood tested, then wait for the inevitable phone call that said, "Thanks for your interest, but you're tests don't match what we're looking for," as though all I'd done was apply for a job I didn't really want. That was it. I'd have done my charitable, Christian duty, Phil Lesh would stop growling in my ear, and I could rest easy knowing that no one would be slicing open my abdomen any time soon.

Except maybe that wouldn't be it. Maybe they'd say, "Hey, Josh, good news!" (*For whom?*) "You're a match! How about you let us shank you a few inches from your man-parts and just under the ribs a couple of times so we can harvest a fully-functional organ?"

I tried something then that was out of character for me, which was to ignore myself. An overactive imagination combined with an exceedingly analytical brain had cost me years of sleep and probably a future of high blood pressure, and now it threatened to defeat whatever resolve I'd had just to let someone prick my arm with a needle and take a meager helping of blood. So while my brain flipped through its rolodex of awful and unlikely possibilities, I willed my fingers to act independently, to type the words my mind threw into question. "Dear Pam, My name is Joshua Wise. I got your information from Stephen Johns, a friend of mine who is awaiting a live donor for a

kidney transplant. My blood type is O, so I thought I'd write to see what I needed to do to be considered as a donor.”

My fingers moved as if detached from my brain, dancing along the keyboard as I pretended not to doubt myself and what I was doing. I clicked “send” without even reading what I'd written, neglecting every writerly instinct I have for proofreading and revision, knowing that if there's one thing in this world that can't be undone, it's a sent e-mail.

A few days passed. I didn't talk about the inquiry very much, even with Stephanie who continued to seem more eager than I to get a response. There was nothing to talk about anyway. Either they'd ask me to come in for a blood screen or they wouldn't. I told myself that it was no different than having any other blood work done; it all comes with the possibility of further tests, preventative care, treatment, or surgery. In fact, to talk about it at all, to dwell on it even for a moment, felt to me like wearing charity on my sleeve, which is just about exactly the time that charity ceases to be charitable. Believe it or not, I even began to forget about it, but as is often the case with such things, the moment it finally slipped from my brain into the abyss of everything I've ever forgotten, Pam finally responded.

The first step, she said, was a phone screen. That would determine whether or not they even wanted me to come in for a blood screen. It took several e-mails back and forth to schedule the phone screen, which translated into a few days before we were able to connect on the phone. I had a lot to think about in that time, and I didn't care to think about any of it. I tried to focus instead on Stephen, the fact that whether or not I went through with voluntarily losing a kidney, he'd already lost both of his, and while the loss of one for me would mean relatively nothing, the involuntary loss of both for him meant a rotten life leading to a shortened life. I had the luxury of a choice; Stephen did not. Despite that, Stephen was optimistic, even determined not to let these serious challenges hinder his life. Those things alone strengthened my resolve. Remembering his resolve as well as his

unspoken desperation as I waited for my first conversation with Pam reinforced why I was doing what I was doing. Stephen was the sort of guy who persisted in the face of all odds, and because of that, among other reasons, he was also the sort of guy you wanted to see win. When people eventually found out that I was going to donate a kidney, they told me that I was a good person, but they were wrong. Stephen was always the good person. I'm just the guy who happened to be in the right place at the right time to pass him the ball.