

## A letter to my neurosurgeon

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I last saw you 17 years ago. I was being discharged from your postoperative practice. I thanked you as if you had been my taxi driver. Brisk. Informal. I didn't even make eye contact. I wanted out.

I was 19 years old. I didn't want to be sick any more. I wanted it all to be over. I wanted to move on. Close the door and walk away. I didn't thank you adequately. How could I? I didn't know what hung in the balance.

In most instances, you don't even get to hear how that story ends. The role that you played. The outcome years later. I was out of your care before the scar had fully healed on my skull. I was tender. I am still tender, sometimes.

Years later, I would be sitting in a medical school lecture hall. The circle of Willis projected on the big screen. My classmates feverishly trying to find an adequate acronym to capture the material, and me, trying to fight back tears as I traced your route with my fingertips in my notebook.

I imagined you on the day before my surgery, standing at a large boardroom table, your surgical team around you. My brain imaging strewn like the New World maps of Marco Polo on the table, as you charted out your neurosurgical expedition. I wondered if you had been nervous or excited by the challenge. I wondered if you had slept that night or if you were rethinking your route. Memorizing your approach. Trying not to think about my family sleeping at my bedside in hospital — my parents, two doctors, wishing for a miracle for their daughter — you were our hope.

In residency, I made a point not to be placed for rotations at your hospital. This was in part because I wouldn't have been able to walk those corridors as a



physician, without still feeling the weight of my intravenous pole shackled to my arm. I also had a recurrent dream of bumping into you in an elevator. We would both be wearing crisp white coats. You wouldn't recognize me, so out of context and with a full head of hair. But, I would reintroduce myself. You would be surprised but delighted to see me after so many years. I would take a moment, just as you exited the elevator, to thank you. It would be rushed but heartfelt. You would say something generic but meaningful. The doors would close, and I

would crumple to the floor in tears. I still wouldn't be able to thank you adequately. How could I? "Best not to work at your hospital," I would say. "Distance is perhaps what I need."

I think of you in the fall. When the leaves start to change. I remember that day in November when I first met you in the hospital. It was the weekend. My air ambulance arrived that morning from Halifax and you strolled into my hospital room wearing an oatmeal-coloured sweater and sat on the end of my bed. At first, I didn't understand that you were my

neurosurgeon. You said, “So you are the young lady who I have heard so much about.” You were cool as a cucumber. My world was on fire. I’ve tried to recreate this sort of confidence and calm with my own patients, and have failed miserably. I am just not cucumber material.

It has been 17 years now. In the beginning I was angry — not with you, per se, but at the injustice of the whole thing. I spent my twenties in waiting rooms. It was hard to feel grateful. But that changed when my first son was born. I felt

like I could finally forget about you and I could feign immortality once again — or so I thought.

One evening, I was sitting in the reading chair with my son. His little body was wound around mine as he played with my hair and I read him a story. His fingertips twisted their way to where my hairline meets my neck and there at my occiput he found the keloid scar — your signature. I shuddered as his fingertips followed the ridge all the way up to my ear. He was curious but not questioning. His touch

said nothing more than “so this is what my mama’s head feels like.”

And as I put him to bed that night, and every night after that, as I close the door to his room, I whisper to you, just loud enough for you to hear me — Thank you.

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This article has been peer reviewed.

This is a true story.