

Why Me?

Personal

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My heart is beating faster than I ever thought it could. What if they don't like me? What will they think when they see how picky I really am when it comes to eating food? What if they think I'm not good enough? The sudden stop in the car quickly cleared these overwhelming thoughts - I was glad. In what seemed like seconds, we grabbed all of our bags, looked around and took steps towards a house that was one thousand miles away from my own.

There isn't really a word that could describe what I felt as I walked into this house. I didn't know if I was happy or sad; all I knew was I was now barefoot. In their house. They did not wear shoes past the front door; you could use house slippers, which they kindly provided for my mom and I, or you could walk around barefoot. This was completely new to me. In my house we walk in with our shoes on, even if they have mud stuck to the bottom of them. As I looked up from my now bare feet, I saw the faces of two incredibly beautiful women. They resembled one another. Both had thick, dark hair that fell past their shoulders and stood not much taller than my mom and me. From the corner of my eye, I could see the man who had brought us here to this house, from the airport. He had already made his way into the kitchen to sanitize and prepare for dinner while my mom and I took showers since we had just been on a three-hour flight.

It wasn't until after I showered that I could truly grasp what was going on. There was a clear cabinet in the room we were staying in for the week, and in it stood a picture of a young boy with an infectious smile that shined through the frame. "He is the reason I'm in this house. He is the reason I'm here today," echoed through my mind as I tried to fall asleep that night.

*When I was nine months old, I was diagnosed with a rare liver disease named Biliary Atresia. It affects one in about fifteen to twenty thousand children a year and I just happened to be one of them. After trying countless different methods such as the Kasai procedure and different medications, my doctors came to the conclusion that my liver was not going to fix itself, I would need someone else's liver if I wanted to make it to my first birthday! My family was devastated, but they had hope that I would make it off the dreadful transplant list quickly.*

*On August 16, 2004, months after being diagnosed with this condition, my family sat in a dimly lit waiting room of a hospital. They were anxiously waiting near midnight to hear from my surgeon who had just taken me into the operating room. They always tell me how awful the waiting was, minutes turned into hours and the hours seemed to feel like days. However, on August 17th, 2004, my surgeon walked into the waiting room and told them that as soon as the new liver was placed inside me, it started to work. From what they told me, it seemed like as soon as those words left the surgeon's tongue, the dimly lit room was brightened by the joy on my parents and grandparents faces. I was okay. Their baby was going to survive.*

Time had gone by now, I spent most of the first day in this new house doing calculus homework. It definitely wasn't ideal but it had to be done. At the end of the day, the parents told me that we could eat pizza because I have been working hard all day volunteering and doing my math homework. If you knew them, you would know that the word "pizza" hardly appears in their vocabulary so this was a rare moment. After dinner was over, I finally felt comfortable enough to walk around and look at the decor on the walls. There was a shelf filled with books in the living room and even more books spread across the living room table. As I made my way around the room, another table caught my eye. How could I have missed this when I first walked in? It was right near the front door and quite big. The young boy was there again. However, there were several pictures this time. He and his sister stood laughing in one frame. In another, a handwritten note to his mom expressing his love for her was framed, and there was an article about him. As I got closer, I saw his infectious smile once again and started reading about his life. This article was written beautifully and it encapsulated every ounce of the young boy's life and legacy his parents hoped would continue to live on through others whom he saved.

On the third day of my stay, my mom and I went with the young boy's dad to tour a very prestigious school. As we were passing buildings that all looked the same to me, the knowledgeable gentleman would point out exactly what company owned each building and where the founder went to college. It didn't take me long to realize why there were so many books in that house, he seemed to know everything about, well, everything. As we approached the campus he told me about the amazing professors the university had. He talked of the

immense amount of success stories that came from the college and told me exactly how I would fit in. The campus was huge, the university in my hometown looked like nothing compared to this.

Once we were done walking around and taking pictures, we headed back to the car because it was time to travel to our next destination. The buildings flew by the car as we traveled. However, it all seemed to slow down as we passed one in particular. Signs pointed to this one indicating that it was an Emergency Room. This time, when describing the building, as he had done to many others, it was different. He talked about himself. This is where he had to take his son in the third week of August 2004. It felt as though memories were weighing down the car as he told us about that week. They rushed into that building not knowing what would happen and walked out broken from the news the doctors had given them about their nine year old son. All they had left was each other and a daughter who wasn't much older than her late brother. He spoke about it in such a calm manner and explained how the family coped with this tragic event. From what I gathered, it was far from easy for all of them.

*Tubes and cords were wrapped around my tiny body but I was okay and I was going to make it to my first birthday party and many after that. My health was fragile at the beginning of my life but now you would never be able to tell that I had a liver transplant, unless you saw the rainbow scar that stretched across my stomach. I was smart enough to not show anyone that thing again though. There was no way I could deal with the looks filled with confusion and hints*

*of disgust at the pool when people saw my scar. I completely hated it. Why me? Why did I have to be the one stuck with this ugly scar? I'm not even sick anymore, this isn't fair. I wish I never got that transplant so I could be normal. That is all I could ever think when I was fourteen and fifteen and sixteen...*

As our trip came to an end, I finally worked up the courage to look at the glass cabinet in the corner of the dining room. Memories, trinkets and toys of my donor spread throughout the shelves on one side and the other was filled with his sister's old toys and crafts. His sister was really cool, she was a lot like me and reminded me of my cousin. The day before we left she sat with me and showed me all of her plans for her wedding, videos of the traditional dances they perform, and told me the truth about residency, since she was going through it and knew I was interested in being a doctor. It felt like I was talking to a sister of my own. All I could think about was that I can't wait to see what her wedding dresses will look like, I know they will look beautiful on her, and I'm sure each will be full of perfectly placed beads and vibrant colors. I couldn't believe that the week was already ending, I was not ready to leave this home—it felt like my own now.

March 29th, 2021 was the day our worlds collided. After a year of speaking to my donor's family online, I was able to meet and stay with them for a week. It was such a surreal feeling. I felt as though I was living life through my donor's eyes and I walked in the home he had once ran through. His parents and sister were some of the kindest people my mom and I had ever met.

I learned so much on that trip; a lot of random facts his dad seemed to just know, much more about medical school from his sister, and his mom taught me about their beautiful culture every chance she could. Within a week, this family became my own. The scar that I was ashamed of before I entered that house had a completely different meaning as I left. I left the hospital that week in August of 2004 with a new chance at life and a scar while they lost their only son and brother.

An unknown author once wrote, “Organ donation itself is not a tragedy but it can be a beautiful light through the midst of one”. In the midst of their own heartbreak, these amazing people found it within themselves to donate their son's liver to a stranger whom they did not know. The little boy with an infectious smile and his family are the reason I am here today. They are the reason I’m able to apply for college and work towards fulfilling my dreams. Ever since that week I felt as though I gained a new family. His dad calls me and gives me advice frequently when I have important interviews or speeches. His mom continues to share her kindness and love with me and my family. His sister has opened my eyes and tremendously influenced my future career goals. They are some of the strongest, selfless people I know.

I will never understand how I got so lucky with my transplant journey. However, I know that not all journeys end this way. I will continue to devote my life to advocating for organ donation so others can experience what I have.

Why me? Well, I still can't tell you exactly why this life was picked for me, but I can say that one reason I was given this opportunity was to give back and use my experiences to help other children who are going through similar illnesses, and instill hope in families who are experiencing loss within their lives. Organ donation saved my life and I will help be the reason it saves countless others.