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IT HAPPENED TO ME: I Donated A Kidney To My Husband

When my life partner needed a kidney, it was a no-brainer to donate my spare.

JEN REEDER · MAY 22, 2015

The week before my husband's kidney transplant, our mechanic tried to faith heal him. As we stood outside the garage, Bob wiped his hands on his coveralls and addressed my husband, Bryan.

"Kidney transplant next week, huh? Would you be offended if I prayed for you?"

When Bryan said "no," Bob suddenly grabbed his hand and pulled him into a half-hug. He covered one of Bryan's kidneys with a giant palm, closed his eyes and started praying to God to send healing powers through him.

Bryan shot me a look, and I knew exactly what it meant: "How crazy is this?" I'd seen that look lots of times in the 20 years since we'd fallen in love in college. Back then, we had no idea his body would eventually betray him. I just knew I was really into the guy who, when my adviser crushed my graduate school hopes, had the perfect response: "So buy a boat and sail around the world."

We couldn't afford a boat, but we did work as crew on a sailboat up the eastern coast of Australia after graduation. Our first night, a storm battered the vessel around, waves crashing into us as we tried to stay on course until the captain shouted, "We can't fight it anymore – we have to let it take us out to sea!"

We were drenched and cold, and Bryan was seasick, finding impressive reserves of food to regurgitate. The whole Kerouac lifestyle started to seem like a terrible idea as I shivered in the dark.

Then the sun rose. And its pink fingers revealed thousands of dolphins swimming toward us from every direction, right next to the boat or surfing distant waves, six abreast, descending on the only boat stupid enough to be that far from shore. It felt like they were coming to guide us back to safety. Bryan caught my eye and grinned.

It was one of the great moments of my life. I've shared most of them with Bryan – jumping off a dive boat to swim with pilot whales, dancing in a thunderstorm to “Oye Como Va” at a Santana concert, laughing after rescuing our backpacks from the roof of a moving bus in Guatemala, watching the sunrise wake up 6 million butterflies at a sanctuary. We were always seeking out new experiences, living in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Australia, Maui, Seattle, Taiwan, New Orleans and Colorado, often working odd jobs to pay for extended backpacking trips to developing countries.

We were researching our second guidebook to Hawaii when Bryan had some swelling in his neck that he wanted to have checked out. Lab results raised a red flag that led to a kidney biopsy.

Suddenly the only nephrologist on the Big Island was telling us Bryan had an autoimmune disease called IgA Nephropathy, and confused antibodies would continue to attack his kidneys until they failed. He said Bryan needed to start taking handfuls of pills every day to stave this off, and recommended two years of chemotherapy.

I was terrified that he would die. I'd made him “promise” years before over a pitcher of beer that I would go first – I couldn't imagine life without him. His biggest fear was loss of lifestyle. It's hard to burn like a fabulous yellow roman candle if you're yoked to a dialysis machine.

We fled back to the mainland for a second opinion that didn't involve chemotherapy and found one. After several years of remission, Bryan's kidney function started plummeting.

Doctors explained we should start making plans for a transplant, that because Bryan was only 39, he should have the transplant before the final stages of kidney failure in order to avoid dialysis, a process in which a machine cleans your blood when your kidneys can't. Statistically, his transplanted kidney would last longer – and he would live longer – without having dialysis first.

I had to start taking notes at doctor appointments because after a few minutes, I would get lightheaded from trying to process what they were saying. Were they really talking about Bryan?

The gist of one talk was that once he was accepted as a “candidate for transplant” at a hospital, he would be added to the waitlist for organs, but if he could find a living donor, it would be much better.

They estimated he'd be on the waitlist for about three years – he'd never avoid dialysis at that rate. In fact, 12 Americans die every day waiting for a kidney transplant, according to the National Kidney Foundation.

It was a no-brainer for me: He needed a kidney, and I had an extra. It's a wonderful trick of evolution that we only need one but are usually born with two. And I have the jackpot of blood types, O negative, so I could give anyone a kidney as long as I passed a slew of medical tests to prove I wouldn't die on the operating table.

“Most couples are stronger after one donates a kidney to the other,” the social worker said at my donor evaluation. “But sometimes guilt overpowers the relationship. Are you sure you want to donate a kidney? If not, we'll just say you aren't a match.”

I was sure. A few weeks later, I got the call that I was officially approved as his donor. Bryan and I reached an agreement: He wouldn't feel guilty about taking my kidney, and I wouldn't say things like, “I don't feel like doing the dishes tonight, but I do feel like giving you a kidney...” There were no strings attached. Though if I gave him an organ, I really didn't want to divorce over it.

When it was transplant time, we packed the car and drove the six hours from our Colorado mountain town to Denver. We resolved to keep things light – if we thought about complications or even the biology of what was about to happen, we'd be toast. It had been hard enough to write our wills, sign advanced directives and to tell our families that for the record, we'd prefer cremation to burial.

We went to the grocery store to buy laxatives and juice for the upcoming liquid diet the day before surgery. A song played over the loudspeaker. “I am so into you,” crooned the Atlanta Rhythm Section as we stood in the checkout line. Bryan pulled me close.

“You always said you were into me, Baby – on Friday, you really will be!”

I was secretly worried that something would go wrong at the last minute, like I'd develop high blood pressure or diabetes and be disqualified from donating. That concern peaked at pre-op the day before our surgeries, when I asked my living donor coordinator how many of my antigens matched Bryan's. I knew doctors like at least three of the six to match.

“None,” she said gently. “But you are alive – your brain is pumping blood through your body. This is much better than if the kidney came from a cadaver. Immunosuppressive drugs have come a long way – he will be fine.”

I knew it would be hard to keep this information to myself, but we were walking a tightrope between sanity and panic, and I didn't want to tip us over. Bryan met me in the waiting room and gave me a hug. "It's not too late to hop a plane," he said.

Instead, we went back to the hotel, where family and friends started arriving as my laxatives kicked in. At some point, we got word from the hospital that the surgeries were officially a go. Everyone cheered. Love and positive energy were flowing even more than my bowels.

The next day, our surgeries were "textbook." Later, the nurses dangled the perfect bait to get me out of bed: I needed to walk to the ICU if I wanted to see Bryan.

I practiced walking, but it turned out to be a brilliant bluff – a nurse wound up pushing me to Bryan's room in a wheelchair, while my dad dragged the IV stand. I couldn't wait to see him.

They pulled aside the curtain and there he was, covered in wires, with a tube in his nose. A machine beeped as he opened his eyes.

"Hi Baby," he said with a smile.

The nurse pushed me in close so we could hold hands, then stepped behind a curtain with my parents to give us the illusion of privacy. Bry gave me a look I'll never forget and said, "I'm so glad I met you."

I almost started crying, but from behind the curtain, I heard my parents say "romantic." It was too good to pass up. "We're having sex!" I hollered. Bryan grinned. And I knew we were going to be OK.