



Silent Bond

His sister gave him the gift of life. He didn't have to say thanks.

THERE IS NOTHING LIKE A CRISIS TO GALVANIZE A family, to set its silent wheels in motion. Two years ago I found out I had PNH, a rare disease that decimates the bone marrow. I was 31, the oldest of four and the only son, about to join my father's dermatology practice. The doctors told me my only hope was a bone-marrow transplant; they would fill my languishing marrow with healthy stem cells from a suitable donor.

News traveled swiftly. The next day, my three sisters converged on Memorial Sloan-Kettering Hospital. Much as certain cells in the human body rush to repair damage from an injury, my sisters gathered to take the test of marrow. Each had a 25 percent chance of being a match. Each yearned to be the donor. Each was terrified of failing.

Like a winning spin on a slot machine, an ideal match must correspond at six distinct genetic sites. Lisa, my oldest sister, went first: she matched at only three. Debbie, the second sister, followed with four. Michele, the youngest, went last. And in that final trembling pull of the lever, the third spin found purchase. Michele matched on all six fronts. In the genetic lottery, she was my jackpot.

My day-to-day knowledge of Michele was curiously incomplete. She was six years younger than I was, and recklessly pretty. We rarely talked about anything deeper than a movie or a meal. The family adventurer, she might call one day from Guatemala, where she was helping disabled children, the next from British Columbia on her way back from a trek across the Yukon. Certainly, I loved her, in the way you love a person whose external data are familiar but whose internal workings are a pleasant mystery. I knew she was a vegetarian, played the flute and had pierced ears — that was enough.

Now I needed her. We both knew this, although we never spoke of it. Perhaps she was too polite or embarrassed to mention my sudden reassignment from older-and-wiser to sick-and-desperate. Instead, she curtailed her activities and began to eat red meat, even to sing its praises. One night I asked her, "Are you sure you're O.K. with this?" She dismissed me with a wave of her hand, barely pausing in her dissertation on the merits of Canadian bacon. It was the best we could do.

The transplant took place on Feb. 15, 1996, just as a blizzard was about to blanket the city. That morning Michele was

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taken to the O.R., where she was jabbed 20 times in the hip-bone with a large-bore needle. Six hours later, a small syringe filled with her stem cells was injected into a catheter in my chest. Weeks passed — weeks of fevers, transfusions and tentative touching across the barrier of latex gloves, masks and gowns. Finally, good news: Michele's marrow had taken root in my bones. It had begun to produce blood cells. I was cured.

With the crisis over, my family was once again free to return to their respective worlds, reluctantly at first, only gradually willing to believe the danger had passed. We continued to see each other regularly, albeit on a pre-transplant schedule — for birthdays and holidays. And, in time, the experience faded to a wisp of memory. I went back to not knowing Michele and she to not knowing me.

Nothing had changed. At least not in the sphere of the everyday. But in that stubbornly inarticulate sphere of family, something had shifted. The bonds that joined me to my sister were redefined. She had literally become a part of me.

Nor was her role of donor necessarily over. In the event of a relapse, I would require more of her marrow. And so in the ensuing months, I listened to Michele's plans for far-flung journeys with fear, worry, resentment. Once I even vetoed a trip to Alaska, not telling her why, only that she couldn't go. Michele canceled her plans without a word of protest. Was I being selfish? Unreasonable? Maybe. But I couldn't ignore the fact that I was dependent on her in a way that no one person should have to depend on another.

"It's nice how everything worked out for you," said a young man I met at the clinic one morning while waiting to see my doctor. He, too, had undergone a transplant, and because he had no siblings, he was forced to go through a national registry where donors remain anonymous. "I know she's a woman and she's from Seattle," he explained. "I'd like to find out more so that I could thank her. She saved my life."

She saved his life. Just as Michele saved mine. When a stranger saves your life, she deserves whole fields of appreciation. But Michele was family and that's what families are supposed to do. I never thanked Michele — that is, not in the words we use with our friends and colleagues, in the words we use to get things done in the world. To do so would have violated the pact of silence that brothers and sisters feel compelled to uphold. But she had to know. Somehow, in that sign language of family, she had to know, and with and without each other, we moved on. ■