

An abstract painting featuring two faces. The face on the left is rendered in dark, earthy tones with a prominent eye. The face on the right is more brightly lit, with white and light brown tones, also featuring a prominent eye. The background is a mix of dark and light colors with visible brushstrokes and textures.

under the gum tree

TRUE STORIES. REAL ART. NO SHAME. JULY 2018.



shift

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A breeze swept off the water and into the car's
window as we crossed the Tobin Bridge toward home.

The air smelled of changing leaves and whispered of impending autumn, promising relief from the stretch of late August heat that had spiked into the 90s over several days. I'd said no to air conditioning when my brother asked. Better to have the window down, to feel the air on my skin as I thought about the day's questions that didn't have answers.

A song from Dave Matthews Band was

playing on the radio: "Funny the Way It Is." Sean and I weren't talking as lyrics filled the space around us, painting an idyllic scene of someone basking in the beauty of a summer day, watching children at play. How the moment is shattered as a fire truck tears past on its way to a blaze. The shift from someone's serene moment to someone else's unfolding chaos.

I lifted my hand to shade my eyes

from the sun beating through the windshield. I'd forgotten my sunglasses that morning in our rush to get to our appointment.

"I know that's not what you wanted to hear from Dr. A." Sean glanced over as we navigated traffic. "But he's right, you know. You can always do Kenya next year."

"Yeah," I answered. "If I'm here."

At a break in traffic, Sean looked over again. "Focus on what he said. Remember? He said Kenya has been on the map for thousands of years. It'll still be there after your surgery. After your recovery."

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I'd planned and saved for my safari for more than a year, and was scheduled

buildings. Laughter, as kids play "War."

I'd needed just one neurosurgeon to tell me it wasn't necessary to open my head and I would have been on that plane to Kenya faster than they could have said no scalpel required. We were three consultations in. No one had.

I agonized that I might not be mobile after my surgery. It was something I kept coming back to as my brother and I trudged from hospital to hospital, seeking—hoping for—a dissenting opinion that summer. Paralysis terrified me infinitely more than death. If I agreed to surgery, I was also agreeing to the possibility that I might lose a lot more than my tumor.

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to leave in October. But that was before I'd been diagnosed in late June, before I spent my summer collecting second and third opinions.

I listened to the alternating *thump* . . . *thump* . . . as the car's wheels crossed the bridge on our way home. The song's refrain was winding up again, after punching home the devastation that comes with a bomb's blast. Tumbling

I might lose what makes me . . . me.

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How is it we sometimes hear a song that's a precise reflection of our mood or circumstance in a moment? The timing can be strangely exact. As a violin wept beneath the lyrics, I daydreamed that afternoon about writing a letter to Dave Matthews. I doubt he'd ever see it, but still, should I try? What would I say?

Perhaps just that his song hit me in the softest spot of my heart on one of the lowest days of my life.

His lyrics, the way he sang them, the despairing violin; it was me in that crease of time, sifting through the enormity of it, from a life undiagnosed to one of medical uncertainties and choices. My terror, laid bare over a four-minute soundtrack.

The song ended and a Volkswagen pitchman cut in, yelling that there wasn't a lower price or better selection of new and used cars to be had anywhere on the North Shore—period! His voice grew frantic as he warned time was running out for 0 percent financing. When Sean shut off the radio, I silently thanked him.

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Hours earlier, as we drove to our ten o'clock appointment at Brigham and Women's Hospital, we followed the same route we took to get to Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center two weeks earlier. The Longwood Medical Area is home to Harvard Medical School, a number of hospitals including Beth Israel and Brigham and Women's, and several universities.

"Third time's a charm?" I asked Sean.

"Well, we can't get many who'd be more qualified," he replied.

Dr. A was Chief of Neurosurgery, his resume bursting with distinctions, fellowships, chairmanships. Dr. R at Beth Israel wanted me to see Dr. A because of his specialty in diagnosing and treating cerebrovascular diseases—particularly

malformations that include cavernous angiomas, the type of tumor I had. He'd earned international recognition and lectured at Harvard Medical School.

His credentials left no doubt as to his skills but it was his compassion to which I'd appeal. The votes were stacking up, yet I clung to the hope that someone would tell me surgery wasn't necessary. All I needed was one dissenting voice.

Instead it was a trifecta, and it took Dr. A less than fifteen minutes to concur with the previous two opinions. I reviewed, as I did with the other surgeons, my list of symptoms: constant hiccupping, daily headaches that no amount of pain medication could ease, dry heaving that came out of nowhere and racked my body with intensity yet never produced anything.

Then there were the increasing bouts of dry heaving and vomiting that *did* produce something, burning my throat and leaving me depleted physically and mentally. I yawned like I hadn't slept in days.

Sean and I heard, again, that involuntary reflexes for yawning, hiccupping, and the gag impulse are controlled by the brain stem, the area where my angioma was growing and bleeding. As I'd discovered, and the leg brace I'd brought with me showed, the angioma's pressure was short-circuiting signals needed to lift my left foot and leg.

Dr. A explained my angioma was likely to impact a rising number of functions.

Blood pressure and heart rate. Swallowing. Walking. Talking. Patients with brain stem tumors, Dr. A explained, sometimes develop vocal cord paralysis when the tumor presses on nerves. Hoarseness can result, along with problems swallowing that in turn can introduce choking complications.

Despite our grisly discussion I had tunnel vision regarding my safari and wrapped myself in a cloak of denial. Surely we could wait until after I returned?

"I have plans, see. I already bought my airfare and got all my travel shots."

You may not be here in a year, at least able to walk and function, if we push this back to accommodate your . . . plans." Another pause. "What happens if you drop over there in the bush? No medevac. No brain surgeons on the savanna." A final pause. "Do you really want that?"

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Toward the end of "Funny the Way It Is" Dave Matthews wonders, as an airplane passes, if someone in it might be looking down on him. The momentary quaver in his voice gets me every time.

I often listen to the song, now eight

“My gut told me what was coming. I imagined him raising his thumb and forefinger, a pin held between them and poised over the balloon he was about to pop—the one I’d chased for the last year, dreaming and planning.”

Dr. A looked at me and let a silence settle between us for several beats before the hint of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Oh, Kenya has been hanging out on the map for thousands of years."

My gut told me what was coming. I imagined him raising his thumb and forefinger, a pin held between them and poised over the balloon he was about to pop—the one I'd chased for the last year, dreaming and planning.

"I predict it'll be there for thousands more." He paused, no longer smiling. "You?

years past my surgery. Sitting in Dr. A's exam room that morning my safari escaped my grasp with the thundering speed of a wildebeest migration. Days before I'd have left for my canceled trip I instead spent nearly twelve hours in the OR, face down on a table and locked into a head vice as they opened the back of my skull and excised my tumor, followed by nearly a month of inpatient rehab.

I'll find the song in my music library and play it while writing passages of my in-progress memoir. Each time it puts me back

in the car with my brother, crossing the Tobin Bridge. I feel again the August heat and the icy fear that came with my third and final opinion.

When I hear the song's opening swell I visualize a gliding bird, wings outstretched against a blue sky, dipping and climbing. I wait for the drum's quiet, staccato pitter, the three or four guitar chords, the twitter of cymbals. They rise

together and launch the lyrics . . . and I'm back there. Window down, tires bumping along the bridge, a river glittering in the distance. Listening to a song about the fragility of circumstances—of life—on a car radio, its message shifting from delight to devastation.

Feeling the shift in my own reality as I recognized what waited for me. 🎧



Ann Kathryn Kelly is writing a memoir about living with a bleeding brain tumor that went undiagnosed for forty years and the day-long surgery to remove it. She lives in the Seacoast region of New Hampshire, works in the technology industry, and volunteers with a nonprofit that serves community members living with brain injury. Connect with Ann on Twitter: [@annkelly](https://twitter.com/annkelly).