

Scene 0: *January 6, 2009*

4:00 am. Time to go. The hospital was six miles away and I was giving us ninety minutes to get there. There'd be no showing up late for this appointment.

I felt calm. Days later Wayne would mention how bizarre that had seemed to him: "If it had been me, I'd have totally lost it." But I had made it! The next time I woke, I would *know*. Or I wouldn't wake. Either way, no more waiting and wondering and imagining. Only a few more hours now and I would be asleep.

We took the A train to Columbus Circle and hailed a cab from there, because I was fretting over the time. Only fifty minutes left to get all the way to the East side! Columbus Circle was dark and deserted. I hadn't known that Columbus Circle was theoretically capable of being dark and deserted.

We entered Weill Cornell Medical Center's lobby shortly after five, about 30 minutes early. A security guard was the sole life form inside. No one was permitted into Surgery for a few minutes yet, so I tossed my backpack on a chair and we absorbed our surroundings. The lobby is strikingly handsome. Old gothic windows extend 30 feet high, offering an expansive view of the circular cobblestone drive and greenery that laces the sidewalk. Marble walls and arches stand so tall that you have to lean back and tilt your head up to be certain there's a ceiling. The grandness of the space painted a comforting face onto the massive medical complex to which I was about to entrust my existence.

A tiny prayer room lies in a nook off the lobby, and I walked in to call my parents. I held the cell on my right; I wanted to hear them one last time through my right ear. Mom and Dad were on their way out the door to catch a 6:00 bus into the city. I'd be in the operating room by the time they arrived. They asked me in concerned tones how I was feeling. I said I would just about kill for a bagel and peanut butter. Fasting was a prerequisite for surgery, and the bakery sign down the hall was taunting me. I told them I was listening to them through my right ear one last time. That seemed to make them sad, and I regretted having mentioned it. I told them I loved them and that I'd see them tonight, or at least that they'd see me, and wished them an uneventful trip.

Wayne and I entered the perioperative wing around 5:30. Following a technician's instructions, I donned baggy pajamas, zipped my heavy winter clothing into plastic bags, and joined Wayne in the waiting room. The waiting room was a small white space looking out onto the circular drive. Twenty chairs lined the walls. Four patients sat with one or two family members each. On my right sat two middle-aged women who looked apprehensive and unhappy. In front of me sat a man in his 60's who talked in disconnected non-sentences to a woman who pretended to understand him. To my left sat a girl of about 18 with her mother and friend-or-sister. The girl seemed in good spirits, joking with her young comrade, while her mom attempted to laugh with them but unsuccessfully masked anxiety. I wondered what they were all there for. I thought how silly it was that we weren't speaking to each other.

A technician came in to summon one of the women on my right, and the man who had accompanied her took out a copy of Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged and began reading. I thought, *Wayne gave me that book. I should start reading it. Tomorrow. I'll start reading it tomorrow.* The woman returned a few minutes later with an IV pole attached to her, and sat down to wait some more. I realized that we were each going

to be prepped before our operations. *Okay, so now there'll have to be a tomorrow. Because when else am I gonna have time to read Atlas Shrugged?*

When my turn came, the technician led me to a small exam room in which resided a friendly nurse named Asaye. Her accent prompted me to ask whether she was from Ghana, to which she replied yes. That sent us off to a rosy start: I had taught in Ghana after graduating from college. We talked about a village we had both visited while she began my IV drip. She said,

“This is the hard part – for me. Seeing you *before* your surgery.”

“Oh, when I’m a nervous wreck?”

“Exactly.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to break down or anything.”

She didn’t answer; she watched my expression as she taped the IV line to my skin.

The anesthesiologist’s assistant came in to ask me whether I had questions or concerns. I did, but none that anyone could alleviate, so I said no. Dr. Selesnick, my neurotologist, came in and told me that I needed to specify which side of my head they were supposed to cut open. Joking, I said, “You tell me!” He replied in a no-bullshit tone, “No, *you* have to tell *me*.” Immediately appreciating the safety guard that this practice ensured, I said, “Right.” He asked me to accompany the verbal direction with a physical gesture. I hesitated. Ever since learning that I was utterly ignorant of the goings-on up inside my own skull, I’d had shaky confidence in my sanity. *Is this my right? Is my right everyone else’s right? Even if this was my right when they took the MRI, is it still my right today? Hurry! Decide! Quick, before he realizes you’ve gone insane and refuses to operate.* I pointed to my right side; I felt pretty sure about it. Dr. Selesnick initialed the right side of my neck with a black marker. His “SS” buoyed my confidence: at least the cutting-open part would now probably come off without a hitch. I thanked him, I think. I hope. I don’t remember.

I wheeled the IV pole and myself back to the waiting room. Wayne and I surveyed my new appendage. I looked at the needle disappearing into my arm, at the plastic bag dripping clear fluid into my vein. I said, “I don’t like this thing.” Wayne nodded: “I wouldn’t like it either.” I started making fun of it. Wayne looked tired and blank, everyone around me looked ill or scared or too bewildered to care, except for the 18-year-old girl who was giggling as though her IV were delivering a generous dose of pot directly to her brain. I made fun of my IV pole. I made fun of the initials on my neck. I made fun of the pattern of tiles on the floor. Everything was funny. Waiting voluntarily at 6:30 in the morning in a room of silent strangers with a metal pole taped to your blood supply and a neck tattoo that designated which side of your skull you preferred to have cut open. Think about it. It’s hilarious.

Wayne laughed with me.

To commemorate the occasion, I jotted a few lines on the tiny notepad I carry in my coat pocket. I wrote about muffins and bagels and bed.

Tomorrow tomorrow tomorrow tomorrow tomorrow tomorrow.

Shortly before 7:30, the technician called my name again. Wayne and I stood and walked into the hall. He took my bags. I held him close. I had already thought about the way I was going to leave him, and now I smiled, honestly and also purposefully: *If this turns out to be the last time he sees me, This is how he must remember me.* Our brief words chiseled themselves into my memory.

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

“Will you please eat breakfast?”

“Okay.”

“I’ll see you later.”

“Okay.”

I was pretty sure I would. He didn’t seem as sure. He seemed scared. I watched him walk away, thinking about how much I loved him and hoping he would eat breakfast. Now I had the easy job. He was about to wait and wonder some more.

Then Dr. Stieg, my neurosurgeon, was greeting me, holding a disposable cup of coffee and a broad smile. He asked how my vacation had been. It wouldn’t have been fair of me to say, “Stressful as all hell”, so I said something like, “Oh, fine, saw family. How was yours?” He’d spent time with his kids upstate. Sounded relaxing. I was glad they’d all taken vacations just before my operation. Small talk. Small talk all the way to the operating room doors. I marveled at its ludicrous premise. I was small-talking with the guy who was about to drill open my head.

So how were the holidays?

Fine, usual family stuff. And yours?

Oh, great. Got away from the city. Nice break.

That’s good.

So I’ll be drilling your skull open now, okay?

Yep, okay. Hope you get a chance to finish your coffee first.

Oh, sure thing.

The thoughtfulness of his greeting also startled me. It seemed brave of him. He couldn’t know whether I would disintegrate into hysterics upon saying hello, but he had chanced it.

Then he asked how I was feeling. I said okay, worried about my face. He said they’d save my face. He said that he assumed my right-side hearing was gone by now? I said no, I could talk on the phone with it. His expression said, “That’s weird” and he said I never would again. I said I knew.

Just outside the operating room doors, the anesthesiologist introduced herself. Asked me questions, handed me more papers to sign, which required me to specify two more times which side of my head they were supposed to cut open. That was three times total. What a fail-safe system! The papers asked, “Now, you’re sure about this, right? You’re really really sure?” I signed that I was sure.

Standing there by the closed double doors, I glanced at a few clusters of people nearby talking together, Dr. Selesnick and Dr. Stieg among them. All these people were about to help me remain alive. I longed

to walk up to them and say, “Thank you in advance for whatever you’re able to do.” There obviously was time, but I didn’t move. I don’t know why. Maybe I was shy? Maybe I didn’t want to screw them up? I don’t know what it’s like to operate on a live person. Maybe it’s hard to talk to them like human beings before slicing them open. I figured they were each doing whatever they needed to do to work best, and I wasn’t going to distract them.

Waiting, I balanced on one foot, the sole of one foot resting against the inner knee of the other leg. Probably for something to do. I don’t remember what I felt or thought. Not fear or anxiety. It was something muted. I think my brain just didn’t have enough time to figure out how to feel about such an alien situation. I had just signed permission, three times in a row, for near-strangers to stop my natural breathing, cut my head open, and remove the thing by my brain that was trying to kill it. All I had left to do was walk to the bed and lie down. It was not scary. I had no idea what it was.

The anesthesiologist’s assistant led me into the OR. I was curious but tried not to look around; didn’t want to give my imagination any more ammunition than it already had. I saw a white room lit by fluorescent bulbs. Everything else – the bed, the tables – seemed white too. I lay down on the “bed”, which was a long horizontal contraption with poles sticking out of it. The anesthesiologist smiled down at me. She seemed kind. Fine wrinkles on her face reassured me that she was old enough to be competent. She told me that they would administer Valium to relax me and then give me the anesthetic. I said okay. I hope I thanked her. I watched her face above me as she began focusing on some mechanical function of the bed. Then a fuzzy tan blob said, “It’s over.”

I wonder what I missed.