

A True Story

In Honor of Dr. Thomas Pearson on the fifth anniversary of my cadaveric kidney transplant at Emory University Hospital, February 2, 2006.

1 The Phone Call

“The phone is for you, Kayjoy. Hurry up! It is Emory University Hospital Kidney Transplant...!” My heart skips a beat. I sign myself: *“In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... Lord, Thy will be done. Please let me have this one.”*

“Sister Kathleenjoy Cooper?”

“Yes?”

“This is Kathy, the Emory University Hospital Kidney Transplant Coordinator. We may have an organ for you.”

There are 100,000 people in the United States waiting on lists for a kidney transplant, and they may have an organ *for me*. So far, I have lived through about 4,992 hours on the life support known as hemodialysis, and they may have an organ *for me*. I am painfully aware that an average of eighteen people die each day from the lack of available organs for transplant in the States. It is cause of even deeper sorrow to me to think of people in kidney failure in other countries.

The Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the congregation of Catholic women religious to which I belong has a presence in 26 countries. Of these, five European nations, England, Ireland, Spain, France and Italy, and in the Orient, only Japan have transplant services for a person of average or less income, as I am. Our thousands of friends in other countries in Asia, Central and South America and Africa had better remain healthy or there is little hope for them on their own.

My thoughts wander this world and return to my home country: even here every twelve minutes another person is added to the national transplant waiting list. It is calculated that there are about fifteen thousand deaths in the United States through which organs could be donated at the time of death. Yet, only about six thousand persons become organ donors.

And out of this statistical morass, Emory University Hospital may have an organ *for me*. Is it possible?

2 The Wait

This must be the 6th or 7th time in my eight years on dialysis *this time*, that the crucial call has reached our convent in Miami, Florida. This afternoon the call is from Atlanta, Georgia. But there have been calls from hospital transplant departments in Florida and Pennsylvania. With every prior call: the high of anticipation. The answer from centers across the States after the necessary pre-surgical testing: “Not this time.” The low of resignation. Drawing breath for the courage to wait some more. Drawing breath to tell those sitting with me by the phone. Drawing breath to be able to go to another day (and who knows how many more years?) of dialysis—and

keep my spirits up and my body fighting. The fight is necessary. One has to be in shape to undergo major surgery within hours of a phone call.

Kathy from Emory continues. After answering the few brief questions which ascertain that I have the health and still want an organ transplant, I hang up the phone, as breathless as though I had run to it from down the block. With my community of four other sisters we begin the suspenseful 8-hour wait. These loving sisters have been through this before with me. They have come to want this organ as much as I do. We mix prayer, chatter, silence. Eight hours. Someone goes online to examine flight possibilities. I head towards my room to pack--just in case. Each one moves on with her life in different areas of the house. The time goes quickly; we are used to this.

The phone again. This time I pick it up on the first ring. The sisters rush towards the living room where I am.

“Sister?”

“Yes, here I am.”

“The crushing and too familiar reply: “We’re sorry. Not this time. But keep your courage up. We will keep looking for an organ for you.”

I swallow my tears, as though they were mixed with a scalding cup of coffee. The 7th disappointment in a row, the eight long years of dialysis. *They sting—the tears, the treatments, the no.* The community can tell by my face. I cannot hide it. One by one, they hug me silently as I bite my lip hard. I turn away to move nearer to Him in chapel. Each one follows. No words this time. Just heads bowed in resignation.

Twenty-five minutes pass. The phone again. We had informed all our sisters in our communities across the United States that I was on alert for a kidney transplant. It must be one of the houses calling. I had been stalling in making those difficult phone calls, which I always want to take upon myself. With a fine intuition for the moment, the community lets me get the phone.

“Sister Cooper?” Funny. that’s not how we address each other. This is not one of the nuns from another state.

“Yes,” I sigh, trying to keep my voice steady.

3 The Turnaround

“Dr. Thomas Pearson, head of the department of transplant surgery here at Emory, wants you to know that we are willing to give you this organ. It is high risk for you. However, Doctor realizes that if we do not try this time, you may never get an organ... and there are protections we can offer.”

Am I dreaming? I never heard that it worked this way! The transplant coordinator goes on to explain the risks and requirements: plasma pheresis, megadoses of medications prior to and after transplantation, etc.

She ends by asking: “Do you understand? What do you think?”

What do I think! Of course I want this organ. At all cost I want this organ. How can I thank Dr. Pearson and his team for this humane consideration of a woman whose fuller ministerial life has been on hold for eight years. (This time!) I will thank him, I will thank the

donor family, with every breath I draw, with every work I do for another. *It will all be done in their names!*

“Everybody!” I let out a yelp. The sisters come from all sides.

“It was Emory. I am going! I am going! Call the airline. Call Sister Sagrario” (our Unites States leader residing in Pennsylvania).

“I’d better look at my suitcase. My I.D. My medical papers. Don’t forget to call my dialysis unit tomorrow. Someone please give me dollar bills for tips at the airport. I’m not supposed to eat anything. Who wants to eat? I am getting a kidney transplant! Let’s go to chapel first before anything.”

4 God and I and My Donor and Family

I am on the last flight out of Fort Lauderdale for the day. It is not a dream; I really am on my way to Atlanta, Gerogia, where I will catch the airport bus directly to Emory University Hospital.

I am enveloped in a quiet calm and sheer delight in God’s goodness, in the human caring at Emory, in the thought of a person or the family who has donated “my” organ. I cannot help but be drawn during this three-hour flight toward their grief and generosity. I lift them towards our Creator with hope that they may realize the significance of the choice they have made in their time of loss.

The travel having gone smoothly by air and by bus, I step out onto Clifton Road and look up in awe once more at this world famous research facility in the Peach State. I slowly allow myself to take in the fact that this university hospital has the same steps to the corner front entrance that I remember, the same lobby where I have sat watching human dramas enacted by others involved in sickness and health.

I am by myself as I open a broad door and head toward an elevator. But I feel that I am traveling with every sister in my congregation. Handmaids in both the USA and our Rome, Italy headquarters were notified immediately. The message in English, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Japanese, French: “Kayjoy Cooper of America is going to receive her second kidney transplant. Please pray!” The replies by phone and fax: “Como no! “Chiaro!” “Contigo!””Avanti!” “We’re with Kayjoy; tell her we are praying.”

I walk up to the desk around a corner of the sixth floor transplant department of the hospital and announce: “I am Kathleenjoy Cooper”. With determination I click into place the handle of my carry-on case, as if to say: “I am here to stay”. I hear myself state in an even voice: “I just flew in from Philadelphia for a cadaveric kidney transplant”. I grin like a kid reaching for an ice cream cone. My entire life is about to change. For better or for worse. And here I stand, peacefully ready for an unknown future.

“We have been waiting for you, Sister.” Efficiently, with a caring professionalism that I remember from other visits to Emory, everyone goes into action. Before I can think about it much more, on February 2, 2006, the surgery is accomplished. I am a new woman. I have the

organ of a person younger than me. “May it not die until I do!”, I proclaim gleefully with thanksgiving.

5 Tell Me My Future

Awakening to a new me, I begin to ask many questions. “Do I *have* a transplant? How is my transplant working? What can you tell me of the donor; I want to thank the family.”

“When can I expect my first-year rejection?”

A rejection episode, I can tell you by experience, is like slow descent into a freezing hot hell. You feel sick enough to want to die. Your very high fever makes you shake like the ready-to-blow window screens I have seen in hurricanes in Miami. You are dizzy and although you are lying down, you don’t know which way is up. In a hurricane, the screens expand and pull on their fragile aluminum frames urging all to fly with the wind. In a rejection episode, your body urges everything around it to let it go. It tries to shake off gravity, to shake off life, such a misery of heat and chill and ache. Then they come with the ice blanket and cold like lead is laid on top of the cold heat within.

The body does not want this kidney-invader. The body knows what belongs to it and what does not. Science with megadoses of chemical deception fights the good fight. The person in rejection is in between, the battleground where science and bodily common sense instilled by the Creator struggle for dominance

But that delirium pertains to a past story.

This time nothing happens. Nothing. No fight, no surrender, no desire to die to leave the rejection agony behind. This time in Atlanta in the lovely early spring days, only slow, steady return to self, return to strength and readiness to move out. In my case, fortunately science and a thousand prayers win. The dear Creator once more defers to human effort, human work to confound the sense the body carries within. And I am here to tell the story. I am here with my five year old allograft intact. An alien organ from another human body is mine.

I live the principle of earth recycling of the highest order. I live and move and have my being because my lifeline of still pulsating flesh the size of a fist was ransomed at the death of another. Scientists fought for its life and won.

Within a month I leave our Atlanta convent to return to Miami. I am strong. I am eager. I am ready to work at our church and in my counseling and spiritual direction practice. The welcome home is like Christmas, New Year’s Eve and a surprise birthday party all rolled into one. *Fiesta time* in Miami!

That surprise birthday party is possibly the best analogy of all. Surprise that after eight years, the transplant community did not give up on me, and kept calling. Surprise that test results which seemed to eliminate me from consideration for a specific organ could be turned around to become a challenge for the medical/surgical team and a Gift of Life for me. Surprise birthday

party, for indeed, every day since that February 2nd has been the surprising *first day of the rest of my life.*

Thank you, Emory. Thank you, Donor Family. Thank you, Scientific Community. Thank you, Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus world-wide. From dozens of nations, your messages of encouragement reminded me that you are *sisters* in fact and in deed. "*How great is Your Name, oh Lord our God, over all the earth!*"

Friends, are you carrying an organ donor card? I am.

No, this kidney will not be recycled.

Yet, because there is such a huge need, I offer any other parts of my body which can give others more health than they have. I want to give back at my death any of this Precious Human Body with which our Creator has gifted us for a time. Please give someone a second chance.

Don't take your organs to heaven; heaven knows we need them here.

I am living proof.

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