

Finalist, Fiction

**Brave and in Good Spirits**

by Michael Tesauro

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The point of the Posterior Fossa decompression surgery was to give the brain a little space. Of course there was much more to this major surgery than simply making room for the brain in a crowded skull, but she told people the easier answer when asked why she had buzzed her head.

People, as she had come to find out, were curious. A woman at the coffee shop asked her if she was a lesbian. Questions like these are not commonplace between strangers, so it could not be said what the woman's aim was; the answer received was "yeah, I lick tons of pussy."

She was surprised that she had said such a thing, but the woman had it coming. Because who asks that, she wondered. How could people be so brusque?

No one considered that her brain might be herniating against the top portion of her spine. Nor that two small, unwanted beings called syringes grew in her spinal column, threatening future plans to walk, procreate or dance ballet. These were the things that gawkers did not interpret from her number two guard buzz cut. People saw one of two things: cancer patient, lesbian. Like I give a shit, she said, let them stare. She let them.

When she first discovered that a small portion of head would be shaved for surgery, she thought a standard men's Ivy League haircut would look good; tapered sides and a longer top, much like the Anderson Coopers of the world. Yet, without silver hair and the chance of infection (say 30%), she chose to shore it off in one sitting. At the Aveda salon, she booked a session to be held in the private booth. There, her hair was braided into two, large pieces and chopped. The stylist chose not to forewarn her. People tend to break down just before the maiden cut, making everything worse.

Initially, she asked her husband what his opinion was on the matter. He was null about the subject, saying if they had to shave some of it fine, she could wear the rest in a top bun. At times, he seemed reserved and suspect about the forthcoming procedure entirely. A top bun, this was his answer. He often stared at her shock red hair. He even touched it in a mute,

perverse way.

While she insisted her husband was aloof to the world outside himself, he cried when they thought she had Multiple Sclerosis. That was a possibility before the final Chiari-1, syrinx combo. And after he arrived from work with a shaved head, albeit the same day her own head was stripped of its former bright redness, he later complained that he looked like a skinhead and took to wearing a hat.

He did help with the other necessary preparations before the surgery. When she took up with the local synagogue, he accompanied her there twice. Both times he made jokes about gold coins and complained that his yarmulke was ill fitting. But these could be chalked up to his ignorance as a Gentile. Nevertheless, she planted a spiritual foundation within the sacred Inner Temple of the Congregation Emanuel at the Business Park on Ford Street.

She had other ends to deal with beyond hair and cultural heritage. There was the issue of choices, some of which she could not make if things went wrong during the surgery. Once, she explained to her husband that “wrong” is a 20-30% possible outcome of the procedure. And in this “wrong” there were things like brain damage, nerve damage, death (to her not nearly the worst of wrong), pseudomeningocele, meningitis, hemorrhaging, tetraplegia (this being the worst), or nothing at all happening and the surgery would be useless.

If these possible wrongs became reality, to whom would the choices be dealt to? She signed over all of them to her mother. For it would be her mother who would choose to “pull the plug” if there was a plug, or to end life support, or to let them take her organs. Her husband would be incapable of these things. As a crybaby, she knew he would be clouded with poor judgment if the gavel lay to him. If the surgery resulted in “wrongs” he would receive her life insurance policy in a trust. The money would be used to pay off the house, to see to the remainder of the bills, to let him stew in self-pity.

After she and the doctors conversed the “wrongs” of the surgery, the rights were the push she needed to decide on a surgery date. The pro’s of surgery were reassuring, if only slightly. Since her malfunction existed in the 1 category, meaning the skull had formed around the brain’s misshape, surgical decompression offered the chance at previous luxuries. She could dance ballet again, she could continue at the local Crossfit, she could once again feel the tips of her fingers and toes. These were only possibilities, but these possibilities outweighed

everything else.

She visited first a neurosurgeon at Kaiser Fontana, then a specialist in Phoenix, then finally the head Chiari surgeon at Kaiser Sunset. All three men agreed that surgery was the next step. Equally, buzzing her head was another consensus between the three. Her husband suggested a fourth opinion on the matter.

Her neurosurgeon at Kaiser Fontana, a man who went by Goldenberg, was elected to perform the surgery. He was considered a veteran in the arena of C-1 laminectomies, Arnold-Chiari Malformation and Posterior Fossa decompressions, and Syringomyelia corrective surgeries with 20 surgeries under his belt. She liked the odds of being his 21. She also liked that he was Jewish and his name, she said, was double Jewish. She explained that both the prefix and the suffix of this doctor's name seemed to indicate that he and her, on a greater plane, had a fundamental connection in Judaism.

At 4:45 on the day of surgery, her mother picked her up from the house. Her husband walked her to the car. He cried in a pathetic manner, the hushed snuffle that some men tend to do when they attempt to hold in tears. She assured him it would be all right. This was required, for she was the levelheaded of the two. Surgery or not, she had to be calm. In two hours they would be opening her skull. They being Goldenberg and his team, then another set of they would care for her, then another set of they would visit her in the hospital. Teams of people would gravitate around her. She described this as overwhelming; she as the nucleus of attention, of scalpels, of staples in the neck.

Her father, who met them at the hospital, was struck with terror in the waiting room. And when he started crying, an instance she considered a rarity, her mother directed him to leave. He exited quietly. After he was gone, the head anesthesiologist tended to her, then the team of resident doctors stopped in, Goldenberg assured her success, and at some point after all this, she awoke hours later and vomited so profusely that the small incisions on around her head reopened and bled outright. There were voices in her room; the presence of her mother, her husband and machines. Her first words post surgery were this: go away.

Goldenberg said the surgery went "better than expected" and was "without complications". Her husband considered these terms to be vagaries at best. Later, he would come to know the realities about the surgery; it took five hours to open the lower portion of the skull, physically

remove the intervertebral disc closest to the herniation, give the brain the room it needed and put things back together, another hour and a half was spent sewing and stapling the four and one half inch incision that ran from the bare middle of neck to the pointed back slope of her head.

The neurosurgeon, his team of residents and the head anesthesiologist all remarked she was strong, recovery looked optimal and quick and that she made the right choice to do it then and not later. Various medical professionals in the post-neurosurgery ward, including faceless and unmoved orderlies and nurses, all commented to her visitors that hers was the right attitude. They said that she was brave and in good spirits; that it was nice to treat someone so young and healthy. But inside, somewhere amongst the newly open space cleared by surgery, rituals, paperwork, prayers from various religious groups, support, marital ebb and flow; somewhere in the new space cleared after all these things had passed, she worried the feeling in her fingertips would not return. She worried, she told her husband, about her hands; they were her fingers after all. What would become of them? She worried.