Bright Lights

Surgical lights are specifically designed to not cast shadows. Surgeries are already mind numbingly complicated as is, with hundreds of moving parts and shiny metal tools and dozens of hands holding, reaching, clamping, handing, passing, and checking, but not one shadow will ever cross my body. I've always been fascinated with surgery; the precision, the detail, the pressure, the eerie calm. I was made for it too, with a scientific mind, an eye for detail, a strong-willed nature, and a perfectionist streak a mile wide. The only reason I'm not married to the library, studying to be an orthopedic surgeon, is my strong distaste for blood. My hands feel tingly, my legs shake, and shadows creep in and out of my vision. I wasn't cut out to perform under the bright lights. But that doesn't matter anyway. People like me aren't surgeons; we can't tie surgical knots and the sutures we throw one handed are jagged and clumsy across the slashed practice pig skin. Hell, we can't even wear gloves on both hands.

Nonetheless, I'm still fascinated with anatomy, as if my brain is drawn to the body; learning all of its complexities and secrets; how and why things work the way they do.

Some Lovers Try Positions That They Can't Handle. The mnemonic for the eight bones of the wrist. Plus the five bones of the hand, plus the fourteen that make up the fingers. That makes twenty-seven bones total. If the human body has a grand total of 206 bones, then mine only has 179. Eighty-seven percent; barely a B+. The hand also has two major arteries and two major veins, so that the near thirty muscles used to make hundreds of movements per day can continue to function. These muscles are controlled by two major nerves that allow for tiny, precise, and calculated tasks such as buttoning a shirt or typing, or large, forceful tasks like opening a bottle or carrying a grocery bag.

Under those shadowless lights, gowned, gloved, and hooded figures move quietly and coldly, motions efficient and precise like a well-oiled machine as they attach arteries, veins, tendons, nerves, and skin, making my body less and less my own with each fusion and surgical knot. Building my body back to 100%. A real-life Frankenstein.

Scott Kozin is one of those people who's age is impossible to guess. He could as easily be thirty as sixty. The only hint at his age is the glint of wisdom in his eye, and the peppered grey dotting his hair and beard. He has a calm demeanor, a quiet, soothing voice, and a confident but gentle touch. He's the chief of staff at the one of the premier pediatric orthopedic hospitals in the country and is one of the pioneers of the hand transplant procedure, but to me, he has always just felt like one of those uncles that I see once or twice a year. Our conversations range from sports to music to school, and he has always been another fatherly figure in my life. Every time he walks in the room, *have you been working out? How much are you lifting now? You look great big guy.* Watching videos of me, via my mom, as I perform in karate tournaments and play my personally-customized, on-of-one trombone in one of the top jazz bands in the state. So, it is hard to imagine him standing over my anesthetized body, scalpel and saw in hand. Taking my body away from me, but giving me freedom.

There have been less than five hundred hand transplants preformed in history, around the globe, and only a portion of them are deemed clinically successful. Braving the risks, the months under the bright, sterile lights of the ICU and the surgical rehab center,

and the post operation medication that gradually eat away at my body, do I choose to be etched in history that way, or continue to make a make for myself as an individual.

Red pill or blue pill.

NFL linebacker Shaquem Griffin. Legendary Yankees pitcher Jim Abbott, who threw one of only thirteen no-hitters in Yankees history. Viral college basketball phenom Emmanuel Hansel. Veterans, athletes, children, and everyday people. A community of people touched by God; put in a position where we are forced to embrace struggle. You can't run from it when it's a part of you. A transplant feels like getting up and running away from the struggle, like throwing in the towel and saying I quit, like abandoning all of the hard work and determination and resourcefulness and perseverance that has come to define me, like giving up on myself. The second I change my body, I betray the community. I have no chance to emulate the role models I have always idolized and exemplify the grit of our community in working toward my own goals. I'll be a traitor; a forever cop out in the eyes of everyone who looks like me and looks up to me. I also betray the people who encourage me. When a task seemed so impossible; so insurmountable that I can't do it for myself, I do it for them. *I insisted on showing them what I could do*. I was not fueled by the low expectations Jim Abbott was referring to, but rather by love and cheering hands and kind watching eyes.

I was not going to be on Sportscenter, or ESPN, or Red Zone, or Instagram feeds. Even though all of my role models were athletes, I had accepted that I had a different path in life. However, I wanted to touch lives, especially of people who were similar to me; unseen, underrepresented, and unable. In doing that, I had to not throw in the towel, but rather own my disability and the experiences it had given me. No relationships could be cultivated, trust could be built, or perspectives changed under the cold, bright lights of the operating room, however. Operating rooms were for quick fixes only. In and out. But that's not me. The people who changed my life were my physical therapists; blessed with the gift of compassion and curiosity. They wanted me to succeed as much as I did. The impact they had was immense and immeasurable. Without them I would be without confidence and without hope. I want to do the same for some other little kid, who feels he was dealt a bad, unforgiving hand. A kid who feels like life is out to get him and that everything is unfair; a kid who questions *why me*. Who better to help them than someone who has walked in their shoes. I want to help them feel like they belong in this world. I need to be successful for them.

I wrote my college essay about tying shoes. Four years old, sitting on the rough, speckled carpet floor of my family room. Mom across from me, her shoe in her hand, demonstrated over and over how to cross the laces, make the bunny ear, and tuck him in; motivating me with a bag of tantalizing Swedish Fish and gently coaching, encouraging, and tweaking; her gentle voice calming as I failed again and again. I just could not wrap my head around it. The more I tried, the more I just wanted to rip the shoes off my feet and throw them. I watched at her demonstrations again and again; facing her, behind her, and from the side, but I just could not comprehend.

Yet I was resilient. I was determined to be self-sufficient and independent and would not let anything stand in my way, so I sat on that floor for hours, the carpet leaving red, irritated marks on my skin, and tried repeatedly to tie the shoes, coming up with as

many different ways as I possibly could think of. I finally figured it out, using my left hand to pin the laces against the shoe as the right one did all of the work and made all of the loops by itself. Each hand played its own role. One limited and lifeless, the other pulling all of the weight.

Things that no one else has to give a second thought often make me pause and think. Folding laundry, eating while driving, carrying things while opening a door, scrubbing in the shower, shaving my face and body, taking things out of the oven, typing. All of these tasks are second nature for people with two hands; so autonomous and unconsciously driven that no brain space is taken up thinking about these daily actions. But to me, every task is a process, a trial and error, a distinct methodology that has been developed and refined over a lifetime. In a deep, dark corner of my mind, I desperately long to be like them. I long to not have to carry Shout Wipes with me for when I spill bottled drinks on my shirt while unscrewing the cap, because I have to hold it against my chest to open it. I long to not have coffee stains running down my sweatshirt from pinning the cup against me with my left hand while checking my phone or opening a door. I long to not feel the hot rush of anxiety and embarrassment as I juggle bags or objects while trying to open a door. The longing to be normal continues to nag at me.

My body has accomplished incredible things already, so why would I change it. These same mismatched hands have twirled the bo staff for hundreds of hours and won national karate championships on big stages and under shining lights across the country, while earning three black belts as well. They have played every sport under the sun. They've loved, embraced, carried, held, and cared for the people that I love. And they have lifted hundreds of pounds of clanging iron, breaking down and building up my body again and again until I finally like the image before me in the mirror, under the bright lights of my bathroom. In the words of Shaquem Griffin, *I think I've been doing pretty well with showing people what I really can do*. But I'm still defined as one handed. I was the one-handed soccer player on my club and high school team, no matter how well I played. I was the one-handed lacrosse player for my school as well. Every time I step on the course, I'm a one-handed golfer, no matter what score I shoot. I'm the guy with one hand lifting in the corner of the gym. And now, when I work with patients or train athletes, I'm the one-handed physical therapy student. No matter where I go, I just can't shake that label.

Wearing a prosthetic arm is like trying to walk on stilts. Uncoordinated and unwieldy. Your body is still yours, but barely so. You're not completely there; not able to interact with your surroundings. In my case, not able to feel the cool iron bar, the abrasiveness of the rusted knurling, the rubber grips of the machines. I'm interacting with the world through a contraption of plastic and metal and carbon fiber, and no matter how many people comment on how cool it looks, I just desire to have a flesh hand that can feel and touch and build callouses. And that doesn't slide off. As much as prosthetics have allowed me opportunities that I would not be afforded otherwise, they continue to be the bane of my existence. A double-edged sword. I'm on version four. Four rounds of sitting in endless appointments, getting casted, measured, marked, and felt, then many more visits tweaking, trying, trimming, molding, and adjusting. All for it not to work. All for me to slam it on the ground when I am still not able to hang from a bar, as it continuously slips off despite the professional-grade sticky tack I use. I leave the gym full of frustration and

sadness as my place of sanctuary is gradually ruined. Still not comfortable in my own skin. Always wanting more.

Being special is a large burden to bear. On one hand, there is the anxiety and frustration that accompanies finding solutions to tasks, and the feeling of inferiority when I look at someone doing something that I long to do. But on the flip side, the hint of jealousy and hurt pride in people's eyes when I prove them wrong. And the gratification in my heart when I finally accomplish something I've been working towards. But more than anything else, the simple one liner comments. *Hey, keep up the good work*. *You're looking great*. *Can you come spot me? You're really inspiring*. *You make me want to work harder*. I don't think I'd be able to touch as many lives with two hands as I do with one.