

The Thunderstorm That Saved My Life

By Vanessa Garza

In our seven years of marriage, Ryan and I always agreed on the “big stuff.” We agreed on the daycare the kids attended when I went back to work after my maternity leave (after visiting at least a dozen and definitely not the one smelling like pee). We agreed we would transition them to a Montessori pre-school when they turned three, where they’d grow in independence. And we agreed on our first home, the red brick colonial with white shutters and the awkward steep driveway that we’d eventually use as a makeshift sledding hill with plastic toboggans. And our first dog: We both were drawn to the sleepy one hiding under a patio chair, away from the rest of his pack running wild. He would be ours.

But that changed in a moment at a neurosurgeon’s office in San Francisco, not in Boston, where we live. When the doctor turned toward the computer, his swivel chair squeaked like a dying bird. My eyes followed, toward the oversized screen loaded with hundreds of images of my brain. I tried to keep my face and body language as impassive and sterile as the 10x10 room where we sat, an exam room with fluorescent lights, pale-yellow walls and the stinging scent of anti-bacterial gel infused with alcohol, where the doctor would explain my options.

The white paper on the patient bed crinkled and cracked as I squirmed uncomfortably. Our children, four- and two-years old then, crowded my feet at the end of the bed. They shared an iPad with a red protective case and wore headphones to watch a show. Hers were pink. His were green. Without childcare that day, they had to accompany Ryan and me to the appointment, a scenario we would have avoided, if possible. But some things are unavoidable.

I looked away from the computer screen toward Ryan. He sat on the metal guest chair pressed up against the wall dressed in jeans, a button down, and a Patagonia gray vest, staring at the computer too, but his perspective was blocked.

He didn’t know what it felt like to be sitting on that bed, like an inmate on Death Row. Those images were *my* brain with the big lesion on it, not his. But he looked uncomfortable, and a little angry, like a guy whose just been told his bride, the mother of his kids, needs multiple brain surgeries to remove the dark venomous spider-looking killer on the images. Neither one of us needed a medical degree to know that what we were looking at was dangerous.

The doctor explained I needed multiple brain surgeries to remove the arteriovenous malformation, or it could kill me someday; the timing unpredictable. But brain surgery is risky too, he clarified, not something to rush into, especially for a lesion this large, rare and complex latched on to the inside of my brain. My brain could explode on the operating table. Or I could end up blind, without memory, unable to speak, or without motor functions if something went awry during surgery. The list of bad outcomes continued and ended at death, the death warning before several brain surgeries.

“Doc, when’s the soonest appointment to schedule these surgeries?” Ryan blurted out as casually, as the way he might ask a friend about grabbing a beer. “I’d like to do this ASAP and get it over with.”

Wait, what? Slow down!” I looked at Ryan, stunned and betrayed, like he wished me a quick death. “We should talk more first, don’t you think? We should tell our parents. And what about my job? And who’s going to take the kids to school when I’m recovering? Someone will have to take care of me.” At 35, I was used to taking care of myself—*and* taking care of my family. But brain surgery recovery would render me useless for a while, even if everything went perfectly.

And I wasn’t ready to have my brain cut open. The lesion would have to come out eventually; I accepted that. But the doctor said I didn’t have to rush. I wanted the lesion out on my terms, at least on our terms. My gut said to wait a while, check off some bucket list items with the kids, and maybe go to Disney, just in case I died in surgery. His said the opposite: Let’s do this in a hurry. I was scared I wouldn’t wake up from multiple 12-hour brain surgeries or that I’d wake up impaired. He worried that I would die or be impaired because I waited too long or die from anxiety waiting for surgery.

Ryan, ever the calculated husband, checks our bank account dutifully, creates a schedule for our vacations, monitors his carbs, does not make decisions in haste. The last time we bought a couch, he measured the room countless times, marking the floor with green tape, drawing and reconfiguring the layout to ensure the dimensions were perfect to maximize television viewing. But he was signing me up for brain surgery before we could talk more about it, before we could tell the kids and our parents. His reaction felt counterintuitive.

I am typically the one in our relationship quick to make decisions. I bought the first wedding dress I tried on, took the first job offer from college, and drive my car dangerously close to empty. I chaotically prepare our kids’ lunchboxes every morning without taking inventory. Sometimes my methods result in balanced meals. Other times, sweets replace vegetables and salty snacks substitute fruit. But I wasn’t about to make an imprecise decision about cutting open my head even if it meant removing the deadly lesion inside sooner.

While my eyes bubbled with tears and my stomach curdled with rot, my kids attempted to tickle my feet bored with the episode of Bubble Guppies playing on the iPad, unaware of the conversation in the room.

Before sawing open my skull and surgically removing a piece of my brain, I needed to generate questions, check in with our families and jobs, secure childcare, ensure we had our finances, insurance, the kids’ college savings in order. He needed the password to the lone banking account I still had in my name only, even if it only had a few dollars in it. And if I died in surgery, I wasn’t sure how or where I wanted to be laid to rest. And the kids needed new winter boots and snow pants – he needed to know I buy them large to make them last two seasons.

For the first time, I needed Ryan's green tape to measure the impact of brain surgery on our lives, possibly my death. And Ryan was opting for surgery without any preparation.

Nothing was normal that day. There were no glass jars filled with tongue depressors or cotton balls in the exam room. There were no hanging mobiles from the ceiling or colorful maps for my children to admire, like the ones in the pediatrician's office. Neither the disorganized me nor by-the-book Ryan were in that exam room. There were only the images of my brain, two children, a skilled neurosurgeon, and a married couple, the shells of our bodies, unsure how to navigate a life-altering, death-defying decision.

"I recommend you think about this and talk it through as a family over the next few days. *Then* we'll come up with a plan for surgery," the doctor advised.

"Thank you, Dr. We will be in touch with lots of questions, I'm sure." I stared into his blue eyes, then gazed up at his wavy white hair, and thought to myself this man would cut open my brain someday. We'd just have to decide when.

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"It's literally brain surgery, and I'm scared to death. I could die in the operating room. I don't want to rush." I said to Ryan at the Mexican restaurant I chose for an early dinner after the appointment, talking in a weird whisper-yell so the kids wouldn't catch on. He chugged his beer and I guzzled a margarita, licking every last bit of salt from the rim. The kids ate spoonfuls of rice, and I cut up pieces of chicken for them, reaching over the chips and salsa strewn atop a blue and white mosaic table, as if we were having a typical conversation about my co-worker planning her wedding or an annoying client of mine.

"We just want you better soon. We need you healthy as soon as possible."

"I just need a little bit of time to... ." Before I could finish my sentence, I caught a glimpse of the rain starting to fall outside. "Shoot, we should go before it gets worse." We had two small children and no umbrellas and we were five blocks away from our hotel room.

I picked up John, held on to him tight, dodging rain drops the size of tennis balls, and ran recklessly in downtown San Francisco, a city I didn't know too well, except for a couple of work meetings that didn't involve neurosurgeons or kids. He squeezed my neck hard with his small arms and wrapped his legs around my torso, and he cried.

The big black sky felt like it could swallow us whole. It was so wet out I couldn't tell the difference between the lighting strikes in the distance and the headlights of rush hour cars on the street where we ran, both appearing as bolts of electric white from every direction. I ran behind Ryan and our daughter. At 4, she felt safe running while holding her daddy's hand, the safest place in the world to her. But as the booms of thunder and honking horns grew louder, and then hail dropped, he picked her up. We ran as fast as we could until we were safe and dry.

It didn't seem a coincidence we were caught in a torrential storm that night, surely foreshadowing our lives and the chaos multiple brain surgeries would cause. But I didn't know if the storm was the warning I should have surgery immediately, or wait a little bit. No matter the timing, our lives would be disrupted, and I'd feel helpless at times. But I knew a few things: Ryan and I had to be in this together; together, we'd keep our kids safe. I also knew we should have been better prepared for that evening, checking the weather before venturing out without umbrellas and rain jackets, and a plan, especially with children in a city thousands of miles from our home. We knew better than that.

And then when we were warm and dry and settled and the lighting and thunder stopped, I looked at Ryan. He looked at me. And we looked at our kids. And then we both knew what to do.

Vanessa Garza (she/her) is a survivor of a rare neurovascular malformation (brain AVM), which led to multiple brain surgeries, epilepsy, a deficit in the left superior field of both eyes and moderate deafness, which requires dual hearing devices. She holds a BBA in Finance and Government from the University of Notre Dame, worked in the corporate arena and wore business suits to work every day for nearly 15 years, up to her diagnosis. She transitioned from consultant to essayist, pursuing a passion for writing, when she didn't die from her trauma. In 2021, Garza graduated from GrubStreet's Intensive Essay Incubator Program, where she learned to hone her craft. A South Texas native, she lives in Boston with her family. Find her on Twitter @vanessagarza317.

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