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OPINION

## Thank You for the Tissue Graft



Julia Breckenreid

By HANA SCHANK  
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FOR weeks I had been reading the sample thank-you letter I got from the hospital. In June I underwent A.C.L. replacement surgery, which means that one of the major ligaments in my knee — the one that holds the knee in place — was removed, and in its place doctors screwed in an anonymous cadaver's Achilles' tendon. Along with the tendon, I got a folder filled with recovery instructions for taking a shower and protecting the stitches and a piece of paper on how to write a thank-you note to the family of the donor. Every few days I'd pick up the paper and my eyes would fill with tears as I was reminded that my gain was someone else's heartbreaking loss.

I'd been struggling with the letter in part because I felt like I wasn't the family's ideal recipient. They'd probably gotten letters from people thanking them for a heart or kidneys, from burn victims with skin grafts or people with fatal diseases. In the face of the loss of their loved one, a letter saying, "Now I can ski!" seemed almost heartless. Your relative did not die in vain — I can hit the slopes again!

The injury happened last winter, when I was skiing at Hunter Mountain, a few hours north of New York City, with my family. It was the final run of the day. Nothing good ever happens on the final run of the day.

But Hunter was my mountain. It was the place where I learned to ski when I was 12 years old, coaxed by an outdoorsy cousin onto a trail that looked, to my novice eyes, like a sheer drop of ice and snow. I watched other skiers zip by me, as if it was nothing more than a gentle dip. "Take it slow," she said. And I did. I picked my way down to the bottom. After that, skiing became my favorite sport.

I married a man who also loved to ski. On our first trip together, we huddled on an early morning bus that crawled through a Christmas Day snowstorm from Midtown

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Manhattan to Hunter. After we were married, we'd elbow each other on the chairlift to point out little kids zipping down the mountain, looking forward to the day when we could teach our own kids to ski.

Last winter was the first time both of our children were old enough. So for our very first family ski trip we went to Hunter again, and I beamed as our 6-year-old floated effortlessly down the easy trails, and giggled as our 3-year-old attempted the bunny hill.

Late in the afternoon, with the kids in ski school, we opted for a black diamond run. Hunter isn't a particularly big or difficult mountain, but it does have a few steep drops, and this was one of them. I paused at the top, overheard a few skiers nervously sizing up the trail, and remembered 12-year-old me. And then I took off, leaving the others behind.

It was a lovely run. Not too crowded. Not too icy. I decided to really open it up and go as fast as I could. Then, suddenly, I was going faster than I had intended. No big deal, I thought. I'll just fall. But as I fell my ski caught onto something. The binding didn't release. My body pivoted and my leg didn't. My A.C.L. snapped in two. It would be six months before I could walk normally. Without a new A.C.L., I would never ski again.

And this was what made writing the thank-you letter so difficult: I did this to myself. I wasn't born with a bad heart. I didn't need a new spleen because of some horrible car accident. Instead, a combination of bad luck and hubris tore my knee in two.

Also, never being able to ski again isn't quite like spending the rest of your life on a heart-lung machine. There are scenarios in which it could be good letter-writing material. If I were a college student on a skiing scholarship, for example, or an Olympic hopeful. Or really anything other than a 40-year-old mom out for a fun day on the mountain.

I dragged myself to a stationery store to pick out an appropriate card, but Thank You for the Cadaver Graft isn't something Hallmark makes. Most cards seemed too bubbly. The blank cards all felt like they had double meanings: a card with flowers on the front looked like a condolence card, which felt inappropriate. Anything involving glitter was wrong. In the end I settled on one with a picture of the Brooklyn Bridge. I live in Brooklyn, and I liked the idea that the card would convey a little piece of me without over-sharing.

I went home with the card and carefully copied the words from the sample letter onto it. (I am writing to express my sympathy for your loss, it begins. Thank you for honoring your relative's wishes or making a donor decision at an extremely difficult time, it ends.) I added my own story in between, stressing the part where I am now able to walk normally again, throwing in a bit about being able to run after my young children, and only mentioning skiing in passing.

I also checked a box allowing the donor family to contact me. I'm curious about the donor — the person who used to be attached to the tendon that is now in my body. But I also imagine that if I'd donated a relative's body, I might want people to know something about that relative. I might want to share her story, so that she could live on in some small way. I hoped that learning that story was one thing I could do to begin to show my gratitude.

But it's been four months since I sent the letter, and I haven't heard back yet. Soon it will have been a year since my injury, and we're heading back to Hunter for winter break. My son, now 7, is already talking about which runs he wants to try, and I'm looking forward to watching my family glide toward the lodge, red-faced and giddy with adrenaline. Next year, I should be able to join them. I'm told that, by then, I won't even remember which knee is the injured one.

But I won't forget the donor and that family's gift — even if I didn't say it in my letter, I'll be thinking of them on the day I ski again.

*Hana Schank is [the author](#) of "A More Perfect Union: How I Survived the Happiest Day of My Life" and a consultant on Web site usability.*

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