

# ESQUIRE - AUGUST 1996

## BRAIN SURGERY MADE EASY

By Jimmy Breslin

Adapted with permission from *I Want to Thank My Brain for Remembering Me: A Memoir*, to be published by Little, Brown (New York).

It is morning in Phoenix and the nurse walks in and I am awake.

"How are you?"

"I could use some coffee," I said.

"You can't have anything," she said.

"Come on, I can have coffee," I said.

"You can't have anything if you're having surgery."

She handed me these long surgical stockings. They are supposed to help keep your blood vessels intact from head to toe. I was tugging them on when my wife and daughter walked in. I was so calm that my daughter thought I had been given a lot of Valium. And I had nothing yet. The hand of God kept the fear out of me.

"It's all right if I go out of the picture today," I said to my wife. "I'm in the state of Grace. I can go. You ever think of that?"

"I'm well aware of what can happen," she said.

The priest came in. He suggested that we say a prayer. So my daughter, wife, and I, and the priest held hands in a circle and he said the Our Father.

Then the priest left and the three of us stood in the room and looked around for anything, staying busy on something small to kill time while waiting for something big to start. Tricks I'd seen in other places: the prizefighter staying busy putting new laces in his shoes; going to the bathroom in case; rehearsing your lines. But there was nothing to do. Just a bare room and a stillness of waiting.

Suddenly, in the doorway, there was a nurse and an attendant who pushed a gurney right into the room.

"You ready?" she said.

"I can walk," I said.

"No, you can't," the nurse said. I had to get on the gurney.

The nurse went first. The attendant pushed from the back. We went down one hall and down another and we went toward the operating room.

It all started twenty days before this, when I left my house one morning in the fall of 1994 to go to work. I noticed my eye doctor walking about halfway up the street to my building. I was certain he would spot me immediately and I retreated into my building and sat in the dimness against the wall.

I had my hand covering my left eye. The eyelid was down and I was seeing double. Which was the reason I was hiding from the eye doctor. I always hide from doctors. Of course, I could not let the eye doctor see me in such condition because I had completely disregarded his advice and warnings; I hadn't even seen him for at least two years. I waited until he went by, after which I came out and started for the only kind of work I've ever done.

There is not a single solitary job in the world that is as good as the one I had. The money was as good as anybody in the history of the business ever earned. I started out as one of the last of the generation who came off the copyboy's bench. People at desks in the city room called out, "Boy! Copy-boy." Or, "Oh, boy. Boy!" You were off the bench and running through desks to the guy calling you. Mostly they wanted a sandwich, a pencil, a container of coffee, or clips from the library, which we called the morgue. After each run, you went back and sat on the bench and smoked cigarettes. Age? I was sixteen.

That afternoon, I went back to the newspaper office on Park Avenue in Manhattan. I forgot about my eye being shut, and I walked right into the glass entrance doors.

I wrote. I finished at about 9:00 P.M. and I walked out of the building and onto Park Avenue. I deserved something, a drink, a laugh over a drink, a big cigar over a beer, and I was afraid I'd lose the other eye, so I got nothing. I stepped out to get a cab and nearly was blown away by one speeding by. I reminded myself that I couldn't see and I better get home and sit in safety. Very carefully, I stood on the curb and waved for a cab. This can't continue, I decided.

I went to bed with the hope that a good night's sleep would cause the eye to open magically in the morning. But I was up at 4:30 and the eyelid was as

tight as a security gate. There was a pain across the top of the left side of my head. At 8:00, the eye still had pain around it. At 9:30, instead of ducking him, I was in the eye doctor's office.

He spent some time with a light, peering into my left eye. He said he was thinking of an aneurysm. He thought I should get an MRI to see if this was the cause. MRI stands for magnetic resonance imaging. He took out a prescription pad and wrote "MRI-for possible aneurysm." It was just a conversation in an office.

I did not know what an aneurysm was. I thought it was something like an embolism, although that was murky to me, too. I did remind myself that the only time I ever saw the words aneurysm and embolism was in obituaries. The eye doctor told me that an aneurysm was a bulge in an artery up in the brain and that they fix it by clipping it. The common quality of the word clip caused me to nod and get up to go. There must be nothing extraordinary about it.

I went home and called my friend Peter Johnson, the lawyer. He does a lot of medical suits and knows a lot.

"What did the eye doctor say?" Peter Johnson asked me.

"Oh, the guy said something about an aneurysm."

"Aneurysm? Are you nuts? Stay there. Don't move."

When he called me back, he gave me the name of Mark Kupersmith, a neurological ophthalmologist at New York University.

I took a cab over to NYU Medical Center. The entrance to the building was crowded with cabs and cars, and I got out of the cab directly in front of the blue brick medical-examiner's building next door. On the steps, there was a woman with a gray face and tears. She had a husband inside in the morgue, that was clear.

Kupersmith came into his office, young and hurried, as it was the end of the day. He immediately examined me at length. He said he did not believe it was an aneurysm and thought it would be wasteful for me to get an MRI.

"You'd know if you had an aneurysm," he said. "You'd have the worst headache in your life." He said that an aneurysm, this bulge in the wall of an artery, fills with more and more blood over the years. The blood coursing through arteries is rough on the artery walls. If one gives, and this

aneurysm, this balloon, forms, the rushing blood over time causes the balloon to swell and the balloon skin to weaken more. With much blood collecting in the sac, each heartbeat causes the blood to swirl angrily against a thinner and thinner balloon and one day the aneurysm bursts.

What is most noticeable about a burst aneurysm is a new body in the morgue or an unconscious form in an emergency room. Before that worst headache, there is no sign at all of trouble. Kupersmith was saying, "Half the people with aneurysms that burst never make it to the hospital. Of the 50 percent that do survive, only half are aware of very much. The rest, that's 25 percent, are listed as fine." His face and tone indicated that those listed as fine had the spirit of wallpaper.

"You can die from an aneurysm," I said sagely.

"If you're lucky," the doctor said. "You don't want to know what happens if you don't die from one of these things." He gave me Tylenol with codeine and sent me home.

But when my head was still throbbing later that week, I called Kupersmith at NYU. "Gee," he said, "I don't like to hear about a pain this long after seeing you. Maybe you ought to come in for an MRI."

"I'll be right down there," I said.

The doctor said, "It's already 5:30 on a Friday."

"I'll be there by 6:00."

Six days later Kupersmith's secretary called me. She asked me to hold on. After a while Kupersmith came on the phone.

"We were right in saying that there was no aneurysm or tumor affecting your left eye. But then the doctors took time to study the whole MRI film, not just the portion on your left eye. And in a completely unrelated place they have noticed what seems to be a bulge. We had a conference about it. It could be a strange formation of the brain that was there when you were born. Others are afraid of an aneurysm. Nobody is sure. What appears to be the bulge is directly in front and we should be able to find out what it is."

"It is directly in front of what?" I asked.

"The front of the brain," the doctor said. "But they have a way of treating that."

"What do they do?" I asked.

"A brain operation," the doctor said.

Kupersmith made an appointment for an angiogram. The test would take nine hours. They were going to cut into my leg and insert a plastic catheter into the large artery. They would run it up to the inside of my head. What would it do there? It would shoot dye that gives a marked contrast to my whole head, all over the brain, and it would provide the contrast for all the pictures they would be shooting.

On the morning of my angiogram, there were men and women in green-blue operating-room clothes around me, and my right thigh was numb. I thought I could feel somebody using something to cut into the groin. Hands were pushing down hard on the groin, and for sure I felt something being stuffed into my leg.

After about twenty minutes, there were these buzzes of pictures being taken of my blood vessels at the rate of two and three per second. A dishpan of hot water splashed inside my head. There was a series of lightning streaks behind both eyes.

One of the people hovering over the table, a tall guy, was gone and then he came back.

"We're doing well," he said.

"What's it look like so far?" I asked.

"You have an aneurysm."

What it meant was that I was in a lot of trouble, but I was treating it just as I do any horrible thing that occurs in a day. I report on a tragedy by remaining cold and callous and concentrate on making notes of the smallest details. In the small hotel kitchen in Los Angeles, I counted Sirhan Sirhan kicking his legs five times before somebody sat on them after he shot Robert Kennedy. By remaining that distant, I can write an account without nerves interfering. I go home and sleep beautifully. When it hits, about dawn, I am up and I am sick.

I had to stay on my back in a recovery room because they had cut a hole in a major artery, like the biggest I have, and it needed time to close up. If it did not close up, I would close down. When they finally let me up five hours

later, the tall thin guy from the test handed me a large brown envelope with a copy of my angiogram film.

"What do I do with this?" I asked.

"Show them to a neurosurgeon. If you're smart, you'll get this operated on right away."

He took out a pen and wrote down a name on the corner of the envelope. "This is the one we all know."

He wrote down, "Spetzler."

In our family we have young people who live on computers. Each day they searched the medical files and brought home piles of printouts on neurosurgery. Others asked anybody they knew. Soon it became apparent that you could fit all the good brain surgeons in the last row of a movie house. We made up a list. We had twenty names of surgeons on it, and then we began to go to them one by one and ask them how they would vote. Of the twenty votes we got only one did not list Robert Spetzler. I sent him my angiogram film.

I had read about him. Spetzler is fifty and was born in Wurzburg, Germany. His cousin was killed over a bombing plot against Hitler. His father, who had been a watchmaker in Germany, came here with an invention for a quartz clock that he brought to Westclox, a company in Illinois. Spetzler was five when he arrived in Peru, Illinois, with his family. He went to one of those good small midwestern colleges, Knox, and said he wanted to be a neurosurgeon and nothing else. He studied at Case Western in Cleveland and later on, when he was passed over as the head of the neurosurgery department, he left. He is not very good at being ignored. He came to Phoenix and built a center in the sun, the Barrow Neurological Institute.

What else did I read? Spetzler has a baritone voice and is an old swimmer. He did the backstroke in college. He has a large house in Paradise Valley with a pool. He does things like ski out of helicopters. He takes chances for sport, and for a living.

I was home when a man called from Spetzler's office. He said I was a good candidate for an aneurysm operation. I remember his voice was low. Since the subject was slightly important to me, I immediately dropped into an unexcited, plodding comprehension of what he was telling me.

"When do I come?" I asked him.

"When would you like to come?"

"Anytime starting Monday," I said.

"We'll see you here at two on Monday."

"When do you think I'd have the operation?"

"On Tuesday morning at eight-thirty."

"How long will I be in the hospital, do you think?"

He said he didn't know.

Into the bright Phoenix morning we came. We got to the Arizona Biltmore Hotel and instead of going to the room, I went into the coffee shop. My wife and daughter came and had salads while I had coffee. Then we went out into the sun and lawns and took a cab to the hospital. The light-brick color of the Barrow Neurological building rose from a wide empty street, with a larger hospital, St. Joseph's, on the opposite side.

There was this one large entrance but on the left was a glass door with Robert Spetzler's name on it. You just went through the door and into a small waiting room with a counter straight ahead as you entered. Three or four women receptionists sat in a room behind the counter. The waiting-room windows looked out on the hospital driveway and a small parking lot and that was it. In an alcove, there was a soda machine and a phone booth. When one of the women saw me walking in, she looked up and said, "Yes?" And now it was official.

Spetzler's office has a concert piano. He also has a large fish tank and three television monitors that show the operating rooms and what is going on in them. The door opened and Spetzler walked in quickly. He was dressed for the operating room. A blue cap was tied to his head with a white cord. He was tall and had a neat mustache. Big, strong tanned arms came out of a blue short-sleeved shirt. The hands were long and graceful.

He came in with no records with him. He said this would be a pretty much straightforward brain operation for an aneurysm. Of which I was sure there was no such thing.

Until now, I had slid and hid from the one subject I now brought up: "By the way, how do you do the operation?" Spetzler took his finger and ran it across my forehead and down my right temple in front of the ear and

stopped even with the start of the ear. He had a nice touch, but he was outlining half my head being taken off.

"Okay then," he said. "We'll see you in the morning."

Then, just before leaving, he asked, "What kind of work do you do?"

I was elated. Know my angiogram film; the face and name don't count. But the words suddenly flew out of my wife's mouth: "He's a Pulitzer-prize winner!" Never before had either of us ever mentioned the award. When Spetzler saw me looking in astonishment at my wife, he said, "No, that is important that you tell us. If you're a writer, we have to take that into consideration. Your skills come from certain parts of the brain. If you did something else for a living, then we would think in another way."

"We operated on a truck driver who had an aneurysm in a place right where all of his motor skills come from. We had to be extremely careful of that part of him."

So if I were a moving man and it came to a decision between shoulder mobility and the objective case, I would be pushing a piano and saying "Between you and I."

Now he said, "I'll see you tomorrow." Beyond that, there wasn't much to discuss. We would meet in the morning. I said fine, and he smiled and nodded and was gone.

We filled in admittance forms at another desk and were escorted to a bare room with one window looking out onto the street. A nurse came in and handed me this blue gown with the tie strings. I sat and talked with my wife about the only thing on my mind.

"What if I can't put three words together?" I said.

The brain is not just an organ. It is incomparable. It cannot be compared to anything on earth because it does nothing else but think. It weighs three pounds. It has no nickname. Your hand is a paw, the heart a ticker. The brain is the brain. If I had to make a bet, I would say that the mind is a ghost from God that comes from the sky and lives in the brain. But it still uses the brain as its home, and therefore I like my brain quite a bit. Mine has given me whatever of life I have seen. If there is such a thing as owing something to your brain, then I am first on line.

Mike Tyson gets up and says, I am thankful for being allowed to have the strength in my fists to mash my opponent's head like a turnip and maybe kill him right in the ring on Monday night.

Or Miss Mississippi stands out there on stage at the Miss America contest and tells the judges, Well, I'm just so thankful for my cute little fanny. I just know I drive men insane.

I want to thank my brain for what it had done for me. I like my brain. It is the last brain I'm going to get. It didn't make me a concert pianist or an international physicist, but I never deserved that. The brain knows exactly what you should get. I work for newspapers, write a few books, and that's exactly what I should do. That's that for you, Breslin. Oh, my brain can get good and confused. But then, in a matter of utmost importance to me, it has delivered with the speed of a spark.

"I'm glad to see you looking so good," the first nurse to come up to me said. The cart I was on was now stopped.

"Do you have any allergies?" the nurse said to me.

"No."

"Good."

She was writing on a clipboard.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Pacheco. Daria Pacheco. Have you had surgery before?"

"No. What time did you start this morning?"

"I was here at 6:30. Do you have any implants?"

"No. You married?"

"I'm a single mother. When was the last time you had anything to eat and drink?"

"Early last night. You got kids in school?"

"My daughter. I bring her to St. Francis before I come here. You know you are going to have brain surgery?"

"I sure do."

"Do you wish to proceed?"

"Absolutely."

She put a form in front of me and I signed it. She was moving around me now and not too interested in what I had to say. Dr. Peter Raudzens, who was there to administer the serious drugs, took my arm and with very little motion put a needle right into it on the first jab. That was it. A smile that it was done. We were on the verge of a profound act and this was like a common vaccination.

Dripping into my arm were two milligrams of Versed. This is a new form of Valium. It is much quicker and lasts longer. If I had been using drugs or a lot of alcohol, the liver would have had a buildup of enzymes to metabolize the drug quickly. But I have never even taken a puff of marijuana in my life. And I have not had a strong drink in what, two years? So the drug sailed silently through my blood and had to come through nothing. Watching me, Raudzens was pleasantly surprised at how quickly it went.

I was pushed into the operating room. Raudzens started Diprivan and a synthetic narcotic called sufentanil dripping into me, and another drug called vecuronium, which stills all muscles. That was enough to stall a truck.

I became a body on a table for brain surgery.

There are seven in the operating room. The operation is listed as right pterional craniotomy with clipping of unruptured anterior-communicating-artery aneurysm. The right pterional refers to a ridge that separates the middle and front of the brain.

For an hour they work to set me up properly on the operating table. My head has to be in perfect orientation to the aneurysm. While the body is on the table, the head is hanging off and held by three pins of a device called a Mayfield clamp. The head has to be rotated to the precise angle needed to take the skull bone off and go into the brain. The right cheekbone has to be the highest point. This causes the brain to fall away from the skull. The position of the body requires no pressure on the arms or legs. I am covered with a blue foamy material that looks like the inside of a crate of eggs.

A blue marker is used to draw a line all across the top of the forehead, right behind the hairline. Somebody takes a needle and scratches marks along the line as an insurance guideline. A nurse has spread a blue towel on the pale-

yellow floor so the hair will fall on it and can be picked up and disposed of easily. They have shaved only minimal hair from the front. Another towel is put down to catch the blood.

The nurses now scrub the skin with Betadine, an iodine solution that colors the skin a dirty yellow.

The doctor at my head touches me under the hairline with a Number 10 Bard Parker blade. He cuts only the top of the skin at the gum-chewing muscles on the sides, the temporalis and masseter muscles. He has two hinge points at the temples. Now he cuts what looks like a circle route on an airline map. A great C, following the hairline across the forehead to the right temple, and then down a little, even with the ear top.

After the incision is made, gloved hands gently take the skin of my forehead and pull it down over my eyes. The skin bunches up in folds, like a drape. Two doctors thread lines through the top fold of skin and run the lines up to the top of my forehead, into whatever scalp is left, and anchor the thread with what looks like a fishhook. It is attached to a Lele bar, a heavy metal bar attached to the side of the operating table. They do this twice more, three times more, and soon there are nine lines, anchored by nine fishhooks in the very top of my scalp that are holding my skin up so that it will not roll up anymore.

I do not have my face on me. They took the face off me like it was wrapping paper. Now they are going behind that to look for my brain.

A Jimi Hendrix tape comes over a speaker: "The Star-Spangled Banner" from Woodstock.

Spetzler comes in. He goes between people without grazing them and directly to the head of the table, without a sound. Jimi Hendrix has gone off the speaker and then a classical-music tape is being played.

"What is the name of the piece and the composer?" Spetzler asks.

The young doctors, the residents working with him, do not answer. They look at one another.

"Come on," Spetzler says. "You people have European educations."

Nobody answers.

"It is the Trout Quintet. The composer is Schubert," he says.

At the table, Spetzler holds a Midas Rex saw, which looks like a heavy fountain pen with a line attached to it. The high-speed saw screams through the antiseptic room as he drills. The saw has such speed that it turns skull bone into dust instead of splinters that could fly into the brain. The skull has a near-foul smell to it.

The doctor standing on Spetzler's right holds a large plastic tube with a rubber bulb. He squeezes the bulb and water bathes the area. Man basting a turkey. Spetzler drills a burr hole, a small hole in the skull at the top of the head. That's how they start, like ice fishing.

And now here is this new high-speed drill whining and shrieking as it sends the cloud of dust. The drill coming into my skull has a footplate that curves around the drill bit. The drill bit comes down to the cuff of the footplate. This prevents the drill from going right on into the brain.

An entry point is next. They change the drill bit to use one that makes the precise room needed to go under the skull flap and inside. The whine picks up and Spetzler saws a three-by-four-inch oval in the skull. He lifts the piece out. The color of the bone is shiny ivory-white. He places the piece of skull on the edge of the table and covers it with a sterilized blue cloth.

The brain is pink on the surface, running to gray coiled vessels underneath. Red lines running through the pinkwhite surface are arteries that feed the parts of the brain that control all of life. Touch an artery and the person on the table instantly loses entire sections of his life.

The room is dim and the temperature kept as cold as a meat locker. Spetzler sits on a chair that looks like it comes from an expensive barbershop. In his mouth he has the switch to the large Zeiss microscope. The scope enlarges and illuminates so that he is looking at a large, bright map. At his left hand is a silver rod made of coils, operated by a handle. On the end of the rod is what looks like a butter knife. The blade on both sides has the same covering as used on the backs of Band-Aids. Operating this rod by hand, Spetzler causes the rod to uncoil a little, to extend, and to place a retractor against the brain and gently push the lobes of the brain apart.

Spetzler's hands speak to him of how much pressure to use. He was born with a stillness in his hands that becomes complete as tension heightens, as they work nearer and nearer to the flesh and tiny little hairs that are arteries and can cause calamities and death at the very touch. A tranquility settles over the hands. A neurosurgeon can attend schools for a decade and learn

all of science to do with the brain. But let there be one shake on the job and he is gone and so are you. And that is the job description.

Spetzler must immediately identify the vessels as they branch off from the area from which the aneurysm is arising. If the aneurysm ruptures, the blood will come out of it so quickly as to be paralyzing to watch.

Somewhere in the midst of this, he looks at a vein and says, "All this can do is bleed. We'll vaporize it." He holds the bipolars to the vein and sets it afire. The vein curls into a cinder and smoke comes out of my brain.

He looks for the optic nerve, which is around the midline at the front of the brain. On the microscope it is a white pearly structure. There it is; touch that nerve and you go blind right now.

The optic nerve marks the start of surgery on an aneurysm. What looks like a spiderweb is a street map to Spetzler. There are boulevards and side streets and he begins with his Broadway, the optic nerve.

With the optic nerve as a wide street, the eye moves to the carotid artery, which looks like a forearm on the microscope. Once that is identified, the retractors are moved and follow back to the anterior communicating artery, where the aneurysm is hanging.

Raudzens now puts barbiturates into my vein to put the brain into a coma. The barbiturates cause the blood walk to stop at a corner for a red light.

Spetzler says, "All right, no talking, please. Only if you have to. Thank you." He peers through the microscope. He can see down a dark valley to the aneurysm. He is alone with his opponent. The aneurysm is actually two. The top of each is as wide as the neck. They are dark red but the outer part is so thin that it has changed to purple.

The aneurysm is draped with tiny blood vessels that resemble hairs. One of them is so much more than that. It is a tiny vessel that goes to the area of the brain that gives you speech and the ability to put words on paper.

The room is still. His body still, his concentration total, Spetzler holds pliers. A metal clip six millimeters long is in the pliers. It is just long enough to clip the aneurysm without obstructing the vessels around it. Spetzler in his trance, works on the aneurysm. The tops are as wide as the body. He has no way to place the permanent metal clip. He uses two temporary clips to trap the aneurysm. During his probing, the aneurysm tears free, ..the temporary clips won't hold it. The clip is a tiny piece of titanium that opens up like jaws.

But the human hand can't get them open. The pliers are needed. He works for forty minutes on this. Time never counts.

And now the aneurysm suddenly moves. It is twisted and soft and with two heads and the blood is swirling and it all seems to move right up at Spetzler. Suddenly, there is a danger that has not shown on the angiogram film. And it is at this moment that Spetzler's life and ability come together. The hands you trust with your life get their confidence for the same reason that you place yours in them. They have the experience that allows them to stare at danger and take any measure to suppress it, out to the most daring, and walk away with another success. He works with hands that do not seem to move. It is different when seen through the microscope. Here the hands are pronounced and their work is massive and maddening. With quick little motions, a Penfield probe strikes one of the necks of the two-headed aneurysm. The neck gives. The probe now pushes from the side. The side gives. Suddenly, the aneurysm rocks and the color goes from purple to red and the neck inflates all the way around. Start again.

Spetzler has been working on the aneurysm for over two hours. He sighs and steps back. A nurse massages his shoulders. Sometime, somehow, the thing must hold its new shape so that it can be killed with a clip. And all the while, through all the probes, all the anxiety, all the tediousness, one law rules the room: Touch me and I will die.

Finally, with a twist of his wrist he places the clip at the base of the shaped aneurysm. The clip closes and chokes off the ballooning part of the aneurysm. A needle goes into the bulge, and the blood is immediately sucked up. There are small pieces of cotton placed around the clip to cause a scar tissue in the artery, strengthening the outer wall. The aneurysm now is gone.

Spetzler reaches for the piece of white skull. He fits it back like the last brick in a wall. It now has miniature plates and screws fastening it to the rest of the skull.

That was it. He straightens and says, "Thank you very much." And he walks out for his next operation.

That was on Tuesday. I did not move a muscle until late Wednesday afternoon. At which time the famous surgeon Spetzler walked in and looked at me. He asked me my name.

"J.B. Number one," I said.

He asked me what city I was in.

"Topeka," I said.

When they told my wife, who was outside, she said, "So far so good. He was like that when he came here." I vaguely remember something like that. I guess I had a couple of smart remarks stored in my tongue so I could show off by reflex through the haze. Then I dropped in and out, as I would for the next couple of days.

I woke up with a start and immediately tried to throw my legs off the side of the bed and get up.

"You cannot move, you just had surgery," a woman said. She was a dim form somewhere near the bed.

"Is it over?" I said.

"Yes, of course. You had it yesterday morning."

"How did it go?"

"It's fine," she said. "You are fine. Don't worry."

I remember a thought running in an arc. I owed God thanks and I would have to be thankful for the rest of my life, and I knew exactly how I was going to show it, but the arc disappeared and I didn't know what I was thinking about. I was in intensive care. My head felt as rutted, as rough, as Queens Boulevard. I had a pain from the top of my head to my jaw.

"I need coffee," I said. I wanted to have coffee and then start working. I had a cup. Then I threw up. I knew it was going to be a while before I could try any work.

The close watch on me went that way for ten days. Every room had a computer terminal on a table. On each visit, a nurse or doctor tapped an entry. They could call up my record practically to the minute, starting when I first walked into the hospital. Whenever I was half alert and somebody would start on the machine, I would be torn with anxiety. I had to start work immediately. This was not fanaticism or wavering thoughts during a stupor. Since I started my newspaper column in 1962, I had not missed one deadline ever. I had a flu in 1968 and took three days off. And now the end of an afternoon caused instant anxiety; I had to be writing.

I spent two days nervously trying to think of a first sentence. I picked up a pad and pen and with an effort that sapped me, I got a few paragraphs down. The next day I picked it up and wrote quite a bit. My wife went back to the hotel and typed it on a computer. When she showed it to me the next morning, she said nothing. I knew that she would wait for a chance to bring up objections, which her face showed would be at least many. She was right. It read like pure Croatian.

I dropped my head in dejection. I started writing again. The subject was the same one that you are reading about. My brain operation. It took over a day and a half, but I got it done and I knew it was all right. I dialed the newspaper transcribing room. Suddenly, as I was dictating to the newspaper, I noticed that I missed no words and slurred none. I hung up with exhilaration running through me.

Once, this moment would have sent me tearing across a street at early evening and bursting through the saloon doors and saying to myself, "You deserve a drink. You are a good person." Here in the hospital, I put my head back and waited for somebody to come in and say I could go home. There was nothing else. I had everything I ever needed back in the same condition it always was. Beautiful.

The entire journey, this dangerous operation on the only brain I have, turned out pretty well. I want to thank God for letting me live, and I want to thank my brain for remembering me. Good boy, yourself, Breslin. You rate a miracle now and then.