Organ transplantation is one of the greatest medical accomplishments—taking an organ out of one person to function in another. Much of transplant surgery, medicine, and research is focused on the surgical procedure and the recovery, in hopes of improving survival and quality of life. Less attention is paid to the donor process.

Organ donation is both a tragic and beautiful event. A medical student has captured this event and transformed it into words.

Dear Jordan, (Names changed to protect the donor’s privacy)

I am a medical student rotating with the cardiothoracic surgery team.

The night you died was one of the most incredible experiences of my life. As you were wheeled into the operating room, the first thing I noticed was your long, straight, black hair plastered to your forehead. Blankets tucked around you, you looked like you could have been any child coming for a minor procedure. You were moved to the operating table by gentle hands. Two nurses stepped up to remove your warm blankets and place sterile drapes on you, as they would to prep for any surgical case.

Another medical student who had taken care of you in the hospital stood by your side in the operating room until the organ procurement was done. The surgeons had a moment of silence in your honor. I admired the reverence for you very much.

The moments that followed were focused on three recipients, waiting in three other hospitals, for your life-saving gifts. Although I had always felt queasy in anatomy lab, your body was beautiful, pristine. Despite the immense respect you were shown, it was difficult to see you opened, knowing that you would not put back together again. The surgeons worked to isolate your organs from the surrounding tissues. The first to leave your body was your heart. It was a race against the clock to get your heart into its new home. For its journey, it was kept in nothing more sophisticated than an ice cooler, motionless. It was surreal.

Back home, another young boy waited on an operating table with his failing heart ready to come out. Your heart was handed to the waiting surgeon who put it in its new place. My own heart skipped a beat as I watched you come to life again. The best moment of the night was walking into the waiting area to tell an anxious family that their son had a new, strong heart.

Jordan, I often think of you and the night we met. I worry that someday I might forget your name. I say it out loud to myself to remember exactly how it sounds. Since that night—the most incredible night of my life, I feel an obligation to share with the world the bits of your story that I do know—that you were treated with dignity and respect, and that your gift lives on in the body and life of another child. I am grateful your parents chose to make you an organ donor.

Thank you, Jordan, with all my heart.
Jennifer