

MOTHERING A CHILD OTHER THAN YOUR OWN

I was alone in the house with my baby brother when he twisted his little hand around the rubber tube that dangled from a hole in his stomach and yanked it out.

I stared at his little hand holding the g-tube doctors had surgically implanted days after he was born because his vocal cords had collapsed. I was 16 and paralyzed with fear. My mother was running errands, and my father worked 60 miles from home. There were no cellphones to reach them.

As the eldest of six children, I had been a de facto baby-sitter for as long as I could remember. But this little one was different.

I had learned to use the machines we brought him home with: A thin plastic tube to thread inside his tracheostomy tube and clear it of mucus, so he could breathe clearly; a humidifier to keep over the opening in his neck while he slept to keep the airway moist; and that gastric tube that protruded from his baby belly, to which we would regularly attach a large syringe full of formula, so he could be fed.

My mother had stayed with him in the hospital for a month, while I helped take care of my younger siblings at home. But once he was well enough to come home, my parents being small business owners had no choice but to spend long hours away at work.

Doctors had not been hopeful about his prognosis: He'll never eat on his own. He'll never talk, the head surgeon told my mother. It's best to learn sign language, they said.

My mother refused to believe her.

Decades before my children

PARENTS TALK BACK



with Aisha Sultan

were born, my youngest brother taught me the fierceness with which a person can love. I adored him in a way I didn't realize I was capable of during those self-centered teenage years. And I was terrified about what had happened to him on my watch.

When my mother walked in the door, I could hardly choke out the words. As soon as she understood, she rushed him to the medical center more than half an hour away in an ambulance.

It may have been the longest night of my life.

A surgeon had to reopen the hole in his stomach that was quickly beginning to heal shut. My mother retold the story about how the surgeon asked her to hold her 6-month-old baby's head down while he pried open the incision in his stomach with a pair of scissors. There was no time to give him anesthesia, she said. They managed to reinsert the tube, but the terror and guilt I felt that day is seared in my memory.

For the next two years before I left for college, this baby was an extra appendage of mine. His vocal chords matured, and he out-

grew the trach and g-tube. My family and our friends called him our Miracle Baby.

When I made my first trip back home from college, he climbed his toddler self in my lap and asked: When are you coming back home again?

I told him that I'd be back for Thanksgiving, and he said: "No. When are you coming back home to live?"

During the summers, I tried to answer his endless preschooler questions. I took him to school on his first day of kindergarten. I taught him how to tie his shoes. When he had his tonsils removed when he was in kindergarten, I paced the waiting room with my parents. The moment I saw him in the hospital bed, hooked up to an IV in the recovery room, I passed out. He wore his first suit to my college graduation and told my mother he looked like a Bollywood star.

When I started graduate school and work, my trips home could never be as long or as frequent. He was younger than my daughter is now when I got married. We didn't hang out like we did when he was little, but that protective instinct toward him remains to this day.

In a couple of months, he will pack up his stuff from my parents' house and move to Ohio to start podiatry school at Kent State.

How fitting that a baby who defied the doctors' odds will end up a doctor himself.

How wonderful to see a baby you've loved grow into a man you admire.

Thank you, Mom, for sharing him with me.

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