

ECLIPSED

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Contact (2022)

At first, they called you *incidental*. As if to say, *nothing to see here*. They left unspoken, *we still don't have answers about the lightheadedness when you stand or the imbalance between your ears*.

They mentioned you because they'd found something observable, just not what they sought when they placed me in that tube. No one had previously searched inside my skull, so before this scan, we had no way of knowing how long you'd resided there. A bright core surrounded by a dark ring. An inverse of the moon blocking the sun.

Perhaps you'd arrived at my birth, yet for over 45 years, you'd stayed dormant. They reassured me that despite your appearance as a cluster of cells, enlarged and thin-walled vessels in the shape of a berry, you were not malignant. As far as we knew then, you would remain unremarkable.

Partiality (2023-March 2024)

You stayed stealthy, even as your surrounding atmosphere began to shift. Subtle enough that at first, no one held you responsible. A few weeks after the first detection, as I sat typing on my laptop, I began to lose my words, my language, if only for a few seconds. I might not have even noticed, had the searing chest pain not immediately followed, then disappeared without a trace. A storm that blew in and out in less than a minute. My ability to speak, my voice returned, and I continued the task I'd paused a moment earlier.

Shake it off. I tried willing myself into ignoring you. Yet thoughts about the risk of cardiac illness and death in women, and in my family, also lodged themselves in my head. Then the mantra, *we should have known*, when my father's keen scientist's mind began to falter. Only too late did we realize that what appeared as cerebral deterioration likely represented a lack of oxygen to his brain as his arteries clogged to occlusion.

Those losses and missteps haunted me, making me unwilling to leave my fate to chance. After all, I still did not know what caused the lightheadedness that led me to you. When I called my doctor's office to report the scramble in my mind and the pain in my chest, they said, *if it happens again, go to the emergency room*. Mere hours later, I did not make it to the end of the road while walking my dog when the same sequence emerged. I came home and got into the car.

It did not cross anyone's mind to look for you then. They hooked monitors to my chest, not my head. While waiting for the attending physician to arrive, I sat down and stood up and watched my heart rate spike, then drop. Months later, after a tilt table test, we would figure out the source of my dizziness. But that still did not explain the flares you caused.

Losing words became more frequent and disruptive. I tried to convince myself that if I could just avoid the triggering one, I could prevent the ache altogether. Those moments caused me to become mute, or garbled noises spewed from my lips. Yet as soon as the sensation receded, the memory of the offending word disappeared, so I could never be sure which one made my heart race.

You made me afraid to speak.

Less than six months after they first found you, they searched again. They called you *stable*, though the ground underneath my feet felt anything but. A lengthy neuropsychology evaluation attributed my "cognitive difficulty" to stress and poor sleep. Even when signs became glaringly obvious, it's as if you still had me under your spell, hiding, waiting.

A few weeks after that second sighting, I found myself on the floor in my bedroom. I woke up not knowing how I got there. I did not know then that I had lost consciousness. The next morning, I stepped into the bathroom and stared in the mirror at what looked like a purple ring around my right eye. An unfortunate collision with a stealth laundry basket in my path.

My father too had landed for good just outside his bathroom.

Why could no one see for nearly a year that even though your appearance had not yet changed, you played a role in my decline? Even my therapist thought what wreaked havoc on me stemmed from panic attacks.

Yet episodes arrived during mundane tasks. Why would walking, doing laundry, or typing leave me disoriented, coupled with wrenching pain?

The routine became all too familiar. As soon as my words started to falter, like a needle scratching a record, I knew what would come next. If only pressing my hand over my heart or holding my breath would prevent the burn. Only when I finally met an epileptologist did someone understand how and why you ravaged my mind and heart the way you did with increasing frequency. She told me my symptoms were seizures.

I became a storm chaser, a light seeker, an information gatherer. Tapping into my skills as a health researcher, I wanted to predict you, understand you, as if with knowledge, I could coax you into retreat. I decided to collect data about you each day. When did I exercise and for how long? What time did I go to sleep? Did I wake up in the night? Did I drink any caffeine or alcohol?

For a while, it seemed like you didn't want me to listen to books, yet you didn't seem bothered at night. Only later would I learn you stayed active all the time, even when I did not register your presence.

Totality (April-May 2024)

They began planning how to handle you. First, they tried medication. But instead of brief episodes of confusion, it felt like my brain had become mud. And you still came for me anyway. Then, they talked about removing you. A laser with a tip like a soldering iron could use heat to extinguish you. Or they could come after you with a drill, a saw, a metal plate, screws, and stitches. One approach sounded less invasive, less proven. The other, more certain, more violent. I pictured both, and my body recoiled. I could not risk losing language, memory, emotion, all possible, given your location. You became impossible to ignore, and I risked injuring myself or someone else by avoiding you. But given that I did not lose consciousness, I told myself I could still drive and did.

Back in 2017, during the solar eclipse in North America, my father and I made plans to travel to the path of totality in 2024. He would come from California to Michigan, and we would drive to Ohio to see one of nature's most awesome sights. We did not know then that he would not make another trip around the sun. I kept my promise, traveling nearly one hundred miles alone. As if the stars aligned as well as the sun and moon, for that single day, you gave me a reprieve. When looking upward, my eyes covered by protective lenses, I did not see the flares as the moon blocked the light and the outer ring burned into the sky.

Again, I found myself at a loss for words to describe totality, but this time my brain stayed clear. Instead, I joined countless souls who witnessed what the mind could not fully comprehend as the sky lost its color on that otherwise bright sunny day.

After I returned home, you came roaring back. A few weeks later, we finally saw that you had brightened. The size of a pencil eraser, inside my skull, just above my left ear. You had sprung into action, and we could finally witness evidence of your metamorphosis. Upon spying you on the screen, they wanted to measure your impact. For three days, I wore electrodes attached to my head, covered by a thin scarf, connected to a receiver in a tangle of colored wires. I looked like a cancer patient, and the tape tore the skin from my forehead. They instructed me to push a button at the onset of each jolt.

The readout confirmed that the word scrambles and the chest pain stemmed from you, not some other part of my brain. Apparently, you generated even more activity than I had recognized. I had thought my poor sleep led me to have more seizures, when instead, we found the seizures disrupted my sleep.

Over two years had passed since the lightheadedness had begun, and a year and a half since you appeared as an aside. The path forward still looked dark, with minimal light to illuminate the way forward.

Penumbra (June 2024-October 2024 and beyond)

I tried to avoid you. If I appeased you, could I avoid the tools and violence needed to remove you? I agreed to try a different medication, starting slowly. That summer, you became dormant, and my mind seemed clear. My chest didn't ache. But you had other plans.

This time, when you stole my consciousness, I was not alone. My husband witnessed you making me thrash on the bed, then run into walls. The bitten tongue, the lasting muscle aches, the morning of the black eye a year earlier finally made sense. When we reported the morning's events, the doctor asked why I had not increased my medication dose. I had thought I'd escaped the shadows. I would not make that mistake again. As I started a higher dose, the debate about excavating you continued.

I needed a fresh perspective. I sought someone who had dedicated her life to understanding how to tame or remove you. When I watched her videos and read her papers, I felt drawn to her leadership in a patient organization for those who suffered like me or much worse. I got on a small plane with scans on a USB drive and in my patient portal. If only we'd done something similar when my father still had a chance.

She sat with me for over an hour as I sank into the only couch I'd ever witnessed inside a doctor's office. She compared my scans to one another, pointing at you on her screen, and outlining how you had morphed since first contact. I wanted her to tell me why. Less than one-half of one percent of people have this extra companion. If you'd really been there since birth, what did that mean? Some questions remain unanswerable.

She agreed with my home healthcare team's assessment to watch and wait. If the medication worked, I could avoid the scalpel. Unlike a stroke requiring immediate action, which my neurologist father had spent his career treating, you would ooze slowly, giving us time to pinpoint the glow and the size of the rings.

Two months later, when I donned the electrodes for another three days, they did not find evidence of seizures. But the solar flares continued just below my ability to detect them. Becoming asymptomatic represented a crucial step in preventing further damage. It had taken a long time, riddled with many wrong guesses and uncertainties, well-meaning, yet inherently flawed.

I check for traces of you. I picture you there, waiting.

Two years on, you've stayed quiet. They said I had a 20% chance that you would bleed again within five years. ■

Biographical Note

Kara Zivin, PhD, MS, MA, MFA, is a mental health services researcher in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She is the Marcia A. Valenstein, MD Collegiate Professor of Psychiatry, Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology, and Professor of Health Management and Policy at the University of Michigan; Research Career Scientist at the Department of Veterans Affairs; and Senior Health Researcher at Mathematica. Her debut memoir, *Persevered: A Maternal Mental Health Memoir* (Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 2026), tells the story of her mental health crisis surrounding pregnancy, and how she transformed that experience by combining data (research expertise) and story (personal narrative) to increase public awareness about women's mental health conditions. She has a left temporal lobe cerebral cavernoma.