

HOW
MARTY'S
MOM
BECAME
A CYBORG

Written by Adele Pfrimmer Hensley

Illustrated by Brent Messmer

How Marty's Mom Became a Cyborg

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How Marty's Mom Became a Cyborg

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*Dedicated to each person who is struggling
through his or her own comeback.*

*It will take more than you ever thought you had, but it will
be worth every effort, tear, groan, procedure, and hard
decision you have to make to rebuild yourself, your life
and your relationships, because at the end of your story,
you will be whole.*



*I am grateful for the symbolism of having my surgeries
performed in New Orleans,
a city that knows about a comeback.*

Marty was a sixth grader who loved playing his clarinet in the band, loved to read, and loved to watch old science fiction TV shows with his dad. It was good that his preferred shows were sci-fi and not horror, because Marty's mom had young-onset Parkinson's disease. Marty loved his mother, but her Parkinson's affected the whole family so much that a horror fan would be tempted to say she was possessed or might think of her as acting like a zombie.



Because he knew so much science fiction, he often thought of her as inhabiting an alternate reality where time passes ever-so-slightly slower. If she said she would be ready soon, Marty knew she would be a while, and if she ever gave a time estimate, watch out! If his Mom said ten minutes, he could expect twenty. Every hour of her day seemed to take an hour and a half.



The year Marty turned twelve was the year his mother received her cybernetic implants. It was funny . . . even though she had had Parkinson's his whole life, he knew it wasn't really what her normal self was like. There were times when she could only move slowly. She joked that she had a wooden face because it was so hard to tell if she was smiling.



Her voice was very rough and hard to understand. Sometimes she had to make an angry voice to get Marty to hear her, even if she was not angry. Marty hated that.



Marty's mother dragged her left foot when she walked and sometimes she tripped. The previous summer, she had tripped in the driveway and hit her head on the concrete. Marty had heard her cry for help and got to her first. He was the only person available to help her until his dad arrived.



Afterward, they went to the emergency room. His mother ended up with two black eyes. She looked awful, but she was glad to find out that the forehead really is one of the strongest bones in the human body. It was a scary night, but she was okay.



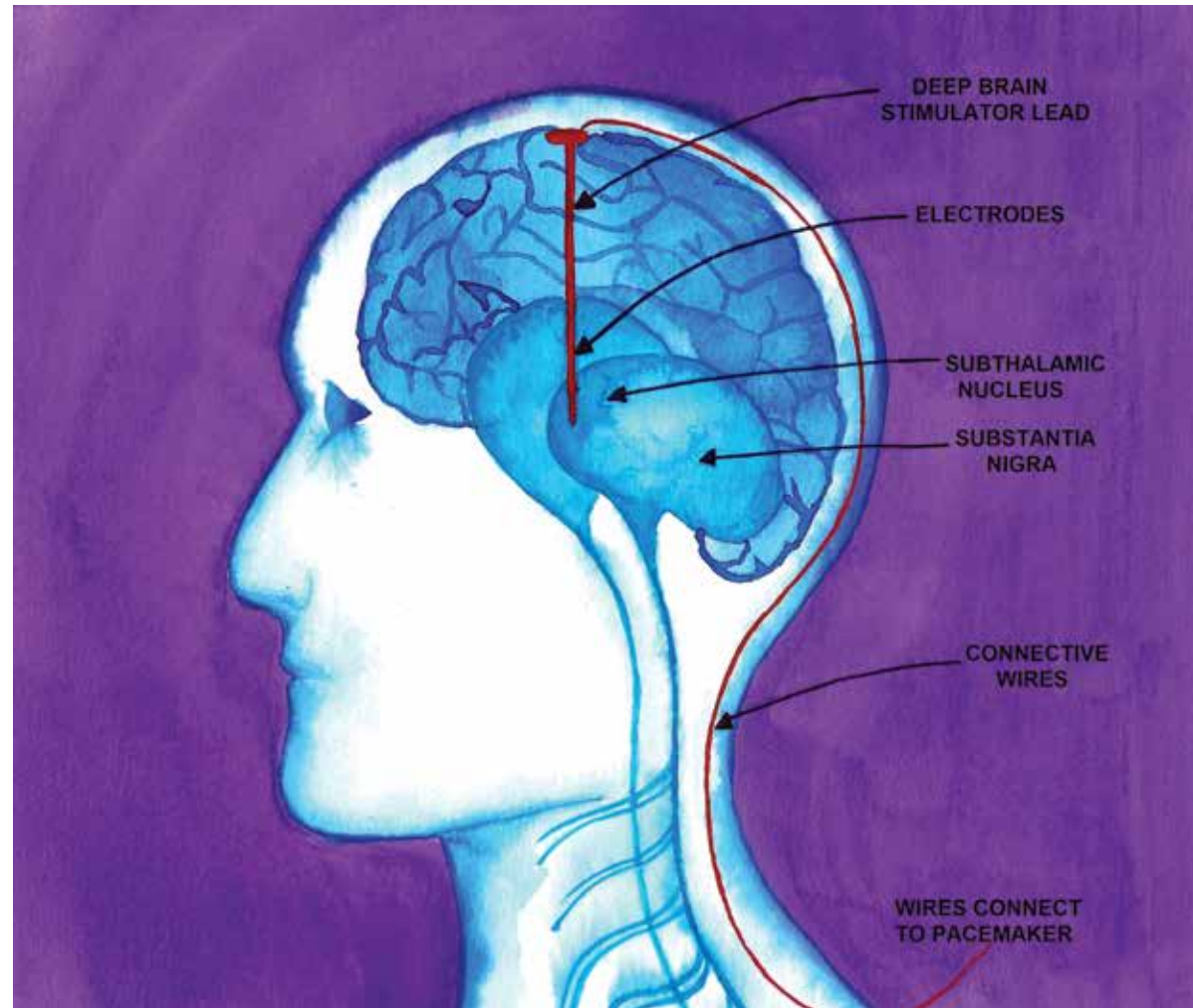
Sometimes his mom's medicines just didn't work. Then she seemed to talk like a zombie and walk like a zombie. In fact, every movement was zombie-like.



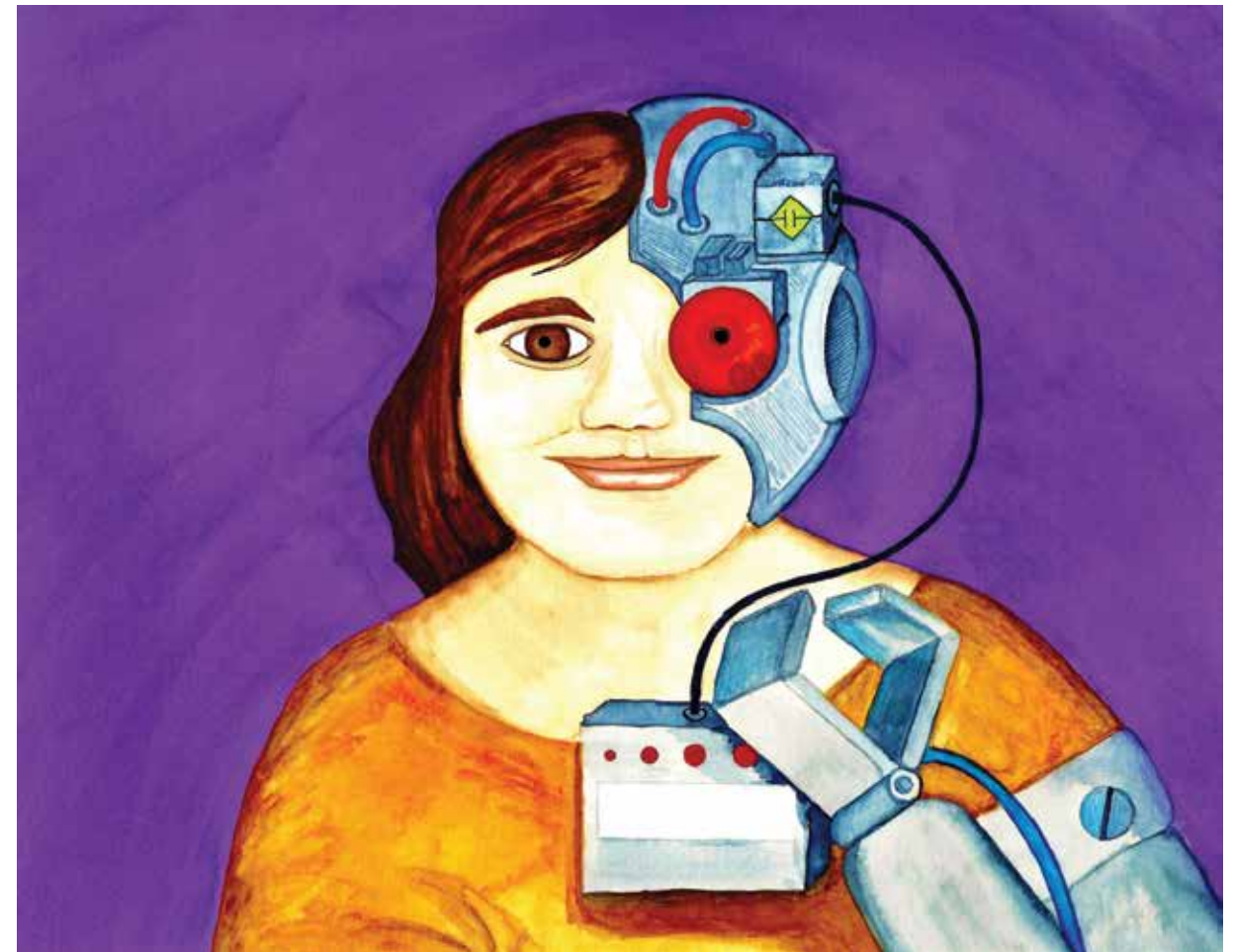
Thank goodness she didn't resemble a zombie in any other ways. Marty never told her that she seemed like a zombie, and she never told Martin that she felt like a zombie, or at least, like a giant wooden puppet.



Unfortunately, the times when her medicines did not work were steadily increasing. The best treatment that gave the most hope for her situation was a pair of cybernetic implants, called deep brain stimulators, or DBS.



Everyone joked because it was so scary to think about becoming a cyborg. The idea of having electrodes surgically implanted into one's brain frightened most people. The idea of having her Parkinson's disease grow worse and worse while she received less and less help from her medicines frightened Marty's mom more.



The implants took three different procedures to install. First up was a short operation to install five screws in her skull. Marty was looking forward to teasing his mother about looking like Frankenstein's monster.



He was a little disappointed, though, when he saw her. She had a bandage all over her head. It looked like a beanie. That night, Marty's mother had to skip taking her Parkinson's medicines. She was pretty miserable.

"Mom, I wish I could make it so you would feel better."

"I wish you could, too, son. There is a way you could help me."



"What is it, Mama?"

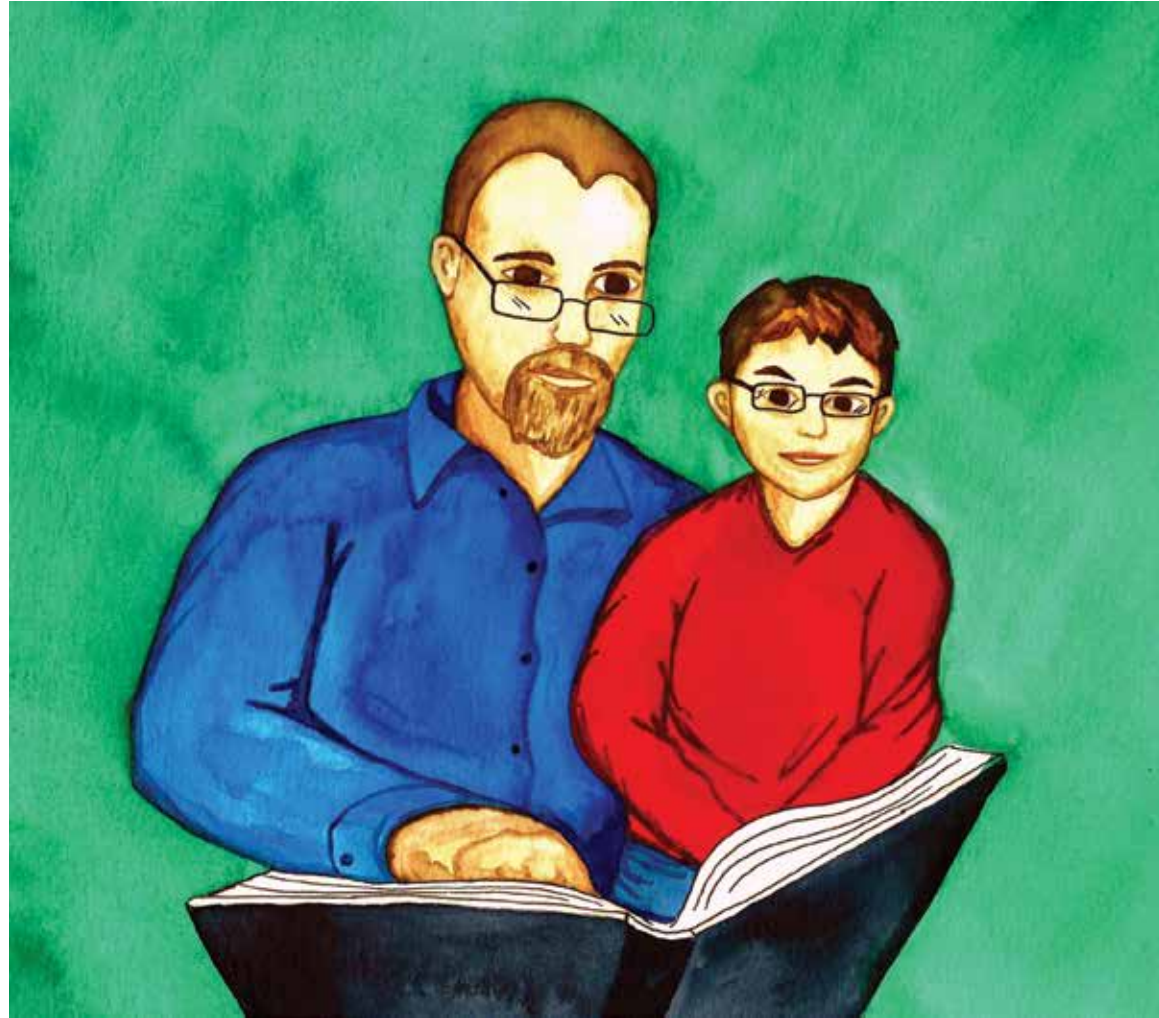
"Marty, I almost cannot stand the way I feel right now. If I am alone, all I can think is I cannot stand it. I cannot make it. But if you could sit with me and keep me company, I will stay calm and I will get through it."





That evening Marty stayed with his mother. They talked about school, band, how Marty loved his clarinet, and the songs he was learning to play . . . and about dogs. Marty patted her on the shoulder when she felt really horrible. He even sang Bob Marley's song, "Three Little Birds" to her. She loved the chorus "Don't worry about a thing, cuz every little thing is gonna be all right . . ."

The next morning Marty's dad told him that in the darkest part of the night, when nothing seemed to calm his mom, they'd figured that out saying the twenty-third Psalm helped most of all.



Marty knew those words. He said them to himself, to see if they could help him stay calm while he waited for his mother to get out of surgery.



Psalm 23

A Psalm of David

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.



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The second procedure was the big one. Marty's mother was in the operating room for about eight hours. When she came out she was halfway a cyborg. The DBS electrodes were in her brain but they were not turned on and had no power supply



They spent a week at home. The next week, Marty's mom had a surgery to put the power supply for her DBS under the skin of her chest. Then the waiting started. She couldn't be a cyborg until the unit was activated. That had to wait for her brain to heal a little bit more.



Finally the wait was over. Marty's mother tried to figure out a way to spare Marty and his Dad one more trip to the hospital. Then Marty turned to her and said, "I have only known you one way my whole life. If you are going to be better when this thing is turned on, I am not going to miss it." He didn't mention zombies, or even an altered time sense, but they both thought it.



The day of the activation of the unit, the day that would turn his mother into a cyborg, the day that would give her much more control over the symptoms of her Parkinson's disease had finally arrived. When the family had crowded into the exam room, the doctor asked Marty to come over. She handed Marty his mother's on/off remote control. She asked if he would like to turn it on. He did.



Marty flipped the switch to turn his mother into a cyborg. She did not seem like a zombie anymore. She did not seem like a wooden puppet. She did not seem like a member of the Borg Collective. She did not have any screws in her head, like Frankenstein's monster or his Bride.

Instead, her smile was big, her voice was clearer, and she could walk without dragging a foot. She still had Parkinson's disease, but she seemed like the person she was always supposed to be. She was his mother. Only now, she was living in real time.



I received my bilateral deep brain stimulators in 2013. I was 47, and my own son was 12.

Thanks to

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And their colleagues at Ochsner Medical Center in New Orleans.

And my deepest personal gratitude for the family and friends that saw me through. I could not have done what I needed to do to get better without the encouragement, prayers and goodwill of nearly everyone I know. I am especially grateful for the support of my dear friends, Sandy O'Quinn West,

Henry Spafford, and Tom Murphy,

and the loving hands-on help and care I received from

my husband Frank Hensley,

my mother Faith Pfrimmer,

my sister Amy Pfrimmer,

and my son Clark Hensley.

To the rest of my family of origin—my father Bob Pfrimmer, my sister Anne Pfrimmer, and my brother Andy Pfrimmer: Thank you for keeping things going, especially the dogs, the coffee, and gales of laughter enough to push back any storm.

Is This Book For Real?

Questions and Answers about ***How Marty's Mom Became a Cyborg***

Are there people who are really cyborgs?

There are people who really use surgically implanted electrodes and generators to live better lives. Some people have pacemakers, some have defibrillators. Some people have insulin pumps, and some, like Marty's mom, have deep brain stimulators.

Is Parkinson's disease really that bad that you would let someone mess around in your brains? Do you really feel like a zombie?

Each person with Parkinson's disease has a unique experience. Some people have a tremor and can shake and shake with no relief. Others become rigid and extremely slow. My rigidity was awfully uncomfortable. My medicine was wearing off two hours after a dose. I decided it was worth risking the surgeries to find relief from my rigidity. Since they are imaginary beings, no one really knows what a zombie feels like; we can only imagine it.

I thought Parkinson's disease was something that only affected older people. Why is the story about Marty's mom, not his grandma?

Parkinson's usually affects adults later in life, but young onset Parkinson's disease—Parkinson's that can be diagnosed in patients before they reach the age of fifty—is not uncommon.

I was diagnosed at the age of 38. My son was 3-1/2. Some people's are diagnosed as early as 20.

Are DBS devices always implanted in a series of surgeries?

No, it depends on the preference of the surgical team. Some do all the steps in one very long day. Some even activate the neurostimulators before the patient leaves the hospital.

Do they have to shave your head?

They have to make a clean incision that will not become infected. Some surgeons prefer to shave the entire head to keep the risk of infection as low as possible, but other surgeons just shave a small spot.

