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Zap

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Zap

Cover Page Footnote

I wish to thank my husband Marty Brueggemann, not only for his incredible dedication throughout my illness and injury, but also for his incredibly keen and creative editing eye. I also wish to thank my beta reader Francoise Lawrence, my siblings Niki Kittur and Carissa Low, and my parents Smita and Dilip Kittur, for their feedback and insight. I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the editors at Survive and Thrive who saw vision in this piece, who gave me confidence to know that my story was worth sharing, and whose feedback was thoughtful, encouraging, and inspiring. And finally, a deep thank you to all of the healthcare professionals, teachers, family, and friends who helped guide me through one of the most turbulent periods in my life to full recovery. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Zap

The pain wracks through my body like electricity. I gasp – I can't move. Phone in hand – hand to ear – I am still as a statue. It feels like I hit my funny bone – just all over my body. Thank goodness my new friend happens to be on the phone. Friend? More than a friend? He drops everything to pick me up at the student union steps.

“Can you move?” He says on the phone as he pulls up. I try to say no, shake my head, but all that comes out is a gasp and searing pain. He brings his lovingly used Chevy Impala around to the bottom of the stairs. He supports my elbow so we can get to the car – it's just a few steps. My breath catches.

The descent is painfully slow. We go one inch at a time; if we don't, there's searing pain up through my back and neck. He holds my hand. We reach the car and the thought of bending over, enough to get in, scares me. My eyes go wide. He convinces me to try, with gentle, sweet words. I bend. I'm on fire. I try to get in. I'm on fire.

I can't get in the car. My heart drops. What if we can't drive? How am I supposed to get to the university's health center? I slowly turn back around, centimeter by centimeter. There is a mountain of stairs we would have to climb to get there on foot. He murmurs gentle words to stoke my courage.

The staircase looms before me. Later, I learn that it is 108 steps, a significant number in the Hindu religion. But had I known how many there were that day, I'm sure I would have never taken the first step. We begin the ascent. I gasp. Electricity courses through my body. We pause. I lift up an incredibly heavy foot. Pain shoots up through the back of my leg, into my spine, up my back. I gasp, releasing my foot onto the next step. Hot tears erupt from my eyes. I pick up my foot and groan, white lightning cascading down every centimeter of my body. My foot touches the step. More tears. A sheath of fog covers my eyes. I steel myself to move my legs, again and again. One hundred and eight times.

When we finally get to the top I want to cry, fall into his arms, take a break, anything. But there is still an entire block to go. He holds my elbow and we walk slowly, as if we were on a leisurely stroll, but my knees are buckling and I'm struggling to stay upright. By the time we arrive at the health center, I am exhausted. I don't know where to go.

I am so glad my new friend (boyfriend?) is with me. We had just had our first date-thing yesterday, where I tried (oh so casually) to ask him and his friend out to

the library, and I was secretly hoping his friend wouldn't be free so I could go just with Marty. The friend took the hint and said conveniently "Oh, unfortunately I'm not available today, but *Marty* happens to be free!" I remember walking carefree with Marty across the bridge to return my library books (ah, the life of a grad student), the cloud-gazing, the easy breeze and scintillating conversation of yesterday. Yesterday, we were just two carefree kids. And now my world is on fire. And he's still here with me.

We walk into the health center. We find a counter, then another counter. The attendant instructs us to "Please sit in the waiting room." Where is that? It's hard to find. We wind through a maze and arrive in a room with couches. This must be it. I can't sit down. I stand still as a statue. I wait. And wait. And wait some more. A physician's assistant (PA) becomes available to see me.

The PA is nice. He listens with wide and attentive eyes to my story. He reminds me of a rabbit – gentle, sweet, and a bit skittish. He asks questions and he puts in an order for test after test after test – MRI, CAT scan. He wants me to come back tomorrow. He's trying his best. I am so exhausted. I call my parents. They're doctors. I hear them heatedly on the phone trying to take over my care from thousands of miles away. In the end, my diagnosis is still a question. Finally the PA says;

"It's likely a ligament tear, young lady, through your neck, upper back, and shoulders."

"How long will it take for me to heal?" He tries his best not to look worried but his darting eyes, his wringing hands, and his shifting back and forth give it away.

"Well, no one can say for sure. It will definitely take longer than a muscle tear. We're not quite sure what it is you have yet – it's possible that it's an impinged nerve but let's give it time and see."

"Will I need surgery?"

"I don't think so. Let's give it a few days' time and see." He sends me home with pain medicine and a heavy heart. I don't even begin to broach questions that are in my mind, like 'Will I ever walk again properly? Will I ever be able to hold a job down again? What other possibilities are you not telling me?' I just sigh and get ready to go.

Marty's waiting for me in the waiting room. He goes to get the car. Luckily it's still there; hasn't been towed. He navigates through the maze of the university

and finds me. Thankfully, there is a pickup circle right in front of the building. I don't mind waiting for twenty minutes. It gives me time to think. More importantly, it gives me time to rest. Most importantly, it gives the pain meds time to kick in. I can get in the car now.

I'm so appreciative...he drives slow. Really slow. Even at 20 mph, going over bumps in the road makes my head jostle and I see stars. He empathizes with my pain; somehow he gets it. I'm not used to having someone think ahead and anticipate my needs; I'm pretty much on my own at a new graduate school. It's a welcome fresh breath and I lean back and try to relax. We ride. He doesn't talk, just lets me cool down and focus on my breath as I prepare for each onslaught of potholes, cracks, and speed bump. I feel each tiny imperfection in my back: smooth - BUMP - smooth - BUMP - smooth smooth - BUMP BUMP.

How we actually get into the apartment is blocked from my memory. I don't remember anything from that night and the next few days are pretty much a blur. Marty brings me back for test after test and there's a lot of waiting. I manage to email all my professors and students with his help, where I tell him what to write and he types it on the computer. My routine becomes numbingly boring. I live in a fog. I wash my hands (ouch), walk to the couch (ouch), numb my brain with whatever is on TV (ouch ouch ouch). I spend a lot of time alone, and a lot of time thinking. I used to wish that I had time to rest, time to do nothing, time to sleep. But this is not how I envisioned it. I go days, weeks, months, without feeling the rush of the wind through my hair on a bike ride. Without feeling the crisp crunch of fall leaves on a long walk by the river. I go for weeks, months, laying on a bed wondering if I'll ever walk again. Ever be normal again. Ever dance again.

Marty comes over. He teaches me guitar as I lay on my back and stare up at the stars. The stars on the ceiling of my stucco apartment bedroom, that is. I learn how to play chords - C, G, E minor. I learn how to curl my fingers into D and make a slanted A. I learn a few easy songs that I can play as a beginner. And I beginner I am, in so many things. How do you go from advanced PhD candidate to 'person-who-can-barely-pay-attention' and from competitive ballroom dancer to 'can't-go-to-the-bathroom-on-her-own'? I had to try hard not to compare a stolen life side-by-side.

I do my PT exercises and marvel at how my 'exercises' have become less than child's play. I have to lay on the floor (or bed) and lift my arms towards the sky. Then lower. Then lift. My shoulder blades rise less than an inch off the floor. Hope deflates in me like a balloon droning out air. Someone has to feed me with a spoon because I can't bring it up to my head without dying inside.

My new friends, so beloved and so dear, after one year have gone from spiritual-reading-acquaintances to true supporters. They switch shifts, checking in on me almost every day. They bring me soup, carry new supplies to my kitchen, bring books to my living room. They give me their time, their energy, their love. I feel restless, useless, like I can't help them. Day in and day out, the feeling gets stronger. Am I only to take, take, take? Am I to be the one constantly in despair? How long will they be willing to help a poor old fuddy-duddy like me instead of going on with their lives and using their precious spare grad-school time to enjoy life?

I work harder. Somehow it motivates me. I can't turn into an invalid at 25 and be dependent on others the rest of my life. I just can't. I lift and lower with abandon. Soon I can bring my arms parallel to the floor. It's not long after that I am given the okay to walk. I push myself to walk a little each day. Can I make it to the kitchen (ouch)? Can I walk to the living room (ouch)? Can I make it to the door (ouch ouch)?

Weeks go by with incremental improvements. One day I get to the top of the stairwell in my apartment. The next week, down half a flight of stairs. The next week, down the full entryway staircase.

Little by little, I push myself out onto the sidewalk. I have to rest for hours afterwards, just due to the pain and the effort. "Don't despair!" I tell myself, when my back is throbbing and I am frustrated that I used to be able to jog 3 miles. "Just start again, like you're a little baby going for a walk."

People of all ages would regularly pass me. I have to keep reminding myself that even if they thought I was weird (nothing appeared wrong with me from the outside), I absolutely had to listen to my body or I would hurt something.

The days are long without hanging out with my dance friends, but I have my caretaker spiritual friends, and my kinda-guy stops by often, singing me songs, keeping me company, making sure I'm well fed.

After some time, walking down one side of a sidewalk block turns into walking all the way around a street block. I stay at the street block level for a few weeks then work up to two. Then three. I take lots of breaks and spend more time standing than I do walking.

But one day, after being socially deprived for months, I challenge myself to go out to see a movie with friends. I dare to walk 14 blocks to the theater. It's more than usual, yes, but I feel it would be good for me for me to see my friends, and I'm sure there will be a good long rest once I got there. I can't even remember which

movie we're going to – I just enjoy it because I'm there with my buddies. We watch the movie. We exit the theater, throw out our popcorn, laugh about what we just saw. We joke with each other as we head back to the cars.

It only takes one block for my life to change again. My back is tight – it's so tight—it feels like a lumpy rock to the touch. I turn to stretch on the diamond metal fence – and to pick the crick out of my neck. Pain. Pain! PAIN! My eyes are burning. My neck feels paralyzed. My back feels like a creature has taken a claw across it diagonally and all the muscle fibers are ripped out, raw, exposed. I've never felt anything so inflamed in my whole life.

Most of my friends will tell you — I generally keep my language pretty PG. By nature, I love civility and gentility, but that day I let it rip. Profane words that people had never heard me utter erupt from my mouth and I scream. I scream for ten long minutes. All my friends shuffle in, trying to help me, trying to do anything. Someone gets a car and brings it around as the world around me erupts in red – again and again. No, please, not this again. I can't breathe, I can't get in the car. It's worse than the first time. With every slight inch of movement, the pain roars. I can't tell where it comes from, how far it goes, what it is – just that it is tearing through my flesh all over.

I come back to reality, and somehow my friends have gotten me into the backseat, but I curse and cry the whole way home. Hot tears run down my cheeks, into my shirt. I almost can't feel my back – it is going numb for me from the overload of hurt. When we arrive at my apartment, my friends try to convince me to get on the bed, though every position is worse than the last. There's no place for respite. I sigh. I try to sit down. It hurts. I move an inch. My back screams at me. *I can't keep doing this!* my mind screams at me, but I have to try. I stand back up.

My parents are immigrants. I come from a long line of freedom fighters. We call ourselves fighters and survivors. I can't give up now...I just can't give in. I have to keep trusting that this will get better, that life will rise to meet me, that I won't have a permanent disability, and that my life won't be filled with pain every single moment of every day. I have to...I have to believe that.

Someone pops me a pill to help ease the pain and after 30 minutes I am finally able to bend over, sit down, and finally lay down on the bed. I slowly stop cursing and my words unwind. My dance friends are all lingering in my tiny, carpeted bedroom, wringing hands, not knowing what to do.

One face, usually so timid, pops out from the crowd with a glass of water and an Advil. He kisses me on the forehead and says he'll be back. He helps shoo

everyone out to let me get rest. Apparently this causes a great stir, and many rumors ripple: *are they more than friends?* for weeks afterwards.

Marty comes every day after that. He teaches me guitar, tends to me gently, listens to my every word. He keeps me alive in heart and soul and spirit. And he helps me rise. Each day, with a bright spirit and a kind word, he encourages me to get out of bed and face the day. Again. And again.

I return to basic PT to gain back some of the function I had. I learn to lift and lower my shoulder blades. Lift. Lower. Lift. Lower. I learn how to mentally breathe out, relax, release whatever tension I can in the back, neck and shoulders. I work up to raising a phone to my ear, calling a Parambulance to school, even though I have to lay on the floor when I get there. I am at risk of losing my teaching assistantship. My sympathetic teaching coordinator gives me a menial teaching assistant job so I can stay on the payroll. I sit in the back of a dark room and change slides on a projector from three decades earlier. I can't physically carry the slides into class, but the professor wheels them in and out of the classroom, and I stare glassy-eyed as I click forward from amoeba to amoeba. At least I can sit up in a chair now. I am so grateful I am allowed to keep my funding. My eyes get wet thinking of what I'd do if I lost my teaching assistant position, if I lost my health insurance, if couldn't afford treatments. The teaching coordinator is truly saving me – I am so lucky.

My friends and colleagues recommend all kinds of things to get better. I try yoga but it's is too much, so I find Alexander Technique, where you only have to think about changes to your posture, not do them. This technique is just right for me. It is passive and I can make miniscule changes to my body. My body learns to re-align and stop bracing itself for more pain. I have a better posture than I ever had pre-accident.

After a few months, I get cocky and try gentle yoga again. I come home in pain all over, have to miss classes. I revert back to the basics. I continue stretches where I raise my arm an inch off the floor. A thousand repetitions of something I should have been able to do; something I COULD have done just a few years ago. But regret can no longer be a permanent part of my vocabulary as it is rapidly becoming the rope that holds me back. I push on and lift light weights. I try to pick up books. I twist to the left. I take the pain. I try to bend. I work up to stretching. The momentum begins to carry me forward and soon I can realize I can walk without putting as much thought into it. My legs carry me forward, bit by bit. I see doctor after doctor, go to physical therapy and they congratulate me. This is progress.

People don't see it when I walk. When I get on the bus, I am scared I won't be able to stay standing, with all the jiggling and the bumps and the turns. I barely hang on – reaching up for the cord is excruciating. But I can't bring myself to ask the other passengers to get up for me. I wish I had a red mark on me, or a cast, or a sling, just so they'd know to offer. I'm too afraid they won't understand, or will judge me as someone who is 'gaming the system' and think I'm taking away a handicap seat from someone who 'really' needs it. So I take it – the beating – one jostle after the other – and I make it to my destination but I'm too exhausted to pay attention during the lesson.

After a few months things start to get better. Now I can do gentle yoga, but I still don't feel like it's very gentle. I wish they had another kind. Like asuper-gentle yoga, or 'yoga-for-people-that-can-only-move-5-centimeters' or something. But that doesn't exist. So I keep trying to fit into the programs designed for people who are not me and come home raw and sore, unable to open a can of beans.

There's no one turning point for recovery in this journey. Inch by inch, it takes over a year to get to daily functioning, with multiple setbacks and successes. It takes two full years to get back into the type of physical shape I was in previously. Over time, I find that technically, I am healed. But I know the scars are internal. The fear that *I will never be able to walk again* reappears whenever I experience pain in this area. My 'ligament tear' is a permanent injury on yoga forms, a scar to remind me how hard I had to work to regain function, and that an erratic injury may be just one move away.

I also carry scars of a deeper, more lasting, and positive kind. I was able to come back from the brink of permanent disability, and I carry that gratitude whenever I walk or hike or go on a grocery outing for my parents. I was able to receive grace and help from friends, even when feeling selfish/unworthy for doing so. I got connected to a world of integrated healing, which is in my heart to this very day. And the deepest positive scar of all is that I was able to find the love of my life, my soul buddy, my partner, and my husband through the turn of the world in such a way that his qualities would uniquely shine.

If your life has zigzagged into the place where you are recovering, from a surgery, an accident, a temporary setback, I wish you the luck, courage and strength to be amongst friends/family/supporters and to work towards a life with freedom and without pain.