

A Life Worth Living

6th-8th

The pain followed me everywhere. There was no escape.

The priest told me that it was a punishment; that I had done some great evil in my previous life, and it was now time to pay for my sins. My mother told me the opposite; that I was an angel sent down from heaven to watch over the world, and the pain that I felt was nothing but homesickness, portrayed in a physical way. I believed neither of these theories.

The doctors have told me time and time again that my pain is all rooted around my condition, CRPS, or Complex Regional Pain Syndrome. It is very rare, and is usually caused by an injury of some sort.

For me it was when I fell out of a tree a little more than a year ago, just before my fourteenth birthday. The nerves around my leg were badly damaged, and are no longer able to control feeling, blood flow, or temperature in my leg. Unfortunately, instead of getting better over time, the condition only escalates, and as predicted, the pain had spread to my other leg and up into my lower back.

When a person does have poor enough luck to be diagnosed with CRPS, the effects are horrible. Even having your hair brush across your back, a pleasant feeling for most, is transformed into searing pain, like knives stabbing you again and again. The simple parts of life, the ones that we are taught to cherish, become incredibly difficult.

Have you ever gotten a bee sting, or burned yourself? Do you know the feeling when the only thing left to console you is the knowledge that most of the pain will have subsided in a matter of minutes? Imagine that, but your previous understanding is replaced by knowledge that the pain will not fade. It will never fade. It will stay with you until the end of time. It will follow you.

One day, about three months ago, my mother returned from work early. She called me downstairs, saying she had something to talk to me about. I was taken aback by the first sight of her. She had the biggest smile that I had ever seen on her face. In the place of her old faded uniform, she had on a brightly colored sweater. At a closer glance, I found that it was the sweater I had given her about three years ago as a present.

In my excitement in seeing her this way, I forgot about the crooked bottom step and fell heavily to the floor. The pain came surging through my body, as tears fought their way through my shut eyelids. I began sobbing. My mother came rushing over, and sat on the floor next to me. She placed my head carefully in her lap, and gently began running her fingers through my hair.

She started whispering, "It's alright Sofie. It will be gone soon. The pain will be gone, I promise!"

"No!" I shouted, suddenly overcome with anger and frustration. "No it won't! You know that! The pain will never go away!"

"It will though, honey! That's what I wanted to tell you!"

"What are you saying?" I asked, suddenly very curious.

"I talked to Doctor Hugh today." she replied, as her enormous smile returned. "He told me about a new technology that has been brought to the lab. It is called Chemical Sympathectomy, and it will take away your pain, at least for the time being. I have thought about it long and hard, and I scheduled surgery for you in two weeks."

I lay motionless on the ground, every muscle in my body tense. For once, I forgot about any pain I was undergoing. So many questions came rushing to my head, that I could not ask a single one. I could not ask a single one, let alone breathe. How long would the surgery be? How much would it cost? Do we even have enough money? With mom working both a day job, and a night shift at the hospital just to pay for our basic needs, there is no way that we could afford this.

Being the mother that she is, she somehow managed to completely read my mind. "Don't worry about money, we'll just take out another loan on the house. We already have so many, what does it matter, one more or less?" She

was trying to find humor in an obviously humorless situation, trying to make me make me feel better, just as she always has. "And it won't take away your pain forever, but at least for a while until they come up with a better cure. It will take all night."

The next couple weeks went by in a flash. For once, nothing could faze me. Even with three pop quizzes on Thursday, I still somehow managed to keep my mood up.

There was still the normal amount of whispering in the halls, gossiping, and bullying. I have tried to ignore it all my life, just as I have with my condition, but it was the first time I had actually succeeded. I finally felt that I had a life worth living.

It was here. The day that I had dreamed about, yet never expected was finally here. Approximately eighteen hours and twenty-three minutes from now I would be waking up, for better or for worse, in a hospital bed. I have tried to imagine what might happen, all the different possibilities, but it only scares me further.

I chose instead to read a book. I find that reading is one of the only ways to truly take your mind off something, unless, of course you choose a book that does not interest you, which I managed to do perfectly. The minute my eyes hit the page, my mind began wandering.

I found myself staring upward toward a picture that I had taken the summer before I got my condition. My wall was littered with pictures, but this one had always stood out to me. The picture was of myself. I was standing in the middle

of a railroad track, and there was a train just visible in the distance. I was wearing a bright red dress, and had my hair down, letting it fall carelessly against my back. I remember that day vividly. I remember feeling invincible, as though even if the train had hit me, I would have been okay. I wanted to feel that again.

I slowly lifted myself off the ground and walked over to the computer at my desk. I found the site I was looking for immediately. The hospital nearest to my home, the one where I did almost all of my tests, had a website. In that website, amidst a jungle of random, useless information, I found what I was looking for. ***New Procedures*** it read in large black letters at the top of the page. After a list of about fifteen surgeries, I came upon the surgery.

I realized that I had been holding my breath, and when I looked down, I found that my fingers had been clenched so tightly that my knuckles had turned white. I took a deep breath and slowly clicked on the link.

It read; *Chemical Sympathectomy is meant to destroy any damaged nerves through means of alcohol, phenol, or hypertonic saline nerve blocks. This method, however, is very dangerous, and has also been known to increase pain, create serious complications, and leave behind a nasty scar on patients. It will lose its effect after about a year.*

I fell back against my chair. I had to do this. If I didn't, I would always regret my decision. I knew what I needed to do, but I was scared to death to do it.

The waiting room was excruciatingly boring. It was filled to the brim with people, with injuries ranging anywhere from a man who had somehow managed to get his hand stuck in a vase, to a boy with a fishhook in his lip, who was wailing so loud that it sounded like a fire alarm was going off.

Whose idea was it anyways to put a bunch of different sick and bloody people into a room for a couple of hours so that they could catch each other's sicknesses? They could at least pass out some hand sanitizer.

After what felt like a million years, my name was finally called over the loudspeaker, and I was rushed outside by my mother, who was obviously having a bad time too, considering she was forced to sit next to a man who would not stop sneezing on her.

There was a nurse waiting for us just outside the waiting room, and as soon as she saw us, she grabbed me by the wrist and began pulling me quickly down the hallway. She was walking so fast that I had to jog to keep up with her. I didn't even know where my mother was any more.

All of a sudden she stopped, and would have sent me flying past her if it weren't for the iron grasp she still had on my wrist. I felt her grip loosen slightly, as she ushered me through the open door in front of us.

"In here. Lay down on the bed. The doctor should be in shortly." She said in a voice I never would have expected to come out of a young lady like herself.

I tried to say thank you, but the words got caught in my throat. In the fifteen years I have been on this planet, this was the most scared I had ever been. I lay down awkwardly on the bed, feeling like a frog in a science lab awaiting its dissection.

The door opened quickly, revealing a short, stout woman wearing the stereotypical white doctor's coat. She announced that she would be the one performing my surgery. By then my mother had come in, and was sitting on a chair next to my bed. She was gripping my hand tightly, and when the doctor asked her to let go, she seemed reluctant.

The doctor dramatically pulled out a needle and asked me if I was ready. By then I was just anxious to get it over with, and I shoved my arm out toward her.

I was asleep within minutes.

My eyes slowly opened, allowing a few rays of sunlight to come in through a cracked window on the far side of the room. There was no one with me, and I was relieved by that. I felt disoriented, as though these thoughts were not my own. My head was racing, trying to remember what was happening, because I was still in that dream state, when you aren't quite sure what is reality.

I like to think that dreams are just random memories and thoughts that the brain needs to dispose of, and that if you remember your dreams that you are somehow beating the system. I almost always remember at least one of my dreams, but that night was different. I didn't even remember falling asleep.

Suddenly it all came crashing down on me. I was overcome with a feeling of pure dread, as my fingers slowly reached down and pressed upon my leg. I cringed, waiting, expecting the pain that I had always experienced, the pain that held me suspended, never escaping. I felt no pain.

Here I am, two years later. Although the surgery was only supposed to last for a year, I have never felt that same amount of pain since. Every once in a while I feel it, just a flicker of my old life, but relief always comes, the pain always fades. I am happy, and I am thankful.

I finally feel that I have a life worth living.

