

# 1

When I woke up in the hospital, they told me my girlfriend had been killed. She wasn't my girlfriend, but I didn't correct them.

The first weeks were a confusion of morphine and fluorescent strip lighting. A scrubs-clad stranger told me I wouldn't walk again. She said something about a wheelchair and I said I preferred crutches, still not understanding.

Each morning arrived too early and too loudly, delivered by the clatter of the curtain being pulled back: nurses gossiping, machines beeping, patients calling out, mop-bucket wheels squeaking, relatives arguing, doctors talking, toilets flushing, my own voice in my head counting over and over the stupidities that got me here. I resented being pulled from vivid dreams where I walked, wasn't in constant pain and hadn't met Melissa that night. Steeped in painkillers, muscle relaxants, anticoagulants and anti-spasmodics, my brain turned dreams into staged re-enactments of my life. I took every chance and every pill to see what vignette of my past that sleep would play for me. These dreams were more real than the washed-out moments awake in a hospital. The characters' wigs were askew and the cast not quite right for the parts, but I was

the director. When the dialogue turned against me or the narrative galloped away, I stopped the action, repositioned the players and began again from the top of the page. I edited dialogue so I said what I should have said. I cut whole scenes from my life. I was redrafting the story, because I didn't like the ending.

My neighbour was a good ol' boy who broke his neck on a fishing, mostly drinking, trip. His fishing buddies, his family and girlfriend visited every day, and every day I opened my eyes to his nightstand full of greeting cards. Every day: a card with a cartoon dog surrounded by smiling sunflowers; another card with a smiling sun; another sun; one with flowers – all cheerily commanding 'Get well soon'. Fuck you, dog. Fuck you, flowers. Fuck you, sun.

For the first months, I had to be put into a back brace before being sent downstairs for physical therapy. The orderly adjusted my legs one by one. My damaged nerves reported an ambiguous pull at my hips, but when he touched my feet it felt like they were dipped in scalding water. My feet would turn bright red from the gentlest of touches. The doctors and physical therapists assured me this was normal.

At the centre of the physiotherapy room, a set of three steps stood like an altar. An elderly man, lopsided from a stroke, with a driftwood gnarl of a left arm, struggled to lift his leg onto the first step while three therapists hovered around him murmuring encouragements. Half a dozen wheelchair-bound patients – old young fat thin white brown black – worked away at weight machines or hand cycles. A line of grotesques and the pitiable. And I was one of them, gooble gobble gooble gobble.

The therapist poked me with a pin. She marked on an outline drawing of a sexless body in my medical folder

where insensate flesh began. She stretched my legs and explained which muscles she, not me any more, was working. She encouraged me as if she was toilet training a puppy. Good job. That's it. Hurray for you.

Hurray for me. Hurray for this cockless creature measured by whether I'm avoiding pressure sores, constipation or foot drop. When our sessions finished, she pushed me over to the weight machines and warned me not to overdo it while still wearing the brace. I waited for the therapist to leave, then asked a patient's mom to push me outside where the orderlies smoked.

I fist-bumped with Ricky. His green scrubs were tight against the thickness of his arms and legs. He looked like a thug, but I had seen that barrel of belly, Marines flat-top, cauliflower ears, cradle in those arms an old lady, tiny and ashen in her thin hospital gown. He had gently lifted her from wheelchair to bed. Brushing back the loose wisps of grey and in answer to her repeated thank yous, he had wished her good night.

'You ain't doing PT?' Ricky said and handed me a cigarette. I nodded my thanks.

'Why're you all trying to shove a basketball in my lap? I didn't give a crap about sports when I was over six foot. I'm sure as hell not interested now that I'm four foot gimpy. God clearly wants me sitting on my ass doing nothing. Who am I to argue?'

'Who's talking about basketball?' Ricky took a long drag, watching me. He blew the smoke over his shoulder. 'Your tris and delts are your legs now.' He straightened an arm and pointed at the flexed muscles with two fingers, his cigarette between them. 'You can't be expecting other people's mommas to push you around.'

'Duly noted,' I said.

‘Shit,’ Ricky said. ‘Where your people at?’

‘I got no people.’

He sucked his teeth. ‘You got people.’

I looked away and took a long drag. After our smoke, Ricky brought me back to my bed. He positioned the chair and locked its brakes.

‘A lot of guys try to pretend this ain’t happening. They ignore everybody’s good advice, but the quicker you get your head right the quicker you can get back to normal.’ There was that word again. You can’t tell an able-bodied person that being a cripple isn’t momentous. It’s impossible to accept. At the time, I didn’t. All your understanding of living assumes two working legs. Newly disabled, you can’t know that with time and practice you won’t need to think about how to manoeuvre a wheelchair off kerbs or pull yourself over a step. You adapt and move through the world differently but as easily. Depending on who you are, the disabled are a memento mori, the good deed for the day or a vessel into which you pour pity or curiosity. The last thing you want to hear is that it’s no big deal.

I struggled to keep my balance as Ricky lifted my legs onto the bed.

‘All this . . .’ He waved his hand around the hospital room and pointed at the wheelchair. ‘You think this is the end of the world? It ain’t. You ain’t even that bad off, but you don’t want to hear that.’

‘No, I do not.’

‘Light off or on?’

‘Off.’

I was awoken by a woman from the finance office. She shoved my shoulder roughly and repeated my name. She wore a fleece jacket covered in cartoon pugs playing sports

and yet, with an inch extra of working spinal cord, she was better than me in every way.

‘Are those pugs playing soccer?’ I asked.

‘My husband bought it for Christmas.’ She held the lapel out and looked down, smiling.

‘Are you guys still together?’

‘Yes,’ she answered, her forehead wrinkling.

‘Amazing,’ I said.

‘Sir, sorry to wake you. But we need to arrange your discharge.’

I sat up sharply, ignoring the slashes of pain. ‘I can’t,’ I blurted.

‘The doctors are very pleased with your progress. The brace can come off.’ She smiled. She handed me a letter from the surgeon. Her polite grin disappeared as she watched my hand shake. I couldn’t focus on the words.

‘They said six months. I’ve been here three. What happened to six months?’ I asked.

‘With your insurance situation—’

‘I have nowhere to go,’ I pleaded.

‘You were aware this was a possibility. We’ve discussed this.’

‘Is this because of the hot dog thing?’

She shook her head.

‘I was trying to cheer the old lady up. The nurse was being a jerk. It was funny.’

Her lips tightened. She looked to the ceiling and sighed.

‘Is it because the guy across the hall gave me his meds?’

‘No.’

‘I’ll take PT more seriously.’

She set her folder on the bed rail. She looked tired. ‘This isn’t a disciplinary action. We have a limited number of beds available.’

Her weariness sapped the fight from me.

‘What do I need to do?’

She opened the folder of papers to be signed. I followed her finger to the dotted lines and the check boxes.

‘Is there someone you would like us to call?’

‘No. I’ll do it. Can you see if the nurse will bring me some pain pills?’

Without the back brace, I could get myself in and out of the wheelchair, but the months of being in bed, the Dilaudid and cigarette breaks when I should have been doing physical therapy made the distance to the payphone across from the nurses’ station a chore. After ten years, I still knew his number by heart. On any day for the past ten years I could have dialled the number and he would pick up on the third ring and say . . .

‘Hello. Jack here.’ The wall around the phone radiated rays of squiggled phone numbers. What did the person who had to dial ‘Ackroyd 781-2307’ say when Ackroyd picked up? How did Ackroyd respond? No good news could come from this phone.

‘Hello?’ the voice in the receiver repeated.

‘Hello,’ I managed to say without my voice breaking.

The phone went silent until Jack said, ‘Okay,’ unsurprised, as if he knew he would get this phone call one day. ‘What’s happened? What do you need?’

‘Are you around tomorrow morning? I need you to pick me up.’ I choked up from hearing my father’s voice after so many years. Me calling from this hospital phone, from this wheelchair, became a weight pulling me towards my bed ready to let pain pills whisper me back to my stage-managed dreams.

‘Okay. What’s the address? Wait, let me get a pen. Okay.’

I breathed deep and rubbed at my eyes. I read him the hospital’s address from a piece of paper taped to the face

of the phone. In tiny squared letters someone had written 'fuck this'.

'Are you okay?'

I picked at the address and peeled away a thin strip of tape. I wrote Jack's name and number on the wall. I don't know why.

'I was in a car accident.'

'How serious?'

'I'm okay,' I said, fighting to keep any emotion out of my voice.

'Can you tell me what happened?'

Ricky was coming down the hallway. I turned away and put my head against the wall. I didn't want him to see me crying.

'You still there?'

'Yeah, I'm here. Is it possible to stay with you for a week or two while I recover?'

'Okay. We'll get you home. You need me to bring you anything?'

I tried to say no, but when I opened my mouth I sobbed. I cried with gratitude, but a good chunk of self-pity was in there too. I mourned my life, as messed up as it was, because it was over. I wanted to tell Jack I was afraid, but I couldn't. I wasn't ready to admit ten years of failure were my fault. Being a cripple in a hospital amongst all the other damaged can be endured. Out in the world, you must process what it means to be a fuck-up and now a fuck-up permanently confined to a wheelchair.

'It's a few hours' drive from the house, but I'll be there first thing in the morning,' Jack said.

'I'll be here. I'm not going anywhere.'

'Okay,' he said.

## 2

In the dream I couldn't direct or rescript, paramedics stood over me. The buildings and people in waterproof coveralls were washed in the alternating red and amber of an idling fire truck. There was no pain, yet. There was confusion. There was fear. There was my heart trying to escape my chest. But no pain, and that scared me too. I was going to die. I knew that. I wanted to ask if I was dying, but I didn't know the words. More people nearby. People speaking to the driver. People speaking to Melissa. Melissa, was she okay? Ask if Melissa is okay. Every thin thought fell apart before I made sense of it. A voice to my left. I looked. A middle-aged woman. Her helmet, so yellow it glowed, loomed closer until I saw only her sun-hardened face. The deep crow's feet at her eyes made her look kind and gentle. I thought maybe it was going to be okay.

It was not going to be okay.

'Can you hear me? What's your name?' Behind her safety glasses, her black eyes shone in the glare of the headlights. 'Can you tell me your name?'

'Jarred.'

'Hello, Jerry. Can you tell me if you're allergic to any medication?'



‘No.’

‘No, you can’t tell me? No, you’re not allergic?’

‘No, not allergic.’

‘Jerry, I’m going to put this tube between your ribs to inflate your lung. Your ribs are broken. It’s going to hurt. Ready? One . . . two . . . three.’

Pain arrived as promised. A fiery Fourth of July bloom of hurt burst from my side. It vibrated down my ribs, spreading along my spine, shoulders, arms, neck, skull. My teeth loosened in their sockets. It awoke all the other agonies. A jolt of electric pain shot from the break in my arm and churned my stomach. I didn’t want to be sick. I was going to be sick. I needed to tell them I was going to be sick. The kind-eyed woman set my arm in a splint and I heard the terrible yelp of a dog being punished. It was me who had made that noise. Scared, I was very scared. Golden sparks swam and fizzled in my vision and each time she adjusted the tube between my broken ribs the pain rippled new and fresh. This couldn’t possibly go on. This couldn’t get worse. I was wrong. Every root and branch of nerve hummed hate and each shallow sip of air that burned my throat reassured me that what had happened was not a dream. My body shook.

‘I’m cold,’ I said through chattering teeth.

‘We’re going to take care of you,’ she said.

In the darkness my body drifted up. The sounds of that night faded and there was a steady beeping of an unseen machine. I felt the flicker of tv light behind my closed eyelids. I opened them and I was in my hospital bed. The sheets were damp with sweat. The redneck roommate snored away on the other side of the curtain, dreaming of beer and bass. The harsh light from under the door kept the room in a yellow gloam. I had to reassure myself that

I was awake and this was not the dream. But I still felt pain.

My head was being compressed. At each throb, pain jabbed my eyes. Nausea churned my stomach and I fumbled for the bedpan. My heart tapped out a triple beat before stumbling back to its steady rhythm. I mashed the nurse call button. My unfeeling, unmoving legs were being twisted. I was lying on my back, but my legs were pinned up behind me, curling like a withering plant. My left leg twisted away from my body. The bundled straw of my muscles snapped one by one under the torture. I tried to climb the bed to escape the attack. I mashed and mashed the call button. I could hear the bell ringing at their desk down the hall. My howls resonated in my skull and drowned out the snores of my unperturbed roommate. I yelled a little louder, partly for the relief, partly to hurry the nurse and partly to wake the redneck up. A nurse arrived and casually walked to my bed. I felt an urgency that this suffering should be shared.

‘My legs! What’s happening to my legs? They’re breaking. They’re breaking!’

She pulled the sheets away. She touched my legs, still irritatingly calm, while I struggled in bed pulling at the skin of my stomach. She felt my head. How could she be calm right now? How could my roommate be sleeping?

‘Do you feel like you have a hangover? Nauseous?’

‘Yes,’ I said, teeth clenched.

‘You need to sit up.’ She pressed the button on the bed. Another nurse came in and took my blood pressure. ‘Have you peed?’

‘My fucking legs. They’re twisted. Straighten my legs, straighten my legs!’

‘They are straight. It’s neurological pain, probably dysreflexia. I’ll go see if you can have some meds.’

‘I can have meds,’ I screamed, as the unseen hands twisted my legs into another impossible direction. Paraplegia isn’t just the golden ticket to great parking and people’s condescension. It comes with surprises like autonomic dysreflexia and phantom pain. Though it was the phantom pain that was torturing me, I found out later that it was the dysreflexia that could kill me.

She came back with two yellow pills. I gripped the rails so tight that my fingers hurt and tried to pull the rail from the bed. I wanted something besides me to be broken. I wanted the nurses to be as scared too. I wanted my roommate to be awake and witnessing. The pain in my head started to fade, but my legs were still being twisted off.

‘The pills aren’t working.’

‘They will. They will.’

‘No! They won’t.’

The two nurses looked at each other, looked at me, wordlessly conferring. I wanted to shout, ‘Why are you so calm? Look at my legs!’ A nurse left and came back filling a syringe. She gave me the shot and calm and peace and a floating goodness spread through my rebelling body. My legs drifted back to their normal position and I felt warm and exhausted and happy to be going to sleep and, as I drifted off, I heard my roommate’s thick Texan drawl say, ‘Welcome to the shitshow, partner.’

Later that night, the crack of light under the door flared into full sun then quickly died back to its strip of harsh glow. The curtain around my bed squeaked open, closed and a woman giggled.

‘Hey, babes,’ the woman said. By the outline of shadow, I knew her hand was on the bed. Maybe on my legs. Touching me. Even though you are paralysed, you still sense the presence of your legs. They are there and you vaguely

know their positions, but the details are scrubbed. She touched my foot, maybe, then I guessed she ran her hand up to my knee. She patted my knee, I think. Was she touching my thigh? I didn't speak or move. She drew closer, and I smelled the freshness of her soap and shampoo. I realised my mouth was hanging open. I swallowed.

'Wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey,' she whispered as she brought her face to mine. I opened my mouth to speak.

She said, 'Shit, wrong bed.' Her shadow disappeared. My neighbour's curtain squeaked. 'Hey, babes.'

The grumbling of my roommate waking up, a hushed conversation, their kisses, the hiss of two beers opening. I thought about her touching my leg, leaning in to give a kiss that wasn't mine. Longing filled me. Their bed creaked, creaked again, giggles, creak, creak. I didn't want to listen, but I did. The bed's motor whirred, too loudly, as I raised the top half. She moaned and I stopped. I felt embarrassed at my arousal and want. Quietly, carefully, I moved my legs over the side of the bed. I was afraid that the unseen hands would start their tortures again, but only a lingering ache in my legs and back remained. Those pills were doing their job, but my balance was off. The noises on the other side of the curtain became steady, gaining in urgency. I took my chance to leave them alone to enjoy this moment.