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Finding Will in Despair

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Cover Page Footnote

The author would like to acknowledge her parents: Ramesh & Kantaben, along with her sisters: Bhavisha & Riya, for their instrumental support all her life. She would also like to mention Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Dhyani Swami for their unconditional guidance.

Finding Will in Despair

Celebration is a word whose complexity and weight increases with each moment in my life. It is associated with happiness and admiration. Such feelings are invoked when I think about a time period in my life. This period shed light and brought a new meaning of celebration for me.

During the middle of my first semester of medical school, I began to have some concerning health symptoms. The symptoms pushed me to seek medical attention at an Urgent Care facility. The doctor seemed to brush away my symptoms for a much lighter diagnosis. He thought it was something that could simply be fixed with antibiotics and told me to wait it out. I had already waited long enough. At this point, I just broke down. I told the doctor it would be impossible to study for my upcoming exam with this uncertainty, not to mention the symptoms. No reaction. Nothing. No empathy. No other suggestions. Nothing. Defeated, I drove home where my anxiety heightened until my dad called a friend who suggested going to the ER—a deed I will always be thankful for.

After my symptoms were stabilized in the ER, I was waiting for my lab results to come back. I was almost expecting something small, as hinted by the urgent care doctor. Instead I was taken in for an MRI. It revealed cauda equina syndrome. The hospitalist was still waiting to speak with a neurologist who could confirm my symptoms with the diagnosis. However, she informed me that I would most likely have a portable catheter.

It struck me that I was never going to be *normal* again. I would be that weird girl in school. Tears flowed down my face as I tried to study for my test. Eventually, the neurologist decided to see how I would perform on steroids without a catheter. From there, it was a waiting game. Eventually I was able to perform normally, but they wanted to keep me overnight for observation with steroid injections.

Although, it looked promising, but I still did not sleep that night. I just wanted to go home. In the morning, another wave of fear struck when the neurosurgeon suggested surgery would be a good option to prevent paralysis. Though the surgery did not have to be right away, he said the sooner the better.

Some people walked out of the surgery and did fine after a couple of months of recovery while others became paralyzed from the waist down. All I could think about was how was I going to finish medical school?

How would I become a doctor if I was in a wheelchair?

I was discharged only with steroids (and thankfully no catheter). In between the risks of surgery weighing me down, constant follow ups, and emotional distress, I ended up failing my test and my grades suffered markedly. There were only a few exams left to give me the opportunity to pass my first semester. I spoke with many different advisors and directors about my options. I didn't want to take a leave of absence because it would mean not being with my friends, but it was always in the back of my mind.

I had no idea how I would be able to take my tests, but the exam results were promising. I was back to normal. Then randomly, after two weeks, I found myself back at the hospital with the same issue. While I was studying on the hospital bed I laughed at the ridiculousness of my situation, while I was waiting to be catheterized.

Strangely, this time I was back to normal once they removed the catheter.

My neurosurgeon to this day has no idea why my MRI findings caused the two episodes of urinary retention back in October 2019, but no more. According to him, there should have been more episodes for my diagnosis.

I have been back to my normal healthy self and I did well during my first semester of medical school. Now, I spend many days finding motivation from my experience. I often wonder how I am so lucky that this syndrome is not causing any symptoms. How is it possible that I beat the odds against having a surgery?

The tears I shed during that phase of my life are different than the ones I am shedding right now as I am writing this. This story allows me to call my life in its entirety to be a celebration.

My very existence is rare and I am humbled that it is so. Every day, I celebrate my family who never left my side, my friends whose comfort knew no bounds, those professors who understood my pain, the staff at the hospital whose sincerity filled my heart with joy and finally, myself for somehow finding courage among all those tears to keep going forward.

- ▶ **ARTIST STATEMENT:** *This essay is about my emotional journey as I discovered what celebration means to me.*

DHRUTI HIRANI IS A FIRST YEAR MEDICAL STUDENT WHO IS INTERESTED IN HELPING UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES. SHE ALSO ENJOYS LEARNING ABOUT PHYSICIAN ADVOCACY THROUGH THE FOMA ORGANIZATION. SHE WOULD LIKE TO ACKNOWLEDGE HER PARENTS: RAMESH AND KANTABEN, ALONG WITH HER SISTERS: BHAVISHA AND RIYA FOR THEIR INSTRUMENTAL SUPPORT ALL HER LIFE. SHE WOULD ALSO LIKE TO MENTION BHAGWAN SWAMINARAYAN AND DHYANI SWAMI FOR THEIR UNCONDITIONAL GUIDANCE.