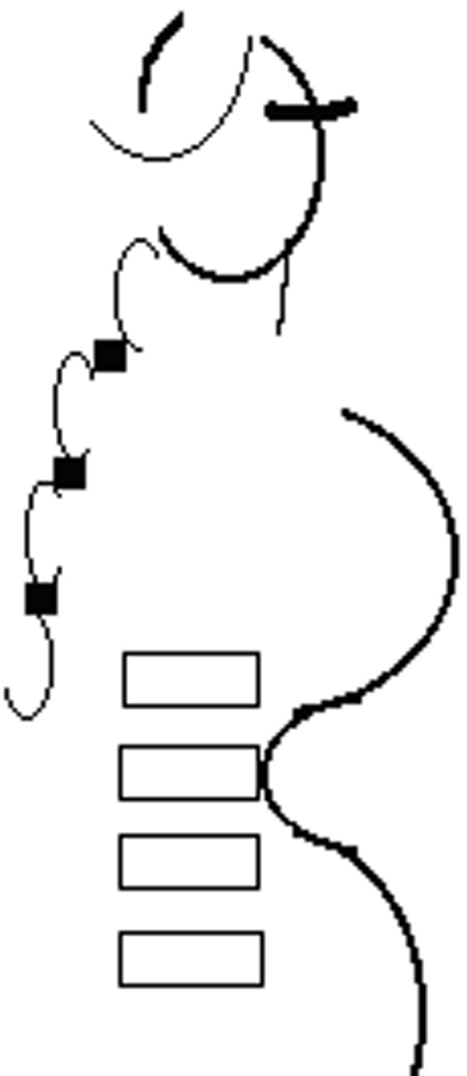


The birth of a superheroine with scoliosis



KREMENA

Life is a slow death and healthiness prolongs the process.

As something of a sickly child, I was wrapped in cotton wool and spoiled rotten by an army of grandmothers and grand-aunts. Unlike my hard-to-kill tumbleweed counterparts, I was the kind of kid to run home crying because of a tiny cut. I broke my fingers a lot and I remember being taken to the children's ward at the hospital, where there were peeling communist cartoon characters painted on the glass window.

When I fractured my right finger in a clumsy miscalculation of acrobatics during a Physical Education class, my plaster got dislocated. I had insisted on knitting while wearing it, so I ended up with a deformed little finger. But what is a crooked finger compared to a crooked spine? Actually, they are surprisingly similar.

The rib bump was first noticed by the hook-nosed-but-nice school nurse.

Her stethoscope is cold and her disinfectant odor engulfs me as she matter-of-factly informs my grandmother of my suspected condition.

"... but she will outgrow it," the nurse adds with reassurance.

Even Grandma resists the temptation to over-react. I am hardly the Hunchback of Notre Dame at this stage so it is understandable that everyone is reluctant to make a mountain out of my molehill of a random rib deformity.

Actual and perceived possibilities of certain occurrences are inversely proportional.

Bad posture is considered common amongst kids hence I am sent off on my merry way with only a mild

recommendation to attend special straightening exercise classes.

Thus, dusty gymnasium mattresses and foam mats full of cloudy dirt clumps become a part of my life. I attend a couple of times a week. The exercises are supposed to improve the position of my spine by making the muscles stronger.

Where there is dreaming and doing, despair and defeat do not reside.

The classes are conducted by a communist coach of an Amazon woman. Red-haired, wrinkled and full of detached discipline, she operates from a tiny empty office situated in the enormous concrete building that houses the gymnasium on the outskirts of our tiny Eastern European town.

“... And stretch,” she commands us. Like the other children, I keep to myself. Only occasionally we eye each other.

Getting there involves walking up the icy, lethally slippery steep steps. I am aware of the imminent danger of falling and cracking my head open like the spiky green hedgehog shell of the wild heavy chestnuts; they thunder to the ground from the height of the ancient towering trees with fan-like leaves painted by autumn’s ochre palette. The cracked green juicy shell reveals a glossy brown chestnut dipped in the gleaming succulent oil of youth — it’s a matter of days before it shrivels, its glossy skin becoming dull and dusty and its juicy guts giving way to hollow dryness. It was the implications of this life cycle that scared the shit out of me, as it was a nagging reminder of mortality — every human’s eventual fate.

I knew scoliosis meant curvature of the spine. In its early stages it’s entirely unnoticeable to the naked eye.

Therefore, for a haunted hypochondriac such as me, the condition had mostly mental manifestations. Its tendency to alter my concept of time meant that there was always the threat of deterioration. My private terror of time became most amplified at night, with my nightmare recurring each time I attended appointments with orthopedic specialists. To get to these appointments I took the train and waded through knee-deep mud fields to reach the isolated hospital; then followed excruciating queuing and waiting all day for a 10 minute visit that resulted in the declaration that the curvature had increased, despite my jaded exercise efforts. Then I would head home deflated as I sullenly surveyed the shards of my world once again.

*Poison makes you spew
Razors cut you deep.
The options are a few
Since death is not like sleep.
So spare you the strife
By living out your life*

Idiopathic scoliosis means it has an unknown cause. It tends to worsen during puberty as the skeletal structure grows. The curvature is measured in degrees with angles drawn on the x-rays with old-fashioned maths rulers. I started off with only a mild deformity and a few twisted vertebrae — only 10 degrees. With each visit to the blue-tiled chlorine-smelling hospital, it increased slowly but surely, while proportionally causing my morale to plummet to new depths.

I struggled with my deformity-induced adolescent depression and upgraded my fears after every visit with an intensity increment of about 10 degrees each time. I felt extremely sorry for myself, sulked and refused to do the exercises. This led to guilt and even more terror; time was an insidious enemy with every minute working against me. I felt I could do nothing but face a future as a

deformed cripple. This was my ultimate fear and it led to private panic attacks and tsunamis of despair, further crushing my fragile ego throughout my early teens.

This mental masochistic madness led to an obsession with people's backs. In my anguished anger, I would evaluate people's posture, desperately looking for an asymmetry. I sought kindred spirits, or at least someone in a similar situation. But the uniqueness of my condition created more hysteria, which meant that I swept my scoliosis under the carpet as much as I could. By hiding it, my internal insecurities increased exponentially. Every aspect of my existence was dominated by my desire to have a straight spine.

All signs signaled that my earthly options were exhausted. Thus, in the true style of desperation, I turned to spirituality in a pitiful effort to satisfy my wish and surrender my sickness to the skies. My religious origins are kind of eclectic, consisting of my grandfather's Russian Orthodox Christianity, Pagan influences dating back to the Roman empire origins of our tiny mining town and atheism caused by almost half a century of Eastern European communism. The pagan influence was most evident in the importance I placed on talismans and amulets. I had drawers full of bells, blue horses, beads tied with red string, pouches of garlic cloves, furry rabbit tails and carved pieces of wood. I'd carry them everywhere and carefully assess and analyze their magic powers according to how much luck they brought me in a game I played or what test grade I received at school.

Church attendance was never regular, compulsory or considered to be a social event. Instead it was a time of quiet reflection.

Pray so that the followers are protected from each other.

The church we went to was tiny, dark, cozy, and infused with the smell of incense and burning wax. It was said to be the home of a 16th century “miracle maker” who was painted as a gaunt old man in monastery robes clutching an ancient scroll of wisdom. Since I certainly needed a miracle, I knew Saint Ivan Rilski was the man for the job, so I thought I might ask just in case, the way I might ask granddad to make me a tiara out of foil.

Beyond the wooden doors, the foyer had a little cubicle, where the church sold all manner of mystical merchandise: crucifix necklaces that painted your neck green with oxidization when worn on a hot day; long thin candles and pocket icons. Inside, the flame flickers danced, reflected in the gold paint of the Saint icons and brass candleholders.

I placed my modest donations on this grandfather figure of a saint’s glass-covered altars full of wilting flowers. Then I added my own candle to the wax-covered holders and wished for a miracle. I hoped my cents would bribe the heavens into granting it. Grandma, in the meantime, stuck her candle dramatically in the sand-filled tray in the corner — with the icon image of a weeping saint above it, this symbolized the graveyard, with the candles being the souls of the dead.

Love to live and life will love you too.

Emerging into the sunlight had a similar effect to emerging from a cinema — somber stinging reality struck in the form of blinding sunlight, signaling the end of this spirituality stint.

My church wish might have been a not-so-modest demand for a miracle to alter the architecture of my

spinal structure, but my mother's was always immigration to a Western country. This wish was even more impossible than mine considering the circumstances — almost non-existent funds and visa applications that consumed decades with futile hopes.

“We are going to be left to rot in this hell-hole for the rest of our lives,” she'd say. “If we wait much longer, all the doors will close.”

And she was right; the border regulations were becoming stricter and we were no longer eligible for refugee status.

The opportunity cost of seeking security is opportunity itself.

Lots of our friends had already made it to the Promised Land. My worship of the West was idealistic at the very least. My metaphorical window into what immigration might be like was a magazine sent by somebody who had gone to America. Its airbrushed beauty also made for a deceptively interactive experience because it contained perfume samples — they were the magic molecules of immigration as far as I was concerned.

The brain is the only body part that is most beautiful when it is bloated, due to a diet of brilliant ideas.

Nonetheless those immigration dreams were the reason why we got a steel-reinforced mailbox with a glass label and a sturdy padlock. The only mailbox maintained so well — a pretty suspicious move which invited vandalism despite its design to withstand it.

When eventually our Australian visas were received after a seven-year-long stressful selection-process spell that was seasoned with superstition, they didn't just look like lottery tickets stuck in the passports.

The implications of this event were too surreal for me to comprehend, so I opted for excitement and optimism rather than the more justified fear anyone with more sense would have felt. After all, I would, for the first time in my life, be forced to leave the safety of my grandmother's home and be thrust into an entirely unknown environment.

Denial, like self-brainwashing, is a useful form of filtering out reality.

I was basically a weakling; a crooked indoor pot plant about to be uprooted and re-planted in the barren but weedy topsoil on the other side of the world — unfamiliar habitat indeed. Not only would I need to withstand the winds and the drought, but I would have to avoid being toppled over by my curved spine as I desperately tried to grow roots strong enough to reach the rewarding rich nutritious earth deeper down.

Always overestimate your stupidity and underestimate your intelligence.


The most terrifying aspect was the insecurity of the unknown — never quite knowing what would happen next. My main difficulty was my inability to articulate and rationalize my situation at the time.

And I didn't attempt to do so, instead I clutched onto my one-legged Barbie for comfort. I had come across her on a visit to my cousins and had refused to give her back in true spoilt-brat style. Even though they let me keep it, I was paranoid that I would have to give her back eventually, which meant that I refused to let this pretty amputee out of my sight under any circumstances.

Experience may be the best school but even there you might find yourself repeating a class.

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An excerpt from:
Sex Scars & a Superheroine with Scoliosis

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