

1st Place, Non-Fiction

Miles to Go
By Mel Finefrock

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For Jessica Costakes:

Whenever I thank you, you insist I made this happen for myself through hard work and determination. But as proud as I ought to feel, I owe much of my success to your loving expertise. Your friendship brightened my best days and carried me when I wasn't sure I could stand any more.

1

“Can you move your leg over the edge of your bed?”

Already it's been roughly two weeks since my rail platform accident. Still I'm bedridden, still my left leg is all plaster and bandages, and already I'm growing dangerously thin by comparison to my usually slim build.

I concentrate all of my energy into moving my leg. That's when the excruciating pain quite literally kicks in, taking the form of a spontaneous muscle spasm.

I don't flash back completely, but my leg does. I feel terrified and am ashamed when I break down crying with childlike abandon. But Jessica doesn't scold me the way the therapist in the hospital did. Her voice, colored by a hearty Michigan accent, contains realism and optimism in equal measure.

“That's all I need from you today,” she says, placing one hand on my shoulder and one on my leg. “I just wanted to see where you're at.”

“Okay,” I sniff.

“I want you to do something for me. Whenever you’re in pain, or you think to, I want you to lightly massage your leg. We don’t want you getting RSD.”

I scrunch my face in reply. I don’t know what will be worse—feeling my hands on my leg or my leg under my hands.

“Touch receptors are quicker than pain receptors,” she explains. “This exercise will help distract you from the pain, but it’ll also help to re-acclimate your nerve endings as they heal so it doesn’t hurt so badly every time something touches your leg.”

I nod, attempting the exercise and flinching. Jessica gives hand-over-hand guidance, then starts gathering her things. Already our first meeting is almost over.

“Can I give you a hug?” she asks.

“Yes, please.” I reach out. I’m becoming accustomed now to the gentle embraces of strangers. But Jessica, I can tell, won’t be a stranger for long.

“By the way,” she laughs, “you can cry and swear all you want, and it won’t bother me at all.”

2

A few sessions later, I sit in my wheelchair in the light of my open window. Jessica sits to my right, instructing me in a series of leg exercises.

“That’s ten seconds,” she says. Her tone of voice alone is praise. “You can rest now.”

“Jesus, that’s all? It felt like longer.” I lower my shaking leg and realize just how much more work I have to do. “I’m barely even sweating, though!”

“Remember, you have that heavy cast on.”

“True.”

“Oh, and Mel?”

“Yeah?”

“We don’t sweat. We glisten.”

I laugh until my leg doesn’t hurt anymore.

3.

We’re twelve weeks post-accident now. I’m healing more slowly than most might because my bones are brittle and it’s hard to get my bearings as a semi-ambulatory blind person.

Today, Jess and I do standing exercises in my walker. I attempt a toe raise. There is a nasty popping of scar tissue in my ankle, and my balance falters. I cry silent tears and feel as though I may lose the udon noodles I ate for lunch.

Jess is right there with her hand on my back. “I’ve got you,” she says for probably the hundredth time. It never gets old. “I’ll catch you if I even think you’re going to fall.”

4

“Why is it easier to walk on grass?” I muse, hobbling along on a crutch and support cane. Jess follows just behind and off to the side. Together we revel in the late September sunshine.

“I don’t know, but you’re weird,” she kids. “Most people would prefer the sidewalk because it’s more level. The grass is softer, but it takes more effort.”

I smirk. “Works for me.”

“I’m going to take the crutch away for a second, see how you do with just the cane. Switch hands so that it’s on your left.”

I panic inwardly. With just the support cane, no matter how hard I try to advance, I’m rooted to the spot.

“You’re thinking too much. Stop it,” she coaches. She’s always gently honest.

A light breeze tousles my hair, and I can hear the tolling of my wind chimes. I focus on these things in order to draw strength and determination from around and within me. This is almost meditative ...

SMACK!

“What was that for?” I laugh, jumping at the impact on my right hand, which I’d subconsciously extended for balance.

“Sorry, mom moment ... I was trying to stop that mosquito, but I think it may have gotten you anyway.”

A flash of inspiration strikes me, and I try to channel my startled adrenaline into motion. I do so, however painstakingly. I don't know how much time passes before I'm able to take a few cautious steps, but eventually I pull it off.

"Okay, so the cane isn't quite functional for now," she says, stopping me with a hand on my shoulder. "Let's try the crutch."

I maneuver considerably better this time. I know it'll be a while before I can walk confidently with a crutch in my left hand and my white cane in my right, but once I get the hang of it, the extra point of contact will help me to feel secure.

"Let's go inside," she says. "You did a good job today."

While Jess adds notes to my case file, I sit on my bed beside the open window, idly twirling the support cane in my hands.

"I used to be a baton twirler," she says, briefly glancing up from her work.

"I remember you mentioned that. Am I doing it right?"

"Kind of." She finishes her notes for the day, then shuts down her tablet and gets her things together. "Stand up, and I'll show you."

And so it is that we end our lesson twirling a purple support cane like a baton. I can feel it moving faster and more freely through my fingers with every revolution. Jess even says it's not bad for my first try. We hug, and I continue twirling long after I hear her red Lexus pull out of my cul-de-sac.

Today is pretty low-key. Jess and I are reevaluating my case so that we can get approved for a few more weeks of therapy. My leg's been acting up, so she stretches me before we get started with range of motion measurements and strength tests.

Before, stretches were an exercise in straining not to swear or cry. They're still painful now, but in a weird sort of way, they're also cathartic and a relief. Getting help with stretches is like asking a trusted friend to scratch an itch I can't reach. I'm noticing now that I can even maintain casual conversation while stretching.

I've been hearing offhanded, half-joking comments from loved ones about my progress, or what they seem to feel is a lack thereof. Today is one such day. A conference about me, but without me, crescendos from hushed words like "still not over the honeymoon phase" and "awfully attached to that wheelchair" to "Don't you think so, Jessica?" shouted down the hallway.

It's like they don't even know me. Like they don't see how hard I'm working, how far I've come, how much I wish I hadn't fallen in train tracks, how much I want to be running free like before. But before, instead of my walk, they were criticizing my walk of life, my struggles to secure employment due to blindness discrimination, personal decisions I chose to confide out of trust and was thus misunderstood. This all may have been rooted in love and concern at first, but I'm not sure what to make of it anymore.

"She's doing great, really," Jess calls amicably in reply as I scribble my name in a bright white box on her tablet. "She gets spooked sometimes and overthinks, but she's working hard."

Jess alone is aware of the tears of embarrassment still pooled in my eyes. Not for the first time, I feel like we've made eye contact—soul contact—when she says, “You going to be okay?” and hugs me.

“Yeah,” I whisper, swallowing a lump in my throat, then add mentally, “touch receptors are quicker than pain receptors. Touch receptors are quicker than pain receptors ...”

6

It's cloudy today, so Jess and I stay inside to work on improving my mobility with the walker around my family's cute but inaccessible little house.

I have an attitude. Even I know it. I shouldn't let them, but people's words are still getting to me. Why do so few seem to understand what I'm dealing with? Generally I can bounce back thanks to the support from said precious few, but I'm reaching my limits.

Jess, of course, is among those allies who understand and accept my journey fully. It's like she's PT-gone-counselor, for which I feel both grateful and sorry. She listens patiently, lightens the mood when necessary, but always acknowledges where I am. I may have miles to go, but progress comes in steps, after all, not leaps and bounds.

We move from walker exercises to working with the support cane.

“I feel like I'm sucking at this,” I grumble as I gimp along at what seems to be a snail's pace. I assume a pinched expression and, with simultaneous elements of

comedy and bitterness, pitch into a falsetto. “Mel, why aren’t you walking unaided yet? Mel, aren’t you practicing your exercises? Mel, we know you’re just milking it.” I pause to catch my breath. “I swear to God, if I hear that one more time ...”

“Let’s try something,” Jess interrupts compassionately, though not, in hindsight, without a hint of something like mischief in her voice. She comes alongside me and takes the cane. I’m standing up fairly straight; that, at least, I can do well, if not painfully at times.

Somewhat sheepishly, I reclaim my focus. “What is it we’re doing?”

“I want you to walk to that wall,” she instructs, projecting her voice toward the intersection of the dining room and the foyer.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Remember, I’ll catch you if I even think you’re going to fall.”

She hooks a finger through my belt loop as I muster the willpower to start moving. My gait is wide, heavy, and unstable, but after some minutes, I walk ten or so feet to the wall.

“See? You did it!” she praises.

I smile shyly. “I’ve got a long way to go.”

“But you’re missing the point. So are your critics. Look how far you’ve come.” She hands me the cane again. “Now walk back to that couch.”

“This was an exercise in attitude adjustment, wasn’t it?”

When Jess answers with an affectionate laugh, I know without a doubt I've cracked her code. Her plan was successful, though. If I want others to be proud of me, I have to be proud of me, too. It's about time I saw my progress through her eyes.

7

We tried—keyword tried—to do lunges and wall sits today. Needless to say, I took Jess up on her cursing permit (a regular occurrence during our time together). But at least I've been improving on getting up from the floor.

"I wish this didn't hurt you so much," Jess says, concern and sympathy evident in her voice. "I'm betting that has to do with bone mass, so it should get better with time."

We sit and rest for a moment, and then she gets out her belt. I haven't seen that thing since a few weeks in when she had me stand on just my right leg and reach down to pick up rubber cones off the floor. We'd laughed and laughed throughout that exercise, which hadn't at all helped my equilibrium.

"The next thing I want to do is a resistance exercise. It's fun, but if you're tired or in too much pain, we can do it another day."

"Why don't we try it and go from there?"

"Okay." She moves to stand behind me and loops the belt around my waist, then holds on to the ends with both hands. "When we turn around," she says, "I want you to pull me from the fireplace to your bedroom door."

We pivot, and I start forward. I'm surprised to find that this is easier than I expected.

“Pull harder!” she teases. “I know I’m not that heavy!”

I erupt into a fit of giggles and lean briefly against the laundry closet to regain control, then press on.

“Good,” she says when we reach my bedroom door. “Now we’re going to go back, but I want you to walk backwards.”

“How did I know that was coming?” I chuckle, still winded.

We turn so that I am in front again and the belt is bracing my back. I take a few breaths and start walking.

“No touching the walls! Cheater, cheater!” she drills.

“Just trying to get my bearings,” I explain. “I don’t want to off-road us.”

“I’ll give you directions. Now, no hands! Veer to the right a little; there’s the hall tree. Okay, go straight, straight, a little to the right again ... stop.”

I’m still cracking up when Jess unlatches the belt and I sit down on the hearth, reflecting on how so many things she and I do are exercises in trust; and after five months—after she’s seen the good, the bad, and the ugly in me more than most—it dawns on me how much I’ve come to trust her, how wonderful it is not only to be seen, but to be truly understood.

For the past few sessions, Jess’s challenges have been admittedly (though fondly) reminiscent of “Green Eggs and Ham.” Could I walk around my front and back

yards, up and down the treehouse stairs? Would I do laps around the cul-de-sac, even around the block. Why, yes, Jess, don't mind if I do.

Today is no different. Jess and I both love any excuse to be outdoors, and for me, therapy is as much now about quality time as it is about rehabilitation. Jess tells me colorful stories about a trip to Germany and apple-picking with her family in Michigan. I confide in her about my crush. We talk about what each of us is doing for Thanksgiving.

Inevitably, this segues to my refracting impressions of family, and with a growing sense of resignation I lament about how I thought they'd understand this—understand me—better. Even though I know they must mean well, sometimes the best of intentions still hurt. Nonetheless I must strive to see their perspective as clearly as I want them to see mine, if only to aid in my personal healing.

My leg is in pain. Serious pain. But I realize we've walked almost the whole half-mile to the park by my house. I pause to lean on the purple baton in disguise.

"You okay?" she asks.

"I think so."

"Want to turn around?"

"No. We're almost to one of my favorite places ever, and I want to show it to you."

At last, we've reached the street corner near the park.

"Okay, maybe I pushed myself too hard," I admit.

“But was it worth it?” There’s that impish teacher’s grin in her voice again. She always asks me this when I feel I’ve overexerted myself.

“Definitely.”

Slowly but surely, we begin our journey home.

“I want to advise you to be careful,” she says, “but on the other hand, it’s that same determination that will get you through this.”

“I’ll try to find a happy medium.”

At the last four-way stop before my house, I trip up the curb. I don’t even scream; it’s like I’m in the train tracks and the wind has been knocked out of me all over again. My eyes water, and I feel nauseous. I am remembering. I fell. I fell, and ...

I don’t even hit the ground. With reflexes like a cat, Jess wraps her arms around my waist in an unspoken refrain of her promise, “I’ll catch you if I even think you’re going to fall,” and helps me to stand upright. We step out of the street and wait a moment until I get my wits about me.

“Sorry,” I say past the lump in my throat. “Flashback.”

“You’re okay,” is her simple affirmation—not dismissive, but not dwelling—and we continue Northbound on my street.