

A Chapter from *Written In These Scars: A Memoir*

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Summer—the second day of April

Walking toward the university hospital, my shoes are the only thing I take notice of: a pair of flat, black Mary Janes with a thick elastic band holding two ends together, covering brown, root-like scars. The shoes are scratched like all the other pairs I've worn. They have narrow openings and their closed design gives my toes an uncomfortable, cramped feeling. Another step and my left knee gives out a small clicking noise as though something in my knee had burst or a bone had snapped out of place. Endless falling has caused my knee to click, and click, and click. My shadow limps, a reminder to keep the upper half of my body straight, stop swinging, keep my steps silent and gentle. My arms stiffen, my fingers follow. My heartbeat quickens and my breath comes in a series of labored puffs. I have only been walking a short while.

The dread that my body is dying down, dwindling, at the age of twenty-two comes to me in different forms of pain, pain that is musical—the thudding of flat feet, the snap and pop of tight joints, the sudden spasms of overlapping toes, the vibrating ache of weakening muscles, the unbearable weight of burdened knees. It's the kind of pain that pushes me to give in.

The admission comes slowly, almost like defeat. "I've been thinking...that maybe I should go back to doing therapy," I tell my

mother, sitting by her bedside one night after dinner. She is half-asleep, her right arm over closed eyes. When she hears this, one eye peeps open in surprise. “Really?” she replies, propping herself up from the bed before continuing. “Funny, I have been thinking the same thing lately.” There is a pause. “*Oo, para lumakas din yung legs mo*, and then you can go anywhere, do anything. I think it’s about time.” She rises and moves toward the sink. The sound of water running from the tap, the clinking of plates. My eyes follow her.

“Me too, I mean—” I will not tell her, I decide, about the real reason for this sudden desire to return—something about the fear of one day realizing I’ve missed the last train home or that I am not where I am supposed to be because my legs got too weak to go anywhere. “I am not doing much of anything this summer so I figured I might as well go back,” I finish, thinking of trains.

There is a long queue of patients in the waiting area when I arrive at the rehabilitation center with my brother the next day. My mother will follow later. When I hand her my information sheet, the secretary informs me I am ninth in line and have to wait since none of the doctors have arrived, I motion to my brother and we pick the only vacant seats in the room. The blue plastic chair that I sit in creaks under my weight. My feet remain suspended in the air, not touching the ground as I settle, the tips of my fingers hanging on to the black metal railing that connect the blue chairs and hold them up. My brother yawns and settles into his chair, slouching and thumbing at his phone.

My entire body becomes restless and I fidget. My hands begin to sweat and I crack my knuckles. I clap my shoes together and try to wiggle my rigid toes. I feel the big toe throbbing as it pushes up against the shoe’s edge. I squeeze my thin calf muscle, feeling a bit of bone under flaccid flesh. It feels like squeezing lightly at a balloon inflated only half-way. “They’re still strong,” I try to convince myself. “They’ve still got some fight in them. It’s not too late.”

I breathe in. The air in this part of the hospital is thin, a subtle chill. The dizzying stench of antiseptic from the outside does not continue its trail into this part of the hospital. Instead, there is the faint smell of freshly mopped floors. My eyes settle on the small table serving as a makeshift altar on the far side of the waiting area. An ornate statue of the Virgin Mary, two

unlit candles on either side, watches over the slow come-and-go of patients, unnoticed. Time creeps by and everyone in the waiting area seems steeped in an unshakable sleepiness. The crowd is a mixture of young and old: the sick and their companions, the broken, unbroken, and the breaking. “We are all chipped china,” I observe.

Next to my seat a young man stands, his body hunched over his grandmother’s wheelchair while she is being interviewed by a young doctor who bends down, placing his ear to her mouth as she answers. Two seats down, an old man with pallid eyes clutches wearily at his walking stick, wriggling his foot while looking down at the floor as though in search of something. At the waiting area’s mouth, a heavy-set woman enters, talking to her wheelchaired companion, a woman with a blue cast holding her injured foot in place. She embraces her crutches with one arm and holds a crumpled x-ray envelope in the other. “When will it heal?” she asks the young doctor approaching them, her voice cracking.

The young people seem less damaged. They sit in groups, one bandaged knee after another, save for the teenage girl supported by crutches, standing against a wall, one foot planted on the ground, the other in a cast. The girls giggle with their companions who are dressed in school uniforms until they realize they are late for class and give their injured friends quick kisses on the cheek before rushing off. Most of the boys are dressed in basketball jerseys, and, unlike the girls, sit alone. I begin to wonder what I look like to them with my unbandaged knee, scars etched into my atrophied legs.

One of the doctors arrives. The first name is called and no one rises to go into the doctor’s office. A few seconds pass and the name is called again, this time with the word “patient” before it—what I was going to become once again: another name to be called, another information sheet filed away, another body to be watched and studied. An old man with bent knees grips his walker and stands up slowly, painfully. His companion holds on to his pants, pulling him up. They take small, struggling steps toward the doctor’s office and the resident half-smiles before she closes the door.

“I hope this doctor doesn’t tell us that it’s too late or that I need another operation,” I tell Billy, who has fallen asleep. “What if that’s the case? What if they need to operate on my knees this time?”

“Don’t worry, Curl,” Billy reassures me, yawning. “That won’t happen.”

“But what if it does though?” I insist, drumming my fingers on the chair.

“It won’t, okay? Just relax,” Billy breathes deeply and closes his eyes.

The doctor arrives at half-past eleven, but it is past lunch when we are called into her office and hunger has made both my brother and me weak and dizzy. I begin to worry that this will affect her initial diagnosis and make a mental note to eat breakfast the next time I pay her a visit.

“Hello,” the doctor greets us in her thick, sing-song voice as we enter. The young Chinese-looking resident holding a chart closes the door and follows us in.

As I take the seat next to her table, I can tell right away that this doctor has something different about her. For one, she is wearing a dress and sandals instead of the usual white coat. Her face is motherly and framed by curly chestnut-brown hair that flows down to her shoulders. “How are you?” she asks, her smile warm.

“I am fine, doctor. Thank you.” I try to sound calm. Cold air passes through my teeth and I feel my hands clenching into fists. I unclench my left hand and place it on top of her table. I press my fingers against the glass hard enough to leave prints.

“What can I help you with today?” She picks up a pen as the resident hands her my information sheet. I feel my toes grip the ground as her eyes glaze over it. “Your name is Zandy Victoria Sue,” she reads. “Long name! You’re twenty-two years old?”

“Yes, yes ma’am—doctor,” the change comes quickly. I stammer. “Um, I’d like to start doing physical therapy.” The declaration comes out like a jolt, fast and breathless. “I have mild cerebral palsy. But it’s the kind that only affects my lower limbs, my legs. My muscles are weak and spastic.” All the facts I have gathered about my condition over the years pour out of me. The words put themselves together. The sentences come out like pre-solved jigsaw puzzles. “But the rest of me is fine. My brain is fine.” The last bit comes out rather defensively. “I must prove to her that I can still do it,” I tell myself.

“Ah, I see,” the doctor says, looking rather amused that I know so much. “Spastic diplegia,” she tells the resident. He writes this down mechanically. “Have you done therapy before?”

“Yes. Yes *po*. Um—” This time I grope for the puzzle pieces. “When I was young—younger. In fact, my first therapy sessions were done here. I was three when I was diagnosed. But the therapy was on and off because—” *Because it was too painful. Because I wanted to be a normal child, to feel normal.* I don’t admit any of these things, looking instead in Billy’s direction for support.

“Uh, yes ma’am,” he starts groping, “She’s done therapy before but it was on and off because she was busy with school and we moved around a lot.”

“And why do you think you want to start again now?” The doctor looks at me, smiles, and raises her eyebrows waiting for me to answer.

For a while, I am thinking again of leaving trains. The thought passes in my mind like a scene from a film: a train chugging forward at full speed, me running after it, waving frantically, as I disappear in the smoke that it leaves in its wake.

“Because I think it’s about time, doctor. I think I am ready now.”

This time, I mean it.

Everyone exits the room and I am left alone with the hospital gown I am tasked to put on. I unbutton my heavy denim shorts and peel them off of my skin. When they touch the ground, I hold on to the chair and shift my weight to one foot and raise the other out of its leg. As soon as I bend the knee of the raised foot, it stomps itself unto the ground and straightens, shifting the weight abruptly unto the other. It bends and I press down on the chair. Using the strength of my hands I shimmy the foot out of the leg hole and shake the pant leg off. I am naked, save for my underwear, from the waist down.

It is this nakedness that will be looked upon. In a few minutes my body will be cut in half. I will only be where the eyes land, an illustration in the anatomy of bones and muscles. I will be the vibration of thighs, the curvature of knees, the tension of calves, the absence of a heel strike, the dragging of feet. My smallness will be replaced by words with numerous

syllables, old words that I have heard before, that have appeared before, will reappear, sounding new. I will become something out of a medical encyclopedia—a study in deterioration: what can be saved and what is dead.

I take the hospital gown and search for its arm holes. I drape one side over one arm and fumble with the other. I reach for the untied strings at the back and struggle to tie them together. The gown floats, touching my skin, then moving away from it. It refuses to take my body's shape, and finally comes undone. There is a knock at the door and I scramble to cover at least a portion of my body. "Wait. Not yet done," I mumble as the doorknob turns and my brother enters, my mother behind him. Eyes wide from shock and embarrassment, I ask him to tie the strings and he manages to do a decent job before the doctor and the resident return.

"Sorry for making you do this, *ha?* I just really have to see how you walk. Can you walk for me?" the doctor requests, pulling her desk chair outward to face me before she sits. "From the door to the end of the room. One straight line."

I oblige and walk to the door as straight as I can. I can feel all the eyes in the room watching me. I pretend I am a dancer, that I am doing an audition. My way of walking, the only dance I can do. I am the only dancer who can do it. The steps unfold in my mind:

I put one foot forward and barely keep my balance. The straight line I try to keep my feet in is a tightrope. I mumble under my breath for my feet to follow before I feel myself falling. In an instant I put my arms to my sides saving myself from the fall.

An interlude—

"Just walk normally," the doctor encourages. "Don't be nervous."

I put my arms down and begin again, breathing deeply, shaking my fingers and arms loose.

I take the first step, attempting to strike my heel because I know that is how I am expected to walk. When my heel touches the ground, I steady myself to take another step. But this is my dance, the dance my mind has known for the longest time and instead of pushing off, my right foot drags. There is friction between foot and the tiles. This is not how it is supposed to be

done, but this is my dance. I lift my right foot from the floor and it makes an uncontrolled landing—

“Don’t stop moving or you will fall—” my body lunges forward a little.

“No heel strike,” the doctor says in the resident’s direction. “Relax,” the doctor says to me. She tells me to take off my shoes and walk for her again.

Without my shoes on, I feel my toes curling inward, cold and perpetually trying to grip the ground. My left foot’s big toe is tucked under the one beside it. I push it from underneath until it separates itself for a short while. I walk: right arm forward when left foot steps. Left arm forward when right foot steps. A pendulum. The sound of bare feet slapping the floor with each step.

“Relax,” I tell myself. “You aren’t a robot.”

“Not bad *pero* flat-footed *tayo*,” the doctor tells me as it ends and I walk back. “Okay lie down here for me so I can examine you.” She pats the foam-like mattress covered in a thin blue sheet.

This is the beginning of a new dance:

I push my body unto the mattress using my hands to brush my right foot over the back of my left shoe until it hangs and falls off. I do the same for the right shoe and swing both feet up. I lie down.

“Hamstrings.” She caps one hand over my right knee and presses down hard before she lifts my left leg and puts it on her shoulder. A sharp pain pulsates at the back of my knee and intensifies as she lifts it higher.

My right knee jerks to life and starts following the rise of the left. My left knee deforms and goes inward, looking like a droopy tomato or onion.

The doctor’s hand presses down before she releases and relieves the tension. “Tight,” she says. She does the same with my right leg and confirms that it, too, is tight. “*Nagcocompensate yung muscle natin kaya nadedeform yung knee*,” she explains to my mother and brother

“Gastrocnemials,” she moves on. She eyes my overlapping toes with concern. “We’ll have to do something about this,” she says before she puts her hand and part of an arm behind my foot and pulls forcefully.

“The joints down there are fused,” my mother explains so suddenly it comes like an afterthought. “The doctors who did her operation put screws so that she wouldn’t walk on tiptoe anymore and her feet wouldn’t face inward. They’ve taken them out though.”

The tiptoe dance, the one that is just a vague memory, something that feels like being lifted in the air by two people walking on either side.

The doctor’s face lights up. “Oh, so that’s why you had no heel strike when I asked you to walk for me.” She pulls the muscle, and, almost mechanically, declares, “Tight, but we can’t do much about that *kasi nga* fused *yung* joint. I will probably need an x-ray of this the next time I see you.” She is saying this more to the resident than to me.

I am a constellation of fused joints.

“Hip adductors *naman*,” she announces, taking my left foot and stretching it outward, as far as it can go. The sharp pain transfers now to the inner part of my thigh. It is a pain I welcome, a pain that feels strangely good.

We are drawing maps of pain.

“*Hindi masyadong tight*,” she says. “The other one,” she pushes my right foot against the wall and reaches the same verdict. “*Hindi masyadong tight ang adductors natin*,” she beams. “Quads, *dapa tayo*.”

I lie on my stomach. Both my legs are taken and folded until the soles of my feet touch my buttocks, my toes pointing upward. My buttocks rises from the bed a little and the front of my thighs bulge with pain.

She says the word again, “Tight. *Medyo tumataas ang butt natin*. *Medyo* weak. Lie on your back again. Test *natin ang* muscle strength.”

I raise my left foot—

She stops it midway, pressing it downward with her hand. “Fight it,” she challenges.

My muscles tense up and I grit my teeth as I try to oppose the weight.

She does the same to all the muscles and afterwards tells me to do a sit up.

A sit up: Sweat breaks on my brow. I put both my hands behind my head and raise my head from the pillow.

“*Mahina ang core*,” she tells the resident. “One last thing. *Dapa ka ulit* and with your elbows try to push your body up from the bed and hold it

there for a few seconds. Try not to raise your butt.

I point my elbows upward and push against the mattress. My stomach muscles harden. The weight of the doctor's hand pushes my butt down. I hear a voice counting. I shut my eyes and the counting becomes a blur, becomes slower. Until—crash! The weight and heat of my entire body collapses onto the bed. My eyes open.

The doctor looks pleased and motions to me to sit by her desk. The examination is over. The dance ends.

“So what can we do, doctor?” my mother asks.

“It's not bad. There is still some strength in her muscles,” the doctor reports, the ever-encouraging smile still plastered on her face. “They're weak...but we can wake them up.” She takes out her prescription pad and begins to write. “We'll start with therapy three times a week to strengthen and loosen the muscles and improve things like balance and walking.” She turns to me. “You will use all the machines in the therapeutic gym and the ultrasound to soften the tissue in your hamstrings. Then, after three weeks, you will come and see me and we will evaluate your progress. All right?” She nods vigorously as though she is more excited than I am. Out of breath and unable to speak, I nod back, grateful.

In disbelief, my mother asks again. “So, there's still hope, doctor? It's not too late? Even after all these years? She'll really try her hardest this time.”

The doctor looks at the three of us, a glimmer of light in her eyes. “Of course,” she says. “There's always hope.”

This is the last train. This is the last train and I am getting on board.
