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### I Can't Jump

No one gave it much thought that I was born asleep. It was common knowledge that I had been born with water in my lungs. When I started walking with a limp, my mother and great-grandmother corrected it, and there was no more thought about it. When I fell more often than usual, my mother would grab my arm, haul me back up, and rebuke me with a glare and a firm “Cristinita” hissed between her clinched teeth.

No one ever considered these things to be pieces of any sort of puzzle, or even as relevant information for anything. These were things that happened in the past, and sometimes they made for good topics of conversation. How many people get to explain the weird lump in their ear as a result of spending most of their bun-in-the-oven time sleeping with their thumb pressing in that area?

None of those things kept me from playing sports like most everyone I knew. I played basketball and volleyball and ran track in middle school. That's not to say that I was any good, but I made it a point to participate. I never got a lot of playing time on the basketball team, but it was a sport that I could be a part of. I got a bit more playing time with volleyball, but I still wasn't that great. The only thing I had going for me with track were the throws – shot put and discus. I stuck with just volleyball when I entered high school.

I love volleyball. I love everything about it. There's nothing quite like six players on a court passing, setting, and spiking with the efficiency of a fine-tuned machine. I had played

volleyball since the fifth grade. I wasn't a gifted athlete, but hours and hours of practice made me a more skilled player.

I had my first physical at the school with a visiting doctor who was giving free exams. "Volleyball is going to be your sport," she said, looking directly at me as she had me stretch my arms out in front. I had no idea at the time why she said this, and, being eleven, I didn't think to ask her. I still have no idea why she said this, but I remember those words. Volleyball was going to be my sport. The doctor said so. She hadn't noticed a limp or an abnormality in my limbs that would prevent me. I was too short and slow for basketball, and anyone who simply tried could outrun me. But I knew how to pass and set. The rules of the sport came easily to me.

My mom and I paid a visit to my high school before I enrolled there, and I specifically asked about the volleyball team and what I had to do to try out. I made c-team as a left hitter my freshman year. It wasn't anything spectacular, but I still made the team. I didn't get a lot of playing time, but I loved it because I got to be around the sport. When I was a sophomore, I had to have surgery on both knees because of some extra cartilage that needed to be removed, so I wasn't able to play.

During that year, I stayed connected to the sport by practicing my serves daily. As a freshman, I couldn't over-hand serve. My coach had always taken me out of the rotation when it was my turn to serve, and the girl who took my place would do it instead. I practiced serving for at least an hour a day because I couldn't really practice the other skills. I also wanted to be good at this one thing that I couldn't do. I got to the point where I became not only proficient at over-hand serving, but I also became very skilled at it. I could serve short and deep serves as well as serves that would spin extremely fast, making them hard to receive. I could hit floaters, demonic serves where the ball has no top-spin, which means that the ball (not being a perfect sphere)

seems to shake in the air, and its destination becomes hard to decipher in time to get to it.

I went back my junior year, hoping beyond reason that I would make varsity. The last time I had been on the team was as a freshman, and I wasn't even one of the good players. I knew varsity was perhaps a bit out of my league, but I had no doubts that I would at least make junior varsity. *Maybe I can play between junior varsity and varsity*, I remember hoping the first day of try-outs. I could play at the junior varsity level with some time on varsity.

I went back that year with those hopes. I was the hardest hitter. I was one of the best passers. There was much groaning from the opposing side when it was my turn to serve. We called my serves the "serves of the apocalypse."

I didn't make the team.

I didn't make varsity. I didn't make junior varsity. I didn't make anything. The week before school started – the week the cuts were being decided – I was the first to be pulled aside.

"I wish I could have you just as a passer," Jen, the junior varsity coach, told me. "But I need someone who can hit."

A lie. She needed someone who could jump. She wanted someone who could get high enough above the net so that they could hit the ball straight down. It didn't matter that I could hit the hardest and make it difficult for the other side to receive. She wanted height. She wanted massive air.

I had never been a good jumper. In middle school PE, we spent a day every year having a go at the high-jump. I was always the first to get knocked out. Always. When I tried out for the volleyball team, I endured the same work-outs as all the other girls, but my jumping never improved. My actual volleyball skills like setting and passing improved immensely, but my jumping went nowhere; *I* literally went nowhere except an inch or two off the ground. A girl my

height who was on varsity could get half of her forearm over the net. I could only get my fingers over.

Even after the shock of getting cut from the team, I went home that day and played volleyball in the backyard. I hit a few serves. They floated. They spun wickedly. They had such a ridiculous downward curve that they were unpredictable. This serve – my specialty – is such that it looks like it's going deep and then it descends quickly. The receiver has already moved back by the time they notice that the serve is short, so the ball drops in front of them. That didn't get me on the team. Despite that, playing was therapeutic for me. I had done this everyday for so long that it was routine. I didn't have to be on the team to play alone in my backyard.

I ruminated over my loss for a few days. It just didn't make sense. I was just as good as the other girls. My skill level would have me on varsity. My jumping, though, was absolutely pathetic. This ate and ate at me. I could think of nothing else.

It bothered me so much that I decided to see my doctor. Doctor, I can't jump. I loved this doctor to pieces, and I didn't question his judgment when he sent me to see a neurologist.

At the time, I had no idea what any of the big words meant nor did I understand the doctor's logic. I had no idea what the neurologist would be looking for when he sent me in for an MRI. MRI's, by the way, are so much fun. The technicians raise your hopes about getting to listen to the radio for the entire forty-five minutes that the procedure takes, but then you find out two minutes in that the radio doesn't work. It's too late now. You're not allowed to move.

I did my thing and left – nothing special. I saw the neurologist five days later.

I remember disliking the guy almost immediately after meeting him. I don't remember his name, but I remember what I called him in my mind. *El Diablo*.

“What made you want to see a doctor for this?” he asked me.

“I’m having trouble in volleyball,” I told him. “I do all of the same training as the other girls, but my jumping doesn’t improve.”

He made a few quips about playing sports while he wrote a few things down on the chart.

“Take your shoes off and align your heels,” he told me before he took out the MRI images. I gave him a confused look before I complied and took my shoes off. I lined up my toes as I always had before he corrected me. He put one of his hands behind my heels and lined them up.

I looked down at my feet for a moment before I looked up at him. “Have you ever noticed that?” he asked. There seemed to be a note of surprise in his voice.

My feet were different sizes. My left foot barely reached to where the big toe on my right foot began. No, I had never noticed that. No one had.

He didn’t say anything as he searched for a tape measure and proceeded to measure first my right calf and then my thigh. He did the same with my left side. At first, I had no idea why he did this, but then he explained. “Your calf and thigh on your left side are two centimeters smaller than your right.” I don’t remember my exact thoughts, but I remember hearing the one word that I was to become intimately familiar with. Asymmetry. Lack of proportion.

He finally pulled out the images from the MRI.

Cerebral Palsy. C.P. Left side hemiplegia to be exact. The MRI showed that I was missing one-fifth of my brain. There was asymmetry in the right cortex. The missing piece was not just an over-sized ventricle. I was missing some of the right side of my brain. The left side of my body was retarded. I would later find out a few things that would solidify this. The gynecologist would tell me that the muscles on my back were smaller on the left side. I would

notice trouble balancing only on my left foot. I found that my left arm was pathetically weak compared to my right.

On the drive home, I called my best-friend even though she had no idea that I was going through any of this; she had no idea that I had been seeing a neurologist for any reason. She understood the physiological part of what I was trying to tell her: I am missing part of my brain. She didn't understand what this did to me emotionally. My improvement in volleyball was beyond my grasp. Her response to this made me think of people I knew. They were not retarded. They didn't get – and never could get – what it was like to be a retard. That's what my chart said, after all. Physically retarded. Cerebral palsy, left-side hemiplegia.

A former teacher of mine later told me that she thought I was in a kind of depression for a time. She and I ended up working at the same middle school for a while a few years after I was diagnosed. "You couldn't think about anything else," she told me one day as we sat in the teacher's lounge during lunch. "You were so sad. It was like you were depressed for a while."

It wasn't a depression. It was an obsession. She was right in that I couldn't stop thinking about anything else. The next day at school after my diagnosis was utter hell because of that.

I was always early to school in the mornings, and I remember that particular day hanging out in one of the hallways before the first bell rang.

No one knew what I knew. I was walking among all of the other high school students through the student center with my new and devastating secret, and no one suspected a thing.

They didn't know that I was a retard. They didn't know that I now twitched everytime I heard someone use that word because it included me. We were all walking the same hallways just as we had every other day of the school year, but now things were different. The neurologist had stressed that things weren't really different since there wasn't anything new about me, but I

had a new piece of knowledge to carry with me – a label. *That* was what made things different.

Before the first bell rang, I sat on one of the circular, concrete benches in the middle of the junior hallway and watched the students walk by. The hallway was outdoors, and there were dark clouds above, which only reinforced my mood. The gray on the walls around the lockers looked so much bleaker and oppressive than it normally did.

I turned my attention to the students again just to get a break from looking at the gloomy gray color. Students were at their lockers, talking with friends, or walking through trying to get to class. No one really seemed to notice me sitting on the bench.

I got up from my spot after the first bell rang and headed to my first period class. In doing this, I blended in with the rest of the students.

This disconcerted me. I was walking among the students, yet I was not one of them. *They are normal*, I thought. *They are not physically retarded. They have no idea. They have no idea what 'retard' means.* At that moment, I knew that I didn't really fit in with the crowd like I used to.

I walked slowly through the hallway and picked out various students from the mob. There. Her. Talking with her friends. She doesn't suspect a thing. She doesn't know that I have cerebral palsy. I could be sitting next to her in class and doing the same work as her. I am the same as that guy in the trench coat over there holding the trumpet case. For all they know, I could play the trumpet too.

I unconsciously perfected my stride to keep my left shoe from dragging in any way that could be interpreted as *anything*.

That teacher over there. Mr. Farmer. (Really Mr. Bauer, but I had learned from a German exchange student that *bauer* means farmer.) He doesn't know either. He thinks I'm just

like everybody else. He doesn't know that I can't balance on my left foot.

No one knows that my legs are different sizes. No one suspects a thing about my feet being two shoe sizes different. They didn't see that at that very moment my left shoe sported more scuff marks than my right. They didn't see it because they normally didn't have to.

It was unlikely that they would know the feeling of walking among a crowd and realizing that they are different in a way that can never be changed. They don't know what it's like to hear a faint rasping sound every time their left foot makes contact with the ground. They don't have to worry about hiding it.

The clouds overhead seemed to hear my internal musings and they responded with what I liked to think were tears of sympathy. At first, there was only a light drizzle, so none of the students paid attention. As I approached my classroom, I felt the rain come down slightly heavier and faster.

I turned out of the student center and reached my classroom. Right as I reached for the door handle, movement to my left caught my eye, and I turned to see some students walking up the long pathway from the parking lot down to the cafeteria. They were special ed students. In particular, this group was from the Intensive Support Program.

I watched as the short, Chinese girl with Down syndrome struggled to keep her milk carton from falling off her breakfast tray. A boy in a motorized wheelchair zoomed by with his assistant following close behind. Two shorter kids limped along and joked with each other.

*Do I belong there?* I thought as I took a step back from the door and watched the group. I have cerebral palsy and so do some of them. They know what it's like to try and hide a limp.

But they don't know what it's like to think you're normal one second and then another second you're not. They had lived their entire lives with the knowledge of what they have. I am

new to the group. I thought I was normal one second, and within the next second I knew that I wasn't.

No, I didn't belong there either.

Those kids also couldn't really comprehend what being this way meant. The Chinese girl with Down Syndrome probably didn't think of herself as a girl with an abnormal condition. She probably thought of herself as a girl in high school with a few close friends. From what I knew of her, she loved her teachers. To her, the condition probably wasn't even part of what defined her. She didn't watch other students walk by and think about what made them so different from her.

I did. I couldn't stop thinking about it, in fact.

When I was first diagnosed, a friend of a friend of mine caught wind of the situation. I'll never forget what he said. "Half-brain," he called me teasingly. "You've got a four-point-zero, and you're missing part of your brain. That's fucking weird." He paused for a moment to finish some homework he was working on. "That's fucking awesome," he said. "How many people can say that? 'Haha, I'm smarter than you, and I have less of a brain than you do.'"

That was when my entire thought process changed. There was nothing wrong with me, which is a realization that I hadn't really had up until that guy told me what he did. Yes, I am missing part of my brain, but that means almost nothing. I have trouble with balance, but so do many other people. The one difference with my situation is that the saying "practice makes perfect" doesn't always make me better at something as quickly as it does others. Other than that, there's nothing "abnormal." I have to work a bit harder to balance on my left leg. All of my jumping power comes from my right leg. My left arm is virtually useless when it comes to weight-lifting. I can't stand up while putting socks on because of my balance problem.

Everyone has their particularities, and these are mine.

I don't think about any of that when I play volleyball with the teachers at the middle school that I work at. I focus on the sport and on what I *can* do. I serve better than any of them, and we joke that my relative shortness puts me at a disadvantage at the net. Everyone laughs when I'm in the middle front standing opposite from the tallest teacher at the school.

"Roman!" I taunt one of the male teachers that I play against when I see him down the hall. "Steel cage death match! Friday!"

"Oh it's on!" he always yells back.

"I'm gonna sick Kirshman on you," I whisper threateningly when I pass him in the teacher's lounge, referring to the older math teacher who plays with us.

"I'll give both of you the Angel Roman beat-down," he responds.

We joke like this because we consider each other equals. We all love the sport, and we have our areas of expertise. Angel Roman can smash a good one at the net, but I can dig it up and make it look easy. John Kirshman couldn't do either for a while because of an injury, but his serves leave even seasoned and conditioned arms with sore, red spots.

Even the inexperienced players are equal. Dan "The Backwards Man" Hutchins can't pass like I can, but he can make kills at the net using a very weird and unpredictable style. Steve Schripsema hasn't ever really played the sport, but all six feet and three inches of him count for something.

I never think about my cerebral palsy with them. I'm playing "steel cage death matches" with guys, after all, and I hold my own. It doesn't matter that I drag my left leg when I move toward the ball to make a dig. I make the dig and silence their triumphant shouts in the process.