**Precious Metal**

There was a knock on the door. It all boiled down to this moment. The anaesthetist stepped into the room and told me the news I had been waiting to hear for three years - the surgeons were ready for me in theatre. My fears registered when a small girl in a hospital bed was wheeled slowly past me – her parents sobbing. This was it. There was no going back.

I felt as if my stomach was plummeting down a roller coaster. My feet were dangling off a cliff, despite being firmly planted on the chilling stone floor. At the age of fourteen I felt out of place in the hospital, despite still being a child myself. I was a lanky teenager - not exactly a five year old. I sat insecurely on the hospital bed almost naked – shaking, but not from cold – waiting. Then my vertebrae instantaneously jolted violently as the icy intruding needle forced its way between the bones of my spine. The sensation was alien and somewhat intriguing, but, can only be described as the most uncomfortable and painful experience of my life. As the sharp, surgical instrument protruded into my lower back, my back bone straightened immediately in less than a blink of my eyes – which now prized themselves open as I tried to control the affliction. It was as if an electric current had just passed up my spine – my posture was now perfect; yet my head was still shaking - my fears still evident.

A few agonising moments later, a long tube had found itself a home in between my vertebrae. Along with the drip on the back of my hand and the pipe wedged inside a large vein on my wrist, I was beginning to feel less human and more machine. It amazed me to think of the amount of research which has made operations like these possible... and successful.

I was born with a genetic defect – Pectus Excavatum which causes the sternum to grow in towards my vital organs – restricting my lung capacity and potentially causing a heart valve prolapse...

I couldn’t avoid thinking that what I was about to undergo, would alter my life forever... be it for the better or worse? The latter refused to leave the fringes of my consciousness. Would this be the last time I ever saw my parents? The last time I opened my eyes? As I thought of what seemed like my destined, certain end, I realised the beauty of everything I had taken for granted. The brilliant neutral colours of the paint in the room - how amazing! The way the cold metal of the bed stole the heat from my finely textured fingertips and how the light illuminated the small room. Suddenly all so wonderful!

The more I thought, the more imperative the end of my life seemed to be. It had been a nice life, even if I had only fourteen years of it. Was I going to die? Was it going to be the anaesthetic that would cause me to choke on my own vomit? Or perhaps they would pierce my lungs and heart as they sliced through the side of my ribcage and so I would inevitably bleed to death. Maybe I wouldn’t die? Maybe I would wake up paralysed and never be able to move anything but my eyelids ever again. Would that be worse than death? Seeing, but never doing? If there was an afterlife that might be better...

But what of my family? This thought was more unsettling than the thoughts of myself. Would I ever see them again? Likewise, would they ever see me? How would they cope if they lost me? I smiled at my Mum for what would seem to be the last time. I could see my fear reflected in her eyes.

My train of thoughts were quickly disrupted by a nurse explaining anaesthetic to me. I soon found what appeared to be a milk filled syringe injecting its cold contents into one of my many tubes. Once again an unusual feeling took a hold of me. I felt a tingling in my fingers and I sensed the freezing liquid creeping up my veins towards my head.

Was my arm going numb?

“Count to ten,” the nurse smiled.

“OK” I replied excitedly, wondering what it would feel like to be sent to sleep, “Err... one, two, three... I can feel that!... four... fi...” I plummeted into the unknown. This was the end.

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I awoke briefly to the sound of voices and a repetitive beeping sound – instantly recognisable to me as a heart monitoring system from “Casualty”. It was far too difficult to keep my eyes open for any longer then a millisecond. I abruptly closed them and dreamt away...

Was this it? The afterlife? Heaven? It took some time to register in my brain, but it sunk in eventually. I wasn’t dead! I was alive and my parents were by my side! Of course I was alive, these were trained professionals – the best of the best. How foolish I was to think of any other outcome! Relieved, I fell right through my pillow and into a long and carefree sleep.

In my thoughts I reversed time to before the needles and epidurals. I remembered the vivid falling feeling in my stomach that took a hold of me as my feet plodded across the October cold floor of Great Ormond Street Hospital. I remembered the silence as a colourful bed was wheeled past me – a small girl lying there, asleep, her parents sobbing. And I remembered the absolute selflessness of the helpful volunteers and amazing nurses.

I was drifting in and out of consciousness.

When my thoughts fully returned to my muddled mind, I decided to risk a painful stare down at my chest. To my joy and relief, my chest was flat; completely normal! I let go of my head and allowed it to fall deep into my pillow with a zombie like sigh of exasperation.

The operation was a success. I was normal.

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The next few days blurred together. There were no windows in the ward; no sunlight; no wind or precipitation. There was no concept of time; for all I know, I could have been in the high dependency ward for years. I felt like I was living underground and completely isolated from the world I didn’t even know existed. I didn’t even feel like a person. I could move my arms and feet and swivel my head from either side, but my chest seemed to be bolted to my metal bed with the titanium bar which now lay implanted inside my ribcage.

Leaving the hospital I held my head up as high as my physically altered body would let me. I had survived. I was on my way to becoming normal again. Despite being drugged as high as a kite and starved so much I had lost almost all of my muscle, I felt happy. I stepped onto the Caledonian Sleeper beaming a massive smile towards my parents.

Now, two years later, I feel like a much stronger, more mature person. I have obtained the ability to look past painful and uncomfortable situations which consequently has changed my life in almost every way imaginable. Yet, I can’t help thinking what if my operation had gone wrong? Maybe I have stared death in his very face. However my precious experience at this hospital will stay with me forever. It has made me realise just how valuable your time on earth is. You shouldn’t waste it sitting around watching TV or playing video games. Ultimately, I believe the most important attribute I have gained from my experience is wisdom. You only get one shot. Don’t waste it.

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