

## **Khadeejah Abdul-Basser**

People often say, "home is where the heart is". But I often wonder, where is it that my heart is most at home? My heart resides in my body, but much of the time, my body does not feel like home. At times I feel estranged from it, so I seek comfort in striving toward the future, a place full of possibilities unknown. I find comfort in always having a plan, or a problem to solve.

My problem is that I hunt for problems, where others might argue there are none. I relish retracing the outline of old scars, hoping that my finger might stop on a spot that will remind me of how it feels to succeed. Maybe I have no choice but to cast my eyes over the remainder of one of my deepest wounds daily. It is one that I am aware of every time I step up to face a new challenge. Few people will ever see it--- the scar on my upper left leg. But I wonder if at times they can sense it, not the blemish itself, but all the trials I've been through. What's hardest to reconcile is that this experience has granted me the best part of my personality -my resilience. I am one who carries the weight of things unspoken. I am too afraid to leave my fate to anybody else because the hardest thing I've ever done I have done by myself. I'd rather surrender myself to serving others, than rely on someone else.

It's safe to say that these feelings of hyper-independence began when I was in third grade. For most of the academic year, I suffered from a strange discomfort in my upper left leg, which everyone- including my pediatrician- dismissed as "growing pains." The sensation is still difficult to describe. It felt like I was constantly wearing a new article of clothing with an annoyingly itchy plastic tag that would scrape and chafe as I walked. Yet somehow this was happening inside of my body. I could not visibly see anything wrong with

my leg, so at times I was convinced that my body must be playing tricks on me. However, as time went on, I developed a noticeable limp. By early May, my parents were concerned, so we visited an orthopedist. At the appointment, I did my best to remain composed as the doctor carefully inspected my x-rays. I was successful until the orthopedist asked my mother to join him in the hallway. The sting of tears in the back of my throat alerted me that something more serious was wrong. The adults returned with news that would turn my world upside down: a diagnosis of fibrous dysplasia at the top of my left femur. My body was producing fibrous tissue instead of bone, putting my leg at risk of fracture. The orthopedist explained that surgery was the only treatment. I remember feeling trapped and confused in that moment. How could it be that something so catastrophic was going on within me and I had no idea?

My surgery was scheduled for July 31<sup>st</sup>. I remember arriving at Boston Children's Hospital for pre-op, feeling slightly nauseous as I looked at my left thigh, realizing that it was the last time I would see it unscarred. When it was time for the anesthesiologist to put me under, my dad was allowed to hold my hand. She slipped an oxygen mask over my face, and I started to panic, squeezing my father's hand. Soon it began to feel like my body was shutting down. My eyes were the first to go. My father's face was suddenly replaced by a slowly rotating hypnotic black and white swirl. The surgeon and her resident appeared in the middle of the vortex, like cutouts from a magazine. I tried to blink the disturbing image away, but it did not work. I could hear people speaking to me, but I could not respond or move my limbs at all - no matter how much I wanted to. My vision began fading to black and I heard my heartbeat roaring louder and louder in my ears.

When I woke up from surgery, the first thing I felt was excruciating pain. I looked down and saw that my leg had tripled in size. The next day, I was incredulous when the physical therapist wheeled me to a set of parallel bars and asked me to walk. The thought of putting weight on my leg terrified me. Each step sent needles of pain radiating up the length of my leg. It was almost unbearable. I wanted to give up, to sit back down in my wheelchair, and sleep away from this nightmare. Yet, I knew that I had no choice but to be strong, to power my way through the pain. If I did not act now, I would be forever unable to stand on my own. I gritted my teeth, closed my eyes, inhaled, and reminded myself that I was in control. No one could make me contract my muscles, lift my fuzzy-sock encased feet, and put one foot in front of the other. As I inched slowly across the floor, I was shocked to discover that I was crying, tears blurring my vision so that I could not see the ground before me. Yet I somehow made it to the end.

These experiences have imbued me with a tenacity for which I will always be thankful. Over the past 13 years, I've drawn on this experience to remind myself that I had and still have the strength to conquer challenges. I've reflected on my operation and recovery when faced with periods of grief, loss, adjustment, and discomfort, time and time again. Whenever I feel like giving up, I remember that I am the only one who can set limits on what I can accomplish. This self-reliance, however, can be a double edged sword. Often, I retreat into myself when I am dealing with something difficult, shrouding myself in solitude rather than reaching out to other people. One thing that makes me feel safe is a reminder from people around me that I don't always have to shoulder the burden of my struggles alone. Feelings of trust, stability, and consistency are what I value most in a community.