

0 to 128 mph

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The comfort I got from my head reaching for the feathers below the warm fabricated surface was indescribable. Any person can understand this when they are tired or bored, but for me, it was different. If I got up the entire world changed. My head felt like lead, and the only way to manage its weight was to put it on the only thing that seemed to hold it up—a pillow. A parent's worst nightmare—their kid becoming lazy. Well, that's what my parents believed was happening to me.

"GET UP AND GO TO SCHOOL!" they screamed. I was convinced the next-door neighbors heard them and may have even jumped and prepared their elderly selves for school. The mere sign of laziness made my parents question my immobility and diminishing self. I thought if I listened to their yells and pushed myself to get up and go, I would eventually find the cure to this seemingly nonsensical dilemma. So I jumped up, and the light seemed to shut off. Maybe it was just a delusion? Maybe the feelings I was having in my legs and arms were due to my loss of motivation? Well, the lights came back on, but it wasn't immediate. Imagine the lights in a movie theater finally powering on, yet the surrounding darkness wills itself to stay alive, fighting back with stars and white spots until it has lost. Except this time, the darkness seemed to fight for much longer. Eventually my vision became clear again, but my thoughts seemed to be encompassed by a blockade. Every action I had to think about, every right answer was struggling to make its way through the thick walls.

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No, don't do it. Don't give in. Have fun with your friends. Let yourself enjoy the time you're having without allowing fear to take control. Everyone else is doing it, and they are coming off alive; their faces are full of enjoyment. That'll happen to you too. I promise.

A voice screamed in my head. I couldn't control the cyclical nervous rambling. It went on and on....

But what if I don't make it? What if the one time I go on King Da Ka, it breaks, and I go flying off. Then what? Then what will be said?

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The nurses all stared at me. I wasn't feeling well, which is expected of someone who had just undergone rounds of chemotherapy. My typical day involved throwing up at least ten times and laying in bed, staring into nothingness as I waited and waited for the dreadful feelings to abate. The oncologist had said this was some of the worst chemotherapy in existence, and I was enduring it and feeling its full brute force. Yet, they still stared at me with a worried look on their faces. I could see it was different. With every quick glance over the shoulder, I felt the negative energy emitting from their facial expressions.

Originally I didn't want to admit to how awful I had felt while I was sitting in my house. I explained to my mother how my growing fever and inability to move were the normal conditions I experienced after every round of chemo, but she inevitably rushed me into the city to be given some fluids and antibiotics just for precautionary measures.

As I sat in the clinic chair that I had grown oh-so accustomed to, I grew talkative and just couldn't wait to be released to go home. I had fluids coursing through my veins, but all I could feel was the rush of adrenaline that was increasing as the bag grew closer and closer to becoming empty. One obstacle still stood in my way: I had to go to the bathroom. For some reason, the short walk to the bathroom didn't seem possible. So, I sat there, waiting, until...

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I willed myself to do it. My parents were happy to see me entering the bus, but I was fighting an internal battle that no one else could see. As I got to school, I tried to go through my daily routines except the board seemed so far, and the words didn't make much sense. Math, a subject which I normally excelled in, seemed impossible to understand. The difficulty level had risen in every aspect of life, slowly creeping up until I couldn't handle it any longer. I was a seventh grader and I couldn't wait to meet more people and grow even stronger friendships, but my physical battles were hindering my every move, my every goal. I couldn't handle it anymore, and I felt that every second of the day was useless, as I was retaining no information. The struggle I faced trying to get from class to class was tremendous. When I got home that day, I laid down on the couch and from that moment forward I felt dead inside. The only times I moved were to go into a different room, which was one of the hardest challenges. Every time I would stand, I would nearly pass out. I never would have expected this to have happened to me. It seemed I woke up one day to a recurring illness, one that I had no name for and no idea

how to remedy. So, I went to my pediatrician.

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I hadn't ever been on a large rollercoaster before, just some small wooden ones that I would force my dad onto. I would always manage to find the wooden rollercoasters at amusement parks and rush him into the line. He would ultimately agree, after trying to find a way out of it, but in the end we always had fun. The comparison between a mere wooden ride and the enormous ride in front of me was hard to make. I was about to enter the lion's den, about to undergo everything it could give and just pray that I ended up alive. Praying that I wouldn't be eaten alive and thrown out like nothing ever mattered.

Three of my friends and I stood in the menacingly long line to board the ride. Standing next to a sign that said "3 hour wait" showed just how dedicated my friends were to get onto the ride, so I stood there with them, knowing that the longer I waited and the deeper I got into the line, there was no turning back. The worst part of it all was that the ride was visible throughout every inch of the line. I was able to see every person that got on, their hands clenched across the handlebars, some crying, some showcasing their excitement through the whites of their teeth. The fifty seconds that every ride took sent a shock through my brain. My desire to back out became increasingly noticeable to all my friends, but I knew there was no way I could turn around.

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After the mountain climb to the bathroom, I sat down and prepared myself to get ready to go home. My mother and grandmother were by my side, and I had them call over the nurses to alert them about the emp-



ty bag above me. The nurse walked over, unclipped my bag, and took my blood pressure one last time before releasing me. My mom went to another room to call my dad before the hour-long ride home to let him know everything was okay.

That's when the look on the nurse's face drastically changed from calm to fear to alarm. My blood pressure had dropped and was continuing to drop. My expectations had risen prior to this experience and then had just been dumped on the ground and left for dead. I didn't know how to react. All these nurses were suddenly rushing to my side, yelling things to each other. Every patient, every sick person whom I could normally relate to, was now staring at me—they no longer had concerns over their own ailments but rather were focused on mine. Having all

this attention was awful.

The crash team was called as I was laid down on a bed where I instantly had medicine and fluids rushing through my veins with ten to fifteen doctors by my side. Heart rate monitors and blood pressure cuffs were now attached to every extremity, all working to get me stable again as I was carted to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU).

My mom, throughout a lot of this, was still on the phone in the other room. Imagine coming out and expecting to go home, expecting to have your son back in the car in less than 10 minutes and then having all that blow up in your face. She came out to see me being dragged away on a bed with increasing speed. The only explanation that could be heard through all the yelling was a single word. That word was "sepsis."

I had no control of my movement. All I could do was try to crack jokes and enjoy the ride; the doctors were surprised by the way I was acting. I didn't seem afraid and didn't act sick, but they knew that what was happening inside me could kill me.

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"He seems to have depression," the pediatrician quietly told my parents. "I consider it to be school phobia." School phobia...my parents didn't know how to react. Their son, who was telling them he was sick, appearing to be immobile, not being able to attend school, showing signs of something being wrong, is now being diagnosed with something that made no sense.

I loved school. I couldn't wait to attend, looked forward to it during the summer, and now I had a doctor telling me I was lying. Telling me that the feelings I had were due to the way I perceived school and the way my brain was working. I physically felt sick and had no one to run to. No one who understood me, no one who had any idea of what was going on. I was lost. Flying up and down with emotions and fighting an internal battle. Every comeback I had, every rebuttal was shut down by someone I was taught to trust since I was a kid—a doctor. A doctor I had known all my life. *How could I fight that?*

From then on, I fought with my parents every day about the reality of feeling sick. Every day was an uphill battle. Every day there was a new obstacle. A cough had even developed. A cough of a seal. No one could explain why I was coughing. We went back to the pediatrician who had ruled out whooping cough and other illnesses that it could have been related to, but once his book of information was empty, he resorted

to saying that I was forcing the cough to happen and that there was no real cause other than it being habitual.

After that, my parents and I prepared ourselves for the ride of our life. We had to find an answer.

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Counting down in my seat as I stared at the gigantic ride in front of me, I tried to ease my anxiety by telling myself that the ride would only last fifty seconds, but that didn't seem to help. My friend sat next to me, and I watched as his excitement turn to fear. The same kid who had been telling me all about how awesome the ride was now sat next to me, clinging to the handlebars like his life depended on it. The ride took forever to launch. It's all intentional. They make you stare at the gigantic, straight path that follows until you think yourself out of wanting to do it anymore. Once you've had enough and want to get off the ride, you are surprised with a jolt of energy as the ride goes from 0 to 128 mph and sends you flying.

When it finally launched, I didn't know how to react. My stomach immediately became nonexistent and I could hardly keep my eyes open. The force of the wind made it nearly impossible to see where I was going. All I could do was feel. I could feel myself climbing straight up. I could feel the momentary pause at the peak. A pause in life. A pause that made everything below me feel worthless, for that moment. Suddenly, I knew that I would make it. I knew that whatever came next would be exciting, and that all my fear had been for nothing. Once I overcame the top of the ride, the downward portion was an amazing thrill. I could feel myself spiraling and felt so much relief when

we came to the average rollercoaster level again, which ended with a gradual slow in speed. I had done it, I had overcome one of my biggest fears, and I couldn't wait to do it again.

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In the ICU, I was treated with extreme caution. I didn't realize it beforehand, but I was acutely sick. Every action that a person normally does, I suddenly was no longer able to do. The nurses helped me with everything. I was constantly on blood pressure medicine to stabilize the way my blood pressure was reacting to sepsis, an infection of the blood. Having sepsis as a cancer patient is extremely life threatening, because I had no white blood cells to fight off anything. It took days before my blood pressure stabilized without any medicine, and throughout this time I was the sickest I had ever been in my entire life. I had never relied on the care from a nurse more than I did in that moment. Every part of my body was useless, and all I could do was pray that I would end up okay.

When I was finally released from the ICU, I was put into a normal hospital room to finish recovering. I sometimes imagine what would have happened if I had crashed at home instead of in the hospital, where doctors and nurses could react immediately. My life was in the hands of the decisions that my parents and I made that day.

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Almost every doctor I had seen had dismissed my illness. They all pushed me to the side, told me to try other doctors, other specialists, and that they inevitably thought it was all in my head. So many doctors, who I trusted with my life, told my parents they had no idea what was wrong with me. That

is, until I was pushed into the direction of a cardiologist who specialized in a syndrome called "P.O.T.S." (Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome), a syndrome where a person's heart rate and blood pressure can no longer regulate themselves and their immune system no longer works properly. I was put through many different tests to prove that I had this syndrome. The main test was called a "Tilt Test," in which I would lay down on a bed and the bed would tilt up and down. Throughout this process, it was observed that when the bed was tilted upward, my heart rate increased from 90 to over 200 beats per minute. The table had to be lowered to prevent me from passing out.

The results were positive, and after six months of searching, my family and I had ridden out the waves of false diagnoses. I was officially diagnosed with P.O.T.S. There is no "cure" for the syndrome, but there are a few different medicines and treatments that proved to be beneficial. I was given a blood pressure pill and after a few weeks of taking it, all my symptoms, including the seal bark of a cough, gradually went away. The doctor who looked past his book and looked at me as an individual saved me.

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The ups and downs of life, like the ups and downs of a rollercoaster, are all combatted by the end result, where we can look back and acknowledge what we have achieved. Someone may ride a rollercoaster many times throughout a lifetime, and each time it will prove itself to become easier and easier. Every ride in life, good or bad, shows that what is unexpected sometimes proves to be what makes it all worth it in the end.