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My Survival Story

I was seventeen when it happened – a senior in high school who was never home. I left my house at eight in the morning and often didn't return until ten at night. I was a member of the National Honor Society, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and a kindness club at my school. I sang in a choir that had recently performed in Disney World. I was a 4.0 student who had just gotten into my dream university. I had it all – a seemingly “perfect” life – until I didn't.

On December 18, 2019, I was involved in a car accident that changed my life forever. I woke up early to make it to school to take a calculus test before my classes started. Running late like always, I left in a hurry, ignoring my mom's warning of the severe weather that awaited me outside. Snow was blowing rapidly, causing white-out conditions. I slowed down to forty-five miles per hour (mph) in a fifty-mph zone, assuming I was safe because I was going ten under the speed limit. As I continued to drive, I remained utterly oblivious that a thick layer of ice lay beneath the blanket of white snow that covered the road. As I came to an intersection, I hit the brakes and began to slide. By the time I saw the glowing taillights, it was too late. I hit the car in front of me and then rolled into a ditch.

It wasn't until two days after my accident when I fainted at a choir concert and was rushed to the hospital, that I learned the true extent of my injuries. In the emergency room, I was told I had sustained a fractured spine and traumatic brain injury (TBI). Neither injury was severe enough to receive further treatment in the hospital, so I was sent home and placed on two weeks of bed rest.

During those two weeks, I fainted virtually every time I stood. I was convinced this was a normal part of my healing process and ignored the symptoms as much as I could. However, I quickly began having these episodes over twenty times a day. It was at this point that my family and I sought additional medical attention.

For the next fifteen months, I underwent what felt like hundreds of tests. Finally, in March of 2021, I was told that my TBI had triggered an illness known as Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS). The condition stems from a malfunction of the autonomic nervous system, the body's rest and digest, and fight or flight system. POTS essentially shuts the rest and digest portion of the autonomic nervous system down completely, so the body is always in the high-arousal state of the fight or flight mode. Because of this illness, I experience an incredibly high resting heart rate and extreme blood pressure fluctuations with every change of position.

Since my diagnosis, I have undergone extensive cardiac rehab and physical therapy. I also went through several months of intensive eye therapy to relearn how to read after being diagnosed with horizontal gaze nystagmus, another long-lasting effect of my TBI. These therapies have allowed me to regain strength and have even, with the assistance of the twelve medications I currently take, decreased the number of fainting episodes I endure. However, the most significant obstacle I had to overcome wasn't physical at all.

During my recovery, I was forced to accept that the person I had known for seventeen years had died the day of that accident. That high-energy, fun-loving, determined teenager with her whole life ahead of her was gone. In her place was a girl who was weak, depressed, and unable to even shower on her own.

For months I grieved this loss, but it wasn't until almost a year after my accident that I started reflecting on who the girl I left behind actually was. During the many hours I spent sitting at doctors' appointments and lying in bed, I allowed my life before my accident to play out in front of me over and over again. It was in these moments that I realized I had spent my entire life focusing entirely on the wrong things. I had been incredibly selfish without ever realizing it. I had left my mom all alone in our house every weekend so I could go to football games and hang out with friends instead of spending precious time with the woman who raised me entirely on her own. I prioritized school and extracurricular activities over everything else, leaving zero time for me to create those everlasting memories and bonds we as humans instinctively desire. I nearly gave my own life by racing to school so I could take a calculus test. I finally realized that the person I had left behind that December day was someone I never wanted to be. Instead of grieving the loss of my prior self, I began to focus instead on the person I wanted to become.

Although every day of my life is plagued with the symptoms of POTS, I refuse to let my illness destroy my spirit. While I have continued to demonstrate the same perseverance and drive I once had, I spend more time focusing on the things that really matter, like the bonds and memories I continue to create with my family and friends. I no longer put myself first and instead dedicate as much time as I can to helping other people through their trials. For the first time in my life, I can genuinely say that I am proud of the person I am today.

My car accident has prepared me to face life's biggest challenges; it has shown me that no obstacle is too big; it has taught me to work through the hardships that life throws my way. Most importantly, though, it has shown me the value of life, something I will never take for granted again.