

In Stride

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Her heart pounded. Each step was deliberate, and her worn running shoes beat the path to the rhythm of her breath. Her agile frame made the strength of her steps, and the brisk pace of her run seem almost effortless. Tiny beads of sweat trickled down her smooth forehead.

As the silhouette of familiar tall trees appeared on either side of her path, the grey clouds shared a gentle drizzle. With the feeling of her lungs expanding with the fresh air, her thoughts cleared, and the squeeze around her chest began to lift.

“There are new lytic lesions in your pelvis” were the undeniable words of her oncologist on the phone, spoken with compassion and genuine sadness.

As an emergency physician herself, she began to process the implications of this news, dissecting it methodically, the way she had been trained to approach a problem. Her curious and inquisitive mind found it interesting in some ways.

She had shared the news that day. A stream of encouragement and support flooded from loved ones. She was moved. She did not previously realize the lives she touched. Her heart was grateful.

Just over a year ago, she was diagnosed with a rare sarcoma in her skull. After months of fighting, the tumour had responded to radiation and retreated under the toxic, nauseating grip of chemotherapy repeatedly injected into her veins.

The experienced hands of her neurosurgeon had cut out and removed the mass, as well as surrounding pieces of her skull and scalp. The plastics team had achieved reconstructive wonders using titanium and pieces from her forearm to re-create a semblance of normal.

She looked down at the scar on her wrist, taking her eyes off the path for a second. She imagined the large, sickly tumour sitting on a cold metal table. The tumour

in her skull was gone, but its imprint on her life would forever linger.

As she ran, she thought about how her life had changed.

Her days were filled with hospital visits. She chose to go alone for appointments, not because of a lack of people wishing to accompany her but so she could connect, smile at strangers, turn tight shoulders into relaxed ones, and worried faces into laughing ones.

As a proud Canadian, she ran, bearing her baldhead, for Terry Fox. Her emergency medicine colleagues ran with her.

She wrote, openly sharing her experiences of illness and the perspective it had given her. As hundreds of people followed her story, she channelled their attention and support toward the training needs of emergency physicians abroad. Shortly before her diagnosis, she started a non-profit organization. In between hospital admissions, she followed this global work with admiration and pride. Her commitment to the well-being of others, both within her circle and beyond, continued to give her purpose and challenge.

Her days were not filled with anger or sadness. She found peace of heart; she created and expressed a relentless joy.

Prior to the news of the metastases, she planned to get back to work. Knowing it would be challenging, she was still eager as ever to serve patients as an emergency physician. Before her illness, she had been in practice for only one year; it was not enough. Emergency medicine was her passion.

However, now, she would need to pause, again, for her own health.

Overwhelming thoughts and feelings, in quick succession, washed over her, and she patiently allowed

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herself to notice them. The pain in her chest re-surfaced, and this time, her heart seemed to leap into her throat.

She willed herself to stop running. Catching her breath, she planted her feet firmly on the ground and focused on filling her lungs with air. As the sun peeked between the clouds, she closed her eyes and turned toward its rays, appreciating the warmth on her cheeks.

When her heart and mind felt ready, she began to run again.

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