

At the age of 9 I had a stroke of luck. On Friday the 13th October 1978 I was taken to a doctor because my body stopped walking. The doctor said it was "Growing pains with a touch of sniffles". My father was not convinced, so he took me to another doctor. This doctor examined me, hit my knees with a rubber hammer, hit my elbows with a hammer and told my parents to take me to Red Cross Hospital. Countless doctors asked me questions, again with the rubber hammer, after which I was admitted. Peace at last. I was given a tablet to help me sleep. During that night I got irradiated from all the X-rays, had a lumber-puncture, which I was assured would not hurt, although six nurses were holding me in place. The next morning I was totally paralyzed. I was moved to the ICU, where I spent 28 days, beating everyone at chess.

After my 28 days in ICU, I got a weekend at home, after which I was to "report" to Princess Alice Orthopaedic Hospital in Retreat. THE JOY! Weekend at home. Still paralyzed, but I could move fingers by now.

So the weekend rushed past, and the Monday I was admitted to my "new" home. I hated it the first day the teachers came. What bull was this?! Teachers in a hospital? Don't they know sick people are there and we don't really want to go to school? Depressing enough that I couldn't even get out of bed and leave. But every cloud has a silver lining, they brought my "wheels". It was a smallish wheelchair, but I fitted in nicely, being all skin and bones by that time. It took all my energy to get into it, but I did it alone. It was nice to do something on my own. Then my pal in the bed next to me decided to "take me for a ride". What a ride! We became firm friends, quickly. He had cancer in a bone in his right shoulder, so he only had one arm to steer. In retrospect all of us in the children's ward became firm friends. We looked out for each other, helped wherever and when there was need. I practised getting into and out of my 'wheels' daily, and I was getting better at it.

One day I was informed to go to the pool, my first reaction was "what for? You guys want to see somebody drown?". I got my swimming wings, like a 4 year old learning to swim. Sad. Really sad. I did not drown, but movement was difficult in the water. That was the point I later heard. My next appointment was after lunch, physical therapy. I was out the door like a shot, the teacher came in, I was out. At physical therapy I weaved baskets, lots of them. My hands were working better, my co-ordination was better. I was not alone, there were so many children, all with smiling faces, in spite of their illnesses.

After two years, a bunch of us were sitting at the table playing cards, me in my "wheels", by then I was called a "Terrorist on wheels", affectionately of course... Not. So as will happen when kids play cards, a card fell on the ground, a distance away. As I was not facing the table, I gave it no thought, got up and fetched the card, and sat down on my "wheels" again. I looked at my friends, who were gaping at me, slack-jawed. I asked them "What?" and they said in unison "You walked!". Then it hit me, I did walk! I got up again, walked to the Sister's Office, on the way picking up Stephan's dummy, washing it off and handing him his dummy, got some sweets from my drawer, for Amanda, my neighbour on the right, we have not looked each other in the eyes once in the nine months she was there, she was in plaster, I was too low. So with sweets in hand I unwrapped the sweets, standing next to her looked her in the eyes and said "Hi". It was strange to talk to somebody for 9 months, yet not know what they look like. She had no visitors, as was the case with most of us, as our parents stayed too far away. Her parents were the farthest, living in Alexanderbay. I was there the longest, they all looked at me for their answers, when they were depressed I dished out sweets, and listened.

There was no advice I could give, except that they will all eventually go home, and I will help the new ones. But this time it was different. I walked to the Sister's Office and gave Sister Dillon a sweet, for the very first time. Then I asked her if I could go to the men's ward, as there was a 16 year old who had the same illness. He was very depressed, he did not go to physical therapy as he couldn't see the point of it, he was willing to end it all, but he needed help to do it. The irony. So as I walked up to him, I told him, "Get up, stop your moaning, I got up, now it's your turn". Of course the sweet was given too, as sweets were in short supply at the hospital. And we all know a sweet makes everything better. With a promise of "I will get up" I left, on the visit the lady in the Women's Ward. She had the same illness, but she was 82. She was the life and soul of the Women's Ward, but when I walked in she just said "Thank you Jesus". I stayed awhile, chatting to everybody, we were family in that hospital. Even the nurses were family. Distant cousins or something. On the way back I slipped on one of Stephan's crayons, nearly breaking my left foot. Of course I was put to bed immediately, as enough is enough! Sister Dillon was strict again.

About a month later I got my callipers to support my feet, but I was walking! The good-bye was sad, Amanda got her first visit, Stephan's plaster was coming off, soon he was going home too. My father waited patiently as I said my good-byes, it was sad to leave my home of 2 years. Sad to leave friends behind. My drawer of sweets was distributed equally amongst patients and staff, Sister Dillon coming in on her off-day to say good-bye.

When I turned 16 I had the opportunity to visit the hospital again, I was declared "normal". Big word that, "Normal". On the way out I ran into an old friend, the manic depressed guy in the Men's Ward. He was on crutches, but walking! He said he took my advice, and he is very happy to report he has had plenty of accidents on his motorbike again.

Remember I started this by saying I "had a stroke of good luck"? It was, it changed me, changed my beliefs. There are no words that can describe the loneliness of being seriously ill, of the chance you might die, missing your family. I was asked to write this, a thing I did not want to re-visit. I believe it was a good thing, as I can truthfully say I know what it means to be alone, shunned by society, as if what you have is contagious, people sheering away from you at the sight of you. My whole school career I was treated differently, not accepted, because most people do not understand what I went through. All the emotion, the pure and utter sadness I experienced, together with all the people in the hospital, can not be expressed in words. I was lucky, I had some visits, sometimes I even went home for a weekend, while the rest of my friends had to stay in the hospital. Amanda spent 12 months in the hospital, the day she saw her mother in the doorway she cried, uncontrollably, she knew she was going home.

As an adult I went to hospitals visiting children with Guillane Barre Syndrome, speaking to them, explaining that I understood, they CAN walk again, I was the example, all they had to do was get up. Believe. Simple.