

The Listening Room

LARA BIRK

It has been almost thirteen years since I left a high school soccer game on a stretcher, alarmed and bewildered by a sudden onset of unfathomable pain, and entered into a world no sentences could ever wrap their words around no matter how I cast or stretched them. It has been years, and yet I still don't know how to tell the story—the short story—though I've heard myself try a thousand times. Every time I see a person catch a glimpse of the lump or the scars that mark both my legs, I silently start rehearsing the words.

None of these strangers wants the long story, although a lot of them think they do. What they want is an explanation. A promise. *Tell me what you went through won't happen to me. Tell me I'm safe.*

The onset of the pain was sudden. I had an acute muscular disease no one knew I had. It had masked itself at first as "shin splints," the pain of which I had stubbornly run through all summer. My "no pain, no gain" philosophy seemed to pay off. I made the varsity soccer team and played as stopper in our first pre-season game. I remember running, watching the ball as it moved from player to player on the other side of the field, ready at any moment to defend our goal.

Suddenly, I could not pick up my foot. I no longer had control over my ankle. And then the pain came. I raised my hand to be taken out, but my coach motioned to me that we had no subs. I nodded and tried to continue. My teammates tell me I "crumpled" to the ground, seemingly without warning, and had to be carried to the bench. Me, who at age two did not cry when both of my eardrums ruptured and was only taken to the doctor when my mother found the fluid on my pillow, me who ran no matter what I felt like—*me* on the bench. I was writhing, squirming, whimpering.

My vision was blurred with the pain. I only remember being carried to a car, bumped around on the interminably long ride home, my mother's face, the alarming speed with which she drove us to the ER, the green-capped faces rolling me to X-ray, and the white-coated man who called me a "sixteen year-old crybaby" when no breaks were found in the bone. Then, the struggle to get me in the car, the trip home, the long night waiting for relief, the cries my mother could no

longer stand, the early morning trip back, the palpations by different hands, and finally blackness. Emergency surgery and admission to the hospital.

For some reason, still a mystery, I had developed acute compartment syndrome simply from playing soccer. Later, in an article documenting my case, the doctors called it acute *exertional* compartment syndrome. Now people know about it, but at the time, no one knew. The pressure escalated within the fascial sheaths encasing the muscles of my leg. The compartments became so tight, the tissues within could no longer receive the oxygen-enriched blood which keeps them alive. As the muscles began to die, the pain raged and the necrosis spread. It could have killed me had it reached my kidneys. I did not know that. I did not know that this was only the beginning.

When they slit the skin, the internal pressure pushed the flesh apart, cleaving a purple river from knee to ankle. I awoke to find five inches between one edge of my skin and the other. The nurses were on intensive watch for signs of a potentially lethal infection. I could not move. The staff hummed busily around me, hovering dangerously close to my leg, which was heavily draped with ice and propped up above my heart on an unsteady pile of pillows. An errant elbow could knock my leg from its precarious perch, plunging it, me, into wrenching pain.

After the principal of my small private school made an announcement about my hospitalization, I soon had a stream of visitors toting balloons and flowers. But my classmates hovered by the door when they came bearing chocolates; they left notes for me saying, "I would have stayed but you were asleep," even though I could see them scurry past the double doors of my room as I waited. When worried nurses poked through IV wires and struggled with stubborn, sticking bandages to undress my wound, "just to take a peek," the smell of necrotic flesh drove my frightened visitors from the room. They said things like, "You're through the worst of it!" or "Chin up!" before excusing themselves and sounding their footsteps down the hall in quick departure.

Marty Joseph and Sam Robeson were different. We'd been friends for about a year—not close, but I thought they were "cool," cooler than me certainly, which is why I was especially surprised when they decided to visit. The first time they came, Marty and Sam didn't seem fazed like the others. They looked around and then told me with wry grins that they'd parked in the space marked "clergy" in front of the maternity ward so that they wouldn't have to pay for parking or worry about the time.

"You guys are terrible!" I said, shamefully elated at the image of Mrs. Robeson's "grocery-getter" taking up an enormous, illegal space just for me.

When I laughed, their faces lit up.

After this, they started to visit me every day—even befriending the fourth-floor nurses. No one asked them to leave when they stayed past visiting hours. Whenever

the nurses' desk was unattended, they stole wheelchairs. They would race each other up and down the hall. The ambulant kids on the ward giggled shyly from their doorways and then screamed and clapped when Sam beat Marty to my door, adding "wheelies" for everyone's amusement. I looked forward to their visits.

One afternoon, sometime during my third or fourth week in the hospital, Marty came by himself. When he walked in, I was still a little groggy, recovering from another emergency surgery. My surgeon walked in just then on his post-op afternoon rounds and clapped his clipboard on the side rail of my bed, creating a clanging reverberation throughout my body.

"Well, you almost lost that leg of yours," he said, looking at his notes. "We considered amputating due to all the necrosis you've still got in there, but we decided that a real good excision of all that stuff will hopefully do the trick. You'll keep seeping, of course, but we've got you on for three-times-a-day dressing changes."

The surgeon looked at me then. "You're a lucky girl, you know," and he turned and left the room.

In the wake of the silence left by my doctor, I heard the words, several times, in random order, as they banged around inside my head. I forgot Marty was there. I forgot everything. Then, after a while, I could feel Marty's presence again.

He stared at me. His mouth hung open and his eyes were wide. "Oh my God. I had no idea it was *that* serious. You don't deserve this." Marty was tall, a football player with deep brown skin, but he looked small and pale now.

"Marty, it's okay. Things are chaotic, random, you know. Things just happen to people . . ."

"No. Not like this. You *must* have done something—something bad, something really bad—to deserve all this." He stared at me, looking bigger again. "What did you do?"

I looked at him, thinking that if I waited long enough he would change the subject and tell me a joke or something. But then Marty drew himself away from me, his chair screeching on the floor. I was suddenly cold. I heard my voice groping at words but I just laughed.

"I'm not kidding," Marty continued, looking at me with a ferocity in his eyes I had not seen before. "Think about it. Go into your past—you must have done *something* for all this horrible stuff to happen to you. Things don't just happen for no good reason."

I did not answer. I didn't realize how much he needed an answer. A nurse came in then for the first of the post-op dressing changes.

"Marty, sweetie," she said, "I need you to wait in the hall until this is over. It's pretty painful for our little trooper and we'll need to dose her up. You might hear her crying out a bit, but I'll tell you when we're through and you can go back in again. I know she'll need your company after this one."

I could see her wink at Marty, and then I watched him walk out, his image fleetingly casting a shadow back into my room as Nancy began the slow, interminable process of undressing and redressing my wound. The pain was deafening. Marty was not there when the nurse called for him.

Marty did not visit again. The abruptness and totality of his abandonment embodied a violence that left me painfully aware of his absence. Sam visited me a couple more times, but he didn't park illegally or steal a wheelchair to make me laugh. The steady stream of friends who'd visited in the first couple of weeks had turned into an anemic trickle.

Even months later, after I was out of the hospital and had returned to school, Marty avoided all contact with me. I replayed our last conversation in my head over and over. Maybe Marty—and probably the others too—had conceived of me as a *nice girl*, someone pretty much like him. And then suddenly I was in a white bed in a white room facing surgeries, doctors, disability, and pain. It was dangerous for him to continue to think of me as like himself. There had to be something to differentiate us, something that could explain all the suffering I'd had to endure and he hadn't. There had to be something to assure him he would never have to endure the kind of horror that had befallen me. By severing all connections with me, Marty eliminated the possibility that I might further challenge or threaten him.

We want to have faith that we are the authors of our own lives. When people see me on my cane today or witness a spell of my awkward and intrusive pain, they ask me questions. "But you're so young—what twenty-eight, twenty-nine years old?—why the cane?" "What's wrong with you?" And the question that still stings the most: "What'd you do to yourself?" They want the tragic story, they crave it, but only when it leaves enough space for them to feel that things could have been different, better. That space is their listening room, where they can sit in a comfortable chair and project themselves into the scene and imagine all the ways *they* would have done things differently, all the signs they would have heeded that would have delivered them safely back home. Without that space, true listening is unbearable. But the listening room cannot encompass all the stories that add up to the truth that is my life. Pain cannot be told. Yet, in isolation, it grows. It longs to be wrapped in words, just as these strangers long for my gory narrative, but only if told in threads loose enough for them to weave themselves a happy ending. But the listening room does not and cannot protect us. The story that can be told, the story that can be taken in, is never the whole story.