

**Support**

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*“And we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28.*

Praying and waiting; praying and waiting.

“Ready?” Ceci, his caretaker waited patiently beside him, his mom already at the door of the car.

The blank blue wall was marked erratically with leftover paper and tape, remnants of the posters that had been taken down and re-taped onto another area of the room. He sighed and stared straight on through. On the other side of the wall beckoned sunshine and the spectral silhouette of a young girl, smiling, a soccer ball in her left hand, with her head and right shoulder turned back towards him, figure infused with cerulean blue.

“Jony, are you ready?”

He finally nodded without a smile and then wheeled after her out the door.

It had been nearly two years since he had left Halfebrooke Children’s Hospital, convinced of its physical and spiritual stagnancy. Doctors, their diagnoses, patients, their prognoses, had shown him: he would never fully recover—not there, at least. Nevertheless, the building itself smelled, stayed, and spoke the same as always, and here he was, back again.

*She was going to miss him, she said. Dee bent down and wrapped her arms around his neck, abruptly. “I wish you were leaving with me.” He wished it too, amidst*

*the brief ensuing silence. Silence—he didn't know a recovery could bring about such an uncomfortable exchange.*

*"Thanks for everything, Jony." A real smile radiated from her rosy face as she drew herself back to look him in the eyes. "I really do believe you, now." He could see, in hers, the new, glistening life that awaited her.*

*"See you soon. Back at school." With that, she gave him one last squeeze on the shoulder.*

*He wanted to say that he missed her too, already, that he had always believed in her recovery, that he was eternally grateful for her friendship. He wanted to bask fully in her smile, and admit cheerfully that he had done nothing—only pray—to rekindle its existence. But in fact, all he could do was force a smile.*

*He managed a short sentence before her strong fingers left his shoulder—  
"Thanks, Dee. I'm happy for you."*

Jony wheeled past it all—the sliding doors, the familiar old windows and star-sprawled walls, the unfamiliar faces—to the elevator.

*Ding.* The doors opened to the third floor. The same old arrows, neatly painted in dark navy blue on the light peach-pink wall, were the first to greet him, directing him down the hall, to the right, toward Dr. Melinda Bagger's office in Patient 3 South. Two years and the paintings of flowered lighthouses and cottages still clung to the walls; only the collection of colorful masterpieces belonging to the past inhabitants of Classroom 6 had been replaced.

A cautiously cheerful Dr. Bagger—fully and familiarly donned with white coat, trusty black notebook, and file under arm—intercepted Jony at the entrance of the unit, waving him into her office.

“It’s good to see you, Jony,” She smiled, as she held the door open for the boy and his wheelchair. “It’s been almost two years.”

“Hi Dr. Bagger.” *But it wasn’t good to be back.*

“So what brings you here today?”

Jony sighed, hesitant, unsure how or where to begin. He felt the fatigue in his face: brows weary of furrowing, the ends of his mouth tired of curving either up or down.

“I’m not getting any better,” He endeavored. “Nothing’s changed since I left.”

Dr. Bagger nodded at him. Go on.

Jony inhaled and exhaled again, pausing to slow the pounding that had begun in his chest and his head. An anxious energy stirred as he spoke, but he suppressed it with another sigh.

“I’ve done every exercise, every treatment,” he continued calmly, “but I haven’t made much improvement.” He looked down at the immobile lower half of his body, scrutinizing his thin, emaciated legs before looking back up at her. To his surprise, Dr. Bagger was barely writing, her attention instead fixed on him—*“I hate the way they look at me,” she said*—he felt the heat move to his ears.

“I’ve prayed; I’ve seen other kids get better...” A melancholy smile flitted across his face as he said this. *She was, once again, standing in the elevator door, her features gathered in a grimace, wincing tighter with each step of her right foot as she*

*moved her body forward on crutches, exploring the lobby floor on foot for the first time. Cursing and muttering to herself, she stumbled past him, past the starry walls behind him, past the front entrance of the hospital.* His momentary smile inverted itself into an expression of resentment and anguish, as he remembered her leaving, a month later, through those same sliding doors. Dr. Bagger sat waiting for him to continue.

“Hmm. And how does that make you feel,” She finally asked.

“How am I supposed to—I don’t know—” He snapped, overcome by the onslaught of emotion provoked by the image of Dee and the all-too-familiar question and he instead remained silent, no longer absorbed in memory, but trapped in futile anger.

“I just want to get better.”

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Prior to his accident two years ago, the only medical building he had visited was a small, privately owned family clinic in Addis Ababa, and even that was more of a home than a hospital. Unlike the inside of Halfebrooke, there had been no cream-colored walls, no framed acrylics of dimly-lit Victorian cottages, no windows in every room. But the biggest difference between the hospitals from home and the ones here, he guessed, was the number of nurses, doctors, and patients who smiled at each other.

*“Demon possession.” Stay away from him, his mother’s barricading shoulder seemed to say. Jony kept about fifteen meters of distance as he watched his fifteen-year-old neighbor stare forlornly into the dirt. The touch of his mother’s hand on his*

*shoulder was only the second startle—the boy’s eyes had first suddenly shot up in alarm, and were now fixated on him, fear and query exchanged between the two sets of eyes. “I don’t have any,” the other boy said, and began to back away. Jony put his hands up—“It’s okay, Abel. It’s me, Jony.” But the thin, troubled boy continued to stumble backward, his head shaking more violently with each minute. It wasn’t until Jony’s mother had ushered him back to their porch, out of Abel’s line of sight, while uttering a quick prayer for him, that he realized that Abel had really been staring through, and not at him at all. But when Jony looked back to where he had been standing, there was—as usual—no one there. He watched Abel scramble desperately to his feet and run back into the house.*

Between the intense migraines and ins-and-outs of consciousness, there was his mother, his pastor, his verses, his hometown, the accident, the walls of 3A, the tall, dark-brown-haired Dr. Melinda Bagger, and the Halfebrooke community of visitors and patients: some covered in tubes and face-masks, others walking upright, complexions pale with sickness, some moaning indiscernibly as he passed by, even some in wheelchairs like himself—of every color, condition, and combination. They roamed each floor of the hospital, greeting each other like the members of his church on Sabbath.

Classroom 6 was a small room with walls covered in a hodgepodge of blue, red, yellow, orange, and green construction paper: the authentic works of art charitably donated by the young patients of South 3. They were mostly of stick figures and animals, varied in style and artistic technique, and, when juxtaposed next to the pages torn from last summer’s issue of National Geographic, gave the

room a natural and disorganized charm. Here, he re-read textbooks alongside his tutor and the same half-dozen patient-tutor pairs, circulating in and out at different times during his class sessions. The odd timing of the lessons, not to mention the oddness of it all, made talking with the others difficult, and it wasn't until a few weeks in that he made his first acquaintance.

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*Ding* signaled 3 o'clock, and the beginning of her half-hour break between class time and physical therapy. That day, as the other patients left one by one for their own sessions, the room began to empty, leaving Dee Fisher alone, staring into the center of the desk in front of her, and a larger, dark-skinned boy a few desks over. He, too, seemed aware of both the emptying room and her, and began to move slowly toward her.

"Hi."

She gave no response.

"Hello." He repeated from a distance. Dee shifted her gaze only slightly in his direction.

"Are you okay?" he said to her left temple. The boy's sharp, lively eyes followed hers down to her right foot, his curious expression softening with visible regret for what he clearly felt to be a stupid question, and for having disturbed her solitary brooding.

She didn't blame him—not entirely at least—for the feelings of anger and anxiousness, for the hot tears that had begun to build almost instinctively as a result; nor did she attempt to hide her apathy for his concern. He, however, smiled

at her anyway, and she watched warily from the periphery of her left eye, as he pushed the button on the controller in his left hand toward the right, and wheeled himself closer to her.

He then proceeded, even further, to tap her shoulder, an action that immediately sent those silent, slow teardrops from her already-damp eyes—something she hoped he wouldn't notice in his short transit—down her face, and onto her thigh. He didn't speak, and instead stared at her openly, mumbling something, his mouth moving occasionally as the ends assumed a subtle smile.

*Shame.* The single drop trickled into a steady stream as Dee tried to stop herself from crying. Her right hand, however, remained stubbornly locked to the arm of the chair, its only freedom manifested in an uncontrollable, angry outburst of tears. She wiped her face hastily with her left hand; there weren't any tissues.

Luckily, an aide approached the pair just in time to take notice of Dee, reach into her supply bag, and begin drying her stubborn, scowling face with small bunches of disposable Cotton. When she had finally re-gathered herself, and the aide had stepped away with the wet tissues, Dee responded.

“Hi. I'm Dee.”

His smile resumed a more natural form.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Jony Meghari,” he enunciated in an accent she couldn't quite place. The two wheelchairs faced each other, stationary amidst the slowing movement of the empty room.

*“Thank you, it’ll just be a few minutes.”*

Jony, lying in bed, watched as his mother nodded obediently to the two doctors, picked up her purse, and rose from beside his bed—she seemed accustomed to the routine now. She re-tucked the new sheet beneath Jony’s back, and walked to the open door, where Dr. Bagger and another blonde woman stood waiting.

After she had left the cramped hospital room, the two turned their attention to him.

“Can we ask you a few more questions?”

Jony nodded. Of course.

“Anything you tell us will be kept completely confidential,” she stated reassuringly, pausing briefly for his silent acquiescence.

“I just wanted to ask you: how are you feeling about being here?” the doctor leaned forward slightly, softening her gaze—again, preparing herself to receive a solemn and surprising response, as if he had a new answer to her question now that his mother was gone.

But he never did, and almost forty minutes passed as she repeated the same question for the third time.

“I feel pretty good,” He repeated, with the same calm composure he always had, and waited patiently for her to ask about his drug history, faith, and family.

*“What do you remember about your accident?”*

*“Has there been any history of abuse or violence in your family?”*



*"Has anything upset you lately?"*

*"What was high school like in Ethiopia?"*

*"Did you face any challenges adjusting to high school before or after the accident?"*

The nurse came in, gently lifted his heavy, flabby arms away from the bed sheet loosely enveloping his body, replaced the blanket beneath his arms, and left.

*"How do you feel about adjusting to living in the hospital?"*

*"Do you have any regrets?"*

*Not much, I hit my head in a swimming pool. No. No. Pretty similar. Not really, no. Good. No.*

His answers remained the same. What Dr. Bagger and the other American psychiatrists, physical therapists, and specialists who came to see him, didn't seem to understand was that he was, in fact, telling the truth when he said he felt fine. Instead, the psychiatrist seemed confused by Jony's peaceful, positive demeanor. The more often he smiled, the more they suspected, the more they asked. Yet when he spoke, he spoke handily, his eyes meeting theirs without struggle.

"Thank you for letting us talk to you," the two doctors smiled back formally.

"No problem."

\* \* \*

Dee didn't smile at Jony. Angry crying and intense staring at nothing at all had worn out her past energy. The pills didn't seem to be helping either. Beneath her blankness, there was a fire, a frustrated, frightening desire to destroy the hated

forces and people and objects that had confined her to this chair. This rage she rarely controlled, and allowed herself to unleash on almost any interruption to her dark reverie, which she, nonetheless, secretly longed to escape.

“What grade are you in?” He asked her.

“Ninth, what about you?” *Calm, so far.*

“Third year in high school.”

“Where are you from?” Dee continued to stare through him impassively, though, with at the very least, more interest than she first had two weeks ago.

“Addis Ababa. Ethiopia.” This captured her attention—her brown eyes widened a little, and her eyebrows rose ever so slightly. “What’s school like there?”

“Not so different from high school here.” He chuckled.

“I wouldn’t know what that’s like. I never made it to high school.”

She let herself tell him about the day at summer camp, the dive after the soccer ball, the sprained ankle and the broken arm, the surgery, and what her doctor had called a “relatively common condition—temporary and very treatable—resulting from injury.” She hated how weak she’d become, how much she missed her room and her friends and her team and even the plain, gray walls of Mr. Emory’s fourth period Algebra class after recess, how much she cried during break whenever she had no visitors. She hated the ding of the clock, this lonely classroom and how full it was with weak, sick people. She resented the way people talked to her, as if she were one of them—though she was—as if she were forever and always handicapped. *Was she?*

All of it was, to Dee, neither common nor temporary. In fact, Dee felt fearfully alone in its permanence; and from this feeling and the pills prescribed to her by the same doctor, she derived her deadpan stare.

“What about you?” She turned to Jony. “What happened to you?”

He began with his American cousin, the stunt, the shallow end of the swimming pool; and the same cousin who had jumped in after him.

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“Date: 2/14/2008. Name of Patient: Meghari, Jonathon...18 yo m. Ethiopia. Swimming pool accident, c5 burst fracture, severe partial quadriplegia. Treatment: Functional Neuromuscular Stimulation, referral to Dr. Chung (Physical Therapist) in Physical Therapy, Mild signs of depression: denial, refusal to take medication...” 6:43 pm, and the last file Melinda Bagger reviewed before logging off Halfebrook’s patient database. *To discharge or not?*

When Dr. Bagger walked through the open door of Jony’s room earlier that morning, he and his mother were praying together. “*We pray for...healing hands...*” *Words in Amharic. “...Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven...”* She recognized these from the Sunday School of her childhood, written on pamphlets and small squares of construction paper. These patients were always the hardest to treat. They lived by their own set of rules, which only sometimes included listening to a doctor’s suggestions about diagnoses, prognoses, medication. And here was Jony, shipped to her from Ethiopia, and his mother, who thought he was being

persecuted by the devil himself. Jony, smiling the way he did, as if he didn't know that he would be confined to a chair for the rest of his life.

Nevertheless, it was that smile that she carried with her into the driveway, and that she kept with her as she kissed her sleeping daughter's forehead.

\* \* \*

*"Rise and go; your faith has made you well." (Luke 17:19)*

"Do you think you're going to walk again?" Dee approached the table as he nudged the open Book to the other side of the table. Ceci, Jony's aide, walked over, closed it, and put it back in his bag.

"Yes, I do."

Dee looked out the window at one of their classmates, who was retrieving a basketball that had bounced straight off the side of the rim and into some nearby bushes.

"How was therapy?" Jony asked.

She responded directly with a grunt: a spasm had suddenly shot up her leg, and she winced in pain. Ceci, hearing her muffled agony, rushed back over again, this time with Dee's physical therapist, who had been waiting immediately near the door—both pairs of attentive eyes and ears now focused solely on her.

"Hi honey, how's your leg doing?" The therapist leaned over her. Dee's small shoulders continued to constrict in pain.

"It hurts," she grimaced.

“I know,” the older woman rubbed Dee’s left leg, crouching down beside her. “And you made such progress today.”

Dee silently accepted the therapist’s attempt to alleviate her pain, waiting helplessly for both to leave her. She knew her bitterness toward her was unfair, but she couldn’t bear the association the woman had with the hellish foot extensions and walking exercises that tormented her daily.

When both aides had finally left, Dee sighed.

“I’m never going to get better.”

“That’s not true. Look at the progress we’ve made.” Jony lifted his arms and waved them at her awkwardly, fingers still clenched in two loosely locked fists. “Did I used to be able to do this two months ago?”

She lifted her left arm, mock-imitating him, and shook her head, suppressing her own smile. The two quadriplegics waving their arms at each other struck a strangely comical image in her mind, and she let herself giggle.

Jony’s eyes beamed back: Exactly.

*Mark 9:23. “All things are possible for one who believes.”*

\* \* \*

*“One more time, Jony, lift!”*

He willed his legs to move faster. Year two, week two of FNS wasn’t exactly what Jony would’ve described as successful. It wasn’t that the treatment wasn’t working as it was supposed to; in fact, it was only working how it was supposed

to—“*Results will vary with each individual.*” His legs circled smoothly around the bike when stimulated and even seemed to increase in speed throughout the last year, but no matter how many times he cycled or distended and extended his limbs, he had only been able to regain strength and control in his arms.

Frustrated and exhausted after an hour, Jony did his best to help Ceci lift his own body off the stationary bike and back into the chair—a process which took about ten minutes—and then wheeled himself out of the room. As he passed through the cream-colored hallways of the first floor, he couldn’t help but scowl at the paper collages peeking out from the open doors of each kindergarten-like classroom he passed. These had been drawn by the same happy and hopeful patients who, like he had, for the past year and a half, believed in healing, walking, and recovery. He pressed the upward arrow and waited for the elevator.

*Ding.* It opened, and the first thing he saw was the upright, standing torso of Dee Fisher. Again with crutches under her arms, Dee was making short, but steady strides out of the elevator, alternately looking down in pained disbelief at her right leg, and then at her physical therapist, who stood by her side, instructing and encouraging her to continue.

“Good, that’s right—one more step. You’re doing great! Wow, Dee, keep going—” The therapist’s words of encouragement were interrupted by Dee’s grunts and grimaces as she hobbled out of the elevator on foot and stick.

When she looked up the second time, she saw Jony and smiled weakly at him.

“I’m walking!”

He smiled back, a convoluted expression of pride, shame, envy, and joy.

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Melinda Bagger was confused. Jony was no longer quoting Bible verses, and her assistant, Sara, was no longer rolling her eyes as they walked out of the room together. Something had happened: the light had gone dim; that incorruptible smile was now replaced by a somberness that was so easily evident of clinical depression. But Melinda hesitated, not wanting to write anything down.

Rather, she watched him inhale, exhale, sigh and sigh again, while she took mental notes of his changed condition. She felt the weight of his sorrow upon her, even thought of praying with him, or asking him about God. But instead, she listened the way she always did, encouraged him to speak freely, and reluctantly scrawled a few notes on her black notepad. And when the time came, she signed it, suppressing her own sigh: "Prescription: Neurontin (white) and Ketamine (blue), 1 each; taken twice daily. M. Bagger." Today, she had added one more, separately—"take this at your discretion," she had said—"Norpramin, antidepressant, 1 daily."

*God's will.* She pondered solemnly, as Jony wheeled himself out the door, remembering his words.

\* \* \*

*His youth pastor stood over him, praying.*

*There was the appearance and disappearance of his cousin's contorted face—the opening and closing of his eyes in prayer—and the on and off of intense pain*

*shooting through his body. The rest was darkness. But the voices, noises, and sirens were constant. Then someone was lifting his legs and arms. Jony tried to lift his head to see who, and in his failure, remembered, for a split-second, the last thing that had happened before the darkness: the feeling of the wet cement sliding beneath his bare feet and the splash of his cousin's front flip landing before him; then, the sudden solid shock to the back of his neck. They lifted him off the ground and onto a stretcher; then it was bright, white lights.*

He opened his eyes.

Two years later, Jony's was the only bed and body in the room. *How do you really feel?*—the same question that he'd been asked again and again now mirrored back to himself, by himself. *"Your hands shaped me and made me. Will you now turn and destroy me? Remember that you molded me like clay. Will you now turn me to dust again?" (Job 10:8-9)* Job's prayer resounded in his head, along with the passionate declarations of his pastor—*"I see healing. I see you rising up and raising your arms, jumping and praising God"*—and the rest of the Bible verses that haunted him every moment.

Back in his own bed, Jony searched for his "real feelings," for the profound trust that his faith demanded of him. When he closed his eyes, he witnessed the merciful Jesus Christ healing the poor—the ill, the demon-possessed—as he continued to rot, untouched and unhealed, in a far corner of the room. His faith turned to fury. He wanted to pound something, to kick his useless limbs for the last time into the mattress beneath him. *"Who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'Why did you make me like*



*this?’ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?’ (Romans 9) Scripture answered him with a harsh rebuke. He inhaled, exhaled, and closed his eyes again, forcing himself to let the fury subside.*

Dee ran freely in what he imagined to be the grassy soccerfield of Halfebrooke High as he sat alone on the sidelines, stupidly waving his arms at her, shouting from his chair. Dr. Bagger and the other doctors sat beside him like they had those first few visits, scribbling onto their clipboards incessantly.

When he opened his eyes, he found the transparent orange capsules set conveniently beside his Bible atop the table next to his bed-frame. Turning on his side, he reached for the leather bound book, unintentionally knocking over the capsules as he did. Inside a verse he had marked for Dee:

*“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” (2 Corinthians 4:16-17)*

Praying and waiting; praying and waiting. The new body would have to wait.