My Story

By Ryan Lukkarinen

I suppose I should start by telling you where it all began. I was only two years old when I was diagnosed with a dangerous brain tumor. It was killing me slowly, and since I was the first child born from my parents, my small family was absolutely petrified that I might not live. I could never describe completely accurately how my parents felt as I was not old enough to have a conscience. I just know from what they told me that they were as sick emotionally as I was physically. When removed, the doctors said that the tumor was as large as a baseball. As a matter-of-fact I needed two surgeries to remove it completely. The process left me with a long, vertical scar on the back of my head that to this day signals everyone of my nasty incident. More importantly, a considerable portion of my brain was lost forever, leaving me with a permanent dysfunctionality that I still am learning to cope with today and likely will forever. The main thing being that I am terrible at differentiating faces and retain little of the information I receive about real people, including their names. I can meet someone one day, and then meet them all over two weeks later. To sum it up, I was left with a large amount of social awkwardness that was impossible for me to hide, as much as I pretended it wasn't there.

There were I suppose some strokes of luck that fate befell on me after I was diagnosed. The obvious one being that I lived. Another notable fact is that I never needed any chemotherapy or radiation to rid my body of the cancer, so I didn't lose my hair or any vital cells. The last miracle in my opinion, was that since I was only two years old I never had the chance to know life without being a cancer survivor. Some might say that this was unfortunate, but I believe that since I never knew any better I can never feel regret about losing anything from my life.

That of course was not the end of it. Removing the cancer is never the end. While it has been confirmed that I no longer need MRIs or special injections, (I truly was one of the luckier ones), I haven't exactly had an easy life. I know deep down that I could've turned out much worse. One slip of fate and I could've wound up like one of those poor souls who can never go anywhere without an adult by their side. I see kids in school who scream and groan, never really uttering any intelligent words. They flap their hands around uselessly and their eyes never focus on anything. Most people look at those unfortunate 'special needs kids', with mixtures of sympathy, pity, and disgust. But when I see them, I am petrified because a voice inside always seems to remind me, "You were almost one of them". I know I could've been way worse off, no question on that. But I am still troubled deep down with insecurities and fears. My two biggest fears are that I will die alone and unloved, and that I may not even be completely sane or mentally able. These form many questions on my identity and my place in the world. I ask myself more philosophical questions about myself in a day than most people do in a whole year. It is my fears and my knowledge of the past that cause me to do so many unusual actions in my life. Because I am afraid of winding up alone, I go out every day and desperately talk to everyone I come across. I put on a smile, I sound confident, I don't judge or mistrust, (I don't believe I can afford to turn anyone away). No matter how well this goes however, I am always beating myself up and making myself miserable thinking about how I could've done better. If I have friends, I always worry about losing them. Trying to make everyone love me forced me down a path that seemed like it was guaranteed to have no drawbacks - being funny. Unfortunately, this often causes me to hurt someone's feelings, cause disruptions, or get told to shut up in various ways. I make myself feel worse about things that go wrong. I can never figure out how to have intelligent conversations with people. I talk to them, but they rarely talk back.

They just identify me, exchange a word or two, and then turn back to what they were doing. Not always politely mind you. This vicious cycle of trying to make friends and failing a lot, (or at least it feels that way), leads me to question my sanity. Am I really mentally straight? Do people look down on me because they know that I'm not sane? How would I even know if I was sane? Don't I do a lot of the stuff that people going insane do? My thoughts race in my head, they never shut up, and I can rarely get out of my own head. I can barely get to sleep because I'm basically dreaming half the day with my terrible intake on life. The confusion and distress leaves me depressed and miserable so I try to discuss it, thinking it will attract some sympathetic friends. I fear however, that it only drives people away from me because they fear that I am crazy. The brain never rests, it's always at war trying to make peace with itself, and not letting me into the real world which only makes things worse. The only thing that stops the flow of my racing thoughts are memories of TV shows and books that I like, but the thoughts of those race around my head too. My head sometimes feels like the red eye of Jupiter. A storm that has raged for all eternity. I can rarely stay focused on anything and I picture horrible scenarios that might occur if this doesn't stop even though nothing bad has ever happened to me. "What if? What if? What if?" races through my head. It won't shut up. Is this real? Is anything real? I need to take my mind off this. I do sports, I study hard, but I keep imagining screwing up forever like always. Can I ever survive alone? How will I survive when I'm on my own and no one understands my conditions? Can I ever be independent? Can I? I can't even remember when I started thinking about all of this or what I was thinking of before. I will slowly drive myself to madness; the tumor has destroyed me after all!

But then my mother gives me a hug or my dad helps me to understand things I don't get. My friend invites me to a party. A girl that I like texts me. I smell my favorite food upstairs. A

fire had been extinguished by cool water. All that remains is tranquil smoke and charred wood that can be rebuilt. I know then that I am sane, my life is good, and I can never give up. The support of others keeps me alive every day. I could have the most risk-free medication in the world, but it's only love that makes me cling to life. That's why all cancer survivors or those dealing with cancer need love. It's the lifesaver pulling a drowning person from the ocean. It's the force that drives humanity. It keeps my mind functioning. Without it I don't know what would happen to me. I know now however, that life is beautiful, and I have to keep going in it because I am here for a reason. We all are, so don't ever try to push out all of the bad things, because chances are, without friends and family beside you, you'll push out the good things as well. Put yourself into the world and don't beat yourself up when things go wrong. Take it from me. As long as one person loves you, you're set for life.