

Anatomy of a Trip

I didn't stick the landing, not even close. Instead, I landed belly-first in the only handicapped parking space of the local Mexican joint. The confusion and embarrassment of the situation eventually yielded to clarity, so I opened my eyes, jiggled my nose, and unclenched my jaw. My face felt intact, undamaged. A fall at 50 years old could go one of two ways in my mind—a mere speedbump in an otherwise agreeable day or an injury that dictates weeks of downtime, perhaps months of appointments and rehab. With limbs starfished on the asphalt, I surveyed them one by one. My left arm seemed unscathed, as did both of my legs, but my right arm proved to be a problem.

Still lying on my stomach, I pulled that appendage in front of me to size up the damage. Blood pooled slowly beneath the fast-swelling arm, nothing grisly from my oblique perspective, just two quarter-sized puddles. I moaned softly. I thought of unfinished needlepoint projects and stacks of wedding invitations waiting for the scratch of my calligraphy pen. I was, as fate would have it, right-handed.

Shawna, my lunch companion, took one look and said, "I think it's broken." A spirited conversationalist and eristic to her core, Shawna settled into the unlikely role of comforter within seconds of my fall. She had retrieved my glasses, which had skipped across the macadam, eventually landing by the tire of an old Audi, and reset them on my nose.

"Do you think you can get in my car, or do you want me to call an ambulance?" Shawna asked. Never one to lollygag, no matter the situation, I chose the ambulance, and she dialed 9-1-1. Within minutes, the peal of the ambulance's siren cut through the heavy July humidity. My anxiety ebbed as the siren escalated in volume. I thought of that line in *Mrs. Doubtfire*, delivered perfectly by Robin Williams in a fluty, reassuring voice, "Help is on the way."

As I lie there on the asphalt, I thought about pain, adrenaline, endorphins. I remembered eighth-grade science class with Mr. Taylor, his close-cropped beard, ready smile, and goofy ties, knot always loose and crooked, tails never lying flat against his chest. In his class, talk of seismographs, photosynthesis, and cloud formations bored me endlessly. But anatomy? I could sink my teeth into that. I recalled his renderings of bones, sketched crudely on the chalkboard—short bones and long bones, flat bones and irregular bones. I could see his drawings of fractures on cool, purple-ink mimeographs—greenstick, compound, complete. Digging up memories, as it happens, is a coping mechanism for me. Deal with the present by backflipping into the past. On this occasion, fittingly enough, anatomy proved the focus.

The arrival of the EMTs pulled me momentarily from my reverie. With professional alacrity, they rolled me from the asphalt onto the gurney, and trundled me cautiously into the cavernous ambulance. Before we left the parking lot, I felt a nearly imperceptible needle prick in my left arm. As the pain and antinausea medications took hold, I shut my eyes and memories of anatomy lessons flooded my thoughts.

I considered the nuances of bone remodeling, this time courtesy of Professor Curtis, who taught Advanced Human Biology, BIO 324, at the University of Kentucky, 1991. Deep furrows crisscrossed Curtis's unfriendly face. He never smiled during lecture, and he didn't know my name. Curtis knew me only as XXX-XX-3269. But he introduced me to the wonders of skeletal tissue turnover, about osteoclasts that gobbled used-up bone like Pac-Man devouring dots and about osteoblasts that deposited fresh bone. I wondered if my own bone brigade had clocked in yet, shuttling out the wreckage and ferrying in new scaffolding, new substrate, new strength.

Other words pinged in my mind: epiphysis, periosteum, Havisham canals. No, Haversian canals. Miss Havisham is Charles Dickens' wealthy spinster in *Great Expectations*, the mad one abandoned at the altar. Haversian canals were bony tunnels that formed around the nourishing nerves and vessels within bone. Nothing nourishing about Miss Havisham! The pain meds short-circuited my vocabulary, made me mix up people and places, fact and fiction.

Unlike the dim, cool landscape of the ambulance, the hospital ER was all city—bright lights, strained faces, and chirping, humming apparatuses. The swelling of my arm had progressed from expected to extraordinary, according to the first nurse I encountered at the University of Kentucky Medical Center. Despite the hustle and bustle, one voice rose above the rest. Only a threadbare curtain separated me from a wailing woman named Marsha and her dislocated hip. Marsha's protestations instilled meager confidence in the orthopedic team.

Not long afterward, the chief orthopedist arrived at my bedside to relay the news, officially: comminuted fracture of the radius and ulna, with some wrist involvement, reparable only through surgical intervention. I'd stay overnight at the hospital with surgery scheduled the following morning. Before then, though, the team would temporarily set the fracture, a procedure in which the bones are physically placed back into normal anatomical alignment—or as best as possible. This, I knew, would be painful. If I had any doubt, Marsha was nearby, all too ready to inventory her agony. A resident walked into the room carrying a cinder block, the same as those ubiquitous on construction sites, and placed it bedside, and then a trolley with cords, levers, and traction mechanisms appeared. I watched wide-eyed, becoming more and more wary of this procedure. The chief explained I would be given the drug ketamine to reduce pain during the bone-setting. She described the primary side effect: hallucinations, often distorted and hypnotic.

A nurse swept in and plunged the ketamine into my bloodstream. Within seconds, I was thrust into a make-believe past, standing in the middle of Dickens' decaying, tumbledown house he built for Miss Havisham, with its grimy walls and frozen clocks. I saw her there, too, in her soiled wedding dress, her right arm twisted grotesquely, hanging floppily by her side. I whispered, just audibly, "I think it's broken." She hissed and spat at me, hurling insults and hatred. In an instant, the lacy bodice of her dress erupted in lapping, groovy tie-dyed flames.