

No Returning

Ian Harrison

My parents used to read me bedtime stories, huddled close together on the edge of my bed, talking in low voices. Michaela—Micky, four years older—was “too old” for my kiddie fairy tales. Still, I heard her breath catch during the dramatic or exciting parts, tense on the top bunk, indicating that she was listening too.

I couldn't wiggle my toes, but that wasn't what was wrong now. Mum and Dad stood apart, one on either side of my bed. That wouldn't ordinarily happen. And not just because our bunk at home was hard-up against one wall.

Mum held my left hand—standing squashed between my hospital bed and the window. Micky snapped gum and texted at the foot of the bed. Dad shot her a look, earning a glare from Mum. He couldn't hold my right hand; they'd bound it in a sling. I remembered the disinfectant stink from having my tonsils out two years ago. I felt numb then, too, but my legs will wake up soon enough.

Home. Or something like it. I wheel myself over to the window. Outside, my old treehouse rail and door hang askew, banging in the rain, and the tree has gradually moved to reclaim the timber. Dad built the treehouse when Micky was five, but she'd rarely used it—no-one had. It was my little refuge from the age of about seven, that

Mum hated me playing in, but you can't rehearse a dance and make mistakes in front of everyone.

My chair gets me anywhere in the house. Our lush green backyard sports that massive oak tree in the middle, sturdy treads hammered into the trunk with rusty nails. I approach and start climbing, hand-over-hand. I'm at the third step from the top when there's a shriek. Mum pulls me from the tree, slamming me back into the chair.

"Bloody idiot! You could kill yourself, Taylor!"

She pushes me inside, dumping me in front of the TV like a vegetable. She chocks my wheels at the bottom so I can't reach them to free myself, before grabbing her keys. Muttering about Dad on the way out, she tells Micky she's headed to Gran's. She plans a couple of days a week for us to sleepover at our grandmother's, which was ready for a chair before I needed mine. My fall clearly damaged more than just my T8 vertebra.

Three days later, Mum collects Micky and I from school to take me to physiotherapy. Matt the occupational therapist apologises.

"We can't repair spinal cords, Taylor."

Yeah, yeah, I heard all that from the surgeons before they even let me leave hospital. It's easier to take though, coming from him—he's 25 and d-r-e-a-m-y. Movie-star ice-blue eyes, hair that doesn't move and a fiancée who does the massaging. Mum takes his statement as matter-of-fact and breathes his scent. She leafs through an old magazine in the waiting room while I grunt through my exercises. Micky doesn't look up from her phone, having snuck a few photos of Matt.

I'm sweating buckets and Mum helps me into her car and back out of it. Dad's ute is in the driveway and she makes an excuse to get the hell away. Dad meets us at the front door, waving hopefully at Mum's retreat.

A month goes by and Micky's practicing for her life. We were always dancing in the end-of-year bash, and I'm determined to stay in the programme. My printed-out footsteps lie beneath greenery, dead bugs and dirt, three metres up in a treehouse that's as busted as my back, and almost as old. I pinned the moves to the wall, and inside my mind, though I can't make my legs follow them anymore.

"There's no returning from a damaged spine."

Matt's words weigh on Mum and Micky, but Dad didn't thinly feminise our boys names for nothing. He recommends books about determined women who accomplish amazing feats.

He has me researching stem cells. There's hope for spinal injuries, probably not in my lifetime though. My Science Teacher assesses my presentation to the class. Stem cells achieve their potential, specialising to become whatever is required in the situation, just like strong women. I ace it.

Dad comes into my room.

"Next project, Taylor. Do you know who Dylan Alcott is?"

"Duh, wheelchair tennis champ." More aces.

"OK," he says, unperturbed. "What about Alex Zanardi?"

"Who is she?"

Dad smiles.

“A male Formula One driver... once.”

I drag myself up to Micky’s old treehouse, sweeping the floor with my hand and haul myself in. Climbing’s gotten easier with practice, and with Mum not a hovering, freaking-out gargoyle. I sit there like before, how Micky never used to, like a gargoyle myself. Earbuds in, legs dangling limp over the edge after dancing to music wore me out. I could stand, spin, jump, dance without crouching until I was nine, but somehow my head doesn’t reach the ceiling again.

Wifi signal is strong and I watch videos. Formula One, hand-cycling—Zanardi lost both legs, the split-second his car crashed, doing a squillion miles an hour. An ad takes me to wheelchair basketball. It teases enough to have me beg my parents to take us, next chance we get. Mum agrees, and it’s an eye-opener. The din and roar of the sparse crowd rise as the chairs collide, and she watches through gaps in her fingers. Watches me watching them. We lunch—/ lunch—Mum’s lost her appetite, and she brings me home. I make an excuse about my arms being tired from cheering, so she pushes me back into her old house.

Our house.

Dad’s waiting with afternoon tea—lemonade scones—and Mum’s rumbling stomach betrays her. Micky looks up from her phone long enough to raise a knowing eyebrow. Still, Mum bolts her food in record time, and I thank Dad for giving us some mother-daughter time.

I keep watching clips... and ads keep arriving.

“How about murderball?”

My crappy description is sufficient for Dad to buy four tickets. Mum begs off, and...

I. Am. Hooked.

Wheelchair rugby is full contact. Even Micky stashed her phone, transfixed by the goings-on. The basketballers had tats and mohawks, but these guys just don't need them. It's an entirely different aura. These daredevils *accelerate* once escaping a collision is obviously futile. It's a crowd full of people like me, watching people like me. Involved and not merely spectators.

Dad says he's an idiot for making his usual dumb joke about missing the best car spot when we go to *my* events.

"The *arms* on that one..." says Micky, enraptured. "He could bench-press any of the others. Eat your heart out, Matt!"

Another heavy crash sees two chairs teeter, before toppling to their sides with a resounding bang. Occupants pull their elbows in, manoeuvring themselves onto their fronts. The game roars on while a man from each side lies flat on his face, legs strapped to his chair. It's a race to get upright, and muscular arms flip themselves up, wrenching wheels to get back into position. Number 17 goes down next, face-first, with a bone-jarring thud that would leave the average man rubbing his knees. For more reasons than one, he doesn't react, just springs up like a break-dancer, and I remember the move to show our dance / drama teacher Mrs Carmichael later.

"No returning from a damaged spine..." muses Dad. "These guys don't seem *too* broken."

"Just different," I say.

I can't keep calling it *murderball* in front of Mum, but she thinks I'm having some kind of latent mental attack when the words don't come out.

"I want to play m-mu-wheelchair rugby."

It's Micky's birthday and we're sharing dinner and cake. All Micky wants for her birthday is breakfast. Dad booked in a late start at the landscapers, and sleeps on the couch so Mum can have her bed back. In the morning, we four spread around the table, like a family. Like old times. Mum, elegantly dressed for the office. Me, with the most elbow room. Dad's a blur of yellow highlight in his high-vis, at the stove. At the toaster, the fridge, leaning to pour coffee for Mum, when she instinctively kisses his cheek.

"Is that the time?" She jumps up like her chair's on fire and runs out the door, muttering something about work.

"Not broken... just different," says Dad.

Mrs Carmichael, former state gymnast, is a bomb choreographer. She can still do the splits. She called Matt to have him torment me with upper-body exercises. Between them, they made my murderball dream dissipate. Daddy's little tomboys, not ballerinas, but trained dancers nevertheless. I can still picture my little printed feet, illuminated through the cracked treehouse window. She took Micky aside to hatch the plan, which I jumped at.

Huh. Jumped.

After school one day, Micky texted Mum, and I texted Dad, playing dumb about the time we were finishing rehearsals. Our parents stood, one each side of the

door, apart, not saying anything, as we started the lengthy process of translating steps into something I could do in the chair. Mrs Carmichael gave me the moves and had me work flips with a ramp and foam pit while Micky and the rest did trampoline work. Matt worked strength into my arms, and Micky brought it together with grace I never had when I was vertical.

Dad asked Mum to drive us home as he'd planned to prepare her favourite meal and needed it to be ready for our arrival. She saw right through it, again making an excuse to leave for dinner at Gran's. She looked Dad in the eye. We held our breath, then she kissed Micky and me goodbye.

"Happy anniversary," he said to her retreating back.

She wanted us to come with her like pawns, but we made excuses about not being able to go to Gran's. We needed the lounge-room floor space to practice after school every day. It meant Mum came for the occasional meal. Even though Micky and I would retreat early to eavesdrop, listening to Mum and Dad talk late into the night, she never stayed.

Mrs Carmichael had textiles teacher Ms Fisher sew our costumes and suddenly it's presentation night. Micky's stuck to Dad and the organisation committee. When he bought his ticket, she made sure it was the seat next to Mum's.

I'm not nervous for the dance. I learned the steps once, practicing them until I brought one house down. Never anything but a background dancer before, though tonight Micky and I earned the joint lead. Micky doesn't understand why it's a big deal for me to wear make-up. Maybe she does.

We sneak a peek around the curtain. With house lights on, Mum's in position; the audience will be a wash of brightness once the follow-spots hit us, and we won't be able to see who's there, and who's not. Micky grips my arm—Dad's checking aisle letters, searching for his seat! He knows we're up to something, but it's too late. He smiles to Mum, and we quickly hide behind the curtain.

I've practiced this until it's perfect. Spotlights, indoor fireworks, pulsing techno music, murderball flip-ups, and the tricked-out chair works a treat. My chair somersault sticks and I'm ecstatic. Both of our parents cheer louder than anyone, and I'm happier still, and the rest of the performance runs its course. Dancers stretch out on either side and we bow; they back off so Micky and I each receive our own applause. The last of the rockets explode from my axles and the crowd goes ape.

Backstage, Micky removes my make-up. Mrs Carmichael and Ms Fisher give the all-clear and parents rush in. Though there's plenty of space in the dressing room, Mum and Dad stand close, side-by-side. He's wearing Mum's favourite shirt and that cologne we suggested. They're enthusing about our performance like they're the schoolchildren. Their fingers casually touch, and a tingle runs up my paralysed spine.

Ian Harrison is a successful fiction writer, winning the 2020 "Affa" short story award, 2015 "Needle in the Hay" major competition, and placing third in the 2016 "Write Around the Murray". His unpublished 77,000 word manuscript "Don't You Know Who I Am?" won the 6th edition of the "Paperback in Your Hand" competition. His day job

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