

National Orthopaedic Literary Award (NOLA) 2019

WINNER.

Matty.

By Grace Buckley
4th Med/SC1 – RCSI Medical School

Matty hated getting changed for PE. The thought of having everyone stare at him in the locker room was enough to make him nauseous. On Tuesday mornings he would arrive early for school in the hopes of sneaking to the bathroom and getting changed in peace. But it seemed as though there was no place for privacy in secondary school and his habit didn't go unnoticed. The boys in his year had taken to gathering outside the toilet cubicle he would change in, banging their fists against the door they would chant about the various things they thought he could be up to in there. He'd become used to these weekly sieges and he knew that they would tire themselves out eventually. When the chaos stopped, the bathroom would fill with a silence and Matty would feel safe again. This moment was always brief, but it was all he had. With the door between him and the rest of the world, he could sit with himself. Sometimes the sadness he carried with him would bubble over and his eyes would well up. He felt so trapped. His very existence seemed too much to bare at times. He thought that one day the dread would eat him up from the inside out and he would finally disappear. After a few minutes he would gather himself in the way he had practiced and head out to the hall.

One particular Tuesday Matty came into school and he was already struggling to keep it together. He found no solace in the privacy of his cubicle that day and the chanted obscenities had him sobbing. He couldn't let them hear. He tried to hold his breath but they were relentless, he went without air for so long that the tiles started blurring and the world around him began spinning. Finally, they gave up. Matty knew that people would tire of using him for their own entertainment eventually if he just didn't react, remained motionless, unreactive. It was a sort of learned paralysis. But his skills were failing him that morning. He realised that PE today would be soccer. Matty hated soccer. Especially when the teachers made that rule where everyone on the team had to touch the ball once before the team could score. His classmates would reluctantly pass it to him and he always managed to mess it up, kicking the ball over the line or kicking a wide goal. Their groans would turn to buzzing in his ears and his thoughts would become so flustered that he couldn't help but mess up again and again after that. Today was no different. Today it seemed like the balls were purposely coming for his head. He was doing everything wrong, tripping over himself and accidentally bumping into his teammates as they ran towards the net. He was so useless. A ball came for his ribs and the pain went through him like a lightning strike. He found himself sobbing again, this time in front of everyone.

"What are ya crying about, I just hit ya with the ball? What's your problem man?"

"Is he actually crying like?"

"It barely even hit you, stop crying, you're embarrassing yourself"

Matty could barely breathe. The teacher pointed to each of the offenders, "Outside now". They threw dirty looks Matty's way as he stood one hand braced against the wall, the other on his ribs, grimacing through the pain. He mopped his tears up with the long sleeve shirt he wore under his school polo. The other boys thought it was weird that he wore it, they always thought it was to cover his "scrawny arms", but it wasn't. The teacher came over and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder, Matty cowered. "What's up Matthew? Are you alright?". He still couldn't breathe, the pain was unbearable, searing through him. He collapsed. The teacher tried to shake him awake, but minutes went by and he wasn't coming to. They called the ambulance.

The journey to the hospital was a bit of a blur to Matty. All he seemed to notice was how dry the oxygen mask was making the inside of his nose feel. In the ambulance the paramedics tried pulling his shirt up to get a better look at his injury, but he swatted them away. They exchanged a glance. He couldn't let them see. He was so ashamed of himself. The effort of it caused his pain to crescendo. He found himself sobbing into his hands again.

The paramedics brought him swiftly through the triage area doors. "Matthew O'Leary, 14 year old male, collapsed at school after a football collided with his ribs, GCS...", they went on delivering the hand over. In a hushed whisper to the doctor they added, "Something a bit odd happened in the ambulance. He wouldn't let us get a look at his abdomen, kept hitting us away and crying.. don't know quite why but thought we'd let you know". The paediatric doctors were running through their protocols; airways, breathing, circulation. The differential diagnosis; pneumothorax, rather common in young, tall, thin males. Vasovagal syncope, maybe he hadn't had his breakfast. Fractured ribs, musculoskeletal injury, much less likely given the severity of his condition. They'd heard what the paramedics had said, but it wasn't uncommon for someone in distress to behave as Matty had. "Okay, thank you very much, we'll take it from here". The nurses explained to Matty that his shirt and polo shirt had to come off so that the doctors could get a good look at the area, they got out the cloth scissors knowing he was in too much pain to take them off himself. Matty shook his head, tears in his eyes. It was an emergency, they had to continue. His mumbled protests were weakening in conviction, the pain was overwhelming the fight within him. He was exhausted. He wanted the earth to swallow him up. They kept going with the scissors, removing his stained, unwashed shirts. The nurse noticed first. Bruises everywhere. On his abdomen, his chest. His bones protruding, barely covered with muscle or fat. She kept going. His arms. Yellow, purple, blue, black. His entire body was painted with them. Over his right ribs lay a bruise that wasn't new, wasn't acquired from a football. The nurse felt her stomach drop, "Doctor Murphy...", for a moment the doctor stood still, gathering herself in the wake of what she had seen.

"Okay, we need a portable x-ray in here and to start him on some analgesia, have we heard anything from the next-of-kin?"

"Tried a few times, no answer"

"Right.. we need to make a few more phone calls."

The team exchanged knowing glances, thinking Matty wouldn't realise the truth going unspoken between them. But he knew his secret was out. He saw the façade he'd built for

the world shattering in their eyes. The machines he was connected to buzzed frantically and the fluorescents above hummed ominously, casting Matty in their harsh, blue light. The nurses hand trembled as she gently placed the ECG stickers on him, terrified to cause him any more pain. Matty became gripped with fear, his mouth was dry. He was shaking. He remained mute, words escaping him. What could he possibly say anyway?

“We need you to lie down now Matthew, the x-ray machine has arrived and we need to get a look at what’s going on in your chest. Is that okay?”

Matty wordlessly obliged, knowing he had lost this battle. He started feeling as though he was experiencing himself, but from outside. He’d done this many times before. It was somewhat freeing, the act of detaching from your physical being, only existing within your own consciousness. A consciousness that was far away from here. Far away from himself. The x-ray machine clicked. Exchanges were mumbled. “Call the radiologist, he needs to look at this”. They’d found the culprit that caused Matty’s collapse, a fractured rib that had punctured a lung, but there was more. The rib had already been broken by the time the football hit it. The collision was just another insult to another injury. An injury that had happened the night before while Matty lay doubled over on his bedroom floor. His parents had spent the night drinking and they had started rowing. Their midnight shouts echoed far into the night’s still air. He tried to get them to stop for fear of what it would escalate into. Bloody noses, guards called, the howling of his younger siblings. But his acts of selfless defiance were nothing but ‘cheek’ in his parents eyes. He didn’t know who was angrier when he burst into the room pleading with them to stop, himself or his parents. A slap turned to a punch and there he was again, ushered like farm animal into the darkness of his room. It went on and on, blow upon blow, kick after kick. Then the final kick to the ribs. He covered his face, it was all he could do. He detached himself from his body. But then the door creaked shut and he was all alone again, laying in the dusty moonlight that came through his window. The pain chewed him up and spat him back out again, back to this reality. This is where he was, this was who he was.

Hidden amongst Matty’s x-ray were the calcified remains of all the other times he’d found himself in that same position. Matty had tried to pretend to the world that it wasn’t happening, but the truth was in his bones now and they could all see it. He couldn’t escape it. His body had betrayed him and there was nothing he could do. He was remembering the worst of them. The time he’d wet the bed and got a smack that turned to a beating. The time he acted up in school, only to have his mother shove him repeatedly into the door, screaming about how worthless he was in every way. The screams, he could hear them. They turned to buzzing in his ears. Matty had spent his life with a veil cast around his reality and in an instant it had been violently ripped from him. He felt so pathetic lying there in A&E, with everyone staring at the secrets and failures he bore on his body. The doctor came back, leaning towards him cautiously. “Matthew, what’s been going on?”, he pretended not to hear her. “Matthew, I’m here to help you. Please let me help you”. He thought of his little brother and sister and the things his parents had inflicted on them too. He’d failed them so many times before, never being brave enough to save them for fear of the consequences. He stared at the ceiling tiles, counting them, trying to collect himself. The tears fell from silently from his eyes. He blinked them away and looked into the doctors eyes for the first time. Matty could see that she knew. “Go on, Matthew. Tell me what has happened to you”.

All around him people were busying themselves trying to make him better. Drawing bloods, getting chest drains ready, someone had put a box of tissues on the locker beside him. He reached from one, blowing his nose. The kindness had made him feel safe for once. He drew in a shallow breath to calm himself. "It's been going on for as long as I can remember...", he started. He paused. Drew a breath in again. "Yeah, me and my brother, and my sister, all of us, they never leave us alone..", it came pouring forth from him. Years of it. He let the words fill the air around him, the truth enveloping him. He felt the weight he'd carried for years leave his body, the story of all the bruises, all the bones that ached, finally he was free of it all and his veil was gone forever.