

Central Park

The sun glimmers in Central Park. Families are everywhere. As I look to my left, I see a group of school children flying kites, and as I look to my right, I see a happy couple dancing to the slow beat of the live band that is playing nearby. The smell of cherry blossoms dissipates into the air of the park, but it's barely noticeable to most—especially to the mom who is preoccupied with taking care of her two children. On the distant trail, I see a shirtless man jogging while listening to music through his singular airpod. To me, he looks like he is almost flying. I focus on the bend of his knees while he takes another stride on the pavement ground, wondering how in the world his patella doesn't snap in half from the sheer force he generates. I start to get slightly envious, knowing a man like him would never ever choose me. When the mother and her two children walk by, all I receive are glaring stares. The children point me out and ask their mother what is wrong with me. Up ahead, I see the New York City skyline, with its buildings glistening from the sun's reflection.

Me

10 years ago, I was diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS). Though I knew something was wrong before then too. While other kids chose to play outside, I crawled into bed, lying down to relax the tension in every joint of my body. The fatigue I experienced in my childhood was awful in its own way. My pediatrician wrote off my fatigue as “tiredness due to lack of essential micronutrients”, while my parents attributed my fatigue as laziness.

But my teachers always thought I was a great student, because my condition actually benefitted me. Besides mastering the art of putting a smile on my face while feeling radiating pain in every inch of my body, I also took the time to read books and develop a study routine while other kids ran around all day. A few uneventful years later, I graduated summa cum laude at my university, a feat my parents were very pleased with. However, my greatest recollection from my college experience is the pain I felt in my back walking across the stage to receive my diploma, accumulated from the 4 hours I sat on a chair that probably would win the “world's most

uncomfortable chair of all-time” award. All my thoughts, of course, stayed within myself. I shook the Dean’s hand with the most pleasant smile I could fake that day, with my mind screaming because of the bottled-up physical and mental agony I was in.

Central Park

Now back to focusing on the NYC skyline. The buildings glisten from the reflection of the sun, and somewhere, up there, on the 10th floor, inside one of the most ordinary, prison-like buildings, lies my office. And I have absolutely no idea how I am going to get to work on Monday. The usual week already requires ridiculous pain management, as I operate on perfectly rationed pain medications to partake in a highly stressful, useless job at a small cubicle.

But now, I am bound to a wheelchair, and let me explain how it happened.

Last Week

The clouds cast over a gloomy day in East Harlem. I wake up to the sight of nothingness: blank, white walls, which eerily represent the sheer repetitiveness of my life. Medication bottles are everywhere, scattered on the table. My window is open to feel the cool breeze, but all I am hit with is the strong haze of cigarette smoke—a familiar smell in these areas of NYC. Personally, I never understood the notion of punctuality, but I follow it despite the energy plummet I experience in the early morning. Being punctual is definitely a concept that someone like my boss created—a man who could care less about his employees’ well-being. But today was different. This overwhelming feeling of faint overcame me whenever I rose from bed, forcing me to lay down in an anatomically supine position.

Some of my cripp friends in nearby communities have much more accessible jobs that allow them to operate on “crip time”, a joking way to say they arrive late due to their body following a different schedule. But unfortunately, I can’t operate on crip time because no one in my office does that, and my boss would kill me.

The commute to work is painful. I take the train on 116 St. on the Lexington Avenue Line, where I struggle on steep stairs to get to the platform. From there, I get on the train and then walk all the way to work.

No elevators. No accessibility. Pure pain.

And on this specific day, I felt incredibly exhausted just walking into work, with numerous days of fatigue adding up from the inadequate rest.

Everyone glares at me when I enter the office. I check the clock and it shows 9:03 AM. I truly don't understand how everyone gets here so early, but I imagine they actually have energy getting out of bed in the morning. My boss is already at my cubicle, eyeing me down as I walk towards him. I'm anxious, stressed, and in pain as always. He calls me to his office. I start to panic, worried about my job. I need the menial pay to manage living expenses, and fear for my stability. My cortisol levels spike, and the pain starts radiating everywhere. Out of nowhere, I start sweating immensely, and take a few steps forward, and I don't remember what happened next.

Central Park

The doctors advised me to stay in an ambulatory wheelchair. My movement has been restricted to two smooth spherical wheels that grace the pavement. The last time I tried standing up, I felt like I got hit by a truck, and it felt like my heart was beating so fast it was going to jump out of my chest. Everything is going to be so tough from here onwards. I envy the man who is jogging. I envy the kids that are running around the park with ease, having a good time. I envy everybody.

With all these thoughts stirring in my head, all I want to do is lay down to relax my overstimulated brain. I wheel myself to a bench and carefully transfer myself onto it. As I lay down, I feel sharp pointy objects poking my back, causing me to jolt right back up.

My immediate reaction is frustration, but then I recognize how awful this must be for the homeless population. No wonder all of them stick around in East Harlem, as they are simply

warded off from areas like the park because of strategically-placed spikes that make even laying down on a bench inaccessible. And the hostility is clearly visible by the way the architecture is designed, which only continues to get worse as the years go by.

“How’s that bench treating you?” someone jokingly asks.

I rotate my wheelchair carefully. My heart starts racing, but I like this feeling. In front of me is the same shirtless man who I spotted jogging before. Up close, he has curly brown hair, and I notice the sweat trickling down his face.

“You should sit here and find out.”

He sits directly next to me, and I start smiling. For the first time this week, my focus on the pain is hidden by the genuine excitement that courses through me.

“What’s your name?” he politely asks.

Maybe this won’t be so bad after all.