
WHERE IT HURTS

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The day I learned that I needed hip surgery, I cried tears of relief.

On September 23, 2013, I was playing in a JV field hockey game when all of a sudden, after passing the ball to a teammate, I felt something go wrong. It was... a pop?... a snap?... a tear?... and it came from somewhere in my left backside. I could not identify precisely where—in my lower back, upper hip, or glute—I felt it. As I crawled off the field, I struggled to assemble an explanation to provide the athletic trainer. To this day, I cannot say exactly where it was or what it felt like, but I do know, as the past three and a half years have proven, that something was not right.

For the first eleven months after my injury I was diagnosed with a torn muscle in my hip, but physical therapy did little to relieve my pain. I began to see an orthopedic surgeon specializing in hips, who saw nothing notable on my MRIs and encouraged me to continue treating with physical therapy. After months and months of hard work without relief from the pain, I started to worry that I was somehow *doing* it wrong. Finally, a new MRI of my hip, this time done with contrast dye, showed torn cartilage in the joint. This would require surgery to repair. When, after a year of persistent and unidentifiable pain, as well as numerous consultations with hip specialists, a surgeon walked into my examination room and claimed that he knew exactly how to cure my pain, I sat on the table in front of him and sobbed. The recovery would be long and painful, but at least it would mean I was healing. At this point I would have done anything.

After my surgery, I completed nine months of physical therapy to rehabilitate my hip and the rest of my body. But as the physical therapy came to an end, I noticed that something still felt *off*. I occasionally had that same original pain; it was a pain distinctly different from the normal soreness of post-operative recovery, and I was all too familiar with how it felt. Worried that the operation had failed, I tried to ignore my discomfort for a year and a half. I was terrified that if the surgery had not provided a cure, then nothing could. This past December, after the pain suddenly grew much worse, I finally decided that I could no longer ignore my fears. I scheduled a follow-up appointment with my hip surgeon, who referred me to a spine center to look for other possible causes for my pain. To this day, my doctors and I are still searching for its source.

My pain taunts me. It comes and goes. It moves from place to place. It floats, it hovers, over my mind and body, cruelly defying articulation. The English language offers a myriad of terms to describe pain: sharp, dull, burning, throbbing, sore,

stiff, tender... the list goes on. And yet, my three-and-a-half-year search for the words to most accurately capture my experience has left me with the following clumsy explanation: most of the time it does not feel quite like a throb, but more like a series of discrete pinching and tugging sensations with each movement of my lower body, located somewhere between my sacroiliac joint and L5 disc; other times—when I sit or stand for too long—it aches across most of my lower back. Sometimes, though, the pain deviates from both of these descriptions.

Without looking at a calendar or an MRI report, I can list off the top of my head everything I have done in the past three and a half years to try to relieve this pain—five MRIs, a CT scan, countless X-rays, six specialists, two chiropractors, two injections, and one unsuccessful surgery—including the dates on which most of them took place. But, despite my three and a half years of familiarity with this injury, I cannot explain how it physically feels.

Three years ago, I spent my time training for the sport I loved, pushing through the pain of conditioning and doing everything I could to prevent the pain of injury. Now, I spend my time catering to physical pain, altering my movements and avoiding certain motions altogether. I prepare for each doctor's appointment by obsessively practicing my story—the words I've carefully picked to best convey how the pain feels—in my head. I brace myself for the disappointment of watching yet another medical professional fumble for a diagnosis. And I desperately hope for the opposite: I hope that one of these appointments will lead to definitive answers. I hope to one day again cry tears of relief like those I cried the day I believed in the miraculous powers of hip surgery.