

Your Unforgettably Unwanted Presence

Francesca Geyer

Dear Scoliosis,

When I received your diagnosis, I was told that rather than resembling a straight line, my spine imitates a letter. My spine is shaped like the letter “S” and because of this abnormality, I was subjected to religious bracing and physical therapy. My back brace covered me from my shoulders to my hips and was fastened tightly by velcro, limiting my range of motion. As a result of my bracing and physical therapy, I was fortunate enough to avoid the invasive surgery, where they would have inserted a metal rod to correct my spine. My encounter with you has shaped me, both figuratively and literally.

Are you aware of your effect? Doctors screen children for your identifying “S” beginning at age 10, but they never worry. Your presence is overlooked by most, understood by some, and feared by few.

Prehension

One day my back was exposed. The next thing I knew, I needed extra support. It was as if I no longer had the strength to hold myself together. Soon enough, I was being fitted for your brace. Your brace gripped my torso with the air of necessity. Your brace held me together for well over a year. Before your presence, I did not need to be held together.

Your presence consumed me. Because of you, I thought twice before putting on any outfit, attempting to hide the traces of you. It never worked. Because of you, I would be stopped in security for an extra pat down, as the security guards were suspicious of the bracing you required. Because of you, I lived in fear of the

surgery. I lived in fear that, as if you had not affected my life enough for the time being, your presence would become unavoidable for the rest of my life.

I tried my best to ignore you. I tried my best to live my life as if I was never alerted of your presence, as if you had never marked me by way of the long “S” running down my back. Unfortunately, avoiding you was not an option. I could not avoid having to do physical therapy every day and I could not avoid having to wear your brace. All I could do was accept your presence and comply with your regime, hoping for the best. I hoped for your presence in my life to be forgotten. I hoped you would become nothing more than a very distant memory, an interesting story.

In certain moments, I was able to convince myself that the grip of your brace was similar to the feeling of a hug and that living with your brace would only make me more resilient. I tried. I tried so hard and for short, brief moments, it worked. I forgot I even had your brace on. I reassured myself that your grip felt as common and regular to me as putting on my favorite sweatshirt, attempting to equate your tight grasp with the feeling of warmth and comfort. I convinced myself that by wearing your brace I was safe. You held me together and because of that, there was no way that I could have fallen apart. Those 18 months were filled with delusion.

Release

It was halfway through my sophomore year of high school. I was at the doctor's to check up on the damage that you have caused. I was told that I had reached an age where you could no longer harm me. Your presence was no longer a threat. Your bracing was no longer needed, and the physical therapy was now irrelevant.

It was as if I had been holding my breath underwater and I had just come up for air. That day, I took off your brace and gave it to the doctor. I walked out of the office with no layer between my skin and my school uniform. I walked into school

that day with a range of motion that I had not felt in oh so long, with the sense of freedom that I had taken for granted before, the sense of freedom that everyone else had. I was able to move my upper body in such a way without restriction, without hearing the familiar sound of your velcro beginning to detach. Undoing the velcro, your grip, for the last time freed me from your airtight grasp. I was then able to take big deep breaths with no thought to my stomach's expansion, as there was no longer anything clutching it.

Meditation

We are encouraged to see our obstacles as opportunities to grow. The things that your presence taught me, I could not have learned anywhere else or through any other experience. You taught me to find comfort in the uncomfortable by relying on myself. I carry this lesson with me each and every day. This lesson grips my torso where you had. This lesson holds me together.

Although I wish you hadn't found me, I am happy that you did. I am, of course, glad that I can wear the outfits I want to wear now. But it is even better that I am able to wear them as someone who has a life in which you are the past and not the present. Someone who no longer needs to rely on the supportive grip of your brace.

This letter that I have written to you is entitled "Your Unforgettably Unwanted Presence." I do not believe there is anything else sufficient to title this epistle. This title perfectly encapsulates the presence you had in my life. You have made a permanent imprint on me, and not just by way of the "S" apparent on my back. I do not believe that I would be the person that I am today if you had never found me.

Yours no longer,
Francesca Geyer