

PAIN

by

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Part 1

Pain

The pain had started again. Every part of his body ached. His stomach and chest felt as though the skin had been scraped by a blunt razor blade. The soreness was becoming unbearable. His skin was red and raw. Initially, it had started in patches – now it had spread. He didn't know what his body was covered with, and the doctors didn't know either. All they said was, "It will go in time; take these antibiotics." Antibiotics: the doctors' cure for everything. He had been in and out of hospital for over eighteen months. His private consultant, Dr Haswell, paid for by his wealthy parents, had performed every possible test. "Without the cause, we won't be able to cure," was Dr Haswell's favourite saying. Blood tests, skin tests, x-rays, and constant prodding, poking and cutting, test after test after test was completed; until finally, the doctors decided they could do no more. It was now a waiting game, a case of seeing how the illness developed. All that was left were the antibiotics and painkillers. There were still the monthly check-ups, but they were merely routine. He would collect his prescription and submit to a minor blood test to see if there were any changes in his condition.

After suffering for over three years, he knew his illness was getting worse. It was affecting him mentally

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and physically. He no longer cried, but lay awake most nights praying for morning to come, when he could feel human again and talk and laugh with other students at the school. He had many friends, but not that many close friends. Sleep was impossible; the pain was too much. He couldn't remember the last time he had slept properly. His eyes were becoming dark and sunken in their sockets; his face was drawn and white. Splashing cold water on his face, he peered into the mirror. He was not a vain lad, yet he hated the very sight of his reflection. If he squinted, he could imagine how he used to look. He used to be fit and tanned with dark, unruly hair, which came from his Irish descent. Some may even have described him as handsome, especially when he flashed his infectious smile.

There was no cure on the horizon. He would just have to live with his illness. Even the radiotherapy had not alleviated the pain; however, it was difficult targeting the pain when it was spread across his entire body. The only cure Dr Haswell had not tried was chemotherapy, although there was no logical reason to put him through a course of treatment which would undoubtedly have no effect on his illness and could possibly kill him.

As the illness developed, it was not just his physical appearance that had changed. His fitness had also diminished. Damien Harrington's life had totally turned around. Once a fit, athletic young man who had the potential to develop a career as a professional sportsman, now Damien sat watching from the side-lines, dreaming of what could have been.

Damien now struggled climbing a flight of stairs. How much more pain could he endure? At times, life felt unbearable. A few months back, he had contemplated

suicide. He considered all his options, but in the end, he could not do it. He was not strong enough mentally. At one point, he emptied half a bottle of painkillers into his shaking palm, beads of perspiration running down his face, trying to build up the courage to pop them in his mouth. He tried crushing the pills, grinding them into a smooth white paste. He had tried so hard to swallow but still could not do it. He was a failure – a failure that could not even end his own pain, his own miserable, pathetic life.

Today was going to be another hard day. He could feel the severe depression crushing him, and on days like this, with the added pain and tiredness, he knew he was unbearable to be around.

A sudden ringing broke his depressed thoughts. It was the warning bell signalling time for school. Leaving his night-time hell, Damien left his residence hall and followed the paved quartzite track through the well-kept gardens to the main school building. He tried not to dwell on the thought that he would soon return to his personal prison cell, spending many insomnia-filled hours behind a closed door, twisting and turning in agony. He shook his head, trying to dislodge the waking nightmare. His only escape was to focus on happy memories. Negative thoughts always made the pain worse. Keeping his arms tucked in and head down, Damien trundled to school, hoping today nobody would catch his arms as they rushed to beat the second bell. *Why does everybody always want to rush? Don't we all get there at the same time?* Deliberating the reason, he suddenly found his own speed had increased. After all, he didn't want to be late. Damien was only seventeen years old yet his mind and body felt much

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older. Since his illness, he had matured rapidly to cope with the physical and mental stress and strains placed on his young body.

The old school building loomed in front of him. It was not a beautiful building. Very little was left of the original school building. The left wing had been demolished by a fire forty years previously. The original school was financed and named after Frank Worthington, a local entrepreneur who had made his money out of recycling plastics using a new water-based technology. Frank Worthington may have been twenty years ahead of his time with his extreme ideas; however, his designs had made him millions. A stone statue stood at the top of the steps in Frank Worthington's memory. An orange and white traffic cone was normally placed strategically on its head compliments of the sixth formers – today it was cone free.

Damien managed a faint smile. Once, he would have been the culprit shimmering up the statue at night, balancing a cone under his arm with his mates egging him on. Next day they would have felt proud of themselves as the ripple of laughter intensified from the other students at the silly spectacle. The head would give his routine speech for the culprits to come forward; thankfully it was an unwritten agreement that nobody would tell. It was all to do with respect and honour, although Damien guessed the head knew who it was. Who knows? Maybe the head found it amusing as well, which is why it was never taken any further.

Once again Damien glanced up at the statue. The large bulky head blocked the sky. He focused his attention on the oddly-shaped jutting forehead, which distracted his thoughts momentarily from the pain he was suffering.

His legs kept moving. They were on auto-pilot, tackling the steps. The statue was ugly. He had never noticed how ugly until today, although it still carried an air of regal authority. Behind the statue stood the school. It may have looked out-dated; however, the school had an excellent reputation. It was four storeys high with the ground floor covered in warped decaying wood, painted white. The storeys above the ground floor had been left unadorned, reminiscent of concrete slabs used in the old war bunkers. A figure stared out of one of the large picturesque windows on the second floor. Damien thought it was from the staff room but wasn't sure. Since his illness, most of the staff had been sympathetic, even giving him a key to the service elevator to reach lessons, which he used when his energy levels were low, like today.

The art building to the left was the newest building; modern inside and kitted out with large kilns and screen printing equipment. It was not a place Damien ventured into. Art was not one of his strengths, and truth be told, he didn't understand modern art. All the symbolic images – why could people not just appreciate a good painting based on how it looked? Why did it have to have some hidden meaning, every brushstroke analysed, every colour reflected upon? The art building's external walls were painted blue with a bright orange wave fading to yellow. A splash of lemon finished off the design. Two years ago Ms Todd, Head of Arts, had been instrumental in designing the mural, no doubt reminiscent of her summer holidays – sea and sand.

To the far side of the main building lay a bungalow in which the caretaker resided. The ivy clung to its walls, almost covering the two small windows facing the steps.

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Damien dreaded to think what creatures lay in that jumbled mass. Both buildings looked like they had been built more recently than the original school, which created a disturbing mishmash of designs. It all looked how he felt, worn out.

The twenty-five steps to the oversized entrance felt like one hundred and twenty-five steps today. Hearing a shout, he spun around to see Laurel.

“How are you doing, mate?” Laurel shouted, crashing his hand down on Damien’s back.

Damien hollered out, “How many times do I have to tell you not to do that?”

Laurel looked sheepish, as he did nearly every day. He was forever causing his mate to suffer unnecessarily. Twenty steps to go. Damien wished he had brought his wooden walking stick, but it made him feel so old and feeble. The walking stick with its carved handle had been purchased by his well-meaning mother. Damien knew the stick was not cheap; nothing ever was with his mother. Would a modern Leki walking pole have made him feel different? He doubted it.

“I see you aren’t doing your granddad impersonation today,” joked Laurel.

“Ha ha, very funny,” was Damien’s sarcastic response. “If I could, I would thump you.”

Laurel danced around him, punching the air. “Come on, granddad, take a punch if you can.”

“Laurel, I mean it. I’m not in the mood for you today.” Fifteen steps and everybody’s pace was quickening except his. Damien was slowing down until he halted completely, struggling to catch his breath as his breathing turned to a wheeze. Damien placed his hand on Laurel’s shoulder for support and then slowly continued

his battle with the steps. A battle he was determined to win. Ten more steps. Nearly there. Today's progress was exceptionally slow. He was glad Laurel was with him – despite his teasing, he was a good mate.

Despite Damien's dark moods, Laurel had stuck with Damien even when some of his other friends had deserted him. Laurel was like a brother. They had been close friends since primary school. Both lads now resided at Worthington High School, much to the annoyance of Damien's mother, who wanted her sick son to stay close to their family home. After days of anguish and arguments, his mother had finally relented. Damien guessed his father had intervened. Damien stayed at Worthington High so as not to disrupt his education on the condition he could stay as long as he could take care of himself. Nonetheless, his education had been disrupted with all his hospital stays and appointments, and academically he had started to struggle.

"Are you coming to watch me train this afternoon?" Laurel asked.

Damien shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I'll see how I feel."

"Come on, granddad. We could go to the gym afterwards if you want. See if I can get you onto the man's weights and off them girlie weights you always opt for, or I could cut your hair. The Samson idea just isn't working for you."

Damien managed to smile. "You are a sarcastic sod. You know the Doctor said I can't strain myself; anyway, I don't want to start looking like you."

"What's wrong with me? This body is a temple and should be worshipped! Don't you think I am starting to look like Andy Farrell with my broad shoulders and thick bull-neck?"

“More like thick head and very vain,” Damien laughed.

Laurel laughed and kissed his biceps.

“You forgot to mention your daily gym sessions, and you mention them every day,” Damien reminded him.

“Well, I am stronger than everybody else on the team.”

“Who says?”

“I do.”

“Doesn’t Farrell have dark hair?” Damien remarked.

“Yeah, well.”

“Well, you look more like a skinhead with that short-cropped blonde top.”

“You’re only jealous.”

“Maybe jealous that you are the one that secured a trial with the Wigan junior team when it should have been me; however, I am not jealous of that thing on your head.” Damien joked, yet he showed no animosity about his friend’s success. Laurel’s life was dedicated to rugby league, and Damien lived vicariously through Laurel’s success, knowing full-well playing rugby was a distant memory for him, and a trial an unreachable dream. Five more steps, and the top was in sight.

Damien paused again and squeezed Laurel’s shoulder.

“Oy, cut that out,” Laurel demanded. “You’re nipping me.”

“Sorry, mate. My stomach was starting to cramp up.”

“You get more and more like a girl every day. Cramps? Are you sure you aren’t pre-menstruating? And when did you start nipping? You’ll be slapping me soon.”

Damien gave him a shove. “Were you put on this earth to torment me?” he smirked.

“Yep, that’s why you were a left centre three-quarter and I was a left wing three-quarter.”

Damien smirked again, “We did make a good team, didn’t we? It was my speed.”

“I think that was my speed.”

“Well, it must have been my agility and quick thinking on the pitch then.”

It was Laurel’s turn to smirk, “We won tournament after tournament, didn’t we?”

“Have you been over to the sports hall lately to inspect the trophy cabinet?”

“Don’t you mean the aquarium?”

“More like a goldfish bowl since the girls’ netball team started displaying their trophies.”

Laurel gave Damien another friendly shove. “Have you seen their new goal shooter?”

Damien shook his head.

“I am telling you, she is hot.”

“All women are ‘hot’ in your eyes. Anyway, I haven’t been over since William took my position.”

“William Blakewell is not a bad player. He’s powerful and aggressive when he tackles,” said Laurel thoughtfully.

“Thanks, mate. They replaced me a little too quickly for my liking.”

“If it helps, he hasn’t quite mastered the miss two fast wing ball creative move, although he has mastered the Gauntlet Criss Cross.”

Damien sighed. The Gauntlet had always been his weakest move. Standing on the last step, he let out a gasp in relief. The first hurdle had been conquered.

Glancing to his right, he caught a glimpse of Angel. At least, he thought that was her name. Her head was hanging down and her arms were tucked in, not due to illness, but probably due to confidence or rejection from the other kids. He pondered this thought for a moment.

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She was an outsider as well, with few friends, although sometimes he would willingly give up Laurel's friendship with his heavy hand. His back was stinging from Laurel's playful arrival. He prayed another blister had not formed, or it would be another painful night. Damien tried to focus his thoughts on something other than his pain. Was she in his English class? He was having trouble concentrating so was unsure of the answer. He made a mental note to speak to her this week. Since his illness, he understood what it was like to be an outsider.

The Refectory

Morning class had passed quickly; however, lunch was always a challenging time. Angel sat at the end of a large refectory table that was designed to accommodate twelve students. A red plastic tray lay in front of her. In the centre of the tray lay two similar sized apples. Visually they were symmetrical, measured to perfection. The apples were placed six inches from the side of the tray – evenly spaced. Their stalks pointed to the polystyrene tiled ceiling. A single bite had been taken from the right apple, although this was not visible from Angel’s angle. Turning the left apple slightly, she picked it up and took a bite. The apple crunched in her mouth as she bit down on its crisp, juicy flesh. A nutty after-flavour tantalised her taste-buds. Placing the apple back on the tray, the next few seconds were spent adjusting the subdued autumnal coloured apple’s position. Eventually, both apples sat back in their symmetrical position. Angel closed her eyes to block out the clanking of the lunch plates, the scraping of the cutlery and the loud, vulgar voices that filled the room. Every day she suffered the refectory. One hour of torture was written in her daily calendar. Angel went through the motions of school. She attended class, turned up on time, completed homework. She caused no trouble as she drifted, waiting for Edward to return.

A young lad bumped Angel’s table as he rushed to grab the last seat next to his friends. There was no

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apology. The impact disturbed Angel's daydream. The visual symmetrical beauty of the apples now lost. Looking up, she saw that nobody else was sitting on her table – this wasn't uncommon. People tended to keep their distance, scared of the rumours that surrounded her. Focusing on the right apple she took another bite, but the taste had soured. The apple was dead but had fulfilled her requirements.

Life used to be so different. Angel closed her eyes again, trying to recall some of those happy memories. When there were no distractions, she could drift back in time, feel the warmth of her family home. Edward sat staring out of the window, drawing the nicotine from his cigar. Inhaling and absorbing the chemical mixture into his bloodstream before exhaling the smoke into the air, dispersing it into the atmosphere within her mother's living room. Edward appeared so peaceful when he smoked, as though he was savouring every second of the experience. Angel often wondered if he could make smoke rings like Maggie Duke's father at junior school. She never dared to ask. A child should be seen and not heard, in Edward's opinion.

Edward was strict and controlling, and now she was beginning to understand why. She craved information to learn, to understand her role, and only Edward could do that. Edward was different. She was different, too, yet they were not alike in their differences. Edward was always in control, deceitful and devious; never a kind word to say about anyone. "Tall and standoffish," Bessie, a girl at her old junior school, had once described him. A traffic accident killed Bessie's father days after she spoke those fatal words. Edward said nothing. From that moment, Angel had often contemplated the

thought – is it better to have known and lost your father or to have never known your father in the first place? Not knowing who her father was or what he looked like was hard to comprehend. Even her vivid imagination could not create a man she wanted to call Dad. Deep down, she hoped her father did not look like Edward – moustaches were creepy. The hairy creature took over Edward’s face. The head and tail moved in different directions when he spoke, as though it were alive, controlled by an evil force.

Eighteen months had passed since she had last seen Edward, and still she could picture him to perfection, visualise his peculiarities. A long dark brown mackintosh with a wide collar adorned his large muscular frame, his dark hair greased and combed flat – no parting; Edward didn’t like partings. A parting showed a person’s weaker side, according to Edward. His voice was sharp, words blunt and abrupt. A hiss escaped from his lips when he spoke, giving a sinister quality to each and every sentence. An S sounded like “sh,” which used to make her secretly snigger as a child, much to the annoyance of her mother.

Now she could smell her mother’s baking, taste the freshly baked apple and cinnamon cookies, relive those happy times in her life. However, with good memories, there were always the other memories, the bad memories that she needed to explore, to understand.

Angel opened her eyes wide and stared at her hands. For one single moment, she could feel a sticky substance between her fingers, see the crimson red of a haunting horror.

“Not again. Please, not again,” she whispered.