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# *Into the Light*

Story by Jill Wheatley

***When a devastating injury  
leaves a young Canadian  
expat almost blind, she  
takes to the mountains to  
regain her life***

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Neither hovering clouds nor dark morning mist appealed to my fair-weather colleagues. Embracing the fresh autumn air, I grabbed all things Gore-Tex as I led my Grade 10 physical education class to the sports field. A group who seemed to draw on the enthusiasm I feel for physical activity, there was no hesitation as we left the confining gymnasium walls behind.

Teenage eyes lit like glowing stars as they gazed upon baseball bats piled in anticipation of the lesson. The collective energy was high, muscles warmed and hearts raced as, together, we prepared our bodies for the lesson. Guidance given, demonstrations exemplified and questions answered, we teamed off to explore batting equipment, to discover and develop new skills.

Then it happened. Lifting my hands to embrace my head, I plummeted to the ground. Though falling downward, I had no idea which end was up, nor that my life was embarking on an unimaginably steep ascent. The force of the ball grounded me, its impact shifted my world. Despite the explosive pain and utter chaos in my head, I desperately needed the students to take charge and race for help. Curled in the fetal position in my colleague's car, it felt as if I had been tossed into a washing-machine spin cycle, my head banging with every turn in the road on route to hospital.

Friends' anecdotes now fill in the puzzle—from the moment the baseball hit my head, and all through the following month,

memory is but a sketch.

I passed the Emergency Room coherence test and, despite my colleagues repeatedly suggesting further assessments, with a *black eye*, was sent home within minutes. An ice pack of incognito berries from my tiny freezer was my only hope of easing the headache and swelling that was spreading like wildfire. Alone in my Bavarian farmhouse flat in Germany, I simply knew there was something more. I needed to sleep but I stirred, agitated and listless, fighting between a desperation to fall asleep and a morbid fear of doing so. I was on a rapidly spinning carousel from which I could not disembark, with one eye swollen shut, the other blood-filled and blurred, and an overpowering nausea storming in, with the thought of food instantly repulsive.

When a friend came to visit me two days later, he arrived to a black, purple, unidentifiable, swollen face. And he hadn't even put his backpack down before he insisted on rushing me to a local clinic. There the astonished staff, seemingly in a state of panic, transferred me onto a stretcher then into an ambulance.

I would never again live in total independence on the farm, or in Germany at all. For the following four months, a neurosurgical unit at a trauma hospital would be home. In the company of others with traumatic brain injuries, acquired brain injuries, stroke survivors, brain aneurysm patients, Station 44

was a quiet place—yet the footsteps of a nurse, the rolling of a medication cart, emergency helicopters, or even a doctor's soft words of condolence, broke the silence harshly.

The words of the admitting doctor seemed illogical to me. Nothing made sense as he explained the thorough assessments, X-rays, CAT-scan results and need for Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) to further diagnose and monitor my brain. And all this imaging showed cerebral trauma with acute subdural hematoma, and cerebral contusions of the right frontal lobe.

An innocent mistake of a 16-year-old had fractured my skull and traumatized my brain. And it had been bleeding and swelling while I was home nursing what the doctor thought was just a black eye with frozen seasonal berries that had turned to mush. That eye has never reopened, and the area of the brain that was exposed to the trauma destroyed the optic nerve that controls my right eye, limited movement in my left eye, and resulted in cognitive, behavioural and psychological changes. It also utterly diminished my appetite.

When the line-drive dropped me to my knees, the ball took every ounce of my energy and optimism with it. Amid extreme exhaustion, and always desperate for silence and sleep, countless questions stirred in the pandemonium of my damaged brain. Neither a Band-Aid nor a cast can heal a brain, but I kept asking myself: *how could I get fixed?* And when would I be back to *normal*? When would the

throbbing cease? The swelling stop? The eye open? What was neurorehabilitation going to look like?

I expected nothing less than an articulately detailed itinerary of the plan ahead. In frustration and confusion, I blamed cultural differences and language barriers for not getting the answers I wanted—when in reality, I needed to accept that I had a traumatic brain injury (or TBI) and it was impossible for anyone to ascertain the path ahead.

The road was monotonous, slow going, stormy with little light and no promising direction. After almost six months of this, I embarked on a road trip to southwest Germany that sparked an almost childlike anticipation and wonder in me—except, it wasn't a road trip for fun. As my black eye had done nothing but change shape and colour, I was finally able to see—and I use the word ironically—one of the country's most respected neuro-ophthalmologists. And on a cold winter afternoon his diagnosis confirmed that any natural improvement in my sight was likely unexpected.

Unfathomably, it seemed to me, the facts now told the story. This was no fictitious fairytale; my life had changed infinitely, definitively, irrevocably.

For a handful of months, I was able to live somewhat autonomously back on the farm. With such significant vision loss, resulting in the loss of my privilege to drive, I was routinely transported for daily outpatient treatment at the





trauma hospital, where a concoction of therapies filled my days. While waitlisted for a highly specialized neurological rehabilitation centre, my indoor bike trainer became my most therapeutic outlet. Riding my bike felt like something a *normal* person would do. But unbeknownst to me at the time, textbook Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms of detachment and personal avoidance set in. Avoiding people, places and topics I associated with the time of trauma, I did not want reminders, questions, visitors, advice or opinions. I simply wanted to be alone. Physically spinning my legs was my only comfort.

But though my physical activity was increasing, my appetite was not. After my stint of independence, I was readmitted for more intensive testing, brain training, oculomotor, physio and psychological therapy, allowing my neurosurgical team to microscopically monitor my nutrition and activity. The hospitalization was short-lived, and disheartening. The assigned trauma rehabilitation team felt my physical health and fragile state where in need of more attention than their specialization could provide. Loneliness and desperation were increasing, body weight was decreasing, and empathy appeared nowhere to be found. For the following months, to say I bounced between daily outpatient treatment appointments would be a stretch, there was no bouncing, no spring in my step.

Once atop the waitlist, I was admitted into a highly sought-

after neurological hospital and rehabilitation centre, though all therapies were held before they even started. Concern for my Body Mass Index (BMI) took priority as the new medical team saw no potential for neurological improvement without weight restoration.

I felt judged, misunderstood and stuck in a confining jar. How could anyone not specialized in anorexia add that label to me without empathetically considering my innermost feelings? The realm of labels which society tends to assign can be rigid, isolating, cruel; being labelled anorexic felt punishing.

Severely visually impaired along with a life-threatening eating disorder, cognitive deficits, PTSD, single, a foreigner and non-German speaking—did I not mention that I am Canadian, and was in Germany teaching health, sports science and physical education in an international school?—all impersonal labels that left little space on the hospital room door sign, nor likelihood that anyone might meet me with an open, untarnished mind. Consideration of how the combination of them could impact my self-worth, feelings of isolation and hopelessness, seemed to be missing. In the mix of comorbidity, no hospital, doctor or therapist was sure how or what to prioritize, seemingly assuming someone else would take care of the complexities.

My brain was damaged, my vision impaired, my soul had nothing to give, no reason to go on. Life with endless labels

was not worth fighting for. No vision, no hope, no appetite, I withered.

Caught up in fear and turbulent thoughts with no sense of equanimity, I plummeted. With an empty timetable, an empty heart and a headlamp on over my hat, before the light of day, hours before I had to report to breakfast and anytime I knew the nurses would not be visible, I would sneak to the forest that borders the hospital grounds for hours without end. Running gave me a wee feeling of independence and, for better or worse, a reminder of what life used to be like. Adjusting to limited vision and an unfamiliar bodily structure, I could not run completely at ease. Knowing that running—or any physical activity—was not part of doctors' orders added tension and resentment. When my energy wore too thin to run, I would stoically stroll amid tall trees, deep snow and gravely dark, stormy thoughts.

Despite the bedlam among the practitioners, there was agreement that my recovery would be more likely to flourish in an English-speaking environment. Yet despite the medical recommendation, given what they considered to be excessive costs, my insurance provider was unwilling to transfer me overseas. With every tick of the clock my health deteriorated and my thoughts darkened. Finally, when the chief medical director stepped in, noting my survival was questionable, the insurers reluctantly gave in and my brother was on a flight

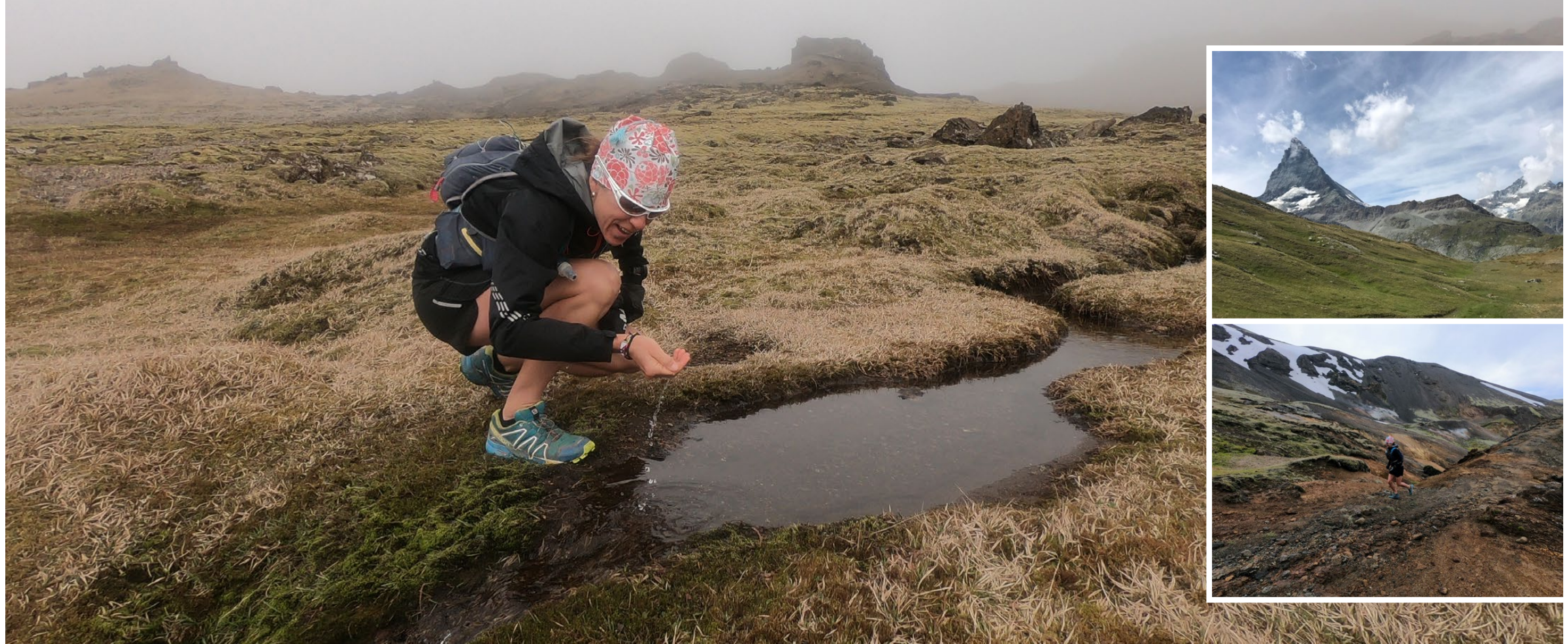
from Canada, willing to do whatever it took to save me.

The precursor to saving my life, it was certainly not me who had any hope. Among residency complications, insurance obstacles, a gravely ill, noncompliant sister (me) and sleepless nights, Ryan was able to procure a bed for me in a specialized treatment centre near his home back in Canada. Yet regardless of the change in location, support and company, I continued to sink, desperate. I struggled physically, and with complex psychological underpinnings of TBI, I was effectively a patient without patience. My spirit didn't want modern technology, medication, artificial nutrition or reliance on others to keep my fire burning. If I were meant to survive, it was becoming clear that I would have to stoke enough to keep it alight.

Before the days turned into a week, it was also clear to staff that I needed a more medically- equipped facility with even greater individualization. Thus, desolate and within the *blink of an eye*, I was being medically transferred to a third country. Which seemed to me just additional characters being added to the situation, more people who I feared would not comprehend my complex and stormy story. From the time I arrived in Colorado in a wheelchair, too weak to walk, I struggled physically and emotionally, and as a nightmare patient was unwilling to comply with hospital expectations.

Tampering with medical monitors, poking holes in feed lines and pulling tubes from my nose, I resisted treatment.





Initial months in Denver are a pea-soup fog. Without strength enough to lift a knee to 90 degrees, stand in the shower on the selective days I was allowed to use it, go to the toilet alone or ever be unsupervised, this horrifying mountain would never lead to a worthy view. A gastro-jejunal feeding tube became my lifeline as well as another consequential TBI scar. For better or worse, along with the physical appearance of my eye and face, a hole in my abdomen will forever remind me of what I have survived.

But with a more thorough analysis of my symptoms and behaviours, the world-renowned medical team at the hospital revised my anorexia label and articulately diagnosed me with Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID), characterized by my persistent starvation due to the detachment from and avoidance of foods since the trauma. As I stabilized and began to weight-restore, my cognitive deficits began to be addressed—and with that, harsh reality and frustration.

I could see less than half of what I used to and felt like a different person, with an inept ability to think, plan, concentrate or remember the most simple of sequences. The capable, clear thinker I once was, an utter stranger. My processing speed rivaled a turtle stuck in mud; the trail, a long, slow, murky one ahead. I remained disgruntled and battled severe, sky-high anxiety about the uncertainty of life ahead. The only path I wanted to be on was out the hospital door and into

the Colorado Rocky Mountains. With a changing body, for which I felt shame and disgust, I resisted nutrition demands, and defied the rules of what I thought of as the hospital pacing police.

Yet from that seemingly dead-end path emerged an unforeseen trail camouflaged by hopelessness. It took tenacious experts—those very same pacing police, with their gentle hands and kind hearts—to compassionately guide me around a corner into a clearing. When I finally got around that corner, my mind opened and something shifted; perhaps the adversity was not going to last forever? I was beginning to see that I could not control the undulating emotional waves in the wake of my TBI, but what I *could* do was let go of the resistance and use my good eye to approach the ripples from a new angle.

On the ripples floated a life preserver called impermanence. I found liberation in a changed perspective; gratitude for the fact that *nothing* lasts forever. What felt to be an ending had potential to become an adventure of self-discovery; a quest in search of inner peace and acceptance. Despite what felt to be a never-ending storm of setbacks too difficult to rise from, I could finally see that the sun will rise even after the darkest night.

Making my way to Denver International Airport, I inhaled freedom with the deepest of breaths yet secretly felt lost. After seven months in hospital just in Colorado, working at rehabilitation in the shadow of the Rockies, plus the time in

hospital in Germany and Canada, it was now more than two years since the initial injury. Eyesight aside, I now knew it was up to me to create a map, a vision for my trail ahead. *What good could I do, what life would I have, if I started to accept the losses? How could I mend the broken relationship with myself? How could I challenge the mountains of my mind?*

Though I had no physical indicators whatsoever, all signs pointed towards Mother Nature. Like the American massif to which I had gazed from Colorado's mile-high capital, using mountains as a recovery playground inspired me; the thought of taking my recovery into the mountains lit my fire like no other. Combining my passion for nature with the goal of rebuilding my relationship with myself, I decided to take my rehabilitation beyond the walls of a

clinical setting. After more than two years in seven different hospitals in three countries, it was time to fill a backpack, let go of the losses, let go of the “cannots” and celebrate the life I nearly lost.

Using some of the world's most illustrious mountains as a host for the party, my goal was to embrace and accept the ways that my traumatic brain injury had changed me. Perhaps because of the educator still within, along with awareness that parties don't last forever, I felt the need for a timeline with articulated standards. I perceived the need to have something concrete, a box to tick. As a visually-impaired brain-injury

survivor, no mountain could challenge me as my time in hospital did. I would make my way through 13 mountain ranges, and by the time I landed back on European soil in a year's time, would wondrously accept the trail my life took happily ever after.

Without a doubt, I thought, following a one-year date with Mother Nature, I would cheerfully manage all that came in the wake of my accident. Putting that painful chapter to rest, I was stoked to ignite a new one, celebrating with Nature's inspiration and comfort. In reflection, I knew no different than to set a goal, a specific target, for my trail ahead. Believing ripples of adversity could not possibly linger any longer, I set out for a year, putting pressure on mountains to do something magical within 365 days.

Though the calendar was launching a new year, I am certainly not able to authentically tick that box as complete. These chapters of recovery and celebration—from Europe through Asia, Australasia, South and North America—have seen progression, though certainly not at the speed of the ball that changed my life. It has been a year of changes—a year of growth, strength, risks and courage, I never could have imagined when deep in chapter adversity.

There have been tears of sadness countered by tears of celebration and gratitude. Some days the pages feel blank with no direction, some days the pages are smudged and





torn and the pen has no ink; yet combined, the pages are forming chapters within my story—one that feels a most surreal page turner. Serendipitous encounters in the outback of Aspen, a flight landing in Lima, Peru hours after taking off from Lima, Peru, bloodsucking creatures finding nourishment on my ankles deep in the Himalayas, hugs when inner storms were torrential and blizzards blasted where snowstorms are unheard of, benches for beds in tea-houses and thumbing for rides—these chapters could not be quilted by the most creative seamstress! New characters, new settings, tales of getting lost, tales of getting found; finding myself and strength I never believed I had.

From the Andorra Pyrenees where I began challenging the mountains of my mind, to the French Alps, Italian Dolomites, Julian Alps, India and Nepal Himalaya, New Zealand through to Patagonia and Peru's Cordillera Blanca. I recently made a stop in Colorado, not only to run in those long-awaited Rockies, but most importantly, and with a nostalgically nervous pride, to thank the medical experts who revived the life in me, who got me on my feet just a year earlier.

These feet have since run me through stunning alpine meadows, high above tree lines, over glacial passes, around gorgeous gorges, through dark tunnels, and up steep scree cols. From roots to rocks, boulders, streams, spiraling stone steps and crevasses between, I am fortunate to have enough

eyesight to appreciate the varying terrain that has kept the pages pristine, the protagonist inspired and glowing with gratitude. When physically challenging trail routes slow my pace or sweep my feet from under me, I am learning to be gracious with myself, mindfully embracing each of these massifs. When such a short time ago I had lost all hope and for months was in one-on-one care, here I am circumnavigating the globe alone in a quest to embrace what my body can do, and to conquer the mountains of my mind.

The time it took to summit a peak, crest a col or the pace I ran a rocky ridge are not what matters, nor what I will remember. It is the dramatic beauty of being face-to-face with Mother Nature as she beams encouragement, listening openly to her soft voice whispering reminders of perspective, of that which is genuinely important; *things, pace or numbers are not*. Time in her presence, connecting trails alongside inspiring mountain folk and mountain runners, inspires me to keep filling my pages with alpenglow. On the hundreds of mountain trails I have run thus far, she is the constant, she is the calm.

From springtime in Colorado, through Utah and Arizona, then Iceland, I marked the one-year anniversary of my travels back in Europe. I reflect on a year of change and gratitude that grows with each flip of the calendar page. Mountains continue to soften my reaction to adversity, naturally providing perspective, enabling me to face anxious thoughts and embrace

all the ways previous chapters have shaped me.

Crawling along washed-out ridges in the Italian Dolomites, hanging on roots over gorges in Andorra, while reassuring a fearful friend, weaving through Jujuy, Argentina's rock-stars and cacti, navigating Nepali erosion, and missing paths in Patagonia. When mountain running transforms into a game of survivor or slow-going slog, I tap into the strength and patience I found to survive my traumatic brain injury. When a trail littered with deep rocks plays havoc with my depth perception, or a discouraging fall or fear of slowing the pace of others sets in, I have learned to slow down mentally and make note of the memory I am creating. A memory of gratitude, and embracing the moment, sits with much more comfort than reflecting back on anger or tears of frustration. A stone misjudged, a root disguised in a shadow, sunglasses broken, knees bloodied, battered and bruised—falling is how I grow. Staying down is depreciating, bouncing back is resilience.

A tree branch scrapping the right side of my face came with guaranteed tears a year ago—not for the blood or pain, rather the reminder of vision loss. Cursing a misconceived tree root, a stone I perceived was meshed with a trail that landed me on all fours, a cyclist seemingly darting in from the right—equanimity was nowhere to be found when this chapter began.

Though certainly not always, it's with experience and time that I am becoming more comfortable, even laughing

at vision mishaps. Time or energy spent *wishing* my vision back, yearning for more autonomy, only takes strength from which could be used to create opportunities. By appreciating my circumstances, by embracing every detour, though my eyesight has narrowed, my perspective has widened.

In the face of that one significant detour that began a cool autumn morning, my attempt to cope with crisis appeared more like an exhausted animal looking to hibernate. I wanted to find a cave and bury myself under a rock forever. If I never saw the light of day again it would be too soon. Yet given time and trails, Mother Nature instilled a power within me; a power in the form of speaking my story at the risk of vulnerability for the first time beyond clinical walls. Pushing my comfort zone, she nudged personal boundaries around tables of manic mountain runners in the foothills of the world's eighth-highest mountain, Manaslu, in the Nepali Himalayas.

An inherent trust I felt on the trails came with me to the dinner table. I found the courage to share a glimpse of my story for the first time, to open up about the tale that had led me deep into the heart of Nepal. No one at those tables knew that the meal in front of us was perhaps as challenging for me to eat as was their run that day. They would have no clue that my relationship with food and my body was a rocky ridge I struggled to balance on. For so long, I feared vulnerability, scared of judgement, shame and the need to





hide the reality of the waves of that fateful September day. Putting myself in vulnerable situations and asking unheard questions tends to lead to local insight, connection, and a plethora of possibilities. For a lone monolingual traveller, regardless of a severe visual impairment, distancing oneself from heavily-trafficked hiking routes takes effort. I have moved to a place where I can counter insecurity and self-doubt with thoughts of opportunity. Had I not risked exposing my naivety about trail running in the Andes of Peru, chances are I would have never connected with the founder and leader of Peru's chapter of a visually-impaired runners group—my new amigo, Domingo Elias Townsend. With an instantaneous connection, I had a motley crew of mountain trails, accommodations, modes of transport to explore and locals to meet. Above and beyond the logistical help was the human connection and empathy—Domingo sent my Peruvian trail on a collision course with my comfort zone. Navigating unmarked trails above the uncomfortable chaos that is Cusco, finding my way up ropes and ladders high above Huaraz before sunrise, striding over stones of Inca ruins, and outrunning crowds to Laguna 69, in the Spanish Speaking south, I flourished. With the rise of its challenges, from outrunning sheep in the Sacred Valley to outrunning snowstorms in Patagonia, South America was *anything* but predictable; and I grew.

Domingo's unforeseen invitation to speak my story and

to run with a team of blind and visually-impaired Peruvians came as shockingly to me as the ball that had recentered my map. I felt honoured, though unworthy. And yet, Mother Nature gently nudged reminders of what I could do over my insecurities. While I did not have an Olympic medal to pass around, thousands of followers, subscribers or dollars to share, I had a similar passion for movement as these local athletes. I too had a visual impairment, a heart and story to share. The only guarantee of sharing my story with an audience—of taking my sunglasses off publically and not dodging cameras—was that it would stretch me. As I spoke to the running club, my mind raced ahead. Was *I connecting all the dots of my convoluted story? Were they bored, perhaps drifting off behind those shaded lenses? Was I giving too many details? Was the translation precise?* Voices within stirred as I told my tale of reclaiming my life after I had lost all hope. Thankfully, the group's follow-up questions silenced the doubt—such thoughtful, heartfelt queries—and as I travelled and continued to mountain run in the coming months, I was often enveloped by gestures of acceptance and support. People pausing on a trail to ensure I safely crossed a rickety narrow bridge, a translated note left under my dorm door, an extended wink playfully mimicking my permanent one, respectful curiosity of my tale, a random embrace, insightful reality checks and reminders, the sharing of silence

and meditation beads. Numerous seemingly insignificant actions bring empathetic light on the darkest of days. And the most genuine curiosity, anecdotes of resiliency and admiration from the entire group that night in Peru, ascertained that my story is worth sharing. Opening up—from talk on a trail, an authentically raw blog, a podcast leaving me naked to the world—has led to connections and experiences that, had I stayed in my protective hibernation mode, would have never made for chapters of growth and gratitude in this story that is my life. Growth that has directed me to a place well aware of how easily I can be swept away by rumination, by contemplating losses, by exaggerated thoughts based in fear and that are products of my imagination. When my mind wanders to such untenable fascinations, growth leads me back to grounding: inhaling courage, exhaling doubt. Authentically sharing the hardships, milestones and celebrations throughout the storyline continually challenges me—yet inevitably has a tendency to heighten intimacy of relationships, assured that regardless of which continent I am on, route I am running or peak I am pursuing, I am not alone on this trail. Choices I make each day, to nourish that seed of adversity, have the potential to bring a mountain of hope to struggling souls. Being truthful in my struggles, being courageous in my fears, I use my vulnerability as an avenue I hope will guide others

towards a place of hope in times of adversity—to show them how to ease from hibernation and onto their own inspiring trail. From hibernation through fierce relentless storms, from recovering and accepting how my life has been a series of massifs to be challenged. By approaching the initial storm with a lens of optimism, adversity has become a catalyst for new opportunities, and for the development of my relationship with myself. I am stronger than I ever imagined possible; as the chapters of my life develop, so do I. Carving intimate time with Mother Nature while running in mountains around this wondrous world has taught me that I can overcome and grow stronger from every storm, every trail, every mountain of my mind. **It's now been four years (September 2018) since Jill Wheatley was hit by a baseball in Germany and left almost blind. For the last two years, she's been travelling, mountain and trail running, solo hitchhiking and writing her way around the world. Why did she make the decision to continue to travel, and where is she now on her journey? Check out her blog, [www.mountainsofmymind.com](http://www.mountainsofmymind.com) for more on her incredible story. And for information on *Yo Soy Sus Ojos (I am His Eyes)*, a nonprofit school/association for visually-impaired athletes in Peru, see them on Facebook. Domingo Elias Townsend volunteers as a running guide with the school, and works with *Go! Running Tours* in Peru. You can reach him at [cusco@gorunningtours.com](mailto:cusco@gorunningtours.com).**