

The Pain Scale

Mel Lake

0-

Birth, probably? No wait, everybody comes out screaming. Or death? Some deaths, at least. Not all. No one remembers birth and no one comes back to tell us whether deaths, you know, the quiet ones, are painful. Orgasm, I suppose. But who among us hasn't had a painful one? When your calf is cramping but you're almost there. Or it's just not the right time or the right slide and you get there but it kind of hurts, too. Zero is so far away that it has to be birth or death or sex.

Zero pain exists where I don't.

1-

When I wake up, the first sense to come back is smell. He's not in bed but his comforting scent is. It's sour. What is love if not acceptance of body odor?

My toes tingle but they don't hurt. I wiggle them to make sure I still can. When I told my neurosurgeon about the tingle, he was nonplussed. The big toe on my right foot still moves: if I need to, I can pull an Uma Thurman and move it, even if it only grips the floor at half strength. You never realize how strong your toes are until they aren't. Dr. N shrugged and said if I didn't feel them again in six months I probably never would. I can feel the sheets moving over my left foot, though, and it feels nice. Luxurious and soft on one side, nothing on the other.

I feel the first twinge in my right hip, where my leg is splayed out at an angle. The rest of me drifts, in and out of the land of dreams. In the drift, I can ignore twinges and aches and shooting stars of pain that zing around like my body is a pinball machine. In the drift of just-woke-up, I can feel the rest of me without caring and I'm almost whole.

2-

When she asks, I say two. Two is default.

The scale slides. They act like it doesn't but it does. Rate your pain on a scale. Okay but what if the scale slides? It tips over like one of those rugs woven to look like a piano that you step on to learn the keys. When you're done dancing on it like Tom Hanks in that one movie, you can pick the piano scale up and tilt it. The pain scale tilts every day and I slide on it, trying to make sense of the numbers as they move. If only I could roll it up like a keyboard carpet and put it away in the closet to collect some dust.

She's looking at me, waiting for a number. The medical assistant is young and pretty and I know exactly how hard her job is. I don't know this doctor very well. I don't know if she yells at her

assistants when they don't put patients in the right room. I don't know if the assistant gets paid more than fifteen bucks an hour to have people like me refuse to answer basic screening questions or yell at her when she tells them the doctor is running late. Her fingers tap the edge of the tablet, waiting for a number.

My two is always. Does that make it zero? Once I got used to two, I stopped remembering what zero felt like. My feet slip on the scale. I took off my clothes and shoes so all I'm wearing is underwear and socks. I kick my feet against the metal table, looking for something solid, but they slip.

I say two.

3-

Courtney L. kicked the ball as hard as her thick thigh could kick it, directly into the flesh of mine. It was deliberate. I can't prove it but she was the meanest bitch on any of the tri-city soccer teams and all the girls knew it. The pattern of the ball stayed on my thigh for twenty-four hours. I didn't do anything to her but exist. The intentionality of it was what put tears in my eyes, not the sting of the impact.

My shorts rode up to reveal an ugly red splotch in a place no one had touched yet, not even me, with little white lines in a hexagonal pattern. An ugly mirror image of the ball I wanted nothing to do with. But what else can you do to get an introvert to mingle with other girls than to shove her on a field with the meanest ones and make her play? I never showed anyone the imprint of the ball on my thigh and I never forgot its shape. Spite, directed at me for no reason. It stung. Then the tang of it faded and left my skin red and hot, sensitive to the touch.

4-

(I hate this.)

You can deal. Of course you can deal. It's not that bad, you can live and work and eat and breathe and talk to yourself in your head. It means nothing. If you can form words in your head, you're still alive and you can't complain. There are children in Flint with no clean water because the system doesn't care about them and you think *you* have a hard life. Chronic pain? Give me a break. You ache. So what. This is America, we don't complain here. It's not that bad. Get in your car and drive across town and deal. Insurance claims aren't going to process themselves.

(I hate this.)

In the cubicle no one can see you cry but you still shouldn't. It's not that bad. It's a four. You can deal with a four. You got the high-walled cube so you don't have to smile all day except on the

phone, and that's not nothing. At least you don't have the one right next to the door like Amber. Anyone can see Amber cry.

(I hate this.)

Load the dishwasher you useless piece of shit, it's not that bad. You know it's going to hurt, it always hurts, this is your life and it's not that bad, you can load the dishwasher. You know it's going to hurt so just get it done.

(I hate this.)

What's in Aleve PM, again? Can I take two or three, what about five? If I had a glass of wine already?

5-

I never had a brand-new car until the summer of sourdough starters and fear. The salesman practically begged me to sign on the dotted line and take this gray Subaru off his hands. I wanted green or blue but we didn't know if manufacturing was going to resume. We didn't know if anything was going to resume.

It's a cliché to say I gasped out loud when I slammed my thumb in the door. But I did. Like an actress in an old movie confronted with something untoward, I gasped. Pain is my old friend but when it visits my fingers, I cringe instead of saying hello. Watching the blood drip down the handle of my new car, I resented my old friend creeping into the crevice between my thumb and its nail. Like a guest that goes into your bedroom without asking. Uninvited, taking a thumbnail home as a souvenir.

6-

I sprained my ankle on Wheeler Peak coming down from the summit, maybe eleven thousand feet up. The summer in New Mexico was a golden opportunity to speak German all the time to strangers in close quarters and be someone who was not me. The Texans who spoke German with a twang danced frantically on a makeshift dance floor with me and the cute goth teacher's assistant and the impossibly beautiful native speaker from Munich. High above Taos in an alpine lodge, I studied and missed the boy I'd recently discovered I liked kissing. All I remember from the hike to Wheeler was the cold and how big my ankle got. Like a baseball stuck under the skin.

I had no idea what a thirteener was. I wore jeans to go hiking because I didn't own a pair of trail pants or even know what that would mean and before I sprained my ankle, the friction of my thighs rubbing together was the worst thing about it. That, and the crushing fear that no one would like me.

Then, a quick roll that made me see stars, followed by an ache I suppose you'd call dull if you were describing it. But it throbbed like a second heartbeat and every single step down reminded me what I'd done and that I would have to admit it to people who already thought I was hopelessly lame.

That summer my ankle swelled and we screamed along to that one Killers song everybody knew and I laughed and laughed.

7-

At mile eighteen the pain began in earnest. My feet always ached during a run, no matter the length. I could jog one lap around the track and my heels would sting with the impact of my weight bearing down on them. The high rides you through it. There's nothing like a runner's high. It's human evolution pushing us to do things we need to do to survive. Get us over the mountain to the next one, where the food is better and life is less hard. It's not designed to push a thirty-year-old to run a marathon on the pavement of Southern California in shoes that don't fit quite right but none of the other ones at the store did either. At least they also cost a fortune.

At mile nineteen, a runner ahead of me hugged her family on the sidelines. An old man, the girl's grandfather, stood up from a wheelchair to cheer her on and she looked so happy and cute. Watching it was like entering a feel-good sports movie, only I never signed up to watch this. You could practically hear the music swell and I wanted nothing more than to punch her in the face. She wasn't breaking down and her family was there, cheering her on, understanding why the race meant so much to her. Her grandfather was alive and sitting right there.

At mile twenty, I forgot. I forgot why I was doing this. It must've been important but the pain took it from me. I forgot why I needed to prove I could run twenty-six miles in a rich suburb of Los Angeles while no one who knew me watched.

At mile twenty-six point two, I didn't collapse. The race organizers ran out of food, so my nutrient-starved body ran on whatever chemicals were left, pumping through me to remind me that I didn't have a car in the parking lot, so I had to find my sister to get a ride back to the couch I'd borrowed. I healed. I ate more pasta than I've ever eaten and I checked the marathon off the bucket list. The smiling grandfather at mile nineteen hurt more than my feet or the rub of my thighs or the ache in my knees.

8-

At eight on the piano pain scale, I find out I can be broken. There's a breaking point at eight and I find it in the semi-private post-op room where a flimsy curtain separates me and my unshaven legs from some other patient with some other pain. Maybe my mom is there or maybe it's the nurse and god I hope it's not the new boy. He's too new to see me groggy from anesthesia and reeling with the idea of being broken beyond repair.

I was asleep so I didn't feel the knife slicing through the muscles of my lower back but I feel the ghost of it now. The lady told me to press this button for morphine. I press it. I press it. I press it.

Later, I'm so eager to please the nurse as I walk around the neuro ward full of Alzheimer's patients that I do two laps, barely hanging on to the walker while my robe flaps between my legs. She only asked for one but I've always been eager to please. I smile when she says I can go home early and I know now that I can be broken.

9-

The disc jelly that's supposed to be cushioning my spine is leaking out instead. I don't know what it's like to push out a child. That's not my nine. Would it be like this? A thing in your body that's not where it's supposed to be. Except you get a kid at the end of that nine. I got irreparable damage to my sciatic nerve.

Disc jelly sounds so nice. It really isn't. Not when it's leaking out, wreaking havoc in the space between the vertebrae. *I don't think you're ready for this jelly.* Beyonce distracts. Thanks, B. Ten years of chronic pain didn't prepare me for this jelly. It's leaking out, making contact with the nerve that runs down my legs like a wire with a current to it.

I know the nerve by heart. I know it in the tingle in my toes and the zing in my hamstring. I know the diagnosis code. I repeat 724.3 over and over in my head, trying to remember the conversion from ICD-9 to 10 but I can't because my lower half is alive and it shouldn't be. The jelly isn't where it should be and I feel like dying. 724.3 is the fire that lights me up from my toes to my midsection and I cannot even cry because crying would take energy. All I have is dedicated to not dying.

I don't think you're ready.

10-

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Mel Lake lives in Denver with a partner, chronic pain, and a very good dog. She has an English B.A. and an M.S. in Technical Communication. She is a technical writer in the corporate world by day and a creative writer the rest of the time. Her first publication is forthcoming in *The Human Touch*. She is hyper aware of every "she" in this bio but keeps typing them anyway.