**A strong story**

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‘’I will pull myself together, I will get up and go…’’

That was Taiga’s Kantane thought after she had a presumably insignificant fall out of hospital bed. Only the next morning 35 years old woman realized that she suffered a stroke. She could not feel her left arm or leg anymore.

‘’ I fell out of bed…’’

All my life I considered myself to be a very healthy, strong person. Being in the prime of my life at the age of 35 I have noticed one day strange symptoms - eye blinking, green stars, like in cartoons, when you have been hit on the head. I am not even able to suggest what caused those symptoms. I was just seeing floating stars, when I was turning my head. If I have turned my head other way-I could see those stars again. Headaches also have appeared later on,-not obvious or very strong, but regular.

I have decided to consult with my former colleagues, as I used to study medicine and was working as a surgical nurse for many years. They all agreed-I need to have a health check.

Needs must! On the way to hospital I was giggling-‘’what could be wrong with me....’’

To carry out an accurate, detailed health examination I was hospitalised. At first, routine full blood test and other analyses were carried out. My treating doctor sent me to have an ICT head scan. The waiting list was 2 weeks. So I was wondering if I could wait for it at home, but doctors said I cannot.

It made me to suspect that doctors had the information, which showed-something was not right with me. The symptoms have proved some kind of serious illness.

The interesting thing was that a stroke condition in medical books was understood better than by my doctors. It didn’t wait around, it just turned up.

One night before going to bed I went for a walk as usual .When I was climbing into my bed I took the book and reached out for water bottle, turning onto my left side. Obviously that was the moment when I had a stroke –my body’s left side stopped working and I fell out of t bed. Ladies in my ward got frightened, not knowing what to do. I tried to calm them down. I was completely sure that nothing serious had happened-I will pull myself together, get up and walk.

Going back to my senses-I did not feel that anything is wrong. As a result- I was fighting with hospital staff half of the night in attempt to get me in right position in bed. I was determined- I will get up and will start walking in a bit, why do they underestimate me?

How to peel off an egg shell.

The very next morning I finally have understood –my life will never be the same. When the doctor on duty came over-all possible tests were done, even those, which I was waiting for 2 weeks. According to ICT results the artery, responsible for my brain blood circulation was blocked. That’s why my arm and leg stopped working. When I was told what actually has happened, I finally realized that I cannot go anywhere, I am bedridden person in reanimation confined to my bed. All the jokes and smiles I had, entering the hospital, faded away. Now I need to face the terrifying reality. My body’s left side did not work at all. I could not move neither arm, nor leg. But the worst thing was the understanding that I am half a human .The fact that I have walked into hospital by myself and will be leaving now in a wheelchair hurt me a lot.

5 years have passed since then, but I still can’t come in terms with the fact that my arm and leg do not work. I make myself to believe that they are asleep, having a rest. But I want them to be active here, now. I needed them last night! I am sure-there will be a moment when my arm and leg will start working again. I know, I am impatient; I want everything to happen now. But I do understand, I need to accept my condition and try to do anything to recover.

I went through a variety of emotions, being in hospital, from disbelief to negation.

I also went through emotional breakdown, quite a serious one. Reading later about strokes nature I have find out that such an emotional ups and downs are quite typical for that kind of condition. Total emotional instability and unbearable despair turns into unexplained optimism within seconds.

If I will feel sorry for myself –I will experience severe emotions. So I have understood that crying, complaining, moaning would not help. It will not solve the problem, so I prohibited myself to cry.

Still, sometimes, it is very difficult to control the emotions and they spill out.

Is stayed in Riga Hospital for 2 months and then went to stay with my mum in Vecumnieki.

I am especially grateful to my mum-she is my angel. Despite the fact that my mum is pensioner, she took care of me and inspired me all the way through. ’Don’t sit and watch TV, do something!’’ If you are told 150 times to do something- you start thinking-maybe I should.

We went through good and bad times. Occasionally I was rude toward my mum, telling her to leave me alone. But her answer was ’’I will if you’ll just do it”

I have started with little tasks-first to keep my balance. At the beginning I sat on the bed, kept sitting, then standing up, trying to keep the balance .at all times my mum was there for me. In theory I could move around in wheelchair, but…being able to use only one hand that kind of device would not work for me. You cannot get wheelchair to move with just one hand. I had to get back on my feet, wherever I wanted it or not.

My bad leg did not work at all back then, so I simply had to drag it along. Little by little I began to take small steps, while exercising every day.

Now, from my experience, I am sure, if you want badly something -You can achieve it, you can master any move, anything you want.

Recovery process after illness resembles the sports approach. In any sport there is the same rule-keep going whatever happens. And every new training will bring positive results.

At the beginning I had problems with eating, swallowing reflexes. I was only able to eat something small and easy to digest. A funny story has happened to me. National rehabilitation centre’Vaivari’ has a unit for stroke survivors with paralyzed parts of their body. Right before Christmas we all were given chocolate marshmallow teacakes. However nobody thought that if a healthy person struggles to get of the wrapper, we all are set up for failure. The very next morning unit’s nurse has brought us a new supply of teacakes and she was astonished why on earth we did not enjoy last night’s treats.

To tell you the truth, nobody realises what a struggle is an everyday life for disabled people. You would not thing that taking shell of an egg, or peeling Christmas tangerine could be a huge problem.

What does a healthy person does with tangerine...- peel it? A stroke survivor bites the peel off.

No more tights…

Because of my mum’s nagging, I have made myself to walk slowly around the whole apartment. The spring was coming-how on earth I was going to get out to fresh air.

My mum’s apartment was situated on the 1st floor. Would I be crazy enough to make my 70 years old mother drag me up and down the stairs in a wheelchair? No I am not doing that. That made me understands that if I admit and accept my difficult and painful condition, my mother will still be suffering even more.

She has already brought me up once. I used to be independent grown up woman. Now, all of a sudden, I dropped back to my infant level, where I need to be dressed, fed and cared for.

I have decided not to give up. However I still could not get out of the house, until my mum’s strong character helped again. She said: ’’ Shall we go out?” “Ok, let’s try.” Very slowly I have taken a step down the stairs. There, in the countryside we had even found a physiotherapist, who was carrying out exercises with me 3 times a week as long as I could do it. And suddenly everything started working out. The revelation suddenly came to me: the more you try to do, the better outcome will be. I have willingly joined my mum on her walks, while before-I was forced to do it. As a rule we walked for a couple of kilometres. My faith in myself grew as the walking distance has increased.

The next major step in a few months for me was to travel to Riga on my own. My mother helped me to get on the coach, and my friend from support group was waiting for me in Riga. I was very lucky to be able to do so much by myself-get to Riga and settle the things. You could see my self-confidence growing.

After succeeding this trip, I started to make plans how I could get back to Riga, where I used to live before ending up in hospital. Having considered the options for a while, I have found a room in student hostel. I have already got used to the idea of facing life with lots of difficulties. As an example- the shower could be a hazardous place for anyone, especially for me. No one had a thought of buying non slip shower rubber matt, to avoid the accidental injuries.

Try to live up to these everyday challenges! Sometimes people say: ’’Oh, nothing is wrong with you, your right hand still does work’ ’But can you imagine to do up a bra or put on a pair of tights one handed. We had been created with 2 arms and 2 legs for a reason. That’s why I am still dependant on others when it comes to everyday life self-care. To make my life easier I have taken out of my wardrobe some garments like tights, etc. Most often I wear trousers, as it is comfortable and reliable. So, little by little, I started to be able to cope on my own.

If I find myself in real need of something- I ask my friends and acquaintances to come and help me out. The most difficult for me is to ask. Although I am amazed how many nice people are around. Sometimes I had to decline help as I have so many volunteers willing to assist.

One of my happiest days was the day when I found a job at Riga City Council Welfare Department. I have been working there for three years. It’s been six years today since I had a stroke. I feel that everything in my life is back to normal more or less. I have been struggling not to give up on my hand recovery for three years. But after I have found a job, the motivation came by itself. Since then, I have not spent much time thinking of my problems. At the moment the main thing I think and care about is to stay in shape. Doctors believe that you can get best recovery results during the first year after having a stroke. What you manage to achieve during that year will stay with you. Afterwards the progress is unlikely to be expected. Although I do not except such predictions. I have disagreed with this statement the moment I have heard it. I simply cannot put limits to myself. I will fight as long as it takes, and one day both my arm and leg will be back to normal.

Till nowadays I cannot comprehend, why it was me, a young person, being struck by a stroke. Deep inside I felt sorry for myself all the time, until I have joined the ‘Vigor’ society, which unites stroke survivors. That association was established by Marina Kuznetsova, who suffered 2 strokes herself. She is a former school teacher and a very active lady. She could not let it go and decided that this kind of support is very important and essential. We are getting together sharing our experiences, letting each other know the opportunities available and actions to be taken in order to recover. When I have just joined the club, I was all of a sudden ashamed of letting myself complain about me becoming ill at such a young age. Here I have met a boy, who had a stroke at the age of 10, while attending year 3 at his at primary school .That’s why since then I do not talk or even think about ‘How unfortunate I am’ ’However, I do feel annoyed when someone tries to convince me that I am lucky only because there are other people in a worse situation. At the end of a day it’s my misfortune, my pain.

All these years, every single day, I have been training hard. There are moments of weakness, when I do not want to do it, don’t feel I can go on anymore. Nethertheless I am fighting myself, trying to overcome laziness. I keep following strict everyday routine. I wake up by 4-5am, not because I have insomnia, but because it takes time to wash myself, to dress up. I am not able simply throw on a coat and run off. Whenever I want to wear a jacket- I need to plan it in advance. Getting dressed process should be carried out slowly, thoughtfully, carefully. I even have to plan my way to work. I plan my route every evening. I plan which transport I should choose, at which stop I should get off, which path I should take. If I would not plan that, nothing will happen. I cannot do anything out of the blue. ’Let’s go there and there tonight’’ No, unfortunately I cannot. If I haven’t planned and thought through how to get there, where to get on and off the bus-it is more that I can handle.

I practice the work out every morning. I start from simply stretching all the parts of my body. I do abs and mental exercises. I think of something positive like world peace. For at least a year I was fascinated about the literature on subconciousness and thought’s power. After I have read it I tried to engage the idea into a real life. I cannot say that I have achieved any extraordinary results. However, nothing fatal happened, so why not to carry on trying? The main thing is not to lose self-belief and understanding the importance of self-improvement. If you experienced a failure, don’t give up, the success will definitely come.

Bold as Brass...

Having a stroke I have not only lost, I have gained something as well. It was when I went back to my life in Riga; I came out with an idea of filling my leisure time with physical activities. I was considering how I can take on the sports. I have surfed the internet without any significant outcome. When I have started my job at the Welfare Department, my colleagues introduced me to the Latvian Paralympics Committee Chairman. Two and a half years have passed from the moment I became engaged into the hardest types of track and field athletics-short put, discus throw and even a bit of javelin throw.

While choosing a sport for myself I tried to find the compromise between my desires and abilities. I did understand that jumping and running are beyond my ability. Therefore I should try something, which involves only half of my body. It was a bit disappointing to hear from the coach-Aldis Shupulnieks, that if only I had come a bit earlier, I could have joined the Beijing Olympic Games…Never mind, I have a life ahead! Sometimes I have a feeling-I cannot do anything, it is going nowhere. At moments like this I tell my coach I will better quit and start playing chess or checkers instead, but he only laughs back.

Howbeit, being bold as brass I can move Heaven and Earth! I am really proud of participating in Hollands’s Open Track and Field Championship on the 29th, 30th of May this year, where I have won the title of Holland’s shot put champion. I am determined that I can take on Paralympics games.

So far I am happy with my training schedule-three times a week. Thanks to sport activities I was able to travel the world as well. Last year I have visited The Czech Republic, this year-Netherlands, and may be in August I am going to Sweden. After having a stroke, I was determined that my limit in traveling would be Riga…Now, it shows, disability does not mean to be incapable of doing things. No matter if you are a healthy or disabled person-there is the only limit to it and it’s in your head. That’s why I do not like saying: ‘’people with special needs’’. Those needs are not special in any sense. Our needs are not different from anybody else’s. We simply need to eat, sleep and have a roof above our heads. Perhaps our abilities to meet those needs are a way lower, but the necessity itself is just the same.

The toughest part of my daily life is to accept the fact that I cannot do everything I want myself, so I do need help sometimes. My friends and colleagues are always there for me to help. However I do feel uncomfortable when I need to ask for their assistance. Nethertheless I am gratefull for what I have got-ability to move, work, and exercise and that is a lot!