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THE LONG WAY HOME

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less travelled by” Robert Frost

There are certain journeys that follow a pre-set and very well known plan. The trip most of us take from conception to birth is a prime example. The route markers are well know: 40 weeks of planning, preparation and anticipation, capped by a rushed trip to the maternity ward (usually in the wee hours of the morning), the requisite day or two in hospital and then mother and child go home and embark on the rest of their lives.

But some of us travel a different road. Take me for instance. My journey started out like any other and for nearly 24 weeks I followed the same tried and true path that millions have taken before me. But then my path diverged wildly form the norm; and as the well know Robert Frost poem notes, it's made all the difference.

You see, I was born too soon. And I'm not talking about a couple of days or a couple of weeks. I'm talking about a mind boggling 112 days too soon. And that single fact has changed everything from the way I view the world to the roads I've travelled since that time.

I ended up in a different place altogether to the one expected: I inhabit a land called Prematurity. People living outside my country have no understanding of my world, its customs and even its language. Their kindly, but misguided views have been fuelled by years of warm and fuzzy media reports: sound bites lauding the latest miracle baby to survive, happy snaps of perfect little babies going home. They honestly believe that we are just like our larger,

full-term brethren, just in a smaller package. Of course, that's not the case at all. There's a very good reason that a full term pregnancy lasts 40 weeks. And trust me; if you are born 16 weeks early, you aren't just like a "regular" baby only smaller.

Take it from an expert: Your road is long and your path is rocky when you're born at 24 weeks gestation. Your lungs aren't fully developed. You need a drug called surfactant just to keep them sticky. You end up being ventilated and oxygen is literally pushed down into your lungs. Because the ventilation tube goes right through your voice box, you can't make a sound. Your eyelids are still fused together; your skin is fragile and red. Your blood doesn't create its own iron, so you need regular transfusions. You are too fragile to even be in an isolette (that's a very common word in the language of prematurity – you'd probably call it a humidicrib), and so you lie under lights, naked, spreadeagled and vulnerable; easy prey for infection and worse, the whole alphabet soup of preemie complications.

Take my case as an example: I suffered from bilateral IVH's, PDA, ROP and BPD just to name a few. See what I mean about the alphabet soup? And the different language? People on the outside don't understand and people on the inside don't have the time or the patience to translate. But for this exercise – bilateral brain haemorrhages, patent ductus arteriosus (a heart-lung complication), retinopathy of prematurity (an eye condition that can result in blindness) and bronchopulmonary dysplasia (a chronic lung condition). My laundry list of medical complications also included seizure activity, asthma, a partially collapsed lung, apnoea and bradycardia.

In some ways, I think I'm the lucky one in this story. I was tiny, frail and fighting for life. I have no memory of the NICU, the procedures and the pain involved. But my mother can still reel off every complication, every medical intervention and medication. She recalls the names of the doctors, can recite the dates I hit important milestones like tolerating 1 ml of milk, reaching a massive 1kg weight and being weaned off the ventilator. She is the memory keeper of my early days.

People think that the journey is over once a premature baby leaves hospital. In a misguided attempt to inject normalcy into a situation

that is anything but normal they talk about “catching up”. It’s ludicrous to think that somehow you get that time back. If you fell into a coma today and regained consciousness in 4 months time, would people talk about you magically getting back that missed birthday, or football grand final or Christmas?

In truth, coming home from hospital is just the first stage in a long and never-ending journey. There are scores of developmental milestones to meet. And when you are old enough to start school, a whole new can of worms, in the form of learning and behavioural issues, is opened. The road is tough for any kid these days, but it’s phenomenally tough if you’re from Prematurity.

I’m one of the ones. On the outside I look like everyone else. But under the façade of normal there’s another story.

The first years of school were pretty tough and another medical condition, Attention Deficit Disorder, was suggested. I took medication for a few years in junior school; just another drug to add to the virtual pharmacopoeia I’ve taken over the years. It did make it easier to concentrate in school, but I lost the essential me – my imagination, creativity and flights of fancy. They all seemed to grey out and lose their vivid life and colour under the sway of Ritalin. Medication is an answer; it’s just not my answer. I’ve learned to cope without it.

Oh, have I mentioned that I stutter? After years of speech therapy I can speak well and clearly if I have the chance to plan and practice. I don’t stutter when I sing or when I whisper. Other than that; all bets are off. I’m comfortable with being a stutterer: it’s just another component of what makes me who I am; like the scar on my lip from the vent tube, my high palette (thanks again vent tube!), the hemangioma on my chest and the tiny pinprick scars all over my heels from the scores of blood draws done in the NICU.

I often think that the mad roller-coaster ride that was my first 4 months of life has influenced every path I’ve chosen since. Take sport for example. Not for me the sweaty camaraderie of team sports. I don’t join fourteen beefy compatriots in thundering up and down a muddy rugby field every Saturday. And nor do I don’t pristine whites, stride out the crease and wield the willow. No, I’m a swimmer; one of that rare breed of individuals who seem to

enjoy chasing the black line. And even with swimming, my path is different to most. I swim competitively and I've had share of success, but I'm not pretty. I don't have the perfect technique you see in other swimmers. I don't have the lithe body. Actually, until recently I would have said that I don't even have the killer instinct. What I do have I stubbornness. I know how to fight. Let's face it: I've walked the roughest road there is and scaled the highest peak. So a little thing like a pool and a stopwatch can't beat me. I'm the kid who refuses to give up.

I have grown to like being the boy not afraid to strike out on a different path to the crowd. My friends all like the current hot singer or group. Me, I'm a classical music kind of guy. They are obsessed by their football while I toil up and down the pool winter and summer, slave to the black line. Oh, and did I mention that I write poetry? Try being a fourteen year old boy who wards Speedos, writes poetry and emits a faint odour of chlorine most days. I've definitely chosen the road less travelled.

At fourteen-almost fifteen years of age I stand on the threshold of adulthood. I envisage my life as a long, and hopefully, satisfying journey; which makes me wonder about the paths I'll travel in the next forty, fifty, sixty years. Some things I do know: roads will diverge and I will have to make tough choices along the way. The road that looks the easiest or the safest may not always provide the vest scenery or the greatest adventure, and the hardest paths are often the most satisfying to conquer. And after all, the journey itself is at least as important as the destination.

How can a fourteen year old know all of this? I like to think that it's because on the first, pivotal journey I made: I took the long way home.

Italicised words at the commencement of the essay are reproduced from the poem, "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost.