

From Body to Mind

A Short Memoir

By Danae Echeverria

I still remember the date. April 27th, 2022. The referee blew his whistle and it pierced through the cold spring air. Both teams return to the field and everything was hushed because there is no good reason for any audience to attend a friendly match of local women's soccer on a Friday night. Coach tells me to stay on the bench and take a break because I had played the entire first half. Thank god, I whispered to myself. It was the first game of the season so naturally, I was out of shape. I wasn't particularly proud of how I was playing—my first touch was off and I had missed a good scoring opportunity early in the game. But to be fair, everyone was a little rusty. Ten minutes into the half, Coach says to take Alison off and tell Jordi to move back to mid. "You can go up front." I never fully understood why Coach decided to play me forward. He played me center midfield all of the previous season so why the sudden change? It's not like I had a notable scoring record, nor was I faster than the other forwards. Forwards have to be good under pressure. I am horrible under pressure. Coach calls "subs" to the referee and tired but ready, I return to the field as a forward.

Running onto the pitch always gave me a surge of adrenaline. I exude an air of newfound confidence because I think of myself as something of a decent contributor. The field is a place of euphoria, where I can strenuously run in spurts, workout frustrations, and just block out the real world for about two hours. It's where nothing really matters except for soccer and that's fine. At least it was. It's funny because I specifically told my teammate Jenna right before I was subbed back on that I didn't need to warm up anymore as I had played the entire first half. "If I pull something, I pull something." I don't really believe in jinxes, but I do like to believe that if I hadn't said that, what happened next wouldn't have happened.

We were up 1-0. I was hoping to score this half and prove to myself that maybe I am a decent forward. The ball is in the air, coming right towards me. I jump up—at least I think I jumped—to take a touch with my right foot, trusting that my left leg will support my landing. How foolish of me. As soon as my left cleat hits the turf, I feel my knee move inwards and outwards accompanied by an audible "popping" noise—all in a fraction of time. So not even three minutes into playing, I find myself on the ground and grabbing my knee with stomach twisting pain. My knee quickly blew up into a balloon and after a few minutes of lying on the turf in a fetal position, Coach comes onto the field to carry me off.

The only other time I've gone down during a game was when I was five years old. It was my first soccer game ever, playing on a team called "The Kicking Ponies." I took a ball to the face and began to cry but I don't even remember it hurting that much. I didn't know how to react to it and everyone was looking at me so I felt the pressure to show some degree of reaction. In retrospect, I wish I went with a less baby-like response. But I never had any major injuries. I made it all the way through my 17 years of playing soccer with few bone bruises and pulled muscles. So it's safe to say that injuries never really crossed my mind. Little did I know, that night I would experience an injury that would test me in ways I wouldn't have expected. I was sitting on the bench, trying to process what had just happened while Coach asked me to describe

the pain, which I struggled to do. He gives me two Tylenols and taped an ice pack onto my knee, advising me to go to the ER to make sure I didn't break anything.

"At least it's not your right one so you can still drive," said Jenna. This was the first time I regretted buying a manual car. Realizing I'll have to call my dad, I grab my phone from my bag and ask him to come pick me up. Following Coach's advice, we drive to the hospital and I feel no inclination to play music as I usually do. I explain to my dad what happened.

"In all your years of playing, you never got hurt. I thought you were immune," he said.

I thought so too. It's not like anyone even hit or tackled me. Just a poorly coordinated self-landing. "It's alright, don't think it's anything too serious," I said. I'm not sure who I was trying to convince by saying that. Then I remembered that I had a shift at work the next morning. It wasn't my original shift but two days prior, my boss had texted me asking if I could work Saturday because no one else could. The café was having a pretty hard time hiring—something about a province-wide staffing shortage. The Tylenol has kicked in and the pain has gone down so I manage to limp through the hospital parking lot and into the ER. Could I work? Maybe if I just stand still at the cash till or stay on the bar? The waiting room is packed, leading to three hours of waiting for an x-ray. This gave me enough time to consult my dad who told me there is no way I'm going to work, similar to the time he had to stop me from trying to go to work while I had pneumonia. I know he's right, I shouldn't even be debating this. So I anxiously write, edit, and re-edit a text to my boss explaining why I can't come in. Why was I always so scared to let my boss and coworkers down? It's not like it's my coffee shop, I know my boss can figure it out. People would say it's generous and sacrificial but deep down I know it's pathetic and a recipe for others to walk all over you. I don't know, overthinking consumes me.

When the nurse finally called my name, I headed in to do the x-ray and we waited an additional two hours. Around 3 am, the doctor finally came out and told me I did not break anything.

"Just keep icing it. We can provide you with a pair of crutches if you don't have any," she said. I'm not sure what I was expecting but I had hoped for a clearer diagnosis. So in an attempt to make myself feel better, I decided to diagnose it despite my lack of knowledge and experience with knee injuries. Clearly, it was just a dislocation.

I woke up the next day to a missed call from the hospital, so I gave them a call back. They tell me the doctor reviewed my x-ray again. "It's looking like it can be more serious than we thought," said the woman on the phone. Convinced that they actually never looked at my x-ray the night before, I proceed to schedule an MRI for the upcoming Monday. By the end of that week, I found out the extent of my injury while sitting in the orthopaedic surgeon's office. A torn anterior cruciate ligament. It's known to most athletes as the ACL, and it is the one thing absolutely nobody wants to hurt. As an athlete in any sport at any level, you think you understand what it means to hear the heart-wrenching "it's your ACL." But you don't. I had

always heard of other athletes battling with ACL recoveries and I felt bad for them, but I had no idea what a visceral experience it was until it happened to me.

Hearing those words made my stomach go into knots and tears quickly filled my eyes. I was scared, anxious, and sort of confused about what lay ahead of me. The thought of tearing my ACL did cross my mind, but it was a distant thought. I didn't think could be true. Maybe I was in denial. I expected the doctor to give me the same diagnosis I had given myself and that I would be able to play again in a few weeks, but I was completely wrong. "People function without ACLs. But if you want to continue playing, I recommend you do the surgery," he said. And so there I had it. I remember telling my dad on the way home how I really wished that someone had tackled me that night. I'm not sure if it would change anything, but it'd give me someone to blame other than myself. Was I being dramatic? It's not like I planned on playing professionally or anything, so was it even that big of a deal? But I couldn't help but think there was a chance I could never play soccer again.

As I walked into the hospital the morning of my surgery, I really did not know what to expect, but all I knew was that as soon as my eyes opened after this surgery my life was going to be different. Soccer was out of the question, but I realized I also wouldn't be able to work, gym, or do any activity for a while. I had come to the depressing conclusion that my crutches would become my new best friend for the next month. It was not going to be easy. Recovery will be 9-12+ months but my physiotherapist said I will really have to work for it if I want the chance to play again. That timeline sounded daunting and unapproachable. I've never been consistent in anything I do. And I wouldn't consider myself a hard worker. It felt like being told that I had to work on a project for one to two years and I just had to begin.

The following year would be a challenge full of strenuous hours of physical therapy, but I knew that if I took the time to heal myself correctly and prioritize my recovery, things would only get better—eventually, I would end up being back at my best. When I wake up from surgery, I saw a guy a little older than me who was getting his third surgery in the same knee. As mean as it is to say, it was the best thing that I could have woken up to. I hope everyone makes it back to where they want to be, but it really is a universally humbling feeling to know that someone always has it worse.