



FIRST PERSON

My cast brought out the best in complete strangers

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I stepped off the sidewalk and onto a front lawn to give the blonde-haired woman space to pass me, strangely thankful for a pandemic that disguised the honest reason for my antisocial behaviour.

But the woman stopped and nodded her head at the turquoise fibreglass cast that hugged my right forearm. "I had the same colour," she said. "Where's the fracture?" I felt my

shoulders relax. I didn't need to tell her that I had moved aside to prevent being bumped or jolted.

"Distal radius," I said, lifting my arm from where it rested on the ledge of my hip. I wiggled the naked thumb and four fingers that poked above the half sleeve of gauze and fibreglass. The gesture felt like a secret handshake.

"Me too," she said. "I broke my wrist last September but now it's good as new." She hefted the canvas grocery tote she carried.

"My cast comes off tomorrow," I said, encouraged by her story. Who knew that my fondest wish would be to carry my own groceries?

For 43 days, my broken wrist had attracted knowing looks, sympathetic smiles and private conversations with strangers I would otherwise have passed without comment in the grocery store, the library and on the sidewalk.

"The strength comes back quickly," said my sidewalk friend. "Just make sure to do the exercises and take calcium. I ate a lot of tinned fish."

At home, I added canned salmon to the grocery list, a task I performed with the concentration of a child. I'd had to learn how to write with my left hand but, later, my husband would need help deciphering my chicken scrawl.

Each kind stranger arrived before I understood that I needed what they offered me.

On the fourth day after what my husband called "the Fall," he drove me downtown to the library. He parked near the front door and offered to collect my books but I insisted on doing it myself. Surely I could manage the double-layer face mask, the sling, the lightweight day pack and the library card I'd tucked into the side pocket of the grey sweat pants I now wore every day.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked.

I hadn't stepped outside since coming home from hospital with a plaster cast on my arm that felt like a boat anchor. I had suffered shock, swallowed painkillers and choked back my pride.

It was time to step out: "I'll be okay."

But we both knew I was lying. My wrist throbbed; the pills fogged my thinking; I felt exhausted from the effort required to bathe, brush my teeth, lift a baggy shirt from a hangar and ask my right-hand man to please fasten the tiny white buttons on my shirt.

Worst of all, I'd ruined our summer. The Fall occurred just as campgrounds opened for online reservations. We had cancelled all of our plans. No cycling, no swimming, no canoe trip with our adult daughters.

In the library, I found my books on a shelf at knee level. I bent over without getting dizzy, pulled the books out one at a time and balanced the stack of three titles in the crook of my left arm. I used my right elbow to hold the books in place and made my way to the checkout counter.

"You broke your arm!" I looked up at the library worker as she waited for me to fish out the plastic card from my pocket. "I fell on the ice last winter and broke my wrist but look, it's good as new." She held up her hand to demonstrate how the tip of each finger could bend and tap the top of her thumb. "Ta-dah, I can play the piano again." She beamed at me, then turned to busy herself with my books.

Her sensitivity touched me and I fought back tears.

She scanned my books, collected them in her strong hands, stood from her desk and walked around to my side of the counter. "I'm going to help you put these books in your bag," she said.

We compared notes on emergency rooms, bone specialists and the best way to arrange bed pillows for sleeping with a cast. "I got lots of reading done," she said, moving in closer to adjust the weight of the backpack hanging from my unaffected shoulder. I sensed that she wanted to hug me. Or maybe all I wanted was to press myself into her kindness. Instead, I stepped back to restore our two-metre distance.

When the heavy plaster cast was replaced with a lightweight fibreglass one, my mood lifted. Strength made a slow return and one day I discovered that I could lace up my own runners.

By day 20, my husband and I decided to find a campsite for our camper van. Soon I was braving dips in a shallow lake in northwestern Saskatchewan, carefully holding the cast in the air above my head, the cool water no higher than my shoulders. Later, as I walked dripping wet along the beach, the cast dangling at my side, a boy with long coltish legs stopped in mid-gallop. "Are you gonna be all right?" he asked.

"I am," I said. "Thanks for checking."

The next day, a young mom carrying an armload of neon pink plastic pails stopped near our campsite to ask how soon the cast would come off.

“Not soon enough,” I said. She laughed, then told me how she had broken the same bone two months earlier. “You’ll feel like a new woman,” she said with a huge smile. “Good luck!”

After 43 days, the cast came off. I do not miss the damn thing.

What I miss is the parade of kind strangers – the doctors, nurses, bone techs, grocery clerks, librarians, servers and passersby – who filled those 43 days.

We all fall down. Yet the right words at the right moment are more powerful than all the king’s men, and helped put me back together again.

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