

## **Fragile**

Audrey Tonkinson

### The Beginning

The smell of freshly cut grass ran across my nose as the sun was beating down on my pasty white skin. I could hear my dad on the roof—bang, bang, bang, went the hammer. This was the sound of reassurance. My dad was no more than 100 feet away, while my sister and I were playing in the back yard on our swing set. It had two swings, a trapeze bar, monkey bars, a hiding hut, and a big yellow slide. I thought it would be a great idea to make a little obstacle course for Dawn and me to do. This obstacle course consisted of walking up the slide backwards, climbing on top of the monkey bars, hanging upside-down, and swinging on the swing. To end this little course you had to jump off the swings and land on your feet. I was the one who started.

“Come on Dawn; this will be fun. Just follow me,” I said, very eager to beat her.

“Are you sure?” she replied.

I said, “Of course. Just do what I do.” It was so much fun; Dawn and I were just giggling up a storm as we were climbing up the slide because for a four and six year old it wasn’t something easy to do.

We had finished everything except for the swings, and I thought it would be a brilliant idea to add a little twist. I told Dawn instead of jumping off that we had to swing without holding on. She didn’t understand, so I decided to demonstrate it. I sat down, and started pumping my legs really hard, and then I was getting pretty high. At this point I was impressed with myself that it worked; quickly after, I was on the ground, screaming in pain. My dad didn’t hear me at

first, and I couldn't move. I was an egg that was splatted across the grass. I honestly didn't know what happened, and I was terrified to tell my parents the truth. So everyone thought I tried jumping off a swing and failed. Little did they know that this was my own fault.

How I got from the ground to the couch I can honestly say I don't remember, but once my mom got home, my dad told her the whole story. She called the doctor, and he thought that there wasn't anything wrong and that I would be fine in the morning. So, my mom gave me some Tylenol and sent me to go shower. This is when she knew the doctor was wrong. I cried through my whole entire shower and woke up every four hours needing my medicine.

As it turns out, I had not one but two major fractures in my arm, and by looking at the x-ray you didn't need a doctor to figure it out.

I was six and already had a track record of two broken bones.

### Somewhere In Between

It was a hot sunny day in mid-July when my best friend Allie and I decided we wanted to go to the park. We hopped on our bikes and started our journey. We took a right out of the cul-de-sac and headed back down Whitebridge Lane until we couldn't go any more; at that point we made another right onto Brookside and continued. That's when it happened; I fell off my bike, but I didn't just fall. I managed to get my foot stuck in the wheel while losing my flip-flop. I was trapped. I was yelling to get Allie's attention, and when she finally realized I wasn't behind her she knew something was wrong. At that point I was able to get the bike off of me and scooch over to the curb. My foot was throbbing, so Allie made her way back to me and we rode back home. I wasn't crying or anything, but after a couple of hours my foot was so swollen it didn't

even fit in my croc. I thought I just sprained it, so I went to gymnastics practice and got yelled at by the head coach because I couldn't walk normally. That was when the water works started.

He said, "Audrey, if you can't walk normally, then get the hell out of my gym."

Gymnastics is an intense sport, but I was a dedicated little athlete, and because I was so heart broken by what my coach said, we called the doctor and they sent us for an x-ray. Three pictures later I was done and ready to go home. They said there was nothing wrong, and it should start to feel better soon. Soon meant two weeks later, where my shoes left imprints on my foot because it was too swollen to fit. I also started to wear down the sole in a different pattern because I was in too much pain to walk normally.

My mom finally took me back to the doctor who referred me to my orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Kramer. There she took three more x-rays, but they were weight bearing. The x-ray tech took me back to my room where we waited for an hour until Dr. Kramer came in to talk to us.

She blew up the image of my foot and said, "You can never seem to break just one bone huh?"

I hobbled over to the computer to see what she was talking about, and then she showed me. I had broken three bones in my foot. The fracture started in the middle bone of my second toe and then traveled through to my second metatarsal.

She asked if I wanted a boot or a cast, and I replied, "Well, with the boot how often do I have to have it on?" She laughed and the nurse came back with lime green cast material. Well that was the answer to my question—always.

## The Worst

I had rough blue carpet under my feet and a sting mat in the corner. I was all ready to do something new—a punch front tuck, punch front tuck. That’s two somersaults, I thought in my head before I went for it. Finally I built up enough courage to go, and I nailed it. Two somersaults in a row and I landed perfectly on my feet.

My coach said, “Now was that luck or skill?”

That’s something you hear in the gymnastics world quite often. You haven’t mastered a new skill until you have done it three times in a row. So my coach told me to do it again. This time I just went for it. I took off okay, then I landed and took off again with a locked knee. It all ended when I landed on my butt in shock. My coach came running over. He had heard a loud clicking noise from the other side of the gym and knew I was injured. I knew I couldn’t move, but I tried to stand up anyway and just fell back down. I grabbed onto my knee and my body started to go numb. While I was crying, my teammate grabbed my phone so I could call my mom to come pick me up. While I was doing that my coach ran to get ice packs but came back with frozen sponges, taped them to my knee, and then carried me out to my mom’s car. I couldn’t use either of my legs; I was in excessive amounts of pain. My mom rushed me to the doctor and she had to carry me into the office. That appointment only took a matter of seconds before my doctor carried me back out to the car to send me to the ER.

The ER nurse took my vitals and sent me back right away. My leg was only comfortable being held at a 90-degree angle, and I refused to move it for anyone. When I was in my room the doctor came in and tried to examine me, but he knew I needed an x-ray. I was down and back in a matter of fifteen minutes, which is record time for an ER. I had the orthopedic staff in my room

just seconds later. I had a three-inch crack in the growth plate of my tibia, which means that I was a lucky winner of a temporary cast that went all the way from my butt cheek down to my toes. My fun didn't stop there. My name managed to end up on a long list of people waiting to get an MRI.

While I was waiting, the doctors drugged me up on Vicodin and gave me crutches. After that I couldn't sit still. I crutched from one end of the ER to the other, and I was twirling around for the nurses. They thought I was being too dangerous so they sent me back to my room every time I got up. They made my mom watch my every move so that I wouldn't further hurt myself.

Then it was my turn for an MRI. They took me for a ride in my hospital bed to the basement where the machine was located. They made me get out and hobble over to the machine because my crutches would ruin the magnetic field. They took a bunch of pictures, then sent me home, and would call me with the results.

The next day I got the news. I had not only broken my tibia, but I had a one-inch crack in my femur. I was later told that it is the hardest bone in your body to break.

### The End

The smell of medical disinfectant overpowered the room as we sat down to talk about my future. This is when I got the news that I was no ordinary child, and that on top of all my other health problems I had to deal with the idea that I had weak bones.

The only reason they came to this conclusion was because I shouldn't have broken my femur the way I did. My bones should have collided with one another and smashed. I realistically should have torn all the ligaments in my knee instead, and that is what made the doctors curious.

They sent me to the imaging center at the hospital for something called a DEXA scan. I arrived for my appointment and patiently waited for them to call me back. I was nervous, because I didn't know what this test was like. They tried to explain to me that it was like an x-ray, but doctors will tell you anything so that you aren't scared.

It was finally my turn. They took me back to this room with a really tall table and this crescent shaped object that was hovering over it. They had me lay down and said it wouldn't take long. Then all of a sudden this ring was circling around me. It only took a couple of seconds and then I was done. They told me I would have to discuss the results with my doctor.

The next day, we got a phone call to explain the results. I had a z score of negative two point zero. Which in non-medical terms means that I have osteoporosis. This discovery meant for me numerous fractures in the future, and that I had to "be careful" for the first time in my life.

### Postscript

My battle with this disease didn't stop when I was fourteen. Since then they have discovered I had three unknown fractures in my tibia and fibula. I have broken five bones in my right foot, a bone in my right hand, my right elbow, and suffered stress fractures in my back and left tibia. Although all my fractures are devastating, I wouldn't be where I am today without them. They all taught me something new about myself, and even forced me to make decisions about my life at such a young age. I was told that if I kept doing gymnastics that I would continue to further injure myself. They ultimately said that even though there were safety precautions in place, if I continued with gymnastics I was putting my own life at risk. This diagnosis has forced me to quite the sport I had loved most, but it also pushed me to try something new. I was told that in order to make my bones stronger I had to be active, and that

was when I decided to start diving. I was putting together gymnastics—my favorite sport—with swimming—something else I had started at a young age. What is even more important is that I am here at Western Illinois University because I broke my right foot. It's crazy to think that a fracture could decide where I went to school, but for me it did. It was because of that fracture that I knew my diving career wasn't over. From that point on, I started to contact schools that I was interested in diving for. The more I looked into it, the more I felt at home here at WIU. Despite my osteoporosis the coach here said that I would be a perfect addition to the team. Western Illinois University would have never been an option if I didn't have osteoporosis.