

The Best Medicine by Krissy Kunkel

For a moment, it is there. I can smell, feel and taste everything about it. For that instant of creation in my mind, time slows down; the Earth stops revolving for a millisecond, and I can breathe in my transient childhood days. It usually happens on those days that never seem to end. The days in which nothing is going as planned and it seems as though I need a little push to get me through. Those days, I am taken back to my old house on Windflower Drive in Maryland. It is not the same as the house I currently live in. It is older, with hidden nooks and crannies that I used as hidden castles and hide-and-seek spots. I would play these childhood games with my sister, Erica. Erica and I were inseparable. Every one of my childhood moments involves playing with her. I can remember our stealing the clean sheets out of the dryer and making forts, draping them from desk table, to the television, to the ceiling. We always managed to get into some sort of trouble, but looking back it was worth every second. My memory takes me back to the days in which we played dress-up and stole all of my grandmother's scarves and chunky old jewelry. Then we crept into my mother's bathroom, and with precise effort, applied her ruby red Chanel lipstick. We would note the original position of the lipstick in the drawer, take it out, carefully apply it to our lips (which meant smearing it all over our faces), laugh hysterically, and then place it back into the proper spot. In those childhood days I can only remember the laughter and the fun. I never worried or had a stressful day. In fact, the only thing I worried about was when I would be taking my nap and what I would be eating for lunch. There were no troubling relationships to mend and no time-consuming papers to write. The only thing that mattered was living the life I wanted and giggling because of the happiness in my heart.

It was the beginning of my junior year in high school. I had had a relatively relaxing summer with friends, but nothing too exciting. At the time I was trying to figure out exactly where I was going in a relationship with a boy from my school, and I was trying to maintain better friendships. I was filled with apprehension about the upcoming year. I knew that this year was important. It was my junior year, the year to be involved, receive the best grades possible, study for countless hours, prepare for the dreaded SAT, make college visits, and excel in sports. I felt as if I was lost in a whirlwind of activities, and the stress was mounting. Somehow, I became focused enough to attend varsity soccer tryouts at my high school. I had been on the varsity soccer team for two years and received a decent amount of playing time. One would think there was nothing to worry about; however, I would be lying if I claimed to be calm and carefree on the soccer field. I was constantly thinking about how I was going to play or if I had played well enough. Did I train enough during the summer? Would I beat my two mile run time from the previous year? Could I outplay some of the incoming freshmen? These questions clouded my thoughts. It is at this time, the beginning of junior year, that a shadow had fell on my inner thoughts, and I became lost.

I noticed that I was growing increasingly anxious. I was always flustered about something and continually stressing over soccer. I began to feel heaviness in my chest at all times. It felt as though someone was sitting on my chest. Sharp pains continued to rip through the upper part of my chest as though someone was tearing apart my heart. The giant sitting on my chest was pounding on it with a heavy metal tool and refusing to stop. Every day I was plagued with this awful feeling. I awoke with it inside me and went to bed the same way. In the beginning, I kept my pain to myself, thinking no one would believe my complaint. I never thought I would be able to describe the physical pain to anyone, and I believed no one would understand. I continued to play soccer even though I was not playing with passion or intensity. The pain and the unknown held me back. School began, and I tried ignoring the

nagging, persistent chest pains. Unfortunately, there was no stopping the pain and no way to ignore it. When the pain increased, I had to tell my parents. Concerned and frazzled, my parents took me to my soccer coach so I could describe how I was feeling and explain what was happening. I was ashamed and embarrassed. No one understood the pain or the frustration I was experiencing.

On the outside, I was the blonde-haired girl with a smile. On the inside, I was screaming in pain and loneliness. I began to feel complete defeat. Every day I awoke with chest pains, dressed, went to school with chest pains, faked a smile or two, went to soccer practice without hope of playing in the games, and returned home with more chest pains. I did not want to burden anyone with my problems; therefore, I kept all my feelings inside. I began to lose interest in activities that once had made me happy. Sometimes I would go on outings with my friends; however, once I left my house, I remembered how much my chest was hurting. I became anxious about the chest pains, which in turn caused more pain. Why was I abnormal? Why am I not happy? Every day seemed longer than the one before.

The doctor visits began. The visits started to diminish the little happiness that I kept secretly inside me. It was as if the beauty of things had lost their vibrancy. Even though I continued to play soccer and go out with my friends, I had little pleasure in the effort. I began a routine of doctors' visits and felt myself losing grip on the reality of life. It did not help that none of the doctors could find an explanation for my pain. I underwent countless x-rays, an endoscopy, a barium swallow, and numerous physical examinations. My chest pains began to take over my life. The story of when they began, what they were like, and what I was feeling at the moment began to be my entire personal history. Any laughter or happiness was only a memory. I began to follow the path in life that too many people travel, a path without a clear meaning or hope for the future.

Around the end of soccer season, I was prescribed a medication for acid reflux disease. Although the gastroenterologist could not explain my condition, he thought that I should at least try the medicine. I began taking the medicine, but I saw little result. Even though soccer season had ended, I was still struggling. I buried my nose in my schoolwork and tried my best to ignore the hammer continuously pounding on my chest. I tried to explain my condition, but not even my best friends could understand exactly what I was feeling. As a result, I became a professional actor who could fake happiness. I was losing sight of myself, and I was losing it quickly. I had taken an act as simple as laughter for granted. I used to be a girl who laughed for no reason; now I couldn't find the feeling that made me laugh. The loving, energetic personality I once had was disappearing, and one that was completely different was taking its place. I truly believed that I would never recover from this condition.

Though I did not realize it at the time, hope arrived in the person of my best friend, who came to me with news of a job opening at Howard County Recreation and Parks. She had been working for the department for a few months and had enjoyed the experience. Howard County Recreation and Parks provides the county with instructional sports and team sports for people of all ages. The position that needed to be filled was an instructional sports leader who would coach kids aged five to nine in sports such as basketball and soccer. I would be teaching them the basic skills of the sports and encouraging them to play. At first I was skeptical. Although I knew how to play soccer and basketball, I was afraid to add anything to my schedule that might worsen my chest pains. However, with support from my family, I decided to interview for the job. I soon received news that I had gotten the position and would start within the next week.

On my first day I was assigned to coach basketball at Worthington Elementary School. Since I was not eighteen at the time, I would be paired with another instructor over the age of eighteen. I was to arrive at the school fifteen minutes prior to the class, but I decided to arrive thirty minutes early to pull

myself together before I started. I was quite apprehensive about entering the school. Questions began to plague my mind as they often had: Will the kids like me? Will they respect me and my instructions? Will this be fun? Who am I working with? Am I going to have worse chest pains than ever? I finally decided to stop thinking and just enter the school. As I walked in, wearing my new Howard County Recreation and Parks t-shirt that was labeled "STAFF," I took notice of my surroundings. On the walls was brightly colored artwork. In most of the cases, you could not make out the exact shapes the students were trying to paint, but the pieces were still the greatest works of art I had seen in years. Posters explained to the students how to be nice to each other and how to work together as a team. As I peered into one of the classrooms, I saw the small chairs for tiny bodies with growing minds. The classrooms were decorated with artwork and signs bearing the names of the children. Throughout the halls I heard children laughing and whispering secrets, hoping the teacher would not see them talking in the halls. I found myself smiling as I walked towards the gymnasium. I realized that observing only a few simple details in the elementary school had made me smile. As I waited in the gymnasium for the students to be dismissed, I introduced myself to my fellow instructor. His name was Matt, and he had brought the basketballs and other equipment needed. He seemed enthusiastic about coaching the kids, and his enthusiasm inspired me. I was excited about meeting these children I would soon be coaching.

Suddenly, the bell rang to signify school had finally ended. In that instant, boys and girls aged seven to nine bounded into the gymnasium with huge backpacks and wide grins spread on their faces. Each of them seemed to possess a vibrant, radiating energy that astonished me. After an entire day of schoolwork I did not sense a hint of exhaustion from any of the children. I was completely surprised because usually, after a day of school, I was completely worn out. With laughter and curiosity, the children looked at me and grabbed a basketball out of the equipment bag. Basketballs started flying everywhere, and the constant sound of those basketballs hitting the floor began. We decided to let the children play among themselves with the basketballs for a few minutes to get some energy out of their system. Then we called the children to the center of the court and seated them in a circle. Standing there waiting to introduce myself, I surveyed the twenty elementary-aged kids I was about to coach. There were mostly boys in the class; however, there were about five or six girls. Each of the children watched us intently, waiting to begin playing. As they smiled and giggled over stories from the day, I noticed some of their smiles lacked a tooth or two. When I asked one child if the tooth fairy had given him anything, I was bombarded by ten other children wanting to tell me their stories about their teeth. We then became engaged in an interesting and humorous talk about loose teeth and the money the tooth fairy leaves under the pillow. I was already beginning to feel comfortable. While I was talking with the children, I noticed how much energy they possessed and how many smiles they kept giving me. In return, I felt myself smiling at almost anything and everything they said. Their only concern in the world was the basketball game they were about to play, though in reality they may not have even been thinking about basketball. They were just there to have fun and be with their friends. It was amazing how the smallest thing could generate excitement and laughter. I admired their attitudes. It seemed as they had everything they needed right there with them, and all they might want was awaiting them with their smiles.

I found that coaching the children came easily to me. Because it was the first class, we went over basic dribbling skills. I instructed them to keep their heads up, use their fingertips, and stay low while dribbling. After a few demonstrations and more practice, we played some dribbling games. Their perseverance and determination made sweat drip down their foreheads when they dribbled. Most of them were dribbling adequately; however, it seemed as though it did not really matter to the children if they were dribbling the perfect way. Full of laughter, the children played and dribbled. They were able to

find humor in a game of “Red Light, Green Light” and played it with a completely carefree attitude. The energy they brought to the court that day was contagious. When it was time to end class, none of them wanted to leave. They were all questioning when we would have class again and what we would be doing. Before they left, they gave each of the coaches a high-five and said goodbye. A few of the children gave me a hug before they left. I felt my heart melt and decided that I had accomplished a wonderful goal: I had made a child smile.

I left Worthington Elementary School with a smile I had borrowed from the children I had coached. I felt that I had been revived and had, in fact regained a capacity for life. I felt like I was being introduced to happiness again for the first time. In the everyday routine, I was beginning to lose sight of it all. From coaching, I realized I was able to stop, take a breath, and really live. I knew that this experience was one I wanted to continue, so I could not wait until the next class. From one day in an elementary school, I had learned more from the children than I had in my entire high school career. I learned how to open myself up to happiness, and I learned how to laugh once again at experience in all of its simplicity. I felt as though I was slowly putting together the scattered pieces of my life. I was learning that I needed to let go and be more carefree, like the children, who instinctively knew there is more to life than the hustle and bustle of everyday business. I finally understood that my worries and my constant questioning were driving me crazy; I needed to be more focused on living. I finally felt a relief; it seemed almost as though the giant on my chest had lost his hammer. Although the pains continued for a while, they became less frequent. I was able to express my feelings more openly and engage in activities that made me happy. I took time for myself and began treating myself better. As I continued to coach the children in basketball, I found that the path I was traveling became clearer when I developed a willingness to change. Coaching became the moment I looked forward to the most during the week. At the same time school was getting easier, and I was receiving the grades I wanted. I continued to coach throughout the year and learned something new from a child every day. I began to wear my smile all day long and felt a sense of oneness. Although I had been searching for answers from medical professionals, I found out the true cure from the children. The doses of life I received from them healed my anxiety.

In my senior year of high school I voluntarily decided not to play varsity soccer. I realized that it was adding unhappiness to my life, and I had vowed to get rid of all negativity. It is true that soccer used to be one of my passions; however, my life had changed. I had found something to be more passionate about: life itself.

I still coach children today, and during the summers I coach a summer camp that incorporates many different sports for a younger group of children aged four to six. Coaching has been one of the most positive experiences in my life, and I truly believe it has been the medicine I needed for my recovery. It has facilitated not only a recovery from a physical and emotional ailment but also a recovery of precious memories that I had taken for granted. When those moments come to my mind, and I once again remember playing with my sister in my youth, I am able to smile and appreciate the thrill children find in the gift of life.