

The Decade of My Herniated Disc

By Kourtney Heintz

I never expected my twenties to become the decade of my herniated disc. Four times over those ten years a disc in my spine herniated and compressed a nerve root, causing crippling pain and making it impossible to sit. I spent months alternating between lying on the floor, kneeling, and standing. All in an attempt to live around the disability.

I was lucky in the beginning. The first two herniations responded to conservative treatment. After a few months of physical therapy and hundreds of pain pills and muscle relaxants, I eased back into sitting. The third herniation required a minor surgery, a microdiscectomy, to remove disc fragments that were pressing on the nerve root.

I lived as much as I could during the lulls between each recovery and re-herniation. But no matter how careful I was, I had a permanent weakness that could flare at any time.

The fourth and worst herniation was in 2008. For nine months, nerve pain ruled my life. Phantom needles jabbed in the tip of my big toe. Fire ants attacked my calf. Lighting bolts of pain shot down my leg. An imaginary vise crushed my hip. Pins and needles in a right foot that refused to awaken. Prickling inside my spine and pressure so intense I half-expected my spine to explode.

The worst part? I could never block out the pain because it morphed as the day went on. As soon as I had a handle on the numbness, it switched to burning.

My personality disintegrated. I couldn't be me anymore. Not while my own body was torturing me.

Sleep became my only escape. But the pain escalated over the course of the day and sleep only came in stolen moments of exhaustion. The pills didn't take away the pain. They just kept me from losing the last of my sanity.

I passed many nights pacing up and down the hallway from the bedroom to the front door in my apartment. Endless loops walked to make the pain a little easier to bear.

No amount of conservative treatment worked. Physical therapy aggravated the pain. Spinal injections inflamed it. My life narrowed to enduring.

At times, I believed a bus running me down would have been an act of kindness.

Until the day I met Dr. Fabien Bitan.

He offered me the possibility of having my life back. An artificial disc to replace the flat, worn-out one in my spine. It was my last chance at a good life.

In November 2008, I underwent disc replacement surgery. I awoke with minor sciatica pain but nothing like the nerve pain I'd suffered before.

A few months of physical therapy followed. I had some sciatica flares, but the pain always disappeared. Just part of the healing process.

Seven months after my surgery, I returned to my exercise routine. I felt like my old self. Like the me I had been before the first herniation at 21. My life was suddenly mine again.

Possibilities flooded my horizon.

Because of Dr. Bitan, I went on the Sound of Music bus tour in Salzburg, road-tripped around Yosemite and Death Valley, rode in Venice's Grand Canal, and backpacked from Hong Kong to Seoul.

He didn't just rebuild my spine; he gave me opportunities I'd given up on. A chance to do everything I couldn't in my twenties. Everything I dreamed of doing before my spine problems. Everything that had once been impossible.

I know what it's like to keep getting sucked into that very dark place where pain and hopelessness surround you. I'll never forget what that period was like. And I'll always be grateful to Dr. Bitan for giving me hope, bringing me out of that place, and helping me build a life worth living.

Author Bio

Kourtney Heintz took all the pain from her herniated disc and channeled it into fiction, imagining what it would be like to be the caregiver for a person unraveling. It helped her to write emotionally evocative speculative fiction that captures the deepest truths of being human.

In *The Six Train to Wisconsin*, when Kai's telepathy spirals out of control, her husband Oliver brings her to the quiet Wisconsin hometown he abandoned a decade ago, where he must confront the secrets of his past to save their future.

This novel was a 2012 Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award Semifinalist. It will be released May 28, 2013, in e-book and paperback format from Amazon.

If you'd like to talk to her about her spine surgery, please contact her at:

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