

## THE EXPERIENCE OF A LIFETIME

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[Assignment: Tell the story of an experience you had that changed you in some way. To be effective, a narrative essay should be strongly detailed and give a sense of having evoked a strong emotional response from you as well as recreate the event so vividly that readers feel they are sharing the experience with you.]

(1) As a sophomore in high school, I contracted a viral infection causing an extremely rare disorder: Guillian-Barre syndrome. This is a devastating sickness which afflicts only one in hundreds of thousands and leaves its victims utterly helpless. At fifteen years of age, my life was completely at the mercy of the Guillian-Barre syndrome, and only machines kept me alive. I was robbed of enjoying the daily flurry of high school activity and was forced to discover sources of strength within myself which would prove vital to my survival. Guillian-Barre syndrome struck fast and struck hard. For two months I was silent and bed-ridden. This rare disease brought an even rarer experience--an experience of a lifetime. In a way beyond ordinary platitudes, ordinary experiences, I was forced to appreciate life and fight for its return. I learned about pain, learned about fear, and discovered that I too could learn real courage in a desperate battle for living.

(2) It was December 10, 1985, and I had a tingle in my toes. Perhaps because this was my birthday, I reasoned, although the accompanying headache was anything but pleasant. I enjoyed the day at school as I did almost every day. High school was busy and exciting and found me quite content. Upon my arriving home, however, I was incredibly exhausted. My energy had vanished and every move was a difficult effort. I spent the following day in bed, weaker by the hour. The tingling had spread throughout my legs and the headache would not abate. I was weak beyond belief, but too tired for active concern.

(3) Morning arrived and I knew at once that something was very wrong. I couldn't wiggle my toes and could barely stand on my feet at all. My face was heavy, and its movements forced and crooked. I was captive to a strange new weakness; my mother carried me to the car. From the car, I went to the wheelchair, then to the Emergency Room and to numerous tests and rising fear. My legs were limp and the rest of my body was quickly catching up. Soon, I was carried into bed and hooked up to a catheter and an I.V. Doctors continued their tests and toward evening finally revealed their conclusion. With solemn faces, they informed me about what they called Guillian-Barre syndrome, a mysterious sickness which now held me hostage. With that they said good-night. The hospital room seemed cold and stark. I had never spent a night there before. My mom held me close as I cried myself to sleep.

(4) Guillian-Barre syndrome is a viral complication which attacks the victim's peripheral nerves. The sheath surrounding nerve fibers is destroyed through demyelination rendering the nerves unable to function. Then, ascending paralysis sets in, and the sickness runs its course. Guillian-Barre sets no boundaries in its attack in that patients are often completely paralyzed, although the death rate today is very low. There is a bright side, however; this sickness, after an average of eighteen to twenty-four months, does mysteriously reverse itself, and 90% of its victims recover completely. The exact cause and cure are still unknown.

(5) The next morning, the doctors' words swirled angrily inside my head. I had this extremely rare condition which I could barely pronounce and which they could do absolutely nothing for. I was completely hostage to this enemy who, I was told, would at will paralyze my body entirely. The attack was far more than halfway complete. My eyes filled with tears. They could do nothing but watch me--helpless. Three days after being healthy and in school, I was being rolled into Intensive Care. The disease had attacked my lungs and the respirator was forced down my throat to facilitate breathing. I had come to this. I could produce no sound, no movement; I was petrified.

(6) Christmas came and found me at my worst. Family and friends decorated the room as much as rules would allow. A tree or some eggnog was completely out of the question. This holiday was quite a trial. My wonderful mother was faithfully by my side at every allowable moment. She daily provided the strength, support, and encouragement I desperately needed. I lived for visiting hours, though they were short. Six tubes and four monitors kept me alive and warned the nurses of trouble. I couldn't signal for help and was approaching the threatened comatose state. I fought every moment to stay awake. Days eventually became weeks as I watched the clock go around. At eight I was fed, at ten I was turned, every hour given shots, and at two the blessed visiting hours began. Cards and gifts poured in daily.

(7) It was nearing February when the doctors were finally encouraged. My vital signs began improving, marking the plateau and retreat of the syndrome. With effort I was soon breathing on my own and even eating on my own. Tubes were quickly becoming unnecessary, and I was beginning to feel like myself again. Even my hands and arms were moving. I had a long way to go but was headed there fast.

(8) Rehabilitation followed which was incredibly difficult yet at the same time so rewarding. Eight hours each day I spent regaining my strength and relearning normal daily activities. Never again will I take walking

or writing for granted. The first taste of food and the first new feel of a shower are what have changed me forever. I could close my eyes at night without fear; I was eager for tomorrow. And after just three more weeks, I was allowed to go home. From wheelchair to crutches to only a cane I progressed so very quickly. The nightmare was finally ending.

(9) The time span for recovery from Guillian-Barre syndrome is widely varied and unpredictable. I am extremely blessed to have improved so quickly. My physical state has returned to normal with the exception of one damaged nerve. Emotionally and psychologically, I believe I have made even greater strides. I am better for having had my ordeal. I can no longer take even simple acts of everyday living for granted. The two months I spent in the hospital, two months I can never and should never forget, have taught me to value the extraordinary richness of life. In living through and triumphing over this experience of a lifetime, I have also learned to value those inner resources within ourselves that we call courage.