

## On Cartwheels and Other Things

*A tall girl. Gangly. Skinny even. Waiting in a group of other adolescents. Wearing a gym suit, blue shorts, pinstripe (horizontal) sleeveless top. Looks pretty geeky. White legs are marbled and goosebumpy, and arms poke out like those of a scarecrow. Hope no one is watching. Teams are being called. The numbers dwindle. Karen Bingler is one captain. Leanne Payne, or Vanessa Bondurant, or some other magically perfect girl is the other. The tall one is not the last to be picked. Not quite. Too noisy to be ignored. She's hoping someone will remember that she can get from base to base rather quickly. Or that she made a catch (surprise, or rather, coincidence, probably) last week. The last ones to be chosen are not much worse than she is. They've called a bit less attention to themselves. They don't care (or at least don't appear to). They usually wear glasses, get good grades and play the oboe. She cares. She wants to be part of it. She gets good grades, and plays the flute. But playing the flute isn't quite the same thing. Boy can she run! But before you get to run, you have to hit the ball (fat chance!), or if you run in the field, you have to end up with the ball in your mitt (it would have to be a pretty big mitt!). Didn't make the cut on the basketball team. Tall enough. Taller than anyone else who tried out. Couldn't jump right. Legs, arms went in all directions.*

Here I am. Grown up now, and a champion athlete in my own right. I have raced in four countries; even have two full shelves of trophies. (Well, I would have two full shelves of trophies, if I were the kind of person to put trophies on shelves. Actually, most of them are just wrapped in newspaper and stuffed in a cardboard box somewhere.) It's amazing, I tell my daughter, to be grown up. Now I can choose what I do. You usually choose the things that you can do, that you want to do. Grown-ups don't have to stand around, waiting to be chosen last for the softball team. And then I tell my daughter how amazed I am that she can catch, and that she's more likely to be captain of the team than last-chosen. And she says "Oh, Mom!" or more accurately, "Oh, Mah – aaaaahm!", dragging out the last syllable of a two-syllable "Mom" to punctuate the what-would-you-know-anyway? Or she might even say, "not everybody's as un-co as you!" (the "un-co" meaning 'uncoordinated', but of course, implying 'un-cool' in my

book as well as in hers). Of course, her great-grandfather played baseball last century before my dad was born. The family legend was that he played semi-pro. (My arduous genealogical research revealed a somewhat less glamorous position in the commercial league, but that must have seemed as impressive as semi-pro to his un-co family.) The way Dad learned about his father's prowess was through a father-son baseball game at school, where he went from being, like me, last-chosen, to being the first one snapped up when the teams were called. That was not-uncool (he probably thought it was 'swell')! He couldn't believe it. His own dad had some kind of magic that didn't go unnoticed by the boy-equivalents to my Vanessa, my Karen, or my Leanne.

But, as I said, I am now a grown-up, and I get to make choices. So, twenty-three years later, I choose to go back to school. Not junior high school, but university. Finally old enough and confident enough to get a degree in fizz-ed. After all, I am a champion now. Not just some kid who can't catch a ball. I can do what I want! But there was a catch. 'Doing what I want' included a required course in gymnastics. The wheels of time started turning back...

*Gymnastics: embarrassed in front of the mats. Centre of attention. Everybody's watching everyone else. Looks easy. Why's my leg going the other way, and where are my arms supposed to be? You just step and stretch, and throw your bum up into the air. I look like a fool. Better clown my way out of this one. Give up? NO! But I don't know what to do! What are they doing? How do they know where their legs are supposed to be? Watching the others take bigger strides towards perfection. I'm stuck and can't get out. An eternal prisoner.*

And now, I am old – twice the age of many in the class. It's another liability. By breathing the same air, sitting in the same room, undertaking the same tasks, I am marginalised. Before I even start! As a kid, maybe, I could have concealed my ineligibility, my inability, my mortal flaw by acting like everyone else. But now, it shows before I even open my mouth. If I could take them for a run, they might forget that I am different, 'cause they couldn't keep up. My mana could come from my performance, as it certainly won't come from my greying hair, or my skill in gymnastics.

Most of them can do cartwheels. OK, so maybe they can't *all* do them, but they will be able to soon. They all seem to be magic too, as if they've lived charmed lives. The main thing is that they don't even seem to know about people like that girl-prisoner of yore, the distressed runner of today, and the many other prisoners who don't understand why gravity only works on them and why their clumsiness affects their lives so much...

"Just watch what I am doing, then you try!"

*yeah....right! I can't see what you're doing. Would you mind doing that in playback?. Slo-mo? And again? And again? Can I do it in slo-mo too? Then I'd have the time to put my hands and feet in those places where yours fall so perfectly.*

I could no more do a cartwheel than fly to the moon. It's not an age thing. It's just me. I can't do a cartwheel! I can run like the wind. Faster than any of those magic people, but I can't move, I can't glide, I can't jump, I can't catch, I can't dance...

The teacher, Peter, didn't say anything reassuring on that first day of gym class. Nothing like: "Don't worry, there will be some of you who won't succeed. You'll still pass the course. The important thing is to try your hardest." No "if you can't do some of the harder moves, we'll have other things for you to try." Who's he fooling? I can feel the magic dancing around all these people in the gym, and farther and farther away from me.

Handstands are the first obstacle. We start with a rolling movement backwards. "May be hard on your abs," we are told. I've got abs of steel, so this should make me feel more comfortable. I know that if my t-shirt falls down while I am inverted, I won't feel ashamed. My younger classmates might even be envious because I have ripply abdominal muscles. But surely it takes more than abs? Otherwise, I'd be a star.

The women in my group are taking this all very seriously. They assume a school-teachery 'good try' approach. I am lighter than they are, and easy to spot. With good abs, good support, and good spotters, I achieve the almost-impossible. I master the handstand in only a few sessions, though I need some help balancing, and I very frequently do something wild, like fall flat on my back, with no advance warning.

I anticipate similar success with cartwheels. I start writing this piece after the first session, convinced that I am on the verge of a breakthrough. (And yet, as hindsight will tell me, how far away it still was!) I think to myself: "In about two weeks of two classes a week, plus a few extra evening sessions, I will master this!" A still-believing fizz-ed student, I mutter about how techniques can compensate for lack of skill. I also start to believe firmly in the pedagogy that was foreign to my junior high school teachers and in the support proffered by my classmates – the support that was lacking those years ago. However, I have forgotten about magic. I still don't have that.

Over the Easter break, we bribe one of our fellow students, Roger, an accomplished gymnast, to coach us twice a week. There are some others who also want some extra help: a ballet dancer, a kayaker, a varsity basketball player, and another 'mature' student who's almost my age. She's thirty-two...

Roger is barely older than my son, and we're a far cry from the nine-year old boys he is used to coaching at his gymnastics club. He's valiantly assuming a directive posture: gently guiding and attempting to correct our deficiencies, and progressively getting more and more frustrated with me. Well, maybe not with me, but with the fact that he is impotent in his inability to advance my skill. He doesn't know what else to try and yet he desperately wants me to succeed.

One particularly awkward, very attractive young male cartwheeler can slam-dunk with his big arms and bouncy legs (his own variety of the cartwheel), and he does this periodically when there is a ball available and when mats aren't out yet. Proof of the similarity of the skills is that within two sessions, he is not only cartwheeling, but doing backward flips off the beat-board and then off the mat. Effortlessly. Like his slam-dunk-cartwheel. Pure magic!

"With these lessons, I'll be flying!" I tell myself, and I make attempt after attempt. I think I am getting there, but the kind look on Roger's face tells me I am not. I have told everyone that I am going to succeed by the end of the Easter break. What will I tell them now? I don't embarrass Roger by crying, though I feel like it.

And now it is assessment week. Or rather, pre-assessment week. Break is over and we are back in class. We all find a little space on the mat, and review our accomplishments. I do a forward roll. Dizzy. I try a . . . gasp . . . cartwheel. No go. I join another tentative gymnast. He spots me for a handstand. "You've come a long way with that!" he heralds enthusiastically, thinking he is being supportive, good teacher-like. I find him aggravating. I never had trouble with handstands. Even in the beginning! I try another cartsmash-crashwheel, and decide to give up. I am going to sit on the bench. I hope no one tries to talk to me, because I'll start bawling. Right there. In front of all those magic people.

"I'm on strike, Peter!" I mutter when he comes to inquire about my progress.

"YOU may be, but I haven't given up yet", he retorts, unaware of just how discouraged I am.

We try a down-hill cartwheel on some slopey ramp thing. It's worse than the flat ones. Introducing new apparatuses and perceptions ruins everything I had rehearsed up until then. I am more distressed than before, struggling to keep it all together. The 'confidence' word keeps getting tossed around. I am starting to hate it. Nothing is wrong with my confidence. I believe in myself, but it appears that's the mistake. There is nothing to believe in. It's all about magic and I don't have any. He suggests we try a sideways handstand. Just so that I can get the feel of where I am supposed to be. I manage that. And again. And again. My shoulders hurt. Keep going. I've got that part down. Dabbling with magic? I am hoping so.

The next session will be the test. Has any of this become a part of me? Can I go from sideways handstands into putting my feet down on the mat, preferably one after the other? A different student leads the warm-up each day. Usually it involves an aerobic-type rhythmic smile-and-do-what-I-do kind of exercise. Today is no different. And up-and-knees-and-arms-and-up! Leaves me behind as usual. Can't tell my right from my left, and can't change movements as quick as real people. Just when I settle into a rhythm, everything changes. Doesn't augur well.

Change of pace. There is a nice white stripe on the mat, asking me to go for it. I start before I have forgotten what I am there for. And I barely have time to think. Let's try a sideways handstand. And bring my legs down one at a time. It just happened. Like that. I am not quite sure how. It's not about confidence. I already knew that. It must just be magic. This time, no kind looks. Surprised faces. "Hey, that looks great!" Are they just trying to make me feel good? I do it over and over, and either there is a general class plot (maybe there is...), or...am I really getting there? Everyone says something (which confirms the fact that they were watching me all along, but somehow it doesn't bother me in quite the same way today). I have done a cartwheel! Not a grand cartwheel, or a fancy cartwheel. I am not slam-dunking yet. Just an ordinary cartwheel. But I did it. No magic. Just a cartwheel. I think I'll keep doing cartwheels every day. Just like going for a run. After all, there is a bit of magic there, too.

*Moving on. Vaulting is the next challenge in Fizz Ed 103, but I've got magic now. I can do things like real people. Like anyone else. Vaulting? Sure, no big deal! Peter hands out instructions in a matter-of-fact way. It's just another easy skill: Start with hand-springs across the mat. "They're just like handstands, with a little spring from the arms", explains Peter. No panic. No goosebumps. No marbled legs. Should be sweet. Just like a handstand, he said. Worth a*

shot. At worst, if you over-balance, you roll out: “Tuck your head, and bend your elbows.” Child’s play! I listen carefully, and think things through. I remember the kinaesthetics of the cartwheel and how it feels to be like everyone else. Tumbleweed connection. I’ll do this too. And no one’s worried about me anymore. I am just like them. No school-teacherly watching out to make sure I know what to do.

The run up’s easy. I’ve got wings, and I’ve still got abs, so up I go! Feel that balance point, arms a bit wobbly, and then one of those freeze frame moments. Help, I’m going over! Bend your elbows. What else already? Oh yeah, tuck your head. That’s two movements at once – a big ask! Too late. Crashespring. Broken toe, sprained neck (better than breaking the neck and spraining the toe, I guess). No more cartwheels for a few months, and no more courage. When the toe gets better, I am back to where I was. Un-co and awkward. The magic vanished. I thought I’d caught it, but in fact, it was just a brief glimpse – enough to put me back in my place...

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I’m loping through Ross Creek. That makes it sound like I am walking on water, or at least splashing, but no, that’s what we call the Ross Creek Reserve, a huge expanse of native New Zealand bush about four kilometres from home. You drop the “reserve” and just call it Ross Creek – everyone knows what you are talking about. I am actually padding up its hilly trails, feet firmly on solid ground. It has that incredible dark feel that only New Zealand bush can have. Little shiny leaves and manuka flowers, rusty rimu needles and cabbage trees, flax and silver fern. And then a bellbird chimes. Its clarion call is like no other sound on earth. And I can’t believe I am here. For hours, if I want, all I hear is the mantra of my footfalls, punctuated by the peal of this miraculous bird, softened by the rustle of the wind, and highlighted by the passing of another nameless runner’s breathy “hiya” as our paths cross.

In front of my computer now, instead of on the tumbling mats, I reflect upon this whole concept of magic. Forty-four now (my, how time flies!) and confined to my seat. The six inch surgical scar wrapped like a koru<sup>1</sup> around my malleolus keeps me off the beaten track. I hobble to the swimming pool, and pretend to run in that watery medium. They call it ‘aqua-jogging’ and yet it’s really ‘bobbing’. I get little pleasure out of this: FM93 ROX is a sad stand-in for a bellbird. But aqua-bobbing will have to do. Nostalgically vigilant, I let it (prepare/remind) me of the running (perhaps/never) to come again.

Do we resign ourselves to our inabilities? As in my pre-cartwheel days, I tumble. Crash, bang. Magic’s gone. But, in its departure, at least, I have finally understood where it ultimately resides. Magic lives in our choices: free to avoid the gymnastic mats if we so choose, or free to ramble over bush tracks in anonymity. As I told my daughter, I am free not to wait to be last-chosen for the softball team. However, right now, I can’t choose to go for a run, and my prognosis is guarded. Running may become a figurative cartwheel provoking nostalgia rather

than terror over my inability to perform. Being deprived of my freedom to choose takes me back, reluctantly, to the mats of junior high school, and yet simultaneously, takes me forward, with cognisance, towards the understanding and acceptance of who I am and what I can do. Even in my anxiety over whether I will ever run again, I put my fingers to the keys and watch words spurt out as if from a fountain. I find other things that help me to identify what I value and enjoy doing; all the while, grieving over my at-least-for-now stride-less existence.

It doesn't occur to me to think about Karen Bingler and what she has made of her life. Yes, she was magic, but the mats aren't before us to prove that any more. My gymnastics mats are in Ross Creek, in the pages of the academic journals who will publish my work, and in my own sense of self. It was fun to do a cartwheel. One of those at-least-once-in-my-life types of experiences. But I didn't have to do it. I've got my own special magic, and already always did.

- 1 Koru is the Māori word for a spiral shape. It comes from the curled-over shoot of the fern tip as it emerges to become a leaf.

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