**Taiga Kantane, 44**

I graduated from medical school, then from the "Attistiba" Higher School of Social Workers Professional Programme, and received a master's degree in Corporate Management from the University of Latvia.

At the age of 35, I had a stroke – cerebral infarction or ischaemic stroke. Right after the stroke, my left side was paralyzed. I was spoon-fed, because my swallowing function was impaired. My face was skewed. I was completely recumbent. I could sit only after 2-3 weeks. Thinking and memory were slowed down. It is interesting that immediately after the stroke I could not speak out, make up my mind, or make a coherent sentence, either in Latvian or in Russian, but I tried to communicate in English – which I had studied before the illness.

I worked for 16 years in medicine – in a surgery, a hospital and a clinic. All these years, daily shifts have contributed to the deterioration of the body.

Right before the stroke I worked at Zygon Baltic Consulting, an organization engaged in business consulting. I worked with clients in marketing. I did not like the work itself but it was my dream company, and I wanted to do business consulting at some point in time. Before the stroke, there were already the first clients whom I consulted under the supervision of experienced workers. That is what I was going for. However, I got a bit disappointed in the working process because the work turned out to be more painstaking and complicated. More knowledge and a better system were needed there. Maybe I was a bit afraid of responsibility. I really liked that what I knew from intense study did exist in practice. I had very good relationships with colleagues.

Before the stroke, I enjoyed walking in the woods and picking mushrooms, driving a car, resting by the sea.

The first signs of a stroke appeared at work. Then I lost my sight in one eye for 15 minutes before it recovered. That surprised me. When I turned my head sharply, I could see stars, like in a cartoon. It was even amusing and surprising. I had a headache, which is rare to me. I knew what it could be. So, I asked the doctor who agreed that I should consult a neurologist, and he immediately sent me to the hospital for examination. The very next day I was in the hospital. I was laughing, not taking the situation seriously. For me it was an extraordinary situation. I just had to go through some technical inspection.

In the evening, before I went to see the doctor, I felt goose bumps or a tingle on one side of my face. It was difficult for me to move my left leg. Then seemed to wear off, but I thought it was not good (it was not fine). Even though in medical school I did not study neurology well, a thought popped into my head: “What if it is a stroke?” Then I had an examination, but I was giggling and not taking it seriously. I was giggling for a week.

The doctor said she wanted to do a computer investigation, but we would have to wait for a week. I asked to go home, but they did not let me go. The next day they brought me IV fluid. I was still laughing like a healthy person, enjoying my ”vacation”.

In the evening around 10 p.m., I was still seeing stars when I turned my head. They looked so beautiful and colourful, as I watched and absorbed them. I took a walk, sent the guests home, took a shower, changed for bed, read a book, reached out to take the mug and froze on the left side of the bed. Then I fell off of the bed on to the floor. I said to the neighbours: "You don’t have to call anyone." It seemed that I had just slipped accidently. I was still laughing inwardly that my roommates took everything so seriously. I was sure that I would lie for some time and then I would get up easily. They called the doctor on duty that arrived with gurney and I was quickly sent for a CT scan, and after that immediately to the intensive care unit. I felt that something was wrong with the left side of my body. I wanted to leave the intensive care unit, but they did not let me go. I wanted to go to the toilet by myself, but I kept falling down. I was angry because they did not accept that I could walk. I was fighting and trying to escape, but they prevented me from doing so and tied me up.

During the morning round, I heard the words: ‘’Cerebral infarction’’. But I did not believe it. At my age it was impossible. This was just a bad dream. And the doctors did not believe it either. They checked for encephalitis and various infections. Аnd I myself did not believe it. I believed that they knew what they were doing and would treat me. I expected it to pass away. They were giving me medication but continued the examination.

When I was transferred to another hospital for early rehabilitation, I still did not accept that I had had a stroke. I thought, if only there were no visible consequences – I did not want to lose my job. I could not walk, but I was most worried about my hand because it was not moving. I thought about the fact that I was not independent –I couldn’t eat or get dressed by myself. It was very frustrating. I was bothered that I was obsessed with little things like not being able to go to the toilet by myself. I was offended by the injustice of life. I was very disappointed but it seemed that this was passing. Although the doctors told me that recovery is a long process, I checked every morning to see if something had changed. I was mistrustful of medical treatments. Everything seemed to be pointless and I had to force myself to do the exercises that I was recommended in the hospital. Sometimes I was helped by my responsibility to myself, and to my mother, who helped and supported me. Mom’s love helped me; she was just there for me.

When I was in rehabilitation, I was informed that my previous life was over, everything is going to be different from now on. I lived with a friend of mine for several years and considered her home as mine. Suddenly she said that she was selling the apartment and I needed to think about finding another place to live. I felt betrayed. Because, before that, I rented an apartment and moved in with her, responding to her call for help.

My staffs were transferred to my mother’s home in Bauska district. My co-workers took me from Vaivari to my mom's home. It was a shock to me. I was aware of the real medical care that I could only get in Riga. Here we live on the second floor without an elevator, I am sitting in a wheelchair and my mother is old. I felt betrayed. I woke up with anger and persistence, which gave me the energy to say: "I will show you!"

I spent the time searching the internet at home, looking for something and gaining knowledge. There was very little information in Latvian. I was looking for a straw to get clutch at. I was hoping there was a magic wand for a quick recovery. I did not have much strength, but I did gymnastics. Then we found a physiotherapist and it became more fun because there was someone to consult with, someone who understood something about the disease. In order to meet with him, I had to wake up, get out of bad, freshen up and prepare for the exercises.

My family doctor in Riga went on maternity leave and I had to find a new one. The only doctor available was 10 km away – in another village. It was difficult to get to him but we went there a couple of times.

At home I walked around the perimeter of the apartment 2 to 3 times a day. I had a goal – training. Then I could go without a cane. Later the physiotherapist helped me with stairs. And then the group was formed. I could walk more confidently only after six months, although I started walking after 4-5 months.

Why did I have a stroke? I think the reason were sleepless nights accumulated through my lifetime – nightly duty at the hospital, studying for higher education.... Chronic exhaustion, stress, inability to cope with them and distributing the load. To top all that, an unhappy love affair and jealousy....

As they say, stress kills. A blood vessel in my neck narrowed and a spasm occurred at some point, the stagnation of blood created a blood clot and it stopped the blood supply to my head. First of all, I was surprised that it happened to me. I had never thought of having a stroke at such a young age. Secondly, I’m a medic through and through, and suddenly I became a patient. It is very weird and funny. It felt so unreal that I found it hilarious.

I was also surprised that the stroke didn’t go away like runny nose. After the stroke I constantly asked when my arm would recover. My hand was the priority at that time. One day I met a doctor who said: “You were pretty lucky! Sometimes people’s hands do recover but not the legs. You can walk!” Then I accepted the non-functioning hand but I kept training it.

After the stroke I noticed a surprisingly large number of people that want to cash in on someone’s grief by selling pills and supplements. As a cure - all to boot. And they do it like telling some secret. I remember being offered a serum made of beaver glands but it turned out it is beneficial only because beavers eat plants... in desperation people give all their savings and get even more disappointment in return. My doctor acquaintance said, “People are ready to eat dog excrement if the price is high.” There are many such distributors in medical institutions. It is amazing how they can freely sell their products and the doctors know about it. Many people use their services. I remember feeling the specific smell of a certain drug in the sanatorium gym, it was everywhere.

When I started recovering, I tried unconventional methods. I and my friends went to a healer in the Valmiera forest. Allegedly he could perform miracles by photo. There was no result after visiting the healer but it was important that we were trying, life went on. There was an offer of Ayurvedic massage with hot stones and acupuncture at a salon. Also they were applying some oils to the head and afterwards there was a feeling of uncleanness (all the dirt and dust stuck to my head). It was unpleasant and very expensive. I understood that it wasn’t right and quit. I was offered the opportunity to listen to the “brain massage” technique on a disc. Afterwards I tried making a tincture of oat grains in vodka, a concoction of dead bees with an acacia root infusion from traditional medicine. I probably ate ten bushes of golden moustache prepared in different variations. It was all for naught.

Interestingly enough, I could drive a car before starting to walk properly. With help from my mother and friends, I raised enough money to stay at the sanatorium. There in Jaunkemeri, I was approached by a guy in a stroller and asked, “Do you have a drivers license? I need to go to the store.” An idea flashed through my head, “I need to try it! I used to drive well and a lot.” And we did. After that, I realised that not everything was lost and I was still able to do some things. Then I started walking more until I became very tired. I decided that the more I did, it the better I would become. That kind of approach was definitely beneficial. Perseverance, the desire to prove that I could do this and not backing down have all helped me. I got help from my previous job. When I got sick, the management kept my position unchanged. I had a place to return to, and it was important for me. But I didn't return there.

A year and a half after the stroke, I decided to return to Riga. I realized I could do that. I went to my previous job but we couldn’t agree on my job responsibilities – I looked too “inappropriate” to work with clients. I got a job in the welfare department of Riga City Council; they needed a person with a disability and an appropriate education (which I had) for some part-time employment. My work experience also matched the vacancy. Getting the job raised my self-esteem. A person with a disability isn’t as useless as it is sometimes thought. The last thing I wanted to do was make others feel sorry for me. The opportunity to be proud of myself and not cause pity from people appeared.

But I still had a lot of free time on my hands. And that’s when I discovered paralympic sport. At first I browsed the internet for information and talked about it at work. Literally the next day the manager gave me a phone number and said, “Here, just make a call!”

I had liked sports during my school years, it was in my blood. I thought that I was competent in sports. It turned out I wasn’t competing with stroke survivors but with people with different kinds of physical disabilities. I also realized that my skills in sports from my school years were gone and I had to start all over again. There was no agility, coordination, balance or endurance to be found. Psychological instability is when you get upset and start crying because of every little thing and for a long time.

I had to accept everything I couldn’t do and look for new ways to resist and not fail. The desire to achieve something helped this acceptance.

I found my sports by the method of exclusion. I have one active hand and one active leg. Having gone through all kinds of sports, I found the ones available to me – discus throwing and shot put. Right now it’s important for me to produce a result and not fail. In 2012, I participated in the Paralympic Games in London. Right now I’m mastering javelin throwing. For me sports are an opportunity to be more proactive in life. It is also a way of having less time to feel sorry for myself.

The thing I had to learn all over again was managing my life. It was necessary to find a place to live and arrange it (after all, it’s hard to even move in with one hand). I had to plan what I needed to buy and how to prepare it. At first I had problems with eggs – boiling them wasn’t a problem but I had a problem with taking the shell off. I had had to ask someone to take it off for me. Now I have learned how to do it but I stopped eating them. Recently I started cooking soups, learned chopping cabbage.

Doctors told me I would never be the same. I would suffer tearfulness, emotional instability, unexpected aggressiveness and sharp mood shifts. Now I try to control my emotions. The idea that this too shall pass supported me. Sometimes, however, I get angry, but then I chill.

Probably, initially you can behave like a stroke victim for some time, but then you must go on, find some new interest, and for example prove to yourself that you are able to go forward.

It is essential to create an environment motivating you to move on. At the beginning, a stroke survivor is to be invited to go out and to do something and later he will want to do this himself. Notations, reproach and discontent will mere hurt the process. I guess my responsibility to my mom and family as well as my perseverance helped me to recover.

After the stroke, I became more responsive and balanced, more reasonable since I did not have as much strength and potential. So I had to evaluate my actions.

I also made new acquaintances and had the opportunity to see and understand another side of life, the challenges disabled people are facing. I realized it is possible to live such a life and have various opportunities. I can work and charge my being with different activities. Actually, I can lead an active life. I`m satisfied with small successes and achievements and appreciate them. For example, my first unaided flight after the stroke, my first shopping, my first housecleaning. Now I can help the others with advice, support or just by being there.

In everyday life, a schedule helps - just start your routine on Monday and continue until Friday. Planning every day also helps. I schedule where to go and what to do. You have a plan and you follow it. However, only one day off is not enough. The week is busy with work, training, social activities at Vigor... Sometimes I look at the calendar and see that I have to hold out a couple of days more until the weekend. In the evenings I`m so exhausted that I fall into bed and am asleep in a tick. Well, that means the day has been done 100%!

I`m upset if I`ve got lazy, postponed my plans or haven`t done my exercises.

As for my successes, I am satisfied with my independence. It is important for me to be an independent full-fledged citizen paying my taxes. There's work, sports and Vigor in my life. After Vigor appeared in my life, I became busier and more particular about communication at the same time. First I learned about Vigor in Vaivari when a brochure caught my eyes, but I was sceptical at that moment. Later I recollected it, searched on the internet but without any result. Vigor did not have a website at that time. Later Vigor was mentioned at the employment courses I attended in Bauska but I couldn`t imagine what they were engaged with. When I met them for the first time, their activities seemed rather stupid. Later, by chance, accompanied by our chairman Marina, I joined the team. It became interesting to learn how they make something out of nothing, how everything happens.

What is still difficult to accept today are the pain and difficulties my mom faced. Now I realize what she endured and how she suffered because of my illness. I remember a Vigor-mate confessed once: “I`ve realized how much my family suffered when I smoked before the stroke. And now, if I started smoking again, it would be disrespectful to them."

If we talk about the support I need, I probably need some kind of “lightning rod” - a place to relax. Books and films help me also. I love good Soviet comedies - "Office Romance", "Enjoy Your Bath!", "Love and doves". I like the movie "Heart of a Dog", enjoy the novel “The Master and Margarita”. “The Shack” by William Paul Young helped me to accept what had happened and to begin acting.

Communicating with someone, I look for mutual interest, a certain IQ level and mental match. Generally, after the stroke I became more sensible towards the others - more critical, more sensitive to the stupidity and manipulating, consuming positions, lack of self-management, avoiding responsibility for one. I am not as trustful anymore and I am cautious in choosing people to communicate and deal with. I avoid contact with people who are unpleasant or whose points of view are unacceptable to me. But on the other hand, there are people whose presence in my life cheers me.

What can make a person psychologically disabled? In my opinion, it is firstly lack of self-interest, self-indifference, egoistic attitude towards the family and friends. I believe that recovering psychologically after a stroke means accepting the new situation, learning to get along with it, not blaming anyone and stopping looking for the reasons it happened. There is no sense in waiting for some magic pill. No one can prescribe one. And doctors are not guilty here. Each person is responsible for his own recovery. One`s perseverance and stick-to-itiveness matter. You should not believe in miracles and rely on them. You should not throw your arms down. In my opinion, for successful recovery, someone needs to understand why the illness has stopped him as it has. I don`t mean alcohol or smoking. It`s important to conceive the problems in your life that you must realize and resolve.

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By T. Kantane as told to volunteer N. Ivanova