

2022 STENE PRIZE *THIRD PLACE*

TEODORA RADOVIĆ

Serbia



My name is Teodora Radović. I am 23 years old and a graduate of the philosophy faculty in Belgrade University's department of pedagogy and andragogy. Since my second year at university, I have been the holder of a state scholarship for success achieved at university. I volunteer with kids. I like to swim when my health allows me to. I like spending time outside. I like spending time with my friends. I love music – I've been playing the guitar since I was 11 years old. Every morning I like to start with a cup of hot coffee and nice music, so I know it's going to be a good day.

I was born in Vrnjacka Banja, where I grew up with my family to whom I am extremely attached. I have a little brother. My favourite person was my grandfather who, for my 15th year birthday, made a makeshift studio where I could draw and play. Unfortunately, he hasn't been with us for almost a year. Since I was born, there hasn't been a summer when my parents, my younger brother and I don't go to the seaside together. I love spending time by the water. I think water heals the soul.

For the past five years I have lived in Belgrade. I'm currently working at a German firm as a manager, and I love my job. I like to travel, read books and watch movies. I love everything Paolo Sorrentino created.

I found out about the Edgar Stene Prize competition through the Serbian rheumatoid arthritis association (www.ors.rs/) portal and was also notified via email by one of the members of the association.

2022 STENE PRIZE - THIRD PLACE ESSAY

Accepting yourself

They say that a man is built from memories and that, in the end, one's quality of life can only be measured in accordance with the quality of one's memories. And I sincerely believe this.

For as long as I can remember, my greatest hope was that I would become a ballerina one day. I found everything about ballerinas to be fascinating. Their sophistication, grace, delicateness and boldness charmed me. The way they own the stage and carry the weight of the focus and spotlight on their shoulders, the way their slender bodies express the shape of music, the way they create pure art through their movement was – and still is – divine to me.

And indeed, the extreme dedication in reaching the goals I set for myself in life, and the fact that determination is the preliminary factor for success, would probably have made me, at worst, a slightly-above-average ballerina.

The next important memory in my life took place on a perfectly normal winter day when I had spent five years in this world. My parents took me out into the yard so we could play in the snow. Everything was just fine until it was no longer so. I remember falling into the snow and not being able to get up. I remember the pain. I remember that being the last moment of my care-free childhood. I remember the incorrect diagnoses. I remember the endless time spent in waiting rooms, waiting to be called. Furthermore, I remember unpleasant doctors, and cold and dreary hospitals. I remember pity in the eyes of paediatric nurses. I remember countless painful injections. I remember attempts at alternative treatments, ointments, desperately grasping at anything that could potentially make me feel better. I remember failures. Knocking on every door after being informed of possible treatment. Then disappointment when it failed to arrive. I remember anger. Being angry at myself, others, the illness, the entire world.

A new life

I remember that my parents never laughed as much afterwards. I also remember them hiding so they could cry because I was in pain. I remember how they grew old overnight. I remember their care-free attitude disappearing forever. What was left was fear. The established diagnosis and a new life. Hopes for a future that would never be the same. A new life and one primary hope – that the illness would not progress. That it won't hurt tomorrow. That it won't hurt ever.

(Continues on the next page)

2022 STENE PRIZE - THIRD PLACE ESSAY

(continuation from page 1. Essay "Accepting yourself" by Teodora Radović)

When you look at it like this, all of this may seem frightening – like a horrible life – but, to be honest, I would not change it for a 100 other lives. And those, truly, are words from deep within my heart. I am 23 years old now. Seventeen years have passed since I was first diagnosed. Almost five years have passed since I got the chance to lead a normal life with the help of biological therapy.

Is anything ideal? Far from it. Sometimes I cannot fall asleep due to anxiety and fear for the future. Sometimes I feel like running to the end of the world, away from queues at clinics overwhelmed due to the COVID pandemic, away from the nausea I feel due to the therapy I need twice a week, from the pain that always finds a way back just when I think that it had forgotten about me.

You may be wondering what my hopes are for the future. Actually, that's the most interesting part. If you'd asked me that five years ago, I would've described to you the life I lead now.

Have I beaten my illness? No, but I have accepted it. I've accepted it just like we accept the flaws of our loved ones.

Strength to change the world

I have accepted myself. Ever-changing, frail, in pain and in joy, in fear and in song, in agony and in prosperity. And I change. Like everyone else, I change. I have both good and bad days. Sometimes, my hope for the future is to get through the day and, sometimes, I feel like I have the strength to change the entire world. Sometimes, I feel as small and insignificant as a grain of sand and, sometimes, I feel like I'm stronger than a river and bigger than a mountain.

My hopes for the future, you ask? I try not to think about the future too much. I build it each and every new day. I breathe it in with every breath. I colour it with every new smile. I create it with every new memory.

I try to remain down-to-earth. I try to believe in a beautiful and sunny tomorrow. I try to be grateful for each new day that I've been given.

My hopes for the future are happy mornings and my first coffee of the day with my family who have been my greatest support during these 17 years of my battle with this illness. My hopes for the future are unforgettable memories with friends who accept me for who I am – in good times and in bad. My hopes for the future are faith in love, great and movie-like, because I stand behind this illness – just like any other girl who was taught that, one day, someone would love her wholeheartedly, regardless of anything. Despite this illness, I have never stopped believing in fairy tales.

(Continues on the next page)

2022 STENE PRIZE - THIRD PLACE ESSAY

(continuation from page 2. Essay "Accepting yourself" by Teodora Radović)

My hopes for the future are, as they have been so far, to be surrounded by great people about whom books or movies should be made.

Listen to my body

My hopes for the future are big and bright, because there's no reason for it to be otherwise. That's what this illness has taught me. A bit bizarrely, my illness is, to a huge extent, the creator of my hopes for the future. I'm grateful to it because it has taught me to appreciate my body and its struggles. I'm grateful to it because it has taught me to listen to my body and its needs, and live in harmony with nature.

Most of all, I'm grateful to it because it has taught me that everything is unimportant aside from what we carry within ourselves. That the most important thing is being, and living in, harmony with oneself. Finding inner peace. Accepting and embracing the pain. Consoling the sorrow. Lighting the darkness. Accepting the illness. Honestly accepting the illness. Learning together with it. Having an interest in it.

Being grateful. Every day, every hour and every second. Being grateful... For the good – and just as much for the bad. Being aware that those two cannot exist without one another – just like night and day. They give weight to one another. They give contrast and a whole spectrum of colours in between.

They give life.

They give hope for the future.