Alumni

A Life in Full

By
Jeremy Smerd '03JRN
|
Spring 2013



Irena Roman

Joshua Prager ’94CC walks with the aid of a cane and a brace to a bench outside Hartley Hall. He has shaggy hair, a muscular jaw, and piercing blue eyes. A scar remains over his Adam’s apple, where a ventilator once connected to his trachea. He sits with his stronger leg crossed over his atrophied left side, just as he did when he lived in the dorm. Back then, he kept his wheelchair as far away as possible so that

girls would think he was just another kid who could throw snowballs on the quad. Once, when an elevator broke, a professor said that he should be carried up the stairs to class by football players.

Prager had had enough. He wrote his first article in a November 1991 issue of the *Spectator* criticizing Columbia's shortcomings in complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act, passed a year earlier. Most buildings on campus were not accessible to wheelchairs, and the ramps that did exist were so steep that they were more useful to skateboarders. Two days after Prager's piece appeared, the school moved swiftly to accommodate the needs of disabled students.

Now his cane, worn down under the crook by his calloused thumb, is never far from him. He's lived longer disabled than not. "My disability is a part of who I am, and I'm very comfortable with that," he says. "I want my cane beside me even if I don't need it."

Twenty-three years ago, Prager was just becoming acquainted with the power of his youthful body. Thousands of pushups had widened his chest. He had grown five inches in eight months and could leap for a rebound and touch the rim. He felt confident in his future. Invincible. He would be a doctor, like his dad. He was nineteen.

But first, a trip to Israel to study Talmud at yeshiva.

On May 16, 1990, Prager boarded a bus in the religious Jerusalem suburb of Kiryat Ye'arim. He thought it was a public bus, but it had been rented by a family. They said, sure, he could come along.

The bus approached a bend in a steep descent outside Jerusalem. Barreling downhill behind them came a large truck. The driver of the truck failed to brake. The vehicles collided. Prager's neck snapped back over his seat and he was flung limply across rows with a force "as loud and violent as a bomb," he would later write. In an instant, he went "from the musk of the young male to the impotence of the quadriplegic."

Doctors fused his third and fourth vertebrae. He lost a few inches from his six-foot-one-inch frame, becoming "a C3–C4 quad — shorthand for a thousand neurological quirks." He lost sensation around his upper chest, but he could feel a pinprick on his buttocks acutely. On a ventilator back at New York's Columbia- Presbyterian Medical

Center, a few miles and a world away from where he grew up playing baseball across the Hudson River in Englewood, New Jersey, a deeper realization set in: *you are now dependent on everyone for everything*.

A few weeks after the injury, the swelling around Prager's spinal cord receded. Partial function slowly returned, first in his right arm and then in his right leg. He spent four months in the hospital and then four years in a wheelchair, steadily, improbably improving. Prager's greatest fear had proved unfounded: he had metamorphosed into a hemiplegic. His body was divided vertically, like a stroke victim's. His right side was strong; his left was seized with spasticity. It furled and shook. Eventually, he learned to do things himself. If his right arm itched, he rubbed it against chin stubble. To trim his right fingernails he stepped on clippers. To stretch his shoulder he whipped his left arm back with his right as he fell backward onto his bed.

The physical parts he has more or less reassembled. But Prager has struggled for more than half his forty-one years to put together the emotional pieces that shattered that spring day. "I have composed drafts of drafts for twenty years," he writes in his new memoir, *Half-Life*, published as an e-book by Byliner this spring.

Twenty years. In 1992, he made notes about the hospital. Between 1995 and 2009, he researched the accident. In 2011, he confronted the truck driver whose horrendous driving record — twenty-six violations — foretold the tragedy. He located fellow passengers, visited their Hasidic neighborhood of Bnei Brak, and over the years came to realize that they had largely moved on with their lives.

In 1996, Prager joined the *Wall Street Journal* as a news assistant, becoming a senior writer in 1999. There, he typed with one finger on his good hand. He was nominated four times for a Pulitzer Prize and wrote an acclaimed book on the 1951 New York Giants, *The Echoing Green: The Untold Story of Bobby Thomson, Ralph Branca and the Shot Heard Round the World*. Shortly after Rupert Murdoch purchased the *Journal* in 2007, Prager left to write his memoir. "I had to get it out of me," he says.

The term half-life refers to the time needed for a substance to decay by half. In Prager's case, that time was a split second — the moment of impact on the Israeli highway — and the decaying substance was not so much his young, healthy self, but his idea of it.

“All these years I’ve been wrestling with who I am today,” he says on the bench near Hartley. “Am I the result of the crash, or is there something more intrinsic to me that was always in me and remains today? It’s not comforting to think you’re the result of what someone did to you. Luckily, I don’t think I am. I wrestled with that for a long while.”

Maybe it’s his good looks combined with the vulnerability conveyed by his limp, but Prager has a knack for getting others to confide their secrets in him. He’s made a career of it: a journalistic priest who hears confessions.

In *The Echoing Green*, Prager broke open the long-held secret that the New York Giants stole signs to win the 1951 pennant. At the *Journal* he revealed that Swedish humanitarian Raoul Wallenberg’s parents had committed suicide, and discovered the identity of the only anonymous winner of the Pulitzer Prize, an Iranian photographer who had depicted a firing squad in 1979, after which the Pulitzer committee immediately invited Jahangir Razmi to New York to claim his award. As a friend put it to him once, Prager reveals “something nobody knows about something everybody knows.”

“People feel now that I will understand them in some way,” Prager says. “And in a lot of ways they’re right.”

Read more from ***Jeremy Smerd '03JRN***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
Read more from ***Jeremy Smerd '03JRN***