

# Hello Stranger



**Texas. Mid-July 2013. I am serving as the Career Assistance Advisor at Joint Base San Antonio - Randolph Air Force Base. My instructor cadre has just earned our command's prestigious Professional Development Program of the Year award, and I've recently aced my annual physical fitness test: 30 push-ups and 52 sit-ups in 60 seconds; mile and a half run completed in 14 minutes. Remarkable feats for a girl whose narrow frame once rebelled against all of the "ups" and who only ran when chased.**

I've targeted every milestone - bachelor's degree, coveted special duty position, early selection slot at the Senior Non-Commissioned Officer Academy. Promotion to Senior Master Sergeant looms on the horizon. I'm flying high.

And then...

Left hand. Fingertips begin tingling, sporadically at first, before falling forever numb.

My right foot requires coaxing to lift it when I walk and my gait grows clunky-funky.

My symptoms go from weirdly worrisome to all-out terrifying. The fingers on my right hand - my **dominant** hand - begin to curl curiously inward and lock themselves into a disobedient fist. At times, I can't dress myself, hold the phone, grip a pen. Next, the muscles on the right side of my body start to spasm and stiffen periodically, inexplicable episodes that stretch painful seconds to minutes.

On a blustery April afternoon in 2014, I took a hard fall at work. Immensely concerned, my commander rushed me to Brooke Army Medical Center. Following a series of blood tests, MRI, and a spinal tap, a dour-faced neurologist delivered news that forever split me into two people: the old, confident me... and the new me, a frightened unsure version of myself with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis.

Changes to my military career came swiftly. MS rendered me ineligible for deployment, dead-ended many assignment opportunities, and I eventually decided to retire. Bidding farewell to the Air Force was painful. When I stripped off my uniform for the final time, I wept. Without those seven chevrons affixed to my sleeve, and a squadron of Airman to mentor and lead, who would I be?

Those first months following retirement were rough. MS had bulldozed my career and derailed the carefully constructed plans I'd made for my future. I was angry. Devastated and needing time to find footing, I didn't seek employment right away. The days were gaping holes of time I struggled to fill. I read a lot and logged countless hours watching 'real' housewives peddle chunky pumps and organic blueberry muffins. It wasn't long before their incessant bickering irritated me and I offed the TV.

And then...

In the quiet of my hushed house, I flashed back to the boy-crazy summer I spent writing my first short story. It was a sweetly unsophisticated tale that centered on an unlikely love affair between the cutest boy at Andress High School and an awkward girl who sounded an awful lot like me. During that hell-hot El Paso summer before my freshman year of high school, I fell in love with storytelling. I vowed to become a writer when I grew up and fantasized about having **my** novels on bookstore shelves.

But life has a way of deferring dreams.

The demands of marriage, motherhood, and military service left little space for much else. For 22 years, the only things I authored were term papers and performance reports. But now I was confined to my home for hours each day with no job and no one to care for. I suddenly had plenty of time.

I opened my laptop and began to type. The embryo of a story formed fast. I marveled as words I didn't know I owned gobbled blank pages. I pressed my tired hands to keep pace. I felt free. Energized. Purposeful.

Five years later, those words I gleefully strung together have fashioned themselves into the pages of my first novel. A work of fiction, it tells the triumphant story of a young woman grappling to adjust in the aftermath of a traumatic life event. I found a great deal of healing in crafting this narrative and hope others will as well.

These days, I'm strangely grateful for the forced stillness of MS, grateful for re-energized

dreams and drive, despite the tingly pins-and-needles skin. A slower life-pace has gifted me with the opportunity to reignite my passion for writing and find myself again. At long last, the oldest version of myself and the new me are now fully one.

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Editor's Note: Find resources and support for veterans living with MS on [the Society website](#).