

Thank you for downloading this excerpt from my upcoming book. So far, I don't have a title for the book, I just call it “The Book”. This is pieces from chapter one, it is an unedited, unfinished draft. I do hope you will excuse any grammatical errors, typos, and excessive use of F-bombs. I write much like how I speak. And I swear like a drunken sailor on shore leave. My Uncle Jim, who was a drunken sailor, said I swear *more* than a drunken sailor! So did my US Marine now-ex husband. I'll take their word for it.

I decided to write this book for a couple of reasons. First, to tell my story, so that maybe I can help some other people take their health into their own hands and learn to advocate for themselves with their doctors. And second, because whenever I was telling my story to people, quite a lot of them said “You should write a book!”

So, here we are. And this is harder than I thought it would be really. This story goes right back to the beginning, to before a person can even possibly have memories. Though I do have memories from as far back as when I was about 2 years old. They're foggy, and just quick snippets, but they're there. Putting timelines together is sometimes tricky, and I've had to Google to look at news headlines for things that I remember happening in the world, to put them together with things that were happening directly in my own life. I don't want to get things wrong, or to mess things up, or to piss anyone off. These memories are how my brain has stored them, and my brain may or may not be damaged from years of physical abuse from my father, alcohol abuse by me, and damage from various autoimmune diseases. If you're reading this, and you were there in my life for any of it and I got something wrong, please feel free to email me at rebecca@rebaweber.ca and let me know before I send this to the publisher! I will be forever grateful.

Well, here we go. Remember, it is unfinished, and unedited, and it's just snippets! ☺

Thank you for reading,

Reba

The thing I most remember from when I was a kid was all the belly aches, and throwing up a lot. I was in and out of doctor’s offices quite often, but I never had “normal” childhood illnesses. Never had chickenpox or mumps or measles, even though my mother would take us over the neighbour’s houses when they were infected. I never got them. I didn’t get a cold or the flu very much. My sister was always getting bronchitis, but not me.

I had stuff like migraine headaches before I was 1 year old. I had belly aches, and throwing up without having a “stomach flu” or food poisoning. I was diagnosed with migraine stomach. What the fuck is migraine stomach? I often had constipation that went with it, whatever it was.

I don’t remember specifically when the throwing up started. Probably when I was an infant, or when I first started on solid foods. Back then, there was no McDonald’s on every corner, the first one in the province opened in 1968, and was a couple hours drive away! So first solid foods for babies back then were typically rice cereal Pablum, or mushy Weetabix. I remember Weetabix. There were times when almost anything I ate would come back up again.

I had growing pains that were so horribly bad that I could hardly walk some days and I cried with the pain. I remember one day trying to walk over to the neighbour’s where my mum was having tea. My knees were both so sore, and inflamed and swollen even, it hurt to walk. I was crying it hurt so bad. I think I was 5 maybe. My father told me to stop being such a baby, suck it up and stop crying so much, or he’d give me something to cry about. Pain and emotion was not allowed to be expressed in my house. At least, I was not allowed to express it. Not unless *he* gave me reason to. And even then, he’d yell at me for crying. I don’t know what he expected of me, after he’d beat me. I was just a kid!

I also had embarrassing skin rashes, all over my body. When it was bad, it would spread from my scalp, across my forehead, around my ears, all the way down my back. Sometimes on my chest, and my elbows. The rash pattern was kind of like Jadzia Dax on Star Trek – Deep Space Nine. But nowhere near as sexy. When it flared really bad, I didn’t like to go out because people thought I was contagious. And it itched like crazy! I remember having to have baths in this weird green stuff, and I had to use tar shampoo that smelled bad, and made my curly hair dry and frizzy. None of it ever helped in the least. I did notice at a fairly young age that it got worse when I was under stress. My doctor said I was too young for stress. Uh...yeah...

I was having menstrual type cramps since the age of 10. My period started at age 11, the first girl in my class. It was embarrassing. I knew what it was, and had expected it; Mum gave the 3 of us “the talk” when my cramps started. My 2 sisters are younger than me, and we had a great laugh when Mum was explaining how sex worked. I remember literally rolling on the floor, tears streaming down my face. Dad was out of the house. He didn’t want to be there for “the talk”. He didn’t have any sons. I sometimes wonder still if that had anything to do with the abuse and violence toward me.

My periods were always very painful and the flow alternated some months so heavy that I’d bleed through those extra thick pads multiple times per day. Remember those huge, uncomfortable things? Girls you’re lucky these days, what with all the lovely different sizes of Always with wings! I was on prescription pain killers for menstrual cramps when I was in high school. Some days the pain was so bad, it would make me throw up. The cramps were always accompanied by a migraine, which would also make me throw up. I rarely missed a day of school because of it though. I just always figured this was what life was. Pain. I might as well learn to live with it and get on with my day, or someone would give

me some reason to cry, as Dad would say. Some days though, I just stayed home, curled up in a ball around my heating pad, a cup of tea and a handful of whatever for the pain.

I think I was 14 or 15 when I was finally sent to an allergist for the skin prick testing. I must have been 15, because Mum was driving. She didn't get her license until I was 15. I'd done several food eliminations over the years, but was never able to pin anything down. One time we'd eliminate wheat, so I'd eat rye bread instead. Or I'd eliminate corn, but still ate all the other grains. If we had just eliminated ALL the grains, when I was like 8, I think my life would have been very different indeed. Anyhoo...the allergist. I remember my Mum took me there, we had to go into the city to the specialist, as there wasn't one in town. We sat down and the nurse started pricking me, and reminded me to not start scratching if I got any reactions. I recall the itch, and the burning. I had several big red welts up and down both arms. The doctor gave me the list of foods I was no longer allowed to eat. Basically, I was down to meat and potatoes. And wheat, and rye, and barley and oats. Corn was out, so no more Fritos corn chips. That bummed me out. He told me I could eat tomatoes though. I don't like tomatoes. But chocolate was still ok! Huzzah! Not milk chocolate though. Thus, was born my love of dark chocolate.

I remember the drive home, trying so hard not to scratch! My arms were on fire! This was the most comprehensive list of foods ever that I was now not allowed to eat. When I was younger, it was always small lists, eliminate for a couple of weeks and start eating them again. I don't remember ever being told “if this food makes you feel icky, don't eat it anymore”. I just remember, don't eat it for a couple of weeks, then you can eat it again. I remember when I was 8 or so, being told I can't eat hotdogs for an elimination. I cried I was so devastated! Hot dogs! Of course, now I know better, but when you're 8 hot dogs are a delicacy! Especially cut up and put in Kraft Dinner and smothered in ketchup! (Kraft Mac 'n' Cheese for my American readers).

I was also struggling with severe depression at this time. Someone had bought me a book “The Women's Guide to Health”, or some such. I think this is where my fascination with trying to figure out my own health started, but really didn't get me very far. This is long before Al Gore invented the internet, and long before Dr. Google. The book had a whole chapter on how food allergies can affect our moods and cause depression. It made perfect sense to me! I had a list as long as both my arms of foods I couldn't eat anymore, and I was totally fucking depressed about it! If I ate any of those foods, I'd throw up or get a migraine. Or both. I was really tired of throwing up all the time. I had a friend who was bulimic, I honestly couldn't figure out why anyone would do that to themselves voluntarily.

One time I went on a student exchange for band. I had my list of foods I was not allowed to eat, and I was supposed to give it to the host family, and I did, but then some of the foods were on my plate at dinner time. I just had this voice of my Grandmother in my head “be polite, clear your plate”. So, I ate it all, then ended up running to the bathroom to throw up. I was humiliated and the host family's Mum was horrified that she had made me sick, because she'd forgotten about my list, and that I was too embarrassed to say anything. I was being a good guest. And I didn't miss the toilet. I rarely ever do. I've had lots of practice.

That was part of my childhood lessons, don't show your emotions, and don't talk about your pain, otherwise you'll be given pain, and reason to cry. Usually in the form of a boot to the head. And try best you can to not miss the toilet, nobody likes to have to clean vomit up off the floor.

I had these weird illnesses and symptoms that nobody could see. I was constantly in pain with something. Daily migraines, stomach and gut pains. Although, sometimes my head would be pounding so much that people actually *could* see it! They could see the throb in my right temple, and my right eye would droop. I also had menstrual pains. Joint pains. Muscle pains. But I was still an active kid. I loved sports, baseball, soccer, floor hockey, field hockey, ice skating, you name it, I enjoyed doing it. I didn't really excel at anything, because of the pain, but I still enjoyed getting out to play. I sprained my ankles so many times, it's a wonder my feet are still attached to my legs. My soccer coach carried me up to my house I don't know how many times! “Mrs. Weber, she's done it again” and he'd drop me on the doorstep. I never did break any bones though, which I find odd.

I think I was 16 or 17 maybe when the ovarian cysts started. I'd never know they were there until they ruptured. This is incredibly painful! My doctor told me that one of his other patients who also had ovarian cysts had her appendix rupture, she said the ovarian cysts were worse! Whenever I had one rupture, for the next 3 days or so I'd feel like I'd been run over by a truck, but at first, I never knew what it was. For a couple of years this would happen a few times per year and the doctor didn't know what it was. I had one rupture when I was out at my high school Spring Formal! I had to go home early. I got home and threw up, my parents figured I was drunk, because...prom.... but nope, I wasn't drunk. Although, that wouldn't have been unusual for me to have been drunk, I wasn't that night, because the pain had started early, then continued to get worse. I asked my date to take me home. One other time I was with a bunch of friends at the Markham Fair, we were on one of the rides, I think the Zipper. Cyst ruptured. Ouch. My friend looked at me and she said I looked green. I asked a friend to take me home.

The cysts continued through my teens, and into my 20s. In 1988, about 2 weeks after my 21st birthday, I was in hospital having surgery because my fallopian tube had ruptured with an ectopic pregnancy. I'd been in and out of the ER for the previous 2 weeks, hemorrhaging. The ER doctors kept asking me if I could be pregnant, I said “sure, I've had unprotected sex” they asked me when my last period was. “ummm...I'm bleeding now, that's why I'm here. I've been bleeding for 2 weeks and I'm in excruciating pain!” I think I was on my third visit before they decided to just go in and look. I had been hemorrhaging for 2 weeks! The surgeon said I likely had been close to bleeding to death, or dying of sepsis because everything was infected. I was in hospital for just a little over a week. In the pediatrics ward, because they didn't have a room available in women's surgical. Lovely eh?

Post -op visits with the gynecologist of course revealed that I was unlikely to ever have a successful pregnancy. I was put on birth control pills to try to control the cysts. That never really worked, and they made me feel sick. The cysts continued, and I was back in the hospital in 1991 to remove another large cyst from my right ovary, as well as have my left fallopian tube removed, and the entirety of my left ovary. There went any chance of having a baby. I was told even IVF would have been a long shot by that point, just because my remaining ovary was scarred and damaged and not working optimally.

They left me with the one ovary remaining, to try to keep the female hormones going as they're supposed to. That never really worked either. After a couple of years, the lone ovary kind of started giving up. It was tired. I started having periods only every 3 or 4 months. Sometimes less. By the time I was 30, I think I was down to 2, maybe 3 periods per year. Still, doctors had no clue as to why.

I was off and on various prescriptions for depression. I tried so many different types, none really worked for any length of time. My weight was creeping up and up. I'd always been a rather slender size 4, then

somehow, I was up to a size 12. I went up and down from 8 to 12 for a couple of years. Then the summer that my sister was getting married, 1998, we went out and picked our bride’s maids dresses, lovely burgundy, with trains. We all matched, I really liked that dress (of all the bride’s maid dresses I’ve worn...and there have been many!) Before the wedding day rolled around, I started losing weight, and my dress was too big. But there was no time to have it fixed, so I wore it as it was. Everyone thought I was maybe anorexic, or bulimic. But nope, I was eating LOTS! But the weight was falling off. Eventually I went down to a size 0. I was bony and gaunt and I looked terrible. But for a goth chick, I looked amazing! Luckily for me, I was a goth chick!

I was drinking a lot at this time in my life as well. My boyfriend and I had broken up before my sister’s wedding, but then he somehow weaseled his way back in, and got an invite to the wedding. Not long after that we had a real screaming match, down and dirty and he took all his toys and left. So, I moved in with my cousin in a shared house in the city, and we went out to party every weekend til dawn. I no longer had a father or a boyfriend to tell me what to do, and I wasn’t going to take it anymore! That was the *most fun* time of my life. Even if I constantly felt like shit. Fibromyalgia is a bitch if you drink a lot and don’t get enough sleep. But I wasn’t going to let a little bit of pain take my fun away from me, and ruin my life. I was 30 and single, and damn it, I was going to go out dancing!

I remember more than once, I’d be dancing in the cage, either by myself or with one or 2 other dancers, and all of a sudden, my legs would give out from under me. I’d fall down and take everyone down with me. Sometimes we’d have as many as 4 people in the cage dancing. It was a lot of fun. Until my legs would give out, and I’d just fall into a puddle. I think this was a combination of all the undiagnosed diseases I had, and the excessive alcohol consumption. A lot of the latter.

On recovery days, the migraines would be blinding! I could hear the lights. Have you ever had a migraine so bad that you could hear the lights through your eyes? The fibromyalgia was also so bad by this point, that I was barely functioning, and living on handfuls of Tylenol, Advil, and Robax Platinum. Washed down with beer. They worked very well in that combination. I honestly don’t know how I kept my job. I know I was teetering on the edge, but my boss at the time was very understanding, because his wife also struggled with depression and fibromyalgia. He understood more than most people what that looked like, and did his best to give me some leeway. And I did my best to show up to work. I rarely took any sick days. I think at one point I had over 90 sick days accrued. Still stuck with that WASP work ethic, and the “shut up and suck it up” from my father ringing in my ears. I suffered through the pain, that hardly anyone knew I had.

I was also travelling a lot for work at the time, which wasn’t helping either. Airplane air is terrible, and jumping all over the continent from one time zone to another and back again every few days takes a toll. For about 2 and a half years, I was away more than at home. At first it was great, I got to see a lot of Canada and the US that I probably would not otherwise have seen. But it really takes a lot out of you. It’s exhausting. Eating hotel room service, or fast food junk day in and day out. Or airport snacks. And those little packets of nuts.

Late nights, early mornings, skipped breakfasts, lots of coffee to get me through the day. And always the handfuls of pain killers and muscle relaxants. We get them off the shelf here in Canada, without a prescription. We can even get low dose codeine over the counter without a prescription. I didn’t take it often, though. It made me constipated, and didn’t work any better than my combination of

acetaminophen, ibuprofen and muscle relaxants. Plus, beer after work hours. I always had a supply with me when I travelled to the US. It’s a wonder I have any functioning organs at all really when I think about it! I quite literally used to take a handful of this shit at least twice a day. Often more. It was the only way I could function.

It was shortly after this day that my fiancé and I decided that I would just go to North Carolina, we’d get married at the magistrate’s office and we could do the Canadian immigration paperwork. It may be easier if we were officially married we thought. HA! Not so much. But not entirely the fault of Canadian Immigration, I was (much) later to find out.

He gathered up all the paperwork and had some lawyer submit it for him. I didn’t think a lawyer was necessary, I could probably have done it myself, if my fiancé had just sent me all the required back-up. He insisted he could do it without my help. The lawyer could do it all just fine. I really had no idea what he was submitting, never got a look at it until years later. They mailed it to Immigration Canada, and after a few months of no response, I tried to have it traced. But because I didn’t have a file number, they couldn’t give me any information. The lawyer had the file number, but he wasn’t sharing. I think it was lost on his desk or something.

So, after a year and a half it became obvious that he was never going to be able to move to Canada, his application had been declined because of incorrect paperwork submitted, incorrect form of payment submitted, among other things that the idiot lawyer obviously couldn’t follow instructions on. So, we started the process for me to move to the US. I did all the paperwork myself this time! I really never wanted to live in the US, but sure, I’ll “do it for love”. That took another year and a half to get through the US immigration system. They lost our application a couple of times, there were delays because of changes in policy post-9/11, and various other bullshit red-tape system excuses.

You can imagine that after so long, and the trauma of 9/11, that the stress was getting to me after a couple of years or so! I was on anti-depressants, AGAIN, and the fibromyalgia, anxiety, mood swings, brain fog and other things were only getting worse. I was having hot flashes that I thought might be perimenopausal, and they were interrupting my sleep, when I *could* sleep. My boss who had been so understanding had been laid off from the company, so I had a new boss. She was not so understanding, and even accused me of lying about the immigration process just to get attention, and that she didn’t care if I was depressed, then she’d switch to a whisper “my sister is on medication too”, but leave it at home, work is no place to have emotions. Ummm...yeah...

I had one ally at work by that time, she and her partner were going through the exact same thing. Immigration Canada has lost her partner’s application as well. Everyone else I think had pretty much given up. If they asked me about what was happening with immigration and when was my husband going to be here, or when was I going to go there, I’d just snap “I don’t know! When I know I’ll let you know!” It’s very stressful, and when people ask you the same thing every day, “why is it taking so long?” I don’t fucking know. Ask the government!

Finally, the company I worked for merged with a competitor, and there would be another rash of layoffs. I put my hand up. Literally! And said “pick me! Pick me!” My husband was at the time undergoing chemotherapy. Again. And I wanted to be with him and fuck all this back and forth shit. And fuck my asshole boss lady who was ashamed and humiliated by her depressed sister so much she couldn’t speak

about her above a whisper. So, a few days later, I was led down the hall to the exit interview. I packed up my shit. 13 and a half years worth of shit, and literally skipped my way out of the building. I felt like Mel Gibson in “Braveheart” FREEEEEEEDOOOOOOOOMMMM!

I started making arrangements to move south in November. My mum took over the lease on my apartment. I couldn't move right away, so I just packed up some of my clothes, and planned to stay until my visa was processed, or for 6 months, whichever came first. I stayed for 5 and a half months over the winter and spring months, then had to return to Canada, because there was no end in sight for my visa. My file was lost somewhere in the North Carolina office. During my stay over the winter, we had rescued a baby Saint Bernard, who I immediately named “George”. She was only a few weeks old. An employee of my husband's had said she bought her for a friend to celebrate the birth of their baby (seriously, who buys a Saint Bernard puppy for an infant!?) and the baby-daddy was being mean to the puppy because she kept piddling in the house. So my husband called me up from work one night and asked me to come down to the pizza shop because his truck had broke down, and he needed a ride home. It was after 11pm.

Liar liar! He wanted me to come and get the puppy! I opened the back door of his truck and there she was, a little fluff ball. Totally adorable, and seemed happy to see me. I said, “well hello George!” and picked her up and cuddled her and pet her and loved her. Strangely, I didn't name her George because of that Loony Toons cartoon though. I named her George after a TV show that was on here when I was a kid, about a Saint Bernard named George. I'd always said if I get a Saint Bernard, I'm gonna name it George. And I did. She had “had an accident” in the back of the truck, but we figured it was because she was nervous about being in the car, and didn't think much of it at first.

We got her home, and I took her around the back yard for her to piddle and do her business before bed, and then settled her into a spot in the living room where she couldn't get into any trouble. We went to bed ourselves, turned off all the lights and hoped for sleep. New puppies can get scared on their own, so she cried a bit, but we thought we should leave her for a bit to see if she would settle down. She didn't. She cried and cried. And scratched at the floor. Then we heard her vomiting ALL OVER THE PLACE. I jumped out of bed and saw that not only had she vomited, quite a lot for such a little thing, but she also had bloody diarrhea, and I was scared! I yelled at my husband to come to the puppy and bring my phone so I could call the veterinary ER. They told me to bring her in right away, as quickly as we could. The ER was 25 minutes away, and it was now around 3am or so. 4 days before Christmas. I just could not let my puppy die on the Winter Solstice. I wouldn't let it happen. The poor wee fing curled up in a ball in my lap. She was small enough at the time to be able to do that. A little white and brown fluff ball.

We got to the ER and handed over the puppy, and I handed over my credit card. I said “fix her”. Tears streaming down my face. I'd known this dog less than 4 hours, and already she had my heart. I was exhausted, but we were determined to fix this puppy and take her home. We waited I don't know how long, then the doctor called us into the exam room to give us the bad news. She had parvo, apparently had for quite some time, as evidenced by the pink stain on her paw. Evidently, the previous idjits that had her had given her Pepto Bismol to calm her diarrhea and vomiting, but hadn't told my husband that's why they couldn't keep her. She was sick, and they knew it. They had a new baby, and neither one of them had a job. (seriously, who the fuck buys a saint Bernard puppy for a couple who have a brand new infant, AND no income? Ugh...) She had hook worms as well as parvo, that were causing internal

bleeding in her intestines. The vet suggested it may be best to “let her go”. I said “absolutely not! Fix her!” More tears.

We left her there at the ER hooked up to IVs and all kinds of medicines, and we went home sometime just before dawn. I had to clean up the mess before I could go to bed. The house was quite stinky by then, after several hours of the vomit and diarrhea fermenting while we were at the vet’s.

The next few days I called several times per day to check on her. The vet said she was getting better. The fever was going down, the parasites were dying, and she seemed to be eating a bit. She was still very weak, but she should pull through. We finally got to bring her home on Christmas day. We got the call while we were sitting down to lunch with my husband’s family. They always did holiday lunch, rather than dinner. It left the rest of the day to recover from the food coma. We picked up our baby George, and went home to be a family, just the 3 of us.

I don’t now how much you know about baby Saint Bernards, but they grow quickly. Females at a rate of about 3 to 5 pounds PER WEEK! Once she was feeling better and recovered from her ordeal (the fur took a while to grow back on her forelegs where they had shaved her for the IVs), she was chasing the neighbour’s kittens all over the back yard, and had me out for walks several times a day. She had so much energy! Too bad I didn’t! We were all 3 of us sleeping on the futon mattress on the floor with her, rather than paper training. I had an alarm set for every 2 hours to take her outside to pee whether she needed it or not. She only pee’d in the house maybe twice, and it didn’t take as long to train her as it had any previous dogs I’d had that were paper trained. It makes so much sense now, after doing it. Why train them twice? First to pee on the paper, and then next to pee outside? Just train them to pee outside! Sheesh!

It was a bit frustrating, being home with this puppy all the time while my husband worked “open to close” most days at the pizza shop. He said his boss made him do it, but I always wondered. He even worked New Years Eve, but had flowers delivered to me, so I wouldn’t be mad. Ugh...yeah...

So, I went home. My mum by that time had moved into my apartment and taken over the place. She was sleeping in my bed, and I somehow ended up sleeping in my guest room.

I was home in Canada for 7 months total. During that time, I was diagnosed with yet another ovarian cyst. Rather large, the ultrasound showed it was about the size of a large orange. So, I scheduled surgery, when they called me with the date, it was about 6 months away. I said I don’t want to wait that long, I already have my immigration medical scheduled, and moving truck booked. I got on the waiting list for the first cancellation, and they called me a few days later with a date in early September 2004, just a week after my immigration interview at the US consulate in Montreal. The surgeon planned to go in laparoscopically, remove the cyst and it should take about half an hour maybe an hour.

I went into the hospital, unprepared for a stay. It was supposed to be in-and-out the same day. I woke up and they told me I’d actually been under for a few hours, and I would be admitted, plan to stay minimum one week. He’d been unable to get through all the scar tissue from the 2 previous surgeries, so he had to slice me open again along the same incision. So, because my guts had all been hanging out for a few hours, I would be bed ridden for a few weeks. He also was nice enough to have removed my appendix, because he knew I was moving to the US. His wife was American, and he knew what the cost of healthcare was south of the border. He saved me a few thousand dollars by not having to worry

about it happening after I moved. He was a nice man. I felt quite lucky that he was my surgeon, and that I was in Canada, and the only cost for my surgery and my 7-day stay was to rent a TV for the week. I think my bill was \$17 or something like that.

I returned to my apartment, and slept on the pull-out sofa bed, so that I could watch TV during the day and not have to move around too much. I also got up to pack boxes (against doctors’ orders) when I felt I had enough energy. I wasn’t supposed to be up and moving around for at least 3 more weeks, but I was stubborn, and ready to move south to be with my husband. We’d been married nearly three years already!

I finally moved south the first week of October 2004, not quite a month after my surgery. I arrived there, and the husband picked me up at Charlotte airport, with the Saint Bernard puppy in the truck waiting for me. She didn’t recognize me at first, I’d been gone for 7 months! Then she jumped on me and nearly knocked me down. A rambunctious Saint Bernard puppy who is already over 100 pounds at less than a year old is difficult to tell “no!” when she wants to be your friend.

The following day, the husband left the 2 of us together and he went to work. The dog panicked and ran off after his truck, breaking her tie-out. I had to chase her down the road, and here’s me, only a month post surgery, with the scar still angry and red and sore. Yeah, good start to a new life!

I was feeling crappy, of course. Recovering from surgery is hard work, and being in a new environment, surrounded by strangers, and in-laws who don’t like you, is stressful. I had no friends there, and was told in no uncertain terms that I was “not allowed” to make friends with any of *his* friends; he actually said, “I forbid you to hang around with any of my friends”. I should have left right then...

I was there on what they called a K3 spousal visa. I had to apply for a Social Security number, as well as Authorization for Employment. I arrived in October, and was not even able to start looking for a job until January 2005. And I had no friends. Nobody to talk to. And I still felt really crappy.

The first job I got was front desk clerk at a local hotel, for \$5.75 per hour. Yep! That’s right! I had left Toronto, and a job that paid me over \$52,000 a year, to go live with my husband who apparently didn’t respect me at all, and to get a job that paid \$5.75 an hour. WooHoo! Go me! And I started to feel even crappier.

I worked second shift for a while, then moved to first shift. I wasn’t there for very long really, a few months I think. It was painful, standing all day long, with very little opportunity to sit and rest. There wasn’t even that spongy floor mat stuff behind the desk to relieve the stress on the legs, like they have in civilized places. One day my toes just went numb, and it never went away. To this day, my toes still tingle constantly. They’re not numb like they were when I was working at the hotel, but they still tingle. I asked the owner if we could get a chair for behind the desk, so that I could rest my poor feet and toes. He said “yeah yeah, sure, let me find you the perfect one...” after 6 weeks there still was no chair, so I quit. I was in pain, I just couldn’t do it anymore.

The next job I got was a few weeks later. I hadn’t been eligible for unemployment of course, at all any of the time I was out of work since I moved there, so I’d been living off of my savings, and whatever was left of the severance I’d received when I got laid off from the software job. My funds were dwindling. My next job was at a photography “studio” where they take photos of kids and families for Christmas

cards and stuff. You know the type of place. That was probably THE WORST job experience of my entire life. And I’ve had some crappy jobs.

When I interviewed, she told me it was for a photographer position, but they’d have one of their “top photographers” train me over the course of a few weeks, so that I’d know what I was doing. I showed up to work, and turns out, they’d actually hired me for a sales position. I hate doing sales. And the trainer was a horrible person. The photographer in the studio even told her she was being horrible to me, and called the regional manager to back me up when I called her to tell her what a terrible experience I was having. So, they transferred me to another studio. Further away, but with a much nicer person! I don’t remember how much I was making there...not much, \$6 an hour or something. Yep, moving up in the world!

I was still stuck in the sales position, but at least the woman there was nice enough to me, and didn’t yell at me when I didn’t understand the trade lingo, or didn’t understand the local colloquialisms. It takes time to learn a new language, and you’d be surprised how different English can be from one end of the continent to the other!

After a few weeks there, they transferred me again to a studio closer to my home, only about 8 minutes away. Here I was finally being trained to be a photographer. During the holiday season! I got a couple of days training, then they left me alone in the store! I really had no idea what I was doing! Seriously, the WORST job experience EVER. During the holiday rush, I was working lots of hours, 40 to 50 hours per week. Then immediately after the New Year, I was cut down to just 8 hours per week. So, I quit. Nobody can survive on \$6 an hour, and only 8 hours per week. And then I went to work with my husband at Domino’s Pizza. Fun, yay!

Ugh...

So there I was, after having had to quit the hotel job because my toes had gone numb, to working in a studio, where I was on my feet most of the day, to working in a pizza shop, where once again, I was on my feet most of the time. And everybody hated me because I was the boss’s wife. And I think because I was an immigrant, but of course, none of them would say that to either of us. The owner though saw my tattoos, didn’t like them, and told the other shift manager to do whatever he could to get me to quit, so that he wouldn’t have to fire me. Yeah, nice guy.

But I was there for a while anyway, and the husband and I even went on a trip to Scotland to go to a friend’s wedding. It was a glorious trip, we enjoyed it quite a lot. We got home, I went in to the shop to get my paycheck and they told me I was expected to be working that shift. I’m like...um...I just got off the fucking plane, are you serious? That job didn’t last much longer either. The husband had already left and gone to work for a different owner, and left me with the staff that hated me. And the owner who didn’t like my tattoos.

My next job was doing data entry and receptionist at the local news paper. After a probationary period, I actually got health insurance benefits! I’d been living in the US for 2 years by this point, and was never able to see a doctor, because I didn’t have insurance, the husband said he “couldn’t afford” to add me to his from his employer. So, at my first opportunity I made a doctor appointment, because I was feeling really crappy by then.

I had had a stuffy nose since I landed in the US, I figured I was allergic to something either in our house, or in our garden. It couldn't be our dogs. We had 2 Saint Bernards by this time, the female and a new male that we had rescued. They're pretty amazing dogs, so of course I couldn't be allergic to them! I had also had insomnia for the past few months, so terrible I had barely slept at all. I was constantly sweating, even in February. Granted, North Carolina is marginally warmer in winter than Ontario is, but still, they do get winter. I would get out of breath, just walking the dogs. On flat roads, with no incline. When I did have to walk up a hill, I'd be huffing and puffing, and sweating like crazy. I was in constant pain, I hadn't really been able to read or absorb anything for months, and for someone who used to be a voracious reader, that's quite traumatic. I was always exhausted, always feeling like shit. I could barely keep up with anything, life was getting away from me. My husband and I argued because I just did not have energy for housework. I could clean maybe one room per week, and sweep up dog fur when the tumbleweeds got big enough to trip over. It was bad. I wanted to just die already.

I got a full workup when I finally got to see a Nurse Practitioner at the local clinic. She called me back a few days later and asked me to come in to go over my blood work. She asked me if I'm always cold. I said "no, I'm always sweating, look at me!" "well hmmm...that's weird, because your TSH is almost nil, you are hypo thyroid, you should be cold all the time...hmmm..." (she obviously didn't know much about the thyroid). So, she referred me to an endocrinologist, and it took 3 months for me to get in to see him.

I went in, he looked at my blood work from 3 months previous and wanted to run some more, with additional tests. He said the NP was wrong, I'm not hypo thyroid, but hyPER thyroid, and alarmingly so! No wonder I was sweating all the time, and out of breath, and had rapid heart rate...oh had I mentioned that before? Yeah, my resting heart rate was almost always over 95. Resting. Even when I was lying down doing nothing. So, he took some more blood, and we made a follow-up appointment for a week or so later.

Test results showed I had Grave's disease. And this is where my story begins.