

In loving memory of my sweet Potato,

To the one I once loathed, but grew to admire,

You forced yourself into my life like a nosy neighbor, but always remained by my side.

I'll never forget the first time I gazed at our reflection together in the mirror. I couldn't tell whether I was looking at the Tin Man, R2D2 or the cleaning robot from the Jetsons.

Yes, it was you, sweet Potato, my bulky orthopedic back brace, who came into my life when I was only 10 years old, to help correct my back's scoliosis. But you stayed around long enough to make me a stronger, better person.

When you unveiled yourself to my two closest friends at our weekly trio slumber party, I had no choice but to disclose the deep, dark secret I had promised myself to camouflage: you. You became a fourth member of our trio, and we all agreed to guard your very existence. We created a secret code for you, 'Potato', so that when we uttered your name in public, no one would know exactly who you were.

But you pushed your way into every intimate moment of my life. When my sixth grade friends locked me in a closet with a boy who was my first real crush, you made sure that my braces were not the only thing to come between us. Thanks for making my first real kiss even more awkward than it already was.

Thank you, sweet Potato, for teaching me humility. For as much as I wanted to raise my hand continually in class to demonstrate my intellectual prowess, the prospect of raising my hand and potentially revealing your existence to the entire class kept my ego in check.

Without you, I might never have known what it feels like to be mistaken for a terrorist. You intimidated even the coldest of stone-faced TSA agents at the airport. You were responsible for us being escorted to that covert miniature security room that everyone fears, but very few ever get to experience. Swabbed from head to toe, I trembled in fear of the red sensor that might have put me on the list of the top threats to national security.

Let's not forget that you challenged my entire family as well. Consider the time my poor mother received an urgent call from my school regarding the deep red scratches and scars that you dug into my body from neck to thigh. I remember my mom tranquilizing herself while she defended the heinous charge that it was my parents, and not you, sweet Potato, who had tormented me in this way.

You made all of us learn to laugh at ourselves.

Were it not for you, I might not have become a successful entrepreneur as young as I did. Realizing that scoliosis is more common than most realize, I knew that other girls my age struggled with the embarrassment of lugging their own Potatoes around. And so I designed and successfully marketed designer bags for braces just like you.

You made me more empathetic and goaded me to start my own local chapter support group for other girls with scoliosis, called Curvy Girls.

You nurtured my compassion. Every yearly checkup, as I stumbled down the silent and gloomy long hospital hallway, and feeling so ashamed of you, the sight of the angelic young children receiving therapy for prosthetic limbs immediately put my own struggle into perspective.

Finally, you enlightened me and led me to understand that beauty IS, in fact, pain, just as my beloved grandmother always said. With every scar, every tear, every laugh and every scream, you unveiled my once covert imperfections and after seven frenetic and tempestuous years, I can say that you, alone, helped me discover my internal beauty and express it for everyone around me, including my once insecure self, to appreciate.