

# Chapter 1

## A Car Accident

It was December 24<sup>th</sup>. We were traveling from Piracicaba to São Paulo for a Christmas dinner party. Not very far from home, the car—perhaps because of excess speeding, perhaps because of worn out tires—skidded on the road and hit a car coming from the other direction. In the few seconds before the crash I realized that my son, who was in the back seat, could fallout onto the road if the door was opened in the crash. Then I threw myself from the seat beside the driver where I was sitting to the back seat, for holding my son. The door didn't open but I broke my neck.

I was rescued by two men who were passing by. They took my son and me to a hospital and

left us there. I burst into the emergency room saying I had broken my neck. It is the sad truth, but the doctor—a young man with a broad smile and no experience at all—made me sit down in a chair and began to fill in a clinical form, chatting with me while he did so and tried to evaluate my psychological condition.



**Zero-quota**

STOP.  
Life has stopped.  
Or was it the car?

By Carlos Drummond de Andrade.

I answered the questions controlling my anxiety as best as I could. But when the doctor

asked me if I knew what day it was—it was Christmas day—I perceived he hadn't believed a word of my story. I asked to be put on a stretcher at once and X-rayed. I was so incisive that he put aside his medical authority and gave me the benefit of the doubt. An X-ray was taken and the diagnosis was made by a more experienced doctor: two cervical vertebrae—the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup>—which doctors identify as C<sub>4</sub> and C<sub>5</sub> were fractured. And the 5<sup>th</sup> vertebra was slightly twisted by the compression.

A diagnosis of vertebral fracture is always very frightening. Anguish drowns your body as it lies inert in bed. Surrounding you is an atmosphere of mourning. Shedding tears is the natural response to the experience, but to rebel against the facts is the only possible way to face them. "Why has this happened to me? Why?" Self-pity comes at first, and it is recurrent. But I

had to accept the facts the situation imposed upon me. And I had to make a great effort for not allowing circumstances affect my inner peace.

The inexperience of the doctor who first attended me can be explained: vertebral fractures are rare and spinal cord injuries even rarer. In the United States of America, the country of statistics, approximately 11,000 new spinal cord injuries occur each year, but this is a low incidence. Statistics may account for the lack of medical training. Moreover, treatment for spine injury does not involve drugs, which is probably the reason why relatively little money has been spent on research in this area: the pharmaceutical companies are not interested.

Anyway, I had to be admitted in the hospital for rigid immobilization and traction. Painkillers and sleeping pills were prescribed. And for

three days I used a cervical traction device available only in hospitals. Thus, shortly after Christmas, a halo ring was held in place by four screws inserted in the skull. A chain was hanged from the halo ring and a five kilograms weight attached to the end of the chain.

I stayed in bed in the hospital for ten weeks. I could not move because this might put the cervical spine at risk. According to a comment made by a friend of mine, I looked like a dried codfish hanging on a hook in a grocery store.

After ten weeks a body plaster cast, which encased my entire trunk and my neck up to my head, called Minerva cast, was applied. I could get out of bed. But the plaster cast which was molded on me was very rough. Although the application was painless, it was very distressing.

In fact, by that time the equipment of the hospital where I was admitted was very precarious. The cast weight was quite considerable, restricting any movement. I had to lift a dish up to my eyes for eating, since I was unable to lower my head. It was hard to get up and walk, especially after being immobilized for so long. And the skin under the plaster became dry and complications such itching and burns were the result.

Following a friend's advice, I decided to go to an orthopedic clinic in São Paulo, just to find out if it was possible to do something—anything at all—which might give me more comfort. The orthopedist in charge was of the opinion that I should have a new plaster cast done, much lighter. This was made and I had the new Minerva cast for three months.

After this last cast was removed, I began to

wear a cervical collar. Five more months went by. Physiotherapy would have helped a lot, but I didn't know that and the doctors didn't give me this information. Nevertheless, at the end of the treatment, it seemed I was ready to go back to routine. Apparently, there were no sequels. I felt myself free. But it was castles in the sky.