When I was 5 years old, my family took our first trip of many to visit our family in India. My extended family is spread out amongst Singapore and the state of Maharashtra, where I have made countless memories. One of the earliest I can remember is when I caught malaria.

Looking back on it now, I think my family was a lot more worried about the situation than I was. The gravity of the situation didn’t really hit me until I was much older looking back at pictures. I had lost about 20 pounds, was frail, and couldn’t walk from my bed to the bathroom without help. Despite that, being the 5 year old I was, I was more than happy to sit in bed all day and watch TV in the hospital.

As I grew up, I’d constantly poke jokes at the struggle I went through when I was younger. I mean, its fun to laugh at another’s pain right? Why not laugh with the people who are laughing? One day, when I came home from school I saw my father sitting at the table with a distraught look on his face. He had just received a call from my aunt, informing him that my cousin had caught malaria. I shrugged this off and played video games in my room for the rest of the day, thinking my cousin would be alright. After all, I had malaria once. If I can beat it anyone can. It is a curable disease!

The next day, I was on a flight to Singapore. My cousin’s health had taken a turn for the worse and he was forced to be hospitalized, much like I was. Even then, I still thought nothing of it. I too had been hospitalized and was fine, so he would be too, right? I glanced over at my mother’s phone. The image she had open shook me to my core. In it, my face was pale. My cheekbones bulged out and I looked as if I was on the verge of death. “This was you,” my mother said quietly, as if it were some kind of unspeakable secret, “when you had malaria.”

[pause for effect]

When we reached the hospital, I saw my cousin hooked onto an IV and a breathing mask over his face. His breathing was labored and you could hear the breaths through the oxygen mask much like Darth Vader. Like mine was before, his face was pale and he seemed to have lost a lot of weight. My father and aunt spoke to the doctor while my mother and I went to the side of the bed. The bones from his limbs bulged out and I looked in horror as the heart monitor beeped in the background.

About three weeks after I had returned home, my cousin was discharge from the hospital in a wheelchair. The thought that what happened to him could have happened to me raced through my head. I internalized that I had the same disease he had. The thought of his situation scared me. The jokes I would make about my ailment stopped moving forward. I couldn’t bring myself to joke about a disease that caused so much pain, even though I had it myself. Seeing my cousin suffer through so much forced me to reconcile with my own mortality. However in a positive sense, it made me grateful for what I have. I am lucky to be blessed with good health. While yes, I had malaria when I was younger, I was one of the lucky ones who was able to beat it without many lasting effects. Seeing my cousin in that hospital bed forced me to recognize that good health is something that not everyone has. While I may have it now, there’s nothing to say that I won’t in the future. I should be grateful for every moment I have on this earth and you should too.