WHERE I SEE MYSELF IN TEN YEARS

Name:	**Kelera Alyssa Railoa**
Form:	**6 S**
School:	**Votualevu College, Nadi**
Country:	**Fiji**

Word count = 1497

It may be a teenaged girl thing, but my heart beats faster and takes over matters of the mind whenever I'm posed the question of what I envision myself to be in say, ten years. Off the cuff, I would probably come up with a different answer each time.

Given my predicament, however, I have more or less made up my mind about what the future holds for me. I have no time to ponder.

You see, I am not your usual bubbly, full of life Fijian girl doing the things a normal nineteen year old does. I crave to do the things that teenaged girls like to do though – day dreaming, enjoying sports and outdoor activities, traveling, socializing, dancing, jogging, going to the cinema, attending boot camp, etc.

But my top priority is to get a good education, starting with attempting, for the second time, to complete Form six schooling at Votualevu College and getting the desired grades in the Fiji School Leaving Certificate at the end of the school year.

I am two years behind in schooling and time is short. I must achieve excellent grades and go straight to do the Foundation Science Program at University next year. Other wise, I will have to settle for Form seven at the same school.

My parents are not pushing me, but I am the eldest of three children and with it come obligations. I must excel academically and set off on the mission to a successful career in medicine. Foremost, I want to make my parents proud and secondly, set an example for my two younger brothers, Samuela and Solomoni.

My choice of career has developed out of my life experiences in the last two years.

In 2009, I was a sixth former at Adi Cakobau School (ACS), a boarding school for Fijian girls near Suva. Up till the two weeks holiday at the end of the second term of school, everything was on track, at least with academic pursuit. I was getting the required grades, even though I believed I could have done better. Apart from the bouts of home sickness and loneliness, I enjoyed life at ACS. I had my circle of friends and teachers for comfort, and in my quiet time, I would thank God for them.

I came home for the two weeks holiday in August with a sore throat and swollen ankles which the school matron had brushed off, on numerous occasions that I visited the dispensary, as the effect of the cold weather that the school was known for. I was feverish for the first few days, which warranted a visit to the doctor who prescribed antibiotic tablets and a shot of diclofenac, which was supposed to reduce inflammation of the joints.

The medication somehow failed to bring any positive change. In fact, my condition worsened. The next day, I was stuck in bed with pain all over. Every movement of the limbs, or the simple act of turning to the other side, was excruciatingly impossible. I was basically paralyzed.

While my friends were making their way back to ACS at the start of the final school term, I found myself going through a regimen of traditional Fijian massage in the village of Yadua, Nadroga. Somehow, the treatment helped and improved my otherwise fragile condition. I was able to help myself off the bed and take baby steps around the house.

Flares of fever and joint pains would continue to bug me however, making me pale and helpless for most of the time. I was down in the dumps and my mood swings were getting on everyone's nerves.

It was difficult for Dad when he had to call the school Principal and concede that I was not going to complete the final term of Form six, let alone sit for the Fiji School Leaving Certificate Examination. Mum was deeply depressed; I saw it in her eyes. I guess Dad was too, but he tried to conceal it by putting long hours at work.

In September, I spent some ten days at Lautoka Hospital for a series of tests. All this while, no one knew what was wrong with me. The symptoms so far pointed to the possibility of Rheumatoid Arthritis, Rheumatic Fever, or worse still, Rheumatic Heart Disease.

Medication and more tests followed for the next six months. In May of 2010, conclusive results came back from Melbourne, Australia. I went with mum to the hospital.

The verdict shook us to the bone. I was diagnosed with Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE or Lupus).

"What the hell is SLE?" was our initial reaction at hearing the doctor read out the diagnosis. As if he was reading our minds, the doctor went on to slowly describe the disease as a chronic autoimmune connective tissue disease, adding that as occurs in other autoimmune diseases, the immune system attacks the body's cells and tissue, resulting in inflammation and tissue damage.

An agonizing silence gripped the room. I could not think clearly. Nothing seemed rational to me anymore. Every word the doctor blurted out was like a knife slowly piercing through my heart.

The doctor added that SLE can be fatal, although with recent medical advances, fatalities are becoming increasingly rare. Survival for people with SLE in the United States, Canada, and Europe is approximately ninety five percent at five years, ninety percent at ten years, and seventy eight percent at twenty years. I was being reminded in a round about sort of way that life is indeed very short.

The doctor was hesitant, for want of a more diplomatic way, when he had to say that there is currently no cure for the disease. That was the final nail. I was going down with the disease.

I soon found out that the course of the disease is unpredictable, with periods of illness, called flares, alternating with remissions. The treatment of cyclophosphamides, corticosteroids and immunosuppressant I am now receiving only addresses the symptoms of the disease. This is apart from over the counter pain killers and medicated oils that I resort to when the flares become unbearable.

My body has become a weather watch, reacting differently to the changes in the weather outside. I am becoming aware of the effect various medicines and I am delving beyond the label of each medicine to understand its use and side effects.

Being at home everyday with mum in 2010 was a learning experience. Each new day brought a lot of new things to learn. I was willing to go back to school but my parents thought that I should stay at home and get well. What an irony! I am not going to get well, and we all know it.

I have finally made it back to school this year, after a year and a term. Votualevu College is a neat, decent school which is just a five minute drive from home. I count myself very lucky to be accepted into the school. Everyone, particularly the Principal, has been supportive, but I feel that my condition has given me an unfair advantage over other students.

My fingers were shaking the day we had our first short test. I thought I was having one of those flares which happens at odd times, but this was different. My body was reacting naturally to being in a test situation after a long time.

As school life goes by, I realize that my life is being rolled out like a dice. I am living on chance. What can I do? Can I change my destiny? Must I curse God and the world and allow this disease to complete the job?

There has to be a cure somewhere, and the great thing about being in the human race is the endless search for answers. Hence, it is my one desire to study medicine and be part of the search to find the cure to this debilitating disease.

So, God willing, in ten years I see myself in the medical field, either as an internist practicing internal medicine, using non-invasive measures such as prescribing medication to treat SLE patients, or as a Pediatrician, treating infants, toddlers, teenagers, and young adults in need of treatment for SLE conditions.

Furthermore, through my career, I will dedicate the rest of my life to bringing more awareness about SLE to the women of Fiji. I want to start by getting to know people who are living with the disease in Fiji and sharing experiences that only those afflicted with the disease know.

God has his intentions and I am not going to question him nor twist his finger to point in the other direction. I believe that I have a purpose in this life, or whatever is left of it, and I am going to take on whatever I can on my fragile shoulders and walk on as long as my small legs will carry me.