Magic Feet

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A trip to the hospital, even if it's just to visit someone else, puts ones own life and health into perspective. The robust arrogance that we humans are naturally endowed with, which makes us take the precarious fragility of our normal good health for granted, gets the necessary and rude shake-up each time we enter a medical institution. Observing someone who until yesterday might have been like us, carefree and careless perhaps, now laid low by some malaise or accident, is an essential lesson for most of us.

I think these thoughts on a sunny Saturday morning as I maneuver my car across the cobble stone roads of Viale Trastevere and up the Gianiculum hills and head for the Salvatore Mundi clinic to visit a close friend. She is there for a fractured ankle and facing surgery on Monday. It seems like a simple case of middle aged bones needing to be cobbled back. Unfortunately, the problem is not the fracture itself but the fact that my friend G is suffering from Lupus, which complicates everything.

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I had no idea what Lupus was until G, my most bubbly, gregarious and physically active friend was diagnosed with it about eight years ago. All I learnt from the books was its definition as an auto-immune disease that can affect any part of a woman's body making her vulnerable to other illnesses. But what I saw from my friend's particular case was what this disease was capable of destroying. In a few years this insidious disease and its cortisone-steroid cure slowly took my slim, vivacious and dynamic friend and reduced her to a limping, bloated woman, who slowly turned in her tennis racket and took to crutches. She refused to surrender to the wheel chair for years.

But a Catch Twenty-two situation emerged when she suffered a lapse and her legs were semi-paralyzed; now, hormones and medication made her gain an enormous amount of weight, which obstructed any progress with physical therapy. Diet alone was not sufficient to shed off excess weight, and her semi-paralyzed legs under her weight made exercising her legs and feet even less effective. She could neither slim down nor strengthen her leg muscles.

The first time I saw her after her legs were semi-paralyzed she asked me plaintively: "Do you think I will walk again?" I replied from my heart, "Of course you will. I know you will walk again. We will just have to get your legs back into shape." The doctor had recommended therapy and exercise, and I gave her a pep-talk about that. Then hugging her tight I came away quickly and went straight to the nearby park where she and I used to power-walk twice a week for years. Now, strolling down the hilly, tree shaded paths bordered with flowering Azalea bushes I gave way to the tears that I had hidden in front of her.