

Two women came chattering and jogging down the path. Their laughter brushed past me like a breeze from the past. Those two friends could have been G and I, so filled with the vitality and appetite for life that even when we met to catch up on each other's news or have a heart-to-heart chat we didn't do it sitting down but while helping each other do our 45 minutes of fast-walking in fresh air.

I looked at the strong calves and firm, sneaker-shod feet of the women receding behind the distant pine trees. Treacherous body, I thought, you have stolen and broken my friend's spirit. Will she walk again? I asked the sky, the birds, the trees, the oblivious lovers sitting clasped on benches. The two women ran past me again on their second lap, and the snatches of their panting conversation and rhythmic footfalls said to me: she will walk; she won't walk; she will walk; she won't.... She WILL, I breathed raggedly as I ran out of the park.

And for a few years, she seemed almost to be winning the battle. With her own enormous resources of will and invincible spirit she continued with therapy sessions, medical treatments and diets, and hobbled her way undeterred through her life, which except for tennis, driving and walking was as pro-active as before. Her busy daily routine, and her energy and enthusiasm for life would put me and other friends to shame. She entertained as graciously at home as always and attended lunches and dinners, traveled and did all her obligations and chores as efficiently as before, leaning on crutches or someone's arm.

Then just the other day, she had an unfortunate fall in her own corridor and is now lying in a hospital bed before me, her leg in a cast, awaiting surgery and perhaps the prospect of facing an indefinite period of being confined to a wheel chair after all.

I am looking out of the window of her room in this clinic on one of the prettiest hilltops of Rome. The view outside is lovely. I had my two babies here and so am fond of this place. But today, it is just a hospital; a place of uncertainty and fear where my friend lies trapped between resignation and despair. The complex state of G's medically coordinated internal system makes any surgery a risky proposition.

"All I want in life is to be able to walk again. This is my only wish and dream..... to take off by myself on my own two feet across a floor, down the steps, over a street, a sidewalk, a park...." She is talking as if of wings and of flying; dreaming of gliding over hills and dales and valleys and oceans. She is talking of the impossible things that I do everyday without thinking.

Then she says matter-of-factly. "Actually, I would be content to just be able to get up from a chair and walk from my bed to the bathroom unaided. Just that." She gazes at her elevated sheet-shrouded limb and sighs: "Some days I simply give up hope."

I mutter empty reassurances and leave. Down the hospital corridor I pass the chapel and keep walking till I'm outside in the car park. I don't want to get into the car. Today, I want to walk and walk and walk. I want to walk for her and for me on my blessed, magic feet, my winged feet. I want to pound the paths of that shady park on Viale Musica whose music was the shared footfalls of two friends, two palpitating hearts filled with excitement about everything in life except that ordinary miracle whose regular beat on the ground we took for granted since the first step of childhood.

Today, I want to nurse my feet and take them for a meditative, prayerful walk. I want to pray against G's loss of hope, so that her surgery is successful and the path to healing and recovery is smooth, so that we can start her battle again with courage, one step at a time. I start the march of hope: she'll walk; she'll walk; she-will, she-will. ■