

Prosthesis

By Jenny Crakes

I can always hear my mother coming by the slight hitching noise of her prosthetic leg. Post-surgery and before the prosthesis, when she returned to work, she had to sit on the ground and maneuver herself up the staircase to her second-floor office, since only senior faculty could have spaces on the first. “How old will I be when my leg falls off?” I asked once as a preschooler, copying her step-hop when she tried teaching me to skip.

We have several editions of the leg around our house, casually propped in a closet or sticking out from under a bed, ready to trip me if I round a corner unaware. The system that connects stump to socket is highly imperfect. For a long time, my mother had to use a special sock with a long metal pin that screwed into place; in cold weather, the metal would cause a numb white-and-red circle on her skin. Currently, her specialist has developed an elaborate pulley system, necessitating my mother to carry pliers around in order to free herself.

No matter what, the prosthesis brings pain. I can tell by the small sigh of relief when she slips it off, by the grim set of her face at particularly taxing intervals. She has walked out of it and hit the floor several times when the connection system failed. On stage crew for our community theater, the director pulls me aside to ask in hushed tones if the work is too much for my mother, if it hurts her, and I tell him she is determined to do it anyway. Without the prosthesis, the pain can be worse. I was nine years old when my mother called me to help her out of the shower. When she leaned on me, we both collapsed to the floor; she spent a week in the wheelchair while guilt clung to me like steam.

She hasn't tried biking or ice-skating since the surgery; she tells me she's afraid. But cross-country skiing is enticing enough for her to risk falls, the blanket of snow soft enough to

keep peril at bay. Even so, the leg pulls regular antics in its contrariness. Once, the pin comes loose and rotates 180 degrees so my mother's foot turns backwards. When she bends down to fix it, the leg takes off downhill on its own ski.

Even in its obstinacy, the prosthesis is an extension of herself. It allows her to walk in relative comfort for up to two miles at a time, though she stretched that to four when we were hiking the lush waterfall trails of Hawaii. She conceals the leg subtly, the only thing my mother ever seems shy about – wearing long trousers in professional contexts, long skirts with hose for *shul*. At home, she'll pop the leg off and use it as a footstool to prop up her stump while she sits to pit cherries or watch a movie. She welcomes the curiosity of children, removing the prosthesis so they can examine it, making “Stumpy” speak to them in a cartoon-character voice that always makes my uncle exhale a mortified *Oh, please* at family occasions. When we go to the hot springs, she leaves the prosthesis in the changing room, hops to the pool on her whole leg while holding my father's arm, and other bathers watch in a kind of stunned reverence.