AMPUTATION

By Nadina LaSpina

The nurse writes down my answers to her questions quickly. She doesn’t even look thirty. She’s attractive and pleasant. She smiles a lot. I smile back at her a lot. At what age did you contract polio? When was the spinal fusion done? What other surgeries have you had? And what are you in for this time?

Doesn't she know? Is it possible that she was sent here to take my history without being told what I was in for? "I'm here to have both my legs amputated at the knees," I say, trying to keep smiling. She's looking straight at my face and smiling back at me. At least she seems to be smiling back. But the smile is frozen on her face, her eyes are blank. For a moment I'm afraid she's going to faint. She's a nurse, for god's sake! She can't faint just because my legs are going to be amputated. She's supposed to be used to this kind of thing. She must have had other patients whose legs were amputated. But maybe not. She is young, after all.

I feel guilty for having been so blunt. I feel I must try to remedy the situation somehow. "It's all right," I say in my most reassuring tone. "It's a decision I made myself. A very difficult decision. But I'm sure it's the right one." She manages to get a hold of herself. "Oh, I'm sorry. It's just that you seemed so cheerful and carefree. I thought you were in for something minor this time. I never thought... You've been through so much already."

Oh, yes, I have been through so much already. She should know, she just took my history. Tendons released, muscles transplanted, joints rebuilt, whole spine fused. Hospitalization after hospitalization. Surgery after surgery. But still so cheerful and carefree. Always cheerful and carefree. Yep, that's me! Perfect description.

"But why are you having your legs amputated?" she asks. Does she need to write that answer down on her pad?

Why?

Because my legs keep breaking. I fall and I break my knee. I fall and I break my ankle. And always at the worst possible time -- at the beginning of the semester when I've just started teaching, right before I'm supposed to leave on a most important trip, right when I've decided I'm going to look for an apartment. Every time a bone breaks it's another break in the progress of my life, my life that's been put on hold so many times for so long. It's hospitals again, and it's months of x-rays and casts, of not being able to walk on my braces and crutches, of having to use the wheelchair.

Why?

Because I've been brainwashed into believing that I must walk, no matter how heavy the braces are, no matter how difficult it is to balance on crutches, no matter how many times I fall and get hurt and break ankles and knees, no matter how much my legs hurt when, after I take my braces off at night, I allow myself to feel the pain. No matter how good it feels to sit in a wheelchair. I must walk because the general consensus is, and who am I to question, that walking is better than using a wheelchair, that using a wheelchair would mean giving up, failing, admitting defeat.

Why?

Because at this point I've totally wrecked my poor legs trying to walk on them. My poor little polio legs that while I was growing up in Sicily knew nothing of surgeons and scalpels and casts. Oh, my father took me to the best doctors in Catania and Messina and even Rome. And they pinched and poked, stuck me with needles and scared me and hurt me. But they never cut me open, never tried to fix, reassemble or reconstruct. The doctor in Rome had braces made for me when I was five but I was never taught how to walk in them. My mother couldn't stand my crying every time she put them on me so she hardly ever did. The only kind of physical therapy my legs knew back then were my mother's tender caresses, and the heat of the sun and the soothing coolness of the Mediterranean Sea. "Massage her legs and take her to the beach as often as possible," the doctor in Catania had told my mother. When I got to America the doctors shook their heads disapprovingly. "She didn't get the proper treatments at the onset and during early development," they declared. And they tried to make up for that with surgery after surgery and painful therapy till they succeeded in getting me to stand upright and had me walking with braces and crutches.

Why?

Because I'm convinced I'll be able to walk better on artificial legs. Or at least I'll be able to keep walking. The doctors don't think I can keep walking on my own legs anymore and I know they're right. But they think I'll be able to walk on artificial legs. The doctors, the therapists, the prosthetists at the Institute of Rehabilitative Medicine have been testing me and studying me and working with me for almost a year. They had me kneeling inside casts that had pylons and rubber feet attached. They took pictures of me balancing on those strange contraptions, holding onto my crutches, in my purple danskins, big smile on my face. Cheerful and carefree. Now all are satisfied that I'll be able to stand and walk on artificial legs.

Why?

Because I must keep walking. It is my duty. I owe it to my parents. My father worked so hard for years to get me to America so I could walk. My mother gave up so much, her family, her friends, her town where everyone spoke her language, to come to a foreign land so far away, just so I could walk. All through my childhood I heard my father say: "We'll go to America and the doctors there will cure you and you will walk. "Well, they didn't exactly cure me. But they did get me to walk. So I have to keep walking. How can I let my father down? Though this decision, this operation, I would not dare with my father use the word amputation, I don't think this was what he had in mind when he thought of me being able to walk in America. I have not been able to talk to him about the amputation. I start talking about it and he clams up or walks away. My mother says he'll come around afterwards, she says it's because of experiences he had in the war, seeing soldiers with their legs blown off... I believe with my mother that he will come around afterwards, that he'll be happy and proud of me when he sees me walking on my new legs.

Why?

Why are my legs being amputated? Because they're useless. Because they've caused me nothing but pain. Because they are too short for my body, too skinny and ugly and full of scars. Because I hate them. And I hate the braces, the shiny metal, the worn out leather straps, and I hate the ugly shoes I have to wear. I'll wear normal shoes on my new feet; I'll go shopping on 8th Street for pretty shoes with little heels, sexy leather boots, open toe sandals. On my new legs I'll wear stockings, flesh colored nylons, black silk, fishnet. My new legs. I'll wear mini skirts to show them off. They'll be long and shapely and smooth and soft, they'll look so real and they won't hurt at all.

It wasn't easy to decide. I wanted the doctors to tell me what to do. I wanted them to say: "You have to have the amputation, you have no choice." Like they had told Maureen who had cancer and had her right leg amputated high above the knee and walked so well and looked so beautiful afterwards that no one could even tell. I remember how at the Hospital For Special Surgery I had envied amputees who looked so normal with their beautiful prostheses while we polios had to wear those ugly braces. Maureen wore high heels and miniskirts. She went on to college, where she met her boyfriend; and would have gotten married after graduation if the cancer hadn't come back. In her lungs this time and nothing could be done.

I was the one to ask the question, over a year ago. I asked my orthopedist. "What if I had my legs amputated? Would I be able to walk with prostheses?" I never expected to be taken so seriously. "That is an option you have if you want to keep walking." And before I knew it I had a whole team working with me till they proved to themselves that I would be able to keep walking with prostheses.

They've made me feel like a star this past year. I've never had so much attention. The head of every department has taken my case to heart. The head of orthopedic surgery will perform the amputation. The head of prosthetics will make my new legs. The head of physiatry has already prepared my rehab plan. The head of the whole institute, Dr. Howard Rusk, one of the founding fathers of Rehabilitative Medicine, examined me a few times, and came to watch me walk on my weird contraptions. He tells me how much he admires my courage. Some of the doctors are even writing articles about me. All are anxious to see how well I will walk after the amputation, how much my quality of life will improve, they need to prove their prognosis is right, they want to finish writing their articles. But none of them ever said I have to do this. "It's your decision. It's an option you have if you want to keep walking."

It wasn't easy to decide. I never "decided" to have all the other surgeries. The word decision never came up. The word option was never used. For years it was my father who signed the consent forms, so happy that finally we were in America where they knew how to help me. I remember signing for the last muscle transplants since I was already of age. But I didn't feel that I was making a big decision. Somehow I always felt the surgeries were necessary. The doctors had never before said to me when they discussed yet one more surgery: "It's your decision. It's an option you have."

It wasn't easy to decide. I've been seeing a psychologist twice a week for the past three months. Do I really want to do this? Am I making a mistake? Will I regret this for the rest of my life? It's my decision. It's an option I have if I want to keep walking.

The nurse is waiting for me to sign the consent form. Not the nurse who almost fainted this afternoon. Another nurse. Older and not very attractive. She doesn't smile. I wonder if she knows what I'm in for. If she knows what I'm consenting to. It probably wouldn't matter to her, anyway. She's used to this kind of thing. I'm sure she's had other patients who had their legs amputated. She's definitely not the type to get emotional. Not like the young nurse who took my history this afternoon. I can tell she's getting annoyed now. She has other patients, other duties, other business to attend to. I've wasted enough of her time. I sign my name on the dotted line neatly with a very steady hand. "Here" I say and I smile as I hand her the form. She doesn't smile back.

At 11PM the same nurse brings me a sleeping pill and watches while I swallow it. I don't remember falling asleep.

It's still dark outside when I awake. I pull the string hanging above my head and turn the light on. I'm grateful that the other bed in the room is empty. I don't have to worry about disturbing a roommate. I look for my watch, which I thought I had put on the night table. But I can't find it. Why didn't I leave it on my wrist? The surgery is scheduled for 8 AM. They'll be here to get me ready at six if not before. I just wish I knew what time it was.

I push the covers off of me. I bend my knees and pull them up against my chest and sit with my arms around my legs, hugging them. Forgive me for what's about to happen to you. Forgive me for all the hurt. Forgive me for hating you. Suddenly I want to know exactly what's going to happen. What will they do with my legs when they're amputated, I wonder for the first time since I started considering the amputation. And I wonder why the question never occurred to me before. Will they throw them down the incinerator? Together with gall bladders, and cancerous kidneys and mammary glands? My poor little polio legs. Forgive me for doing this to you. Little polio legs that my mother used to massage so tenderly, religiously, when I was a little girl. Suddenly I want to call my mother and ask her to hurry and come to the hospital and massage my legs one last time and kiss them goodbye.

I don't realize how loud I'm crying till I hear the nurse's voice asking "Are you all right?" and see her alarmed young face in front of me. It's the nurse that took my history yesterday. She puts her arm around my shoulder and I am so enormously grateful, so infinitely glad that she's here. I want to hug her as if she were my best friend, and thank her for not being used to this kind of thing, for being unprofessional and emotional and human. "You can still change your mind, you know. If you don't want to go through with it, it's all right," she says softly. "Oh, I do want to go through with it," I say. "I'm fine, really. I just needed to say good bye."

When they come to take me to the OR, I've washed my face and combed my long hair twisting it in back of my head so it can fit neatly under the blue cap. I am totally in control. The Hispanic young man that helps me transfer from the bed onto the stretcher has a round pleasant face. He smiles at me as he covers my legs with the blue sheet. "Are you ready to go?" he asks. I give him the biggest smile I can muster: "As ready as I'll ever be!"