

SNAP! Goes the Achilles

February 2008

I have been in a wheelchair for almost two months now, and my husband has just pushed me into *San Antonio*. It's the one café in Lima that has a ramp and the space around the table is (almost) big enough for me and my chair. It also has a big bathroom—the one thing that has become most important when deciding where to dine or where to go. Lima is a bit behind good ol' (North) America and “wheelchair accessible” is low on the priority list for most establishments. In fact, I am a teacher at a prestigious, private American school, and even ramps around school are limited (I do hear they are in the process of making an elevator—too late for me though). The way I get to my classroom is to have my husband carry me, romantically might I add, in his arms, down the stairs; he sets me on a bench; then, clunkety-clunk, he pushes my heavy, 1980s wheelchair down the stairs, and puts me back in it. From 7 a.m. until a driver, my paid helper, comes and picks me up at 4:30 p.m. to take me to *Clinica Americana* for physical therapy, I am left to my own wares.

My students are sweet; a few have offered to push me around, but I am too stubborn, too independent—and by the third day, when I am tired and irritable, no one asks anymore. Some of my colleagues don't look at me in the eyes as if they are embarrassed by my condition. I have been given a single-serving, male bathroom by my class—a “Handicap” sign placed in front of it. But day in and day out, I wheel myself into a bathroom that smells of shit with urine sprinkled everywhere on the seat and on the floor. I cannot maneuver in and out of the wheelchair in any sanitary manner, so since some do not respect the sign, I choose to hold it. On the days I cannot hold it, I am forced to claw my way in and out of my chair without getting urine on my hands or shoes. And when I am done, I return to my class, and with the door shut, cry tears of frustration.

Today, as I drink my *café americano* and savor my *tres leches*, I can't help but stare. From old people to young people, from the servers to the doorman, all I can see are legs. The way they bend, move; the woman in the corner, how she crosses her slim legs at the ankles; the young man in the other corner, how he shakes his leg nervously as his teenage *enamorada* has hers stretched straight ahead, one foot turned in slightly as if bashful.

It's funny how most of us don't appreciate things until they are gone—or not working correctly. I never thanked my legs for a good workout at the gym, or thanked them for successfully completing the 4-day Inka trail, or for being able to walk me to the bathroom in the middle of the night when I needed to pee. But as I sit entranced by others' legs, I feel frustrated with mine. One is in a cast from the toes to mid-thigh, the other cast is short, below my knee and will be removed this week. I look down at the two immovable logs and think: *my toes sure look pretty*. A perfect French manicure. In Lima, even with two casts, salons accommodate clients and though it was quite an event—with two casts in the air and two women soaking the toes with damp cloths, it was well worth it.

As I twiddle my toes, and compare my legs to the others around me, I see my own husband's strong legs across from me. Those are the legs that compassionately carry me to the bathroom not once—but twice—in the middle of every night. He did ask me a week ago, “Do you really want to drink that much water before you go to bed?” I had burst out in tears. I am always thirsty. And I love water. But I have lost the independence to walk myself to the bathroom. After my frustrated waterfall of emotions, my dear husband now sets a gargantuan glass of water beside my bed every night and says: “Drink, Amore, drink,” and we both laugh. When my cast comes off leg #2, I am adamant to teach myself to walk to the bathroom with my crutches and pee by myself. For now both legs need lots of TLC since snapping both Achilles heels at the same time is not an every day occurrence.

It was December 31st, 2007—New Year's Eve in Buenos Aires. I donned a silver, clingy shirt-dress that covered black leggings, and on my feet, I wore 11cm heels (*i.e.* over four inches). It was going to be a sumptuous dinner at an Argentinian Beef House on Puerto Madero, dancing, and free-flowing wine included. For three days leading to this night of celebration, we had been exploring marvelous B.A. by foot, walking about ten hours a day. I had been wearing fashionable, crystal-encrusted totally flat—without any type of support—flip-flops. It was about 38 degrees Celsius (make that over 100 degrees Fahrenheit), so by day two, between the heat and lack of support for my aging legs, I had certifiable fankles (for those who don't recognize this 80s phrase: that's fat ankles). Still, on New Year's Eve, I was determined to stuff my swollen feet into my peek-a-boo pumps and show off my freshly-manicured, pretty toes.

We were enjoying melt-in-your-mouth steak and bold, red wine as we sat outside in the sun becoming drenched with sweat, but when the sun dropped and the DJ started to mix his Latin tunes, we couldn't have been happier. We began dancing merengue at around 10 p.m. and at midnight shared a "*Salud!*" with a friendly couple who had been sitting beside us. Then, we kept dancing. And dancing. Around 1:30 a.m. I wanted to hear "Shook Me All night Long"—one of my favorite songs. After a tip to the DJ, I heard the familiar cords of my song, and knew I would be jumping like a teenager. To avoid injury, I took off my heels.

For years, I had been teaching in heels. I rarely wore flat shoes—just sneakers—and only when at the gym. So over the years, my Achilles tendons had lost their elasticity—they were shorter than other people's who wear flat shoes and keep them stretched. By wearing flats for three days, I had suddenly, unnaturally stretched my Achilles. That's why my ankles were swollen—not just because of the heat as I had imagined. When I donned heels that night, I was actually allowing my Achilles to rest. Imagine a rubber band: stretch it out (no heels); lessen the tension (heels). When I took off my heels, I was once more asking Achilles to stretch. Then I did the unforgivable to my precious legs. I jumped.

SNAP! SNAP!

I collapsed like a rag doll and screamed: "I just broke my ankles! Carry me!" My husband, seeing his wife crumpled on the floor, was probably initially embarrassed, but he lifted me up (his 6' 1" frame has come in quite handy over the years!). He carried me off the dance floor while I screamed: "Get me an ambulance!" This from a woman who refuses to go to a doctor. Then I used the "F" word "Get me a f'n ambulance!" I am not sure what my husband thought but, within minutes, I was in an Argentine ambulance going to the hospital.

It was a miserable night in a public hospital. Two gang members were in a room next to mine with stabbing wounds and seemed to be getting all the attention. The lady in the bed across from me kept telling me, between every hiccup, she liked my outfit! And hubby was running up and down the corridors, acting like a madman, trying to get a doctor to see me. Finally at 4:30 a.m., I was lifted and carried to another room where a tall, calm doctor entered and did the "Thompson Test" informing us, without a doubt, that both my Achilles had snapped, and the only way to repair them would be through surgery. Here or in Peru, he said, "*Tu esposa necesita cirugía.*" He then told us that the Nazis used to cut the Achilles of the prisoners, so they would not run away. Without a good-bye, he left us with that final thought. Thanks.

My husband carried me into a taxi, carried me into the hotel, packed our stuff, carried me into the shuttle, through immigration (no wheelchairs were available since we had not reserved one!) and carried me onto the plane. When we arrived back in Lima at 1 a.m. the next day, all I wanted to do was sleep. So he carried me out of the car to the elevator and put me into bed with two snapped tendons. I refused to go anywhere till I got some sleep. (Yes, I'm a bit stubborn, but I also didn't really believe it. I thought everyone was overreacting; the next morning I would wake up and would have my old legs back.) But, not so. When I awoke, the pain was still excruciating, so we went to *Clinica Americana* and within seven hours, Dr. Chiappe was slicing my leg and repairing the damage. He suggested surgery on one leg as the other was only partially ruptured. How much was "partial"? He couldn't be sure, but he recommended surgery for one leg and just to isolate the other, and "then we would see." There would be months of therapy to teach me to walk again without a limp, and life would be a bit challenging.

As I sit in San Antonio and look at my legs, one emotion is overpowering. Gratitude. I will spend a few months in this wheelchair, but it is not relegated as my forever home or extra limb. Sure the last few months have not been fun, actually they've been a pain in the ass—but more than anything, I feel so thankful that my legs will work again one day. I have a special sensitivity when I see people in a wheelchair. My heart goes out to them—I wish an extra pair of working legs could go out to them, too.