Surviving The Body EMILY RAPP

Standing on a busy sidewalk in South Korea, I turned the map around in my hands, trying to orient myself. Traffic was bumper-to-bumper. Pedestrians and bicyclists vied for space on a street lined with noodle huts and digital billboards advertising cars, bourbon, cigarettes, and cruise holidays. A thick canopy of smells — car exhaust, rotting vegetables, melting tar — hung in the sweltering midafternoon air. As I stepped onto a narrow side street to escape the noise and crowds, my left leg buckled beneath me, and I fell down in a puddle of motor oil in front of a sidewalk stand.

Sitting on the hot pavement, I inspected the damage. My prosthesis had a loose screw. If it fell out, the hydraulic system in my left leg would come apart, scattering the pins and bolts that held it together onto a strange street whose name I couldn't pronounce. Two schoolgirls walking arm in arm stared down at me. A bicyclist swerved just in time to miss me and swore over his shoulder as he sped away.

I had come to South Korea as a Fulbright scholar, and now I was failing my first survival test. Allowed only maps written in Korean, twenty-nine other scholars and I had to find our way back from various drop points to the university, where we were receiving a six-week course in Korean and lesson planning. In less than a month, I would be teaching English in a public school in South Korea — if I passed the course.

I had spent my junior year in Ireland, where I'd enjoyed the challenge of making my way in a strange new country. The

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Fulbright scholarship was another chance to prove myself. I'd chosen South Korea because some of the materials I'd read described it as "the Ireland of Asia." Six months later I was on a plane bound for Seoul.

Mr. Adams, a member of the Fulbright-program staff, had told me that people with disabilities were institutionalized in Korea. "I've never seen one in public," he'd said. "It could be difficult to find a host family that will accept you." The thought that my leg might hold me back only motivated me more.

Determined to pass the survival test, I stood, my backside covered in oil, and found myself face to face with the vendor in front of whose stand I'd fallen. Wrinkles ran like water from the man's forehead all the way down his neck. He wore a visor that read, GET IT ON! Behind him, his goods were piled high: lacy pink bras, Hershey bars, outdated *Playboy* magazines, Buddha statues. I was reluctant to ask the vendor for help, but I had no choice: I could not fix the leg alone.

I hobbled over to the stand, dragging my left leg. The vendor blew smoke into my face. I did not know the Korean word for "screwdriver." I pointed to my leg and twisted my finger, trying to look exceptionally friendly. "Help?" I said.

The man gave a deep, smoker's laugh. "Come," he said, and he sat me on his stool behind the stand. He rummaged around and came up holding a tiny screwdriver. Perfect. I tightened the loose screw and stood up. The vendor's hands hovered beside my shoulders, ready to catch me if I fell, but the leg was steady.

We bowed to one another, I said goodbye and thank you, and I walked away under the deep pink sky and glaring neon.

I soon gave up trying to read the map and hailed a taxi. We hadn't been given any money for the exercise, but I'd stuffed a wad of *won* into my purse, just in case.

In 1974, three days after I was born, I was diagnosed with proximal focal femural deficiency, a congenital bone-and-tissue disorder that made my left femur develop abnormally. My left leg would be amputated, and I would be fitted with an artificial limb. Until then, I would wear a metal brace that held my leg completely straight, to keep the bone from twisting like the roots of an old tree.

Dr. Robert Eilert performed my amputation at Denver Children's Hospital in 1977. During the seven-hour surgery, my father, a Lutheran minister, refused to join my mother in the chapel; instead he walked around the hospital, poking his head into patients' rooms and asking, "Everyone OK in here?" He told me he could not pray that day. "Moving," he said, "was the only thing that made any sense."

I passed the six-week training course and was assigned to teach at a girls' school in a middle-class neighborhood in Seoul. I would teach five conversational-English classes a day. The girls, all between fifteen and seventeen years old, stood and bowed when I entered the classroom. When I spoke Korean, they giggled, their hands in front of their mouths. They wore pink-and-black uniforms and had identical bob haircuts with carefully clipped bangs. Each morning their hair was measured to be sure it complied with the school rule regarding length. Conformity was paramount, and any deviation from the norm could make a girl's life unbearable. Girls whose shirt sleeves were too long were teased. Those who were slightly chubby were ostracized. I saw one girl with acne pelted with fruit.

The initial lessons I taught were in survival English: "What is your name? Where is the bathroom?" The girls in the front row waved their hands frantically when they knew the answer. From the girls in the back, I confiscated CD players, eyeliner, a pack of Brad Pitt playing cards. Mrs. Oo, the assistant principal, informed me that I could throw the items out or keep them for myself. "That's how I got this," she said, holding up a Sony Discman.

I longed to explain my disability to the girls. I felt their eyes on my leg as I moved around the room or walked down the hall. How could I explain, in my limited Korean, that I locked myself in a bathroom stall between classes and wiped the sweaty socket to keep my leg from sliding off my stump? I wasn't ready to explain that strange, messy fact to anyone, even in my own language.

In 1981 I was the March of Dimes poster child for Albany County, Wyoming. Reporters from the *Laramie Boomerang* took pictures of me skipping rope. I showed off my sleek wooden leg as if it were the latest fashion accessory. The newspaper headline read: "Disabled Girl Is Active In Sports."

There were posters of me on the walls of my elementary school, my six-year-old face beaming beneath the March of Dimes motto: "Help prevent birth defects." I visited the governor in his mansion. I was recruited by the Disabled Ski Association. I spoke at rodeos and fairs about how normal my life was, how happy I was — all in an effort to raise money to prevent congenital birth defects like mine. My speeches began, "I have one leg, but I'm not disabled." I explained my disability away with a great deal of youthful zeal and confidence.

I loved the attention. People told me, "You're so brave. You're such an inspiration." I believed that as long as I compensated for the missing leg by being smart, cute, and inspiring, I would have a normal life. Beneath that was a fear that if I didn't prove I was normal, I would not survive in the world; no one would love me.

The days of teaching were a healthy challenge, but the nights were miserable and long. Until I could be placed with a host family, I lived in a small, white-walled room at the end of a long corridor beneath the school gymnasium. Each afternoon, as the sky darkened, I grew anxious. There were no security guards at the school. The only sounds at night were the steady drip of the showers at the end of the hall and the rattle of leaves in the courtyard. I have always been afraid of the dark. Though I left my television and every available light on, I still had trouble sleeping and woke up terrified throughout the night.

At the end of my first week, I had a recurring dream I hadn't had in more than a decade. In it, cats, dogs, and unicorns floated by in a pool of thick blood. The cats had hooves where their eyes should have been; the unicorns had dogs' legs for horns; the dogs had no limbs at all. The animals cried for help, but if I reached out to them, they recoiled. I woke up in the middle of the night hardly able to breathe. I told myself there was nothing to be afraid of. My body told me otherwise. I stared into the single light bulb on the ceiling and fought my fears until I fell back to sleep.

After a month of this, I'd lost my appetite and my interest in teaching. Every evening I sat in my room and watched television.

Finally I called Mr. Adams at the Fulbright program. I didn't tell him about my struggles, because I didn't want to admit weakness, but I reminded him that placement with a host family was a stipulation of my fellowship, which mandated a "cultural immersion" experience.

"I'm working on it," he said. "Trust me."

In December 1978, one year after my left leg had been amputated, my knee was fused in order to ensure a proper fit in a prosthesis. I was four. On Christmas Day, a body cast was fitted over me from midchest down; my right foot and calf were the only parts of my lower body not covered with stiff plaster. My legs, held apart by metal pins, looked like a wishbone waiting to be pulled in two. After the cast had set, the first words out of my mouth were "Let me out of this brick house!" Then I threw a full milk carton at my doctor, pulled out my IV, and had to be sedated.

I spent that Christmas, the earliest in my memory, on my back at home, looking up through the branches of the Christmas tree at the twinkling ornaments. While I unwrapped presents, our little dog stood on my cast and pulled on the bows with her tiny yellow teeth.

Every day my mother gave me a sponge bath and directed a small fan down the opening at the top of the cast. The cool air felt delicious, but the baths did little to alleviate the mix of horrible smells — dried sweat, crusted blood, shit — that wafted up. I went to the bathroom through a small trapdoor between my stiff, separated legs. If I needed to go at night, I had to shout to wake my parents. Sometimes I just peed in the cast and endured the smell until it blended into the others.

The body cast had to stay on for six weeks. After two weeks, my dad duct-taped a pair of skateboards together so I could lie on them and push myself around with my hands. One day, trying to entertain me, my older brother Andy wheeled me outside and raced me down the long sidewalk, which had recently been cleared of snow. In the middle of my descent, I hit a patch of ice and catapulted into the snow-packed alley, landing on my back and twisting the metal pin deep into my leg. The pain made me vomit on the front of the cast.

I looked up into the snow-heavy tree branches. The wind blew, and ice crystals dropped on my face. I heard Andy screaming my name, tasted blood in my mouth, and felt it, fast and wet, filling the left side of the cast. The sun moved over the snowy branches, and then the whole sky exploded into a glowing, sparkling white.

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