

The Running Dream

By Wendelin Van Draanen

My life is over.

Behind the morphine dreams is the dream of reality.

A reality I can't face.

I cry myself back to sleep, wishing, pleading, praying that I'll wake up from this, but the same nightmare always awaits me.

"Shhh," my mother whispers. "It'll be okay." But her eyes are swollen and red, and I know she doesn't believe what she's saying.

My hopes, my dreams, my life...it's over.

The only one who seems unfazed is Dr. Wells. "Hello there, Jessica!" he says. I don't know if it's day or night. The second day or the first. "How are you feeling?"

I just stare at him. What am I supposed to say, Fine?

He inspects my chart. "So let's have a look, shall we?"

He pulls the covers off my lap, and I find myself face to face with the truth.

My right leg has no foot.

No ankle.

No shin.

It's just my thigh, my knee, and a stump wrapped in a mountain of gauze.

My eyes flood with tears as Dr. Wells removes the bandages and inspects his handiwork. I turn away, only to see my mother fighting back tears of her own.

Dr. Wells is maddeningly cheerful. "This looks excellent, Jessica. Nice vascular flow, good color...you're already healing beautifully."

I glance at the monstrosity below my knee.

It's red and bulging at the end. Fat staples run around my stump like a big ugly zipper, and the skin is stained dirty yellow.

"How's the pain?" he asks. "Are you managing okay?"

I wipe away my tears and nod, because the pain in my leg is nothing compared to the one in my heart.

None of their meds will make that one go away.

He goes on cheerfully. "I'll order a shrinker sock to control the swelling. Your residual limb will be very tender for a while, and applying the shrinker sock may be uncomfortable at first, but it's important to get you into one. Reducing the swelling and shaping your limb is the first step in your rehabilitation. A prosthetist will be in later today to apply it."

Tears continue to run down my face.

Dr. Wells softens. "The surgery went beautifully, Jessica." He says this like he's trying to soothe away reality. "And considering everything, you're actually very lucky. You're alive, and you still have your knee, which makes a huge difference in your future mobility. BK amputees have it much easier than AK amputees."

"BK? AK?" my mom asks.

"I'm sorry," he says, turning to my mother. "Below knee. Above knee. In the world of prosthetic legs, it's a critical difference."

Dr. Wells flashed a final smile at me. "Focus on the positive. We'll have you up and walking again in short order."

This from the man who sawed off my leg.

He whooshes from the room, leaving a dark, heavy cloud of the unspoken behind.

My mother smiles and coos reassuringly, but she knows what I'm thinking.

What does it matter?

I'll never run again.

