

2014 Grand Prize Winner (Fiction)

Riding, Falling

By Sandy Hiortdahl

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Sitting on the bench in the hallway of the VA hospital, I was dismayed to see my phone battery down to nearly nothing. I reconciled myself to waiting for my friend without surfing or connecting to Facebook. The drapes were half-open on an early autumn afternoon, with a slight breeze ruffling the yellow-tinged leaves of a maple. I'd worn shorts, so the prosthesis on my right leg from my knee down was obvious, even with its fancy new "calf-like" foam covered in tan hose: I'd paid the leg-man \$150 last month for this addition so I could attend a colleague's wedding wearing a dress instead of a pantsuit. The leg, made four years prior by a company three states away, had been ugly white plastic with a rib down the back and melt-marks near the middle: a hideous thing.

Well-meaning people told me, "That shouldn't matter! Wear it and be proud!" These were people without an obvious physical difference, and I found it hard to explain how my hesitation wasn't shame but a sodden disappointment. Wasn't the idea behind getting all fancied up for a wedding to look nice? How could one do that with a plastic, half-melted ribbed stick for a leg? I wasn't trying to hide my disability, only to pretty it up a bit and wear a dress. I wanted people's first thought to be "Nice dress!" and not "Oh, look how brave she is!"

I felt someone watching me and saw a guy in his thirties in a wheelchair parked in the doorway to the larger waiting room. His crew-cut hair was sand-colored, his eyes a bright blue as he squinted at me. He wore military-issue khakis and his left pants leg hung empty and had been bunched and pinned. His arms were folded across his chest and he was slumped down, but when I met his gaze he wheeled himself into the hall. "Better view out here," he said, "It's like a tomb in there. And I guess they'll find me when it's my time. It's not like I'm gonna get very far."

I knew people, like the friend I waited for, who regularly "rolled" 5k races in their chairs, who could roll faster than I could run on one and a half legs, but instead I said, "Much better view." I could almost hear the slight clapping sound of the leaves in the highest branches and smell the mown clover from the big tractors traversing the lawns.

He rolled closer. "Rick," he said, extending his hand.

"Del," I said, shaking it.

"Army here," he said, "You?"

"Nope. Just waiting for a friend."

He seemed to pull back a little, and then motioned to my prosthesis. "Sorry. I assumed." And then he asked, "Car accident?"

“Natural,” I said, “Born this way.”

“Oh. Not the same.” He seemed disappointed, but he was right, it wasn’t anything like the same. He’d no doubt gotten his leg blown off in combat, but I’d simply been born without one. Having worked one summer with a prosthesis-maker, I’d witnessed the trauma experienced by folks who’d lost a limb through car accidents, operations, or explosions: the loss was personal, visceral. For me, it was instead an altered existence from the start. I wanted to tell him that I did understand some of current experience, and I wanted to be helpful, but I wasn’t sure how to do so without making it seem like I was trying to equate our disabled states.

I focused on the outside and in considering the approaching autumn I was taken back to my childhood on a small farm. I was eight years old and my parents’ version of riding lessons involved teaching me how to saddle a Chincoteague pony named Brownie and then setting me on his back with the advice, “Don’t hold onto the saddle horn or you’ll break your arm. Good luck!” For the next six weeks, I saddled and rode Brownie off into the fields. Every single day, Brownie found a way to unseat me from that saddle. I learned how to relax completely while sailing through midair so as to lessen the pain of hitting the ground.

Brownie took me through rose briar patches, plunged under pine boughs that would’ve all but decapitated me had I not bailed, scraped me against the barbed wire fence posts that led to the big field out front (luckily he only thought to do this on our journey *out* and so it got my right leg, ripping my jeans and scarring my prosthesis and not my actual left leg). On several occasions, he jogged me to the middle of our garden and bucked me off in a patch of overripe tomatoes, covering me in pulpy tomato goo. One October day he led me down into the middle of the farm pond, the muddy cold water rising up past his chest, covering my knees. Then he simply stopped and refused to budge. After ten minutes of me yelling and kicking his sides and pleading with him, I got off and swam to shore. He followed me back to the barn. By the end of the sixth week, I could stay on him or any other horse we owned no matter what happened. And Brownie and I developed a grudging mutual respect.

It was only in later years that I realized I’d been at a definite disadvantage with Brownie because the prosthesis went from the knee down and I couldn’t hug tight to the saddle, nor did I have a right foot in the stirrup but only an approximation with the plastic foot. My balance was always off, as a result. But my parents had treated me like all of the other kids on the farm and told me simply to ‘keep trying’ and I’d get better at it. In those six weeks of falling off, I’d mastered incredible skills in both maintaining balance and losing it. At the end of it, I knew how to ride and I knew how to fall. This was quite an advantage compared to Rick, it seemed to me.

I said softly, “I appreciate your sacrifice.”

He nodded and smiled a little. “It’s not like I chose it. It just happened.”

“You knew the risks when you signed up, though. Right?”

“Yeah, I did, but I... I don’t know if I really understood what it might mean. Everything in my entire life will be different from what I expected it to be. And much harder.”

“Yeah,” I said. It was like he’d just been set in the saddle and told not to hold onto the saddle horn. There would be a lot of falling off, a great many briar patches and at least a few

ponds to swim. And while I could've at any time decided I didn't want to ride the pony anymore, if Rick wanted any sort of shot at a real adult life, he'd have to keep trying.

His expression clouded. "I'm here for another fitting of the prosthesis. Last time it hurt like freaking hell. Sorry for my language."

I didn't want to presume I knew what he was going through, but I'd gotten a new prosthesis every year while I was growing, and still get one every four years as an adult. It does hurt like hell nearly every time, even now. Once, at age six, I threw the prosthesis across the room, accidentally breaking my mother's favorite McCoy planter, and told her I wasn't wearing it ever again. She'd pursed her lips and said she understood, and went to get me Kool-Aid. As I waited for her, I realized I'd thrown the thing out of my reach and I was stranded on the sofa. I called for her to go and fetch it for me, but she didn't answer. I called a second time and a third. Then I launched myself onto the floor and used my hands and my left knee to crawl over. The prosthesis was covered in plant dirt. I put it on and stood. I was cleaning up the mess when she came back in with the Kool-Aid.

Again, I didn't want to be presumptuous. The man had been in combat and who knew what he had seen, what he had gone through. But if I said nothing, it was like saying he was so far out of my world as to be an alien. And he probably faced a lot of that from all quarters. Taking a chance, I said, "It gets easier. It always hurts, but you know better what to expect and how to adapt to the hurt."

He'd hung his head but looked to me up from under. "You're sure?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's going to be bad, but you're going to make it through."

For a long time, he looked at me and then he sat up straighter. "I've survived some tough situations."

"Yeah," I said, "And you made it through to now because you're tough enough."

"Yes," he said. "I've made it to now. *I have* made it to now."

"Right," I said. "And every time life bucks you off, you get back up again."

"My Staff Sergeant called me 'Pit Bull' Williamson 'cause once I decide a thing and clamp down, I never let go."

"Good," I said, "That stubbornness will keep you in good stead." For some of us it's about riding and falling, while for others it's about clamping and holding and I'm sure there are some of us out there who prefer the 'bending without breaking' image. Whatever: it means not letting oneself get taken over by the difficulties; it means keeping oneself on task to survive. Sometimes, for me, it even means something as superficial as not denying myself the opportunity to go to a wedding wearing a nice dress.

A nurse came out of the waiting room area and asked if he were Richard Williamson, said they were ready for him now. He nodded to her and then extended his hand to me. "Hang tough, Del," he said, "And thanks."

"Thank *you*," I said, and closed my fingers around his, squeezed once. We both looked out at the tree. A stronger wind had caused a shower of yellow leaves to swirl in front of the window. They buoyed down and settled in a lucky heap on the grass.