Complicated Footwork

"OK, now switch to the other foot," I whispered as I lay on my back, eyes shut. I could feel the slowing rhythm of my husband's hands, the left-foot massage drawing to an end.

He patted the bottom of my foot and covered it with the stiff hospital sheet. He cradled my right foot and repeated the massage. He worked from heel to toes, rubbing each detail—the tendons of the arch, the fragile bones along the outside of the foot, the pads of each toe.

I was thin when we married six months earlier. I was skeletal in the hospital, sapped by a common digestive disorder that ran amok in my body. It knew no bounds as it fed on vital organs. My once-sculpted face was bloated with steroids. I looked like a child's depiction of a human being: a stick figure with a basketball for a head. My husband's calloused hands on my bony feet flooded me with warmth, muting the beeps of the machines at my bedside, smoothing the jarring commands over the intercom, diluting the smell of bleach in the sheets.

"God, that feels good. Thank you, Honey." I wanted my husband to know I appreciated him. But mostly I wanted him to feel guilty if he stopped. The massages transported me to a pain-free, euphoric state. When I shut my eyes, I imagined the seductive tranquility of the afterlife.

I thought my husband felt betrayed by the wife he saw at the other end of the bed He married one woman, and now had this, nothing like the original.

When he gave me an engagement ring, I noticed it was a little loose. "I guess it's good to have a little room to grow in case I gain weight."

"Get it adjusted to fit you. You won't need a ring if you gain weight. I'll divorce you."

We laughed, howling barks that left us in tears. Barely in our thirties, we couldn't fathom change in our lives, unable to imagine even the benign adjustment of a weight gain. We found the notion hilarious.

Laughter was the fuel of our marriage. We shared a dead-panned comedic timing that could disarm the other instantly. Our humor healed wounds, nudged arguments to reconciliation, and bonded us in a private view of the world.

Lying in the hospital bed, I found nothing funny.

I was seriously ill, preoccupied with pain, and interested only in that which relieved it. Nothing but my hands and feet could be touched without risk of agony. I lay stiffly on my back, furious if a nurse wanted me to turn over; I bullied her for additional narcotics before I'd comply.

Each evening when my husband came to the hospital, I basked in Demerol and listened to accounts of the workday, gossip among friends. I smiled lazily, but resented the people he mentioned, people living untethered to a hospital bed. I hated to look at him, healthy, muscular, climbing the stairs to the ninth floor of the hospital where I lay. I could barely remember the feeling of a useful body, a body that stretched across the tennis court, a body that negotiated moguls on a ski slope, a body that groaned against my husband.

He delivered his daily accounts at my bedside, his two hands wrapped around one of mine. I nodded at his words, as if we were in our kitchen having coffee, morning light splashed across the oak of the table, dots of water and coffee glinting in the sun.

Beneath my glazed veneer, I waited for him to drop my hand and move to the end of the bed to take my foot, the signal I could close my eyes and imagine heaven.

We married in 1985 after an intense and brief romance. After the honeymoon, we staked territories in the home we shared, a home that two weeks earlier had been his exclusive property.

"I'd like to hang my shadow box right here," I said one evening, pointing to a spot on a living room wall.

"No, that won't work," he responded. "It'd crowd the painting of the lion."

"So let's move the lion down a couple feet."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I hung it over the couch so it would be exactly over the middle cushion."

"Can't we move the couch?"

"No, it's in perfect alignment with the middle of the television."

"Can we move the television?"

"No. It would throw the whole room off balance. I set this up perfectly."

"Perfectly for you. But now we live here together."

"No, not perfectly for me. Just perfectly."

I told him it was clear he hadn't marked a place for a wife in his home. I suggested I move back to the home I owned, the home that held my furniture, my knick-knacks – all but the shadow box. I told him we could continue to see each other, since things worked well when we dated. My husband, more traditional than I, didn't want to date his wife. Instead, he gave me a free hand to remodel his, now our, home.

We moved on to other battles, tentatively maneuvering to assert individual wants, individual needs. Neither was willing to cede power without a fight.

"The count is 1-2-3, not 1-2, 1-2," I said, feigning patience, aware someone may hear me.

"I'm counting 1-2-3. But you can't keep talking or I'll lose count."

"You're not supposed to look at your feet. Let me lead and I'll show you how."

"No, I'm leading," my husband insisted.

"Then lead."

"I can't lead if you're dragging me in the opposite direction."

"The opposite direction is the right direction," I hissed.

"No, the right direction is the direction of the LEADER, and I'm the leader."

The truth: I was not a good dancer. I pretended to give in, privately glad to let go.

"Why don't you ever bake?" he asked me one night.

"I don't know. I've never baked. Didn't you notice that before we married?"

"I thought you would after we got settled." I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Who *was* this guy?

"Why would you think I'd start baking?"

"I don't know." He shrugged his shoulders and put on a sad little-boy face.

"You'd like me to put on an apron and be Betty Crocker?" I could feel my jaw tighten.

"That'd be nice," he said.

"How about this? I'll consider doing something I *never* did, if you'd start doing a few things you *always* did before we married."

"Like what?"

"Like mopping the kitchen floor or cleaning a bathroom." Take that! I was on a roll.

The argument continued over the next several weeks.

"You're acting very aggressively," he said one day.

"You think I'm aggressive because I won't be your house slave?"

"It's not that, though it would make things easier," he said. "But you attack me for not doing things your way. I find that very aggressive."

"I am NOT aggressive!"

I spent the afternoon following him around the house, mounting my defense, demanding that he see my point of view – I was a rational person, I was not aggressive. I revisited every conversation in which he considered me aggressive. I insisted I was *assertive*, not *aggressive*. I posited he failed to see the difference, that he attached himself to outdated, societal norms that dictated male and female roles. My husband ignored me and continued his Saturday afternoon routines, tinkering with the lawnmower, clearing the patio while I trotted after him and yelled over the din of the leaf blower. When he turned his head, he seemed surprised to see me. He shut off the motor and raised his protective glasses; when he heard my continued rant, he nodded, his eyes affecting concern, but he said nothing and turned away. The roar of the leaf blower resumed.

When he came back in the house, I accused him of being passive-aggressive. Then, I smugly declared myself the winner of the day-long one-sided argument: "And if you think I'm aggressive, so be it. I'd rather be aggressive than passive-aggressive!"

Though I heard the shrillness in my voice build over the afternoon, I persisted until I wore myself out and sulked on the couch. When evening came, my husband suggested we go out to dinner. He acted as if nothing had happened. From his point of view, that was true. From my point of view, I was exhausted, relieved, and hungry.

The next week we agreed to hire someone to clean up after us.

"Cheaper than marriage counseling," my husband said.

"Much cheaper than divorce," I told him. We shook with long, rolling laughs that briefly slowed, then took on new life and started again. I slammed my hand on the

kitchen counter each time I began anew, unable to talk through the chokes of laughter. Each time, he slammed his hand down in mockery of me, until we both almost cried.

I lay in the hospital bed, eyes closed, as my husband rubbed my right foot. Abruptly, he stopped. I blinked my eyes open. I was annoyed. Why did he stop?

"What?" I asked.

My husband's hands were motionless. "I don't know what I'd do without you." His brown eyes held tears; his face was dry.

"What?" I felt a slap of shame. I'd thought I was damaged, unwanted, a headstrong, aggressive wife he'd barely known who morphed into a patient within months of the wedding. While he had wrestled with anxiety about losing me, while he massaged my feet to comfort me, to hold me to him, I had shut my eyes, fantasizing my departure.

"If I lost you, I don't know what I would do." He looked at me across the span of the hospital sheet, holding my foot. "I don't know how I'd go on without you."

I instinctively rubbed my left thumb against my ring finger. It was bare. The ring dropped off my finger a month earlier, the shrunken digit unable to hold it.

We were silent. I studied him and saw an agony he wasn't sure he could bear. I saw it etched in the lines on his face, across his forehead, crimping the edges of his eyes. I felt it in the grip of his hands on my foot.

"You won't lose me," I said, and for the first time since my illness, I knew I would live. We held each other's gaze.

It would be years before I'd see him like this again, barely containing the terror of a primal loss.

He nodded and began to rub my foot, his eyes fixed on me. I didn't look away.