

HER OWN TWO FEET

A Rwandan Girl's
Brave Fight to Walk

Meredith Davis
and Rebeka Uwitonze

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CHAPTER ONE



REBEKA TRACED THE SHAPE OF HER CURLED FEET THROUGH THE blanket that covered her and her little sister, Medeatrece. Everybody was asleep and she needed to go to the bathroom. She wanted to go by herself, without bothering anybody, but she was also afraid. Wild dogs roamed the Rwandan countryside after dark and could easily get into her yard. She heard no howling, so maybe they were nowhere near.

She wriggled out from under the covers and scooted to the end of the bed. It filled up almost the entire room, wedged between two mud walls, with just enough space for the door to swing open.

“Rebeka?”

“Shhhh, Medea. Go back to sleep,” Rebeka whispered.

“I awake!”

Rebeka could see the whites of her little sister’s eyes in the moonlit room. She wasn’t going back to sleep.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” said Rebeka.

“Me, too,” said Medea, scrambling from under the covers.

“You’re just going because I’m going.” Rebeka knew she should tell her little sister to stay put, but it would be nice to have some company. Besides, it was hard to argue with a stubborn two-year-old. Rebeka crawled across the concrete floor of their home, following Medea outside. She lifted one shoulder and then the other, letting her arms swing forward like pendulums and then placing them back down. Her shadow stretched strange in the moonlight.

“I first!” said Medea, skipping to the latrine. Papa had dug a deep hole a good distance from the house so they wouldn’t smell the stink and built a small shed around it for privacy.

Rebeka listened carefully for howling or snuffling, but all she heard was the soft breath of a cow and the scratch of a goat moving in his stall. No dogs. She crawled quickly across the red dirt yard. She had long since grown used to the grit that dug into her skin. She’d spent her whole life on the ground. But the tough calluses on her knees and knuckles couldn’t protect her if she landed in a pile of goat or cow poo, crawling in the dark. She hoped for the best and kept going.

“Ow!” She brushed the dirt under her knee and picked up something small and hard. Round on one side, pointy on the other, a kernel of maize. Mama had spread a bunch of ears on a blanket to dry in the sun the day before. Rebeka dropped the kernel and crawled the rest of the way to the latrine.

“I done!” said Medea.

“Good job!” Rebeka took a deep breath so she wouldn’t smell the stink and crawled inside. It had taken her a while to figure out how to go to the bathroom on her own, but she’d done it. She had

figured out how to do lots of things in her first four years of life. After she was done, she and Medea washed their hands in a bucket. The slippery soap was hard to hold, especially since her middle fingers were always curled stubbornly to her palms.

Once the girls were done, they shook their hands dry and hurried back to the house. Their bed was still warm as they settled side by side under the blanket, like two kernels of maize on the cob. Medea reached out and tickled Rebeka's side. She wasn't ready for sleep, not quite yet, and neither was Rebeka. Nighttime was the perfect time to whisper, whether it was secrets or stories or dreams or just silliness.

It all felt important when it was whispered.

"I play chickens," said Medea.

"Tomorrow," whispered Rebeka. "You can chase the chickens tomorrow. Maybe I will chase, too, someday."

"Rebeka crawl chickens."

"No, run! Like you, Medea."

"How?"

Rebeka sighed. "I don't know. Maybe magic. Maybe doctors. Maybe God." She touched her curled toes to Medea's warm feet. "Go back to sleep."

"Ndagukunda, Rebeka."

"I love you, too, Medea."

CHAPTER TWO



REBEKA WOKE THE NEXT MORNING TO LIGHT STREAMING through the window. She was alone in the bed. Rebeke scooted to the floor and crawled outside to see where everyone was. Mama stirred porridge in a pot over the fire, and Papa was in the yard, staring out toward the lake. She couldn't see it from the ground, but she knew it was there, the sun shining on the water.

“Why aren't you fishing, Papa?” asked Rebeke.

He picked her up and she shrugged her shoulders to swing her arms up around his neck.

“I had something more important to do today,” he said.

More important than fishing? If Papa didn't fish, he had nothing to sell, and without the money he made from his fish, Mama couldn't buy salt or soap or oil.

“Do you remember the stranger who came to visit us?” asked Papa.

“Yes.” He had come days ago, sat on the couch, and talked to her



Lake Cyohoha, across from Rebeka's house.

parents for a long time. Mama had carried her away from a game with Medea in the yard to show him Rebeka's feet. He didn't wince when he saw them, even though both curled upside down, and her right foot also twisted backward. She remembered the man's hands were cold but gentle.

"He is a doctor, and he wants you to come to his clinic. He thinks there are therapies that may help your legs and feet. He said he would pay for all your treatments."

Just then, Medea screeched and came running around the house, chasing the chickens like it was just another ordinary day.

"Will it hurt like last time?" asked Rebeka. Someone had come

to their house a year ago, saying they could turn her feet, even though the procedure was usually done on babies and she was already three years old. She and Mama went to a hospital where a doctor twisted her feet until the pain made her cry. Then they put casts on to hold them in place, and it hurt so bad she couldn't sleep. When they took off the casts a week later, her feet were still curled.

"That was in the past, Rebeka, and I cannot tell you what the future holds," said Papa. "All I know is what lies before us right now. *Amahirwe aza rimwe*. Chance comes once. We must take advantage of it. You are a whole year older and stronger. Maybe this time it will work. Mama is making your breakfast and then we will go."

Rebeka watched her parents' faces carefully as she ate her porridge. There was something they weren't telling her. Her three older sisters and her brother chatted about what they would do that day, who would watch Medea and who would fetch water and who would mend Papa's ripped shirt. Mama wiped a tear off her cheek, then got up and hurried inside. Rebeka crawled after her, wiggling up the step into their house.

"What's wrong, Mama?"

"It is nothing," she said. "I have happy tears when I imagine these treatments working and my little girl learning to walk. Are you ready?"

Rebeka nodded. "Just let me tell Medea goodbye."

"Why you go?" Medea asked when Rebeka found her. She was sweaty from chasing the chickens.

Rebeka shrugged to swing her arm to Medea's shoulder, then plucked a soft feather off her little sister's cheek.

"So the doctors can fix my feet. Don't worry, I'll be home soon."

“Stay,” said Medea. “Play.”

“I can’t today. Chance comes once.” Rebeka held Medea’s hand. “Don’t chase all the fat off the chickens. We need them to be juicy for Christmas dinner!”

“Christmas!” said Medea. She let go, laughed and clapped, then ran off to play.

Rebeka longed to follow, but it was time to leave. To get to the clinic, they had to travel five miles to the main road, where they could catch a bus, and then walk more miles once they got off again.

“We’ll try to flag down a motorcycle to get to the bus,” said Mama. She took a piece of cloth and wrapped it around Rebeka’s legs and feet to hide them and hold them straight. Then she tied Rebeka to her back. Even though she was four, she was thin and small for her size, and Mama was strong. Papa carried a bag and walked alongside them.

Walls made from dense bushes surrounded most of the houses. Some had clothes or sheets draped over them to dry in the sun. The nicer homes had real walls around them, made from red dirt bricks and covered with thin plaster that peeled and cracked. Everywhere, there were bicycles and people going about their days. After a little while they heard a motorcycle, and Papa flagged it down.

“We need a ride to the main road,” he said.

“Untie the girl so she can sit on the seat between you,” said the driver.

“It’s okay,” said Mama. “She can stay on my back.”

Rebeka kept her arms tucked in front of her so they were hidden, but the driver was still suspicious. He squinted and said, “The seat is better. Untie her.”

And so Mama unwrapped the cloth. When the driver saw Rebeka's twisted legs and feet, he shook his head. "Cursed," he muttered, and drove off.

Papa hugged her. "Ignore him. He doesn't know any better."

Rebeka nodded, though her heart stung. All her life she had tried to ignore people who called her names, but her heart wasn't caloused like her knees and knuckles. It was still tender.

Mama tied her to her back again, and they continued on. They passed women balancing baskets of maize on their heads, with babies strapped to their backs. They passed men pushing bicycles loaded down with sloshing yellow water jugs. And they passed children running and skipping and playing.

Mama's back was hot and wet with sweat by the time they boarded the bus. They walked past full seat after full seat and sat in the back, with Rebeka between Mama and Papa. The heat made her sleepy. She leaned into Mama, closed her eyes, and thought about Medea, who was probably going down for a nap back home.

Usually, she napped at Medea's side. Usually, Medea didn't want to nap, and so they talked until their lids grew heavy and they surrendered to sleep.

Medea, my tummy feels funny.

This bus is filled with strangers,

and their strange smells

and their staring eyes that notice my curled feet

dangling from the bus seat.

I close my eyes so I can't see them looking, and pretend I can

see you stretching across our bed,

RWANDA

*hear you giggling,
feel you tickling me on the side,
and smell the mango juice, dried sticky on your fingers.
I miss you already.
I'll be home soon.*