

2008

# How to Love a Woman with No Legs

Natalie Diaz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Diaz, Natalie. "How to Love a Woman with No Legs." *The Iowa Review* 38.2 (2008): 122-130. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6499>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

NATALIE DIAZ

*How To Love a Woman with No Legs*

Commit to it, like you have something to prove, like you can make up for what's gone, like nothing at all is gone. Like she's all there and yours for the taking.

It'll be easy. If it's not easy, well, you have nothing to lose. Laugh. Of course you don't—she's already lost enough for both of you. Feel guilty for that loss while you're still a kid. Slip that loss into your pocket to use when you get older, to pull out at parties when people's minds are slow and sad with wine—let *them* feel guilty. It'll be the best party-trick you know, but that'll happen later. Until then, there are no parties. There is only her.

Eventually, the remainder of her will disappear, and this should not be lost on you, not even when you are ten years old. Rage against her impending departure. Love her fiercely, more than a child should ever know how to love a grandmother. Think of love as a fistfight. Fight for her like cowboys and Indians, like war, like something you'll lose sooner or later but play anyway because if you don't play you'll be alone.

Pretend you've been given the choice, rather than the white doctors at the Indian hospital. Consider what is left of her body. Which piece will you pick to disappear next? Not those giant hands, soft as well-oiled catchers' mitts. Not her long silver braid of hair—she lets you touch it and brush it with your fingers.

Don't think about her nipples, hanging like overripe figs, dark ovals at the bottom curves of her flabby breasts—dark enough to look like two stains beneath her translucent nightgown. Look away. It's not nice to stare at them, your mother says.

If you absolutely have to pick something about her to forget or to get rid of, and that something doesn't have to be a body part, choose the nightgowns. They make her look like a ghost hovering above the green tile floor of her room. Your second choice should be the bedpan, the heavy steel pan you must move from the one chair in her room when you want to sit. But that's it.

Sit and listen to her stories, even if you've heard them all before. When she tells you about the Indian school, be still. It'll be your

favorite story. She'll want to talk about the beatings, the haircuts, the beads and dolls that disappeared there. Ask if she was scared when they locked her in the closet, if there were coats hanging there, or boots on the floor, or a vacuum. She won't answer. She won't say and you won't ask anything about her two legs. It'll be almost like they never existed, except you know they did.

Be jealous. You never knew her with legs. Hold that against her. Feel left out. Be insecure about not knowing her when she walked and ran and swam and danced. Accuse her of keeping secrets from you—two secrets, two legs. Imagine the places she might be hiding them. On the shelf in the closet. Wrapped in foil in the freezer. Doubt her loyalty. No wonder her legs left her.

Resent her. Curse all the things she did with those legs—without you. Secretly be glad for her leglessness—it's not just hers, it's yours now, too. If she did have legs, what would stop her from leaving you, or from running off in the night like everyone else? Surely not love.

Dare yourself to leave her first. But don't.

Feel guilty for thinking so ridiculously. What she would've or could've done doesn't matter. She's here now. She's not going anywhere—she can't leave this house, this cul-de-sac, this rez, not even the edge of this desert clinging to the Colorado River that bleeds along a seam between Arizona and California—not even if she wants to. She's yours, like a wound that won't close, like a wound you keep picking open.

Half of you will want to see her scars. You'll think it'll make you closer to her, or to her struggles. The other half of you will close your eyes when the opportunity to see them arises. You'll be embarrassed for even wanting to, for wondering if they are purple or brown or red as licorice whips, and for needing to know if they are as smooth and shiny as silk seams, or thick and ropey like the two pairs of corduroy pants you alternate every other day.

Be ashamed for needing to know the details of those scars but not ashamed enough to stop you from telling her stories as if they were yours. Wear her scars like ribbons and badges.

Dream about them—the scars. Dream that you and she gamble for a pair of legs in a game of tic-tac-toe and she beats you, but in your dream she's the one that weeps. When you wake, go to her, press your face against the cool space at the foot of her bed for reas-

surance that there are only scars beneath her worn-out sheets, not legs.

When you go through puberty and grow several inches, your own knees will begin to ache. Don't acknowledge your knees. Lie in your bed at night and massage them until you fall asleep. Learn to cuss instead of cry about the hurt, but know better than to complain.

When you visit her, which will be a few times a week, more if you can find a ride to her house, wear the ugliest, plainest, and most uncomfortable shoes you own. She's missing enough as it is. Don't give her a chance to miss shoes too.

Speak with her in the mix of Mojave and English that is her language. The words will sound broken and jagged. Memorize the brokenness, because when she's gone you'll forget what she ever meant with those words.

Laugh at her jokes. When she laughs, watch her mouth open wide. Know her lips are as soft as her hands. You'll want to kiss her mouth, but that is foolish. Kiss her hands.

When she falls asleep or you're bored, open her fridge and stack the vials of insulin into pyramids in the butter shelf. Eat all the sugar-free Jell-O.

When she buys you your first pair of real basketball shoes, your throat will sting with emotion. She'll ask you to put them on and run from one side of the room to the other. In those few feet, she'll be running too. Know that if she could have, she would have bought those shoes for herself, not for you.

Feel guilty for having legs.

When you are on the playground, or in the gym, run extra hard. Smash your beautiful feet into the ground to punish yourself. People will admire how fast and sure you move. They'll say you run like you are chasing someone. They'll say you run like someone is chasing you. Run harder. Soon, they'll offer you trophies and scholarships. Feel guiltier, because the way you've punished yourself for having legs has only made you better.

Hold her hands from her bed and be thankful for that bed—without it you might not recognize her—you've only ever known her from it.

Imagine her as a centaur, a magical creature like the one Borges wrote about, but with a bed instead of a horse's body. You'll want

to preserve her in honey, like the centaur brought to ancient Rome, but you won't for many reasons, one being that she's diabetic.

Wonder frequently where her kneecaps are. Wonder as furiously as dervishes whirl. Wonder so often that it becomes a type of religion. Pray for those kneecaps like some women pray for harvests and miracles.

Ask the homecare nurse to let you help. In your mind, helping will let you share her pain. Learn to penetrate the latex membrane of the vials with a hypodermic and to ease out the liquid. Concentrate. Hear yourself breathe. Hold the needle up to the light and scan for bubbles. If there are no bubbles, brace yourself against her hip with one hand and drive the needle into her belly with the other. When you do this, think only of how much you love her, but don't say so until after, when you wipe away the small red dot with a cotton ball. She'll just sigh.

The first time she goes into the hospital for more than a few days, for a month to be exact, the empty bed in her room will be like a bright white hole. The silver rails hanging loose at the sides will shine like razors you'll ache to draw across your chest. The sheets will be folded on the corner of the mattress like white flags. You won't know which is emptier without her, you or her bedroom. Make up your mind that love is a hole you've fallen into. Say it out loud in her empty room—you love her. This will be your first wound. It will be nothing compared to the many she has endured, but it will be deep and good enough to last. Carry it around awkwardly—like two halves of a watermelon.

Hate the sight of that empty bed—a chariot, motionless and weak without its gladiator. A mere shell without its horse. Wonder if she's spent more of her life as a warrior or as a horse. Decide that you are the horse and that you would carry her anywhere. But the only place you can think of going is to her.

While waiting for her to return from the hospital, begin drinking diet cola. The taste is horrible at first, but will become familiar. It's a taste she knows, a thing that rests on her tongue, closer to her than the kisses you place along her wrists and cheek bones, so you'll learn to love it.

Wonder if it's possible her legs are somewhere waiting for her, thumping around without her like drumsticks, running wild

through the desert, or waiting crossed and patient on the white mountaintop where spirits live.

Dream her scars spell your name. Dream they are the songs you want to sing to her. Dream they are letters from a lover.

When the doctors let her come home, she'll tell you about her second husband, Roger. Love her more after learning she has lain with more than one man. But envy Roger. Feel cheated that you never met him—that's one more secret. Ask if he was good at basketball, if he was fast, if he listened to her stories, if he loved her. Don't say it, but be glad he's gone.

She'll tell you Roger founded and directed the Indian band, that he marched proudly, leading the parades with the band behind him like a war party of brass and drums. Push Roger from your mind. Try picturing her on the curb or standing in the street—you can't. The only image that comes to you is of her in a wheelbarrow—like the girl from the projects who you watched get hit by a car in fourth grade, and who broke so many bones the doctors put her in a body cast and her sisters wheeled her around the projects in a dirty wheelbarrow with splintered handles—but push that from your mind too. Hope she stayed home when Roger led the band, or that if she was there, the band played badly.

Ask to lie with her. You'll want to lie at her side, but there's no room there. Climb into the space where her legs used to be.

She'll make more and longer visits to the hospital, until her time at home becomes the visit. People will bring her religious artifacts—gourds, sage bundles, crosses with Jesus half-naked and nailed to them, streaks of red paint here and there along his body. Some idiot will bring a candle with Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3 printed on it: *to everything there is a season, a time to be buried...* Be angry—they might as well have brought a shovel and set it in the corner where she could see it.

Calm down. If they had brought a shovel, she couldn't have seen it. Her eyes are as cloudy as desert sky during monsoon season, and in the months before she dies—you're sure she's going to die when you discover that the nurses from the hospital pitched in for the candle—her eyes will turn to storm moons, gray and dull with halos around them.

Of course, nobody will bring a shovel. She's Mojave. When she dies she'll be cremated.

Sit at her bedside for hours while she sleeps. Sleep with her—tuck your chair and legs under her bed and lay your head in that vacant space that was once filled with flesh and bone and legs. Place your hand on her wrist, over the tattoo faded to green pastel—she never told you what it was—and only wake when you feel a growing warmth against your thigh. Realize her colostomy bag is freshly filled. Be embarrassed by the goose-bumps on your arms, but notice that she has them as well. Be more embarrassed when you realize that in your sleep you pushed yourself closer and closer to the warmth of the bag until it pinched between the leg of the bed and your body. She'll sleep through it all.

The day she dies, you'll still be in elementary school. It'll be the day of the spelling bee and you'll misspell *disease* because the two spellers in front of you spell it with a 'c' and that confused you. David Murray will spell it right and you and the other two losers will walk from the stage to join the audience. You won't know it until after the spelling bee is over, but you'll never see her alive again. You will never forget how to spell disease.

At the funeral, in the reservation cry-house, her coffin will be the normal length. The bottom half will be closed. It will make you think of a black and white can of commodity spam, half-peeled back.

Indians from all along the river will travel to her dead body, to weep over her coffin. Laugh out loud imagining the bottom of her coffin filled with Styrofoam peanuts, confetti, or colored yarn from the God's-eyes you made for her in arts-and-crafts—the night she died you unraveled all the God's-eyes you'd ever made for her because you wanted God to know what it felt like without eyes—like she felt without legs, like you felt without her. You tore them from the walls where she'd had you hang them, and pulled the kite sticks and Popsicle sticks from their diamond frames and unstrung them into multi-colored piles—then, you were sure, God would be as blind as he was acting.

Beneath the hot, breathy wailing of the mourners, she'll begin to melt. Go to her body after each group of mourners leaves. You'll need to reclaim it from their salt and touches. Kiss her forehead, beaded with moisture, and be angry at the hardness of her body. This will not be the body you love. Kiss it anyway. Kiss her forehead, her chin, her nose, and her neck. The beads of liquid will

sting your lips and taste like medicine. Push your face into the blue cotton bust of her ribbon dress and inhale—the smell will not be hers. Do this all night. Sometimes someone will lead you away, to a fold-out chair. Other times, they'll leave you draped across her.

At the funeral, after the all-night wake, you'll all move outside. Many women will dance. Men will play gourds and sing the funeral cycles. Your uncles will snap the gray single-ply coffin into a pile of boards. Your brothers will wrap her empty body in thick blankets and rugs, some new and from up around Navajo country, others old, faded and from her bed. They'll handle her and hold her the way you've always wanted to hold her—all of her in your arms, body to body with her, like dancing.

The men will lay her face down in the shallow pit, because for women with no legs the afterworld works backwards—sky is earth and earth is sky—and they'll stack wood on top of her. They'll pile her upside-down body with dresses and ribbons and all the useless things she owned. They'll place plates of food on her. You'll watch someone place old shoes onto the growing pyre. They'll light her on fire.

You'll try to run to her, to dig her out from under the burning mound. You'll have to be held back. You'll call her by her name which is bad luck and a kind of Indian sin—you shouldn't say the name of a dead woman.

You'll think you see her standing just behind a ragged curtain of fire. Count the beads from her shawl as the strings curl like orange snakes and the beads blacken, separate and fall, like a flock of crows settling to a field of maize.

Smell hair and body burning, soapy and thick, like jojoba shampoo. Remember the time your hair caught fire on the novena candles at church. Remember the time a semi ran over your dog and your dad dug a hole and lit the stiffened, clotted body on fire. Your dad said, *It's just a carcass*. Want to stop it. Want to lie next to her, to burn with her. Want that heat to turn you both to gold so you can melt away together.

Dance for her as she goes up in flames. Stomp out the two-step rhythm of the sacred songs. Press your feet into the ground like you're carving a letter to her, telling her you're giving her your legs one last time, tell her to take them with her into the smoke and ash.



In the weeks and nights to come, you'll think you see her kneecaps like small oval moons, like owl eyes on the telephone poles, like dusty quarters from the bottom of your father's pants pockets.

Know that she has gone, and now, you must go, too.

Leave those desert ghosts the first chance you get. Go to college like she always bragged you would. Choose a school on the other side of the country.

Bear the burden of her, which should be all you've ever wanted, as if you carried her two ancient legs around with you—like a stack of firewood, or machine guns, or baseball bats signed by Jim Thorpe—like two legs.

Travel. Live in Europe and Asia. See the sights. Say prayers in the great temples and cathedrals. Take pictures of the shards and fragments of saints—fingers, hands, skulls—cased in glass, sitting on stained satin pillows. It's okay to think about her in a palace in Istanbul, when you view John the Baptist's occipital bone—it looks a lot like a kneecap.

Consider that she must have lost her religion. Don't blame her. Legs are a religion and they were taken from her, sawed off like martyrs.

Without religion, she was vulnerable to any god that knocked on her door—Jehovah's Witnesses clutching magazines with covers depicting cities engulfed in flames, the Nazarene pastor bringing diabetic candies and a black bible with a red-ribbon book-marker hanging from its pages like a snake tongue.

Years after she dies, on one of your trips home, you'll recognize that Nazarene pastor, no longer a pastor, working the drive-thru window at the Jack-in-the-Box and you'll hope she didn't listen too closely to anything he'd said. If she did, she could be lost on the spirit mountain, or worst, working the drive-thru window there.

On plane rides, coming or going, fantasize that it was all for you. She gave her legs up, like an Indian Jesus whose joints were dislocated before being hung on the cross. Or, like in the old mob movies—she refused to give your name to the bad guys. They sharpened their cleaver and took her toe first, then a foot, then another foot. She wouldn't give you up. By the time Tribal police came busting through the door, she had no legs but still hadn't given you up. No way can you give her up.

Be loyal. Look everywhere, not for her, but for her body, that body of love. Seek it out wherever you go. When you meet women, take them home, kiss their kneecaps. Whisper into the bends behind their knees. It will be enough to make them love you, enough to make you leave them—they are not her.

Watch the Monty Python clip in which the Black Knight's limbs are cut off one by one and he insists they're only flesh wounds. Everyone in the room will laugh, but you'll say a quick prayer in your head that there really wasn't that much blood, and that you never have to see her hop like that on her broken thighs. Say that you want to crush the White Knight. Tell the people still laughing that if you ever found the grail, you'd kick it across the cul-de-sac the way children kick cans before hollering, *Olly-olly-in-free*.