

Title: Comic is “Petal to the Mettle” by Christa Couture and Georgia Webber, shown on a background of sketched flowers, leaves, and birds. Transcription written by Amber Griffith.

Panel 1: I’m seated in a row of boxy chairs in a waiting room. To my left, I see another woman sitting in three chairs down reading a magazine. I point to her lower half and ask, “Excuse me, is that a microprocessor knee?” “Yes!” she exclaims, turning away from her magazine to look up at me. “It’s the C-leg!”

Panel 2: I’ve heard about the C-leg. It has a microprocessor that, they say, greatly improves gait and comfort. On one side, there’s the regular hydraulic knee: the knee must be in locked position to weight-bear, it supports moderate activity level, has large flexion angle and increased stability in stance phase, and, most notably, is covered by Canadian healthcare. On the other side, there’s the microprocessor knee: it has a knee angle sensor and a cool robot light, it mimics “natural” gait, the sensors make real time adjustments to determine where it is in space, there’s a stumble recover function, it navigates ramps, stairs, uneven terrain, and has bluetooth technology to adjust settings ... but it costs \$40,000! It’s not covered by Canadian healthcare.

Panel 3: “... What’s it like?” I ask the woman.

Panel 4: “I’ve only got it for a two-week trial, but it’s amazing!” she responds.

Panel 5: “I was born without a leg,” the woman explains, “but wearing this is what I imagine having two legs feels like.” Unlike her, I had two typical legs until I was thirteen.

Panel 6: I remember what it feels like. Crouching down barefoot, running around in flip flops, trying to reach with sock-covered tippy toes, leaning back with one leg bent.

Panel 7: I remember being a small child, standing straight up in an oversized t-shirt with a big, brilliant smile as I waved “hello” to the world.

Panel 8: I remember sitting in a wheelchair with a content smile, loose hospital gown bunching at the waist with a scarf covering my head and comfy socks and slippers on my feet.

Panel 9: I picture myself now as an adult, standing with my combination of a fleshy right leg and a prosthetic left. Would a microprocessor really feel the same?

Panel 10: “Christa?” I hear my name called, pulling me from my reverie.

Panel 11: I stand up and walk past the woman to meet the prosthetist in the doorway. “I want to try that,” I say pointing back at the other woman, who’s already back to reading her magazine. The prosthetist replies, “Sure! There are actually a few knees you can try!”

Panel 12: I’m sitting at a long table with a group of people. My physiotherapist is sitting next to me with the team of prosthetists to her right. There’s a box on the table in front of me with the lid open to show a microprocessor knee prosthetic. There are three men on the other side of the table. “With the Genium®, you can walk backwards!” says one man. “Climb stairs step-over-step!” says another. “Walk and look better!” says the third. The salesmen circle like vultures.

Panel 13: I’m reminded of when I first got cancer, before my leg was amputated as the cure, and my hair began to fall out from the chemotherapy. At recess, kids surrounded me and started pulling at my hair, marveling at how it came out in clumps. I can still feel the shadows of my bullies, their hands reaching out to grab me as I sat

defenseless in my wheelchair. I can still hear their mocking voices, laughing and crying out in disgust. The bell rang – and I looked at my hair scattered on the ground ... crying to myself as I covered my head in my hands.

Panel 14: My face scrunches in worry as I relive the memories. “Christa?” I hear my physiotherapist call out, grounding me back to reality.

Panel 15: “Do you want those things?” she asks.

Panel 16: I shake my head to clear my thoughts before responding, “I want to fall less often.”

Panel 17: As a transfemoral amputee, I fall at least once a week–SLAM–onto my knees, sometimes onto my hands. Most recently, I was walking down the sidewalk, holding my coffee and talking to a friend.

Panel 18: As I lifted my right leg to take a step forward, something in my prosthetic clicked out of place.

Panel 19: My friend turned in surprise as I began to fall forward, throwing my drink in an attempt to catch myself with my hands.

Panel 20: These days, my right knee is perpetually bruised. It takes the brunt of the fall when I smack down onto my hands and knees.

Panel 21: “And I want less pain,” I add.

Panel 22: I get the Genium® for a two-week trial, and my physiotherapist and I practice with it away from the prosthetics clinic. In the beginning, I took slow steps, grabbing the handrails on either side of me with my hands for balance while the physiotherapist knelt in front of me to assist. As we continue to

practice, I am able to walk by myself with the new leg while she stands off to the side.

Panel 23: For the first time in my amputee life, I walk UP stairs, step over step. There's a trick to wiggle the knee slightly, then hoist myself up.

Panel 24: The physiotherapist tells me, "To gain and maintain the strength to use this knee, you'd have to be dedicated to going to the gym on a regular basis."

Panel 25: I look back at her with uncertainty. I can't see myself working out -

Panel 26: I want to spend my time playing piano, singing, and cooking. Sure, I'd save some time not going up stairs one at a time, but I don't care that much for it to become a new hobby. But I can imagine what other people would say. Asking me things like "Wouldn't it be better to look like you've got two legs?" or, "Don't you want to look NORMAL?" ... I do. Or at least I did.

Panel 27: It's hard to ignore the signs everywhere that tell us: be straight, be thin, be cisgender, be non-disabled ... It's hard, but people still do it, even despite facing an endless cycle of questions about why they are different.

Panel 28: When I walk down the street, people stop me all the time. A complete stranger points at me and asks, "What happened?"

Panel 29: I reply, "Nothing, I'm fine, thank you."

Panel 30: A different person asks, "Are you hurt?"

Panel 31: I say, "No no, I'm fine, this is just how I walk."

Panel 32: Some people try to laugh it off, saying "You should see the other guy, right?"

Panel 33: And I just hum back “Mhm!” and give an awkward thumbs up. It’s tough, always answering their questions. For a long time, I confused hating the questions with hating myself.

Panel 34: The memories of kids at recess creep up in my mind. I know I am different. But why should I have to change to be accepted? I don’t want to hide or pass, I want to look like me.

Panel 35: One night at Drag Bingo, queen Joan-E gave me an idea. She was dressed to impress with her voluminous hair swooped to the side and her fringed dress hugging her curves. “If you can’t hide it–” she says, extending her arm out to the audience. “–decorate it!” Joan-E exclaims as her hand opens, launching a handful of glitter into the air, sparkles raining down on me and my friends as we look up in awe.

Panel 36: After the show, I turn to face my friends sitting around the table. “Guys – I’ve decided I want to get a microprocessor knee, somehow, and I want to make it BEAUTIFUL,” I tell them. My friends explode with excitement. “Yes!” one exclaims as she raises her glass for a toast. “That’s amazing!” another says as he slams his hands down on the table and leans forward in excitement. “We’ll help!” he adds. My third friend throws her hands in the air as she adds, “Let’s crowdfund it!”

Panel 37: So we set up a page, writing “CROWDFUND A KNEE! A microprocessor knee will improve Christa’s life dramatically, but it’s not covered by healthcare. Any amount helps!” And it works! People donate to our cause and we use the built-in progress bar to help us track meeting the \$25,000 goal.

Panel 38: Next thing I knew, I was back to sitting in those boxy chairs in the waiting room at the prosthetics clinic. The door opens

beside me and the prosthetist says, “Christa! Nice to see you again, come in.”

Panel 39: I’m back at the long table, this time sitting across from the team of prosthetists. I tell them, “I don’t need to go up stairs step over step, I don’t need to wash my car in this thing, and I don’t need to change settings by bouncing my heel ...” I show them my phone as I continue, “I want the Rheo knee, and I want it to look like this.”

Panel 40: A prosthetist has an amazing job – they know anatomy, mechanics, software, plus they sew and carve and paint – and they’ve never made a leg like the one I showed them. They’re up for the task.

Panel 41: They suggest a t-shirt kind of fabric. I ignore them and choose a floral linen upholstery fabric instead. I can’t help it, I fall in love with its red and yellow and blue blossoms.

Panel 42: The first day I walk in the world with my new flower leg, I feel people staring. Once again, I’m stopped by a random person, saying “Hey ...”

Panel 43: I brace myself for the usual questions, but instead he asks “Is that hand-painted?”

Panel 44: Another woman asks, “Is that robotic? How does it work?”

Panel 45: A third person says, “Wow, it’s so BEAUTIFUL!”

Panel 46: Standing tall, wearing shorts that proudly show off my custom floral leg, I give them a brilliant smile as I say, “Yes, it is beautiful.”