

“Feet, why do I need you, if I have wings to fly”

On my day off last week I went to the Frida Kahlo exhibition at the V&A. I found it very voyeuristic – the artistic equivalent of a pervert rifling through a knicker drawer. After Frida died, her husband Diego Riviera locked away her private letters in their house in Mexico City, saying the trunks and cupboards were not to be opened until fifteen years after his death. The house was subsequently made into a museum and the collection of belongings was left hidden behind the bathroom walls, because the patrons feared it might contain information which would compromise the couple’s image. They were not opened until 2004, a year after the museum patron died.

The exhibition included many things that had belonged to her. As well as clothes, photographs and jewellery, there were very intimate items such as letters to her doctors, lipstick and medication, and it somehow felt wrong to be looking at those things. I found myself wondering, what gave us the right, just because someone was famous, whatever that means? It was a bit like the Egyptian pharaohs buried with all their belongings and then Europeans came along, opened them up and put the things in museums far away. The eerie, melancholy music playing in the exhibition didn’t help much either!

Frida Kahlo spent much of her life in pain, and much of it flat on her back, confined to bed. As a child she had polio which left one leg weak and shorter than the other, and as a teenager she suffered a horrific bus accident which left her unable to have children and meant she needed more than 30 operations on her spine. Eventually her withered leg had to be amputated and she died at 47. She said in her diary: “Feet, why do I need you, if I have wings to fly”



I came away with a huge admiration for her strength through such pain and suffering, including the inability to have children. And it brought new meaning to the previous week’s reading from Mark: ‘if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet...’

Frida Kahlo didn’t need her damaged, painful, gangrenous leg because it would have killed her if she’d kept it. She didn’t need it because she found wings to fly in other ways – through art, through love. Would that we were all strong enough to throw off the things that hold us back.