

The Other Side of the Window

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The nurse is plump and wears a brightly colored smock with teddy bears on it, as if this were the pediatrics ward and not the grim repository of brittle bones poking through tissue-paper skin, of bed sores and adult diapers, which has become my home over the past three months. The young woman is incorrigibly perky, flitting around, black ponytail bobbing, fluffing the pillows and wiping the bums of the old and the dying. She is new to this unit and for the life of me I cannot remember her name, even though I am one of the few around here with an intact memory.

Privately I refer to her as “Perky Two.” (Perky One works evenings and could be this one’s clone except that the ponytail is blond.) I make these women uncomfortable because I am young, like them, and my death, which is progressing slowly in front of them, is like an irritating thorn working its way underneath their thick cheerful skins. They respond to their discomfort indirectly, by becoming even perkier in my presence, their voices growing louder and higher-pitched until they start to sound like Mickey Mouse. On amphetamines. Give me a crotchety old

battle-axe with a gravelly voice and a starched white uniform any day. If the disease doesn't take me first, I could die of all this vim and vigor.

The lady in the next bed, Mrs. Fenester, has been sleeping and has drool on her chin. Perky Two pauses to wipe it off.

“And how are you this morning, Mrs. F?” she chirps.

“Fine,” the old woman replies, “except that my teeth are plugged and I haven't slept a wink in twenty-five years.”

Perky Two looks puzzled. “Your teeth are what?”

“They're plugged, dear. Plugged right up. And nobody is doing a damn thing about it.”

Mrs. Fenester's plugged teeth have been one of the few consistent things in my life over the past few months, even though nobody has the foggiest idea what she's talking about. There are days when she can't remember the names of her children, or what year it is, but nothing can distract her from her mysterious and persistent ailment.

I have the bed nearest the window and since I find it difficult to turn my head, they have angled my bed slightly to give me the best view of the parking lot. It's amazing the things you can learn when you lie still (and stillness is the one thing I've become an expert at). I know, for example, that my neurologist, Dr. Lansky, is having an affair with the MRI technician—and God knows I spent

enough time in that chamber of horrors to remember her—a pretty little blond thing named Marcy or Marcia. They sneak out separately and meet in her camper van, emerging a little while later with flushed faces and ruffled clothing. I don't think they're discussing brain scans out there.

There is a fly buzzing around my window. If I had any strength left in my arms I would pick up a newspaper and swat it. Or maybe not. There is already enough death in this place. It only wants the same thing I want, after all: to get beyond this grimy fourth floor window and out into the natural light and fresh air. Okay then. Instead of killing it, I will proclaim it my first visitor of the day and give it a name. Priscilla. Not just Priscilla, but *Priscilla the Warrior Fly Princess of 4-South. Boldly banging her head where no fly has head-banged before. Struggling courageously (if somewhat hopelessly) toward the light.*

I roll my eyes. I am living vicariously through a fly.

Dr. Lansky arrives for morning rounds. He is a bull of a man, ruddy-faced and broad-chested. He charges into the room without knocking or slowing down and, as usual, he has a troupe of medical students and interns trailing behind him. The students wear short white coats, the medical equivalent of dunce caps, their pockets weighted down with handbooks and medical instruments. They all wear stethoscopes around their necks as if this were the latest fashion accessory.

Lansky ignores Mrs. Fenester (apparently he is not an expert in plugged teeth) and comes directly to my bedside. I am his favorite specimen. His ducklings follow eagerly. He lets them take turns examining me and points out all the “interesting findings.”

“You don’t mind, do you, Kathleen? It’s for the education of our future doctors.” It’s a statement rather than a question.

I say nothing because my speech, which sounds roughly like a talking doll whose batteries are running low, is yet another “interesting finding.” When the students have finished their poking and prodding, Lansky makes a great performance of placing his stethoscope on my chest and looking grim.

“Kathleen, I’m afraid you are no longer managing your secretions very effectively,” he says, standing up to his full height and looking down on me, like a judge pronouncing a guilty verdict. Then, for about the twentieth time, he tells me that I will have to consider going on a ventilator—the alternative apparently being to drown in my own spit.

He turns back to his entourage. He points to the family photos that my mother has put up on the wall. “In this photo, taken three years ago,” he says, “you can see that the patient has full and normal facial expression. In the later photo, taken approximately eighteen months ago but before the patient was diagnosed,

you can already see evidence of laxness and weakening in the facial muscles, resulting in the rather bland expression you see here.”

I would give anything to be able to scowl at him. I’m thinking the sorts of thoughts that used to make me scowl but my brow won’t furrow, my forehead won’t crease, and I couldn’t purse my lips if my life depended on it. The best I can do is an ironic eye roll and a vague Mona Lisa type of smile. Occasionally the medical students catch on and start to giggle behind Lansky’s back. I consider this a victory.

I fantasize about bigger victories. I imagine myself showing the medical students pictures of the good doctor and comparing them like he compares mine. “In this photo, taken from the society page of the local newspaper, Dr. Lansky is seen escorting his wife of thirty years to a hospital fundraiser and looking quite pompous. In the second photo, taken with a telephoto lens from this very window, he looks considerably less pompous as he is seen emerging from a camper van after a quick shag with the lovely Marcy.”

It never hurts to dream.

My visitor, *Priscilla the Warrior Fly Princess*, is slowing down a little, her buzzing quieter, her movements less coordinated. There is a cobweb in the upper right corner of the window and I find myself cursing the hospital cleaning staff. What if my friend gets caught in that web? Lazy fools.

My second visitor of the day is even more intriguing than Priscilla. A slim young man with wavy brown hair and pale acne-scarred skin, he backs into the room, his eyes scanning the long corridor as if he is worried about being followed. He wears khaki pants, a plaid shirt that's much too warm for the early autumn weather, and hospital slippers. He moves behind my curtain, which is partially drawn, and turns toward me.

"Hi," he says. "I'm Greg. I've just escaped from the Psych Unit."

For once I am happy that my face is a blank slate. "Welcome to 4-South Greg," I say, "I wish I could escape with you." I sound like a drunken sailor with a head cold.

"My teeth are so goddamned plugged I can hardly stand it," Mrs. Fenester adds.

Greg's attention shifts to the old woman. "Try this," he says, pinching his nose and puffing out his cheeks. "It unplugs them every time for me."

Mrs. Fenester copies what he is doing and is miraculously cured. A look of unadulterated bliss washes over her apple-doll face.

"You're brilliant," I say.

"I'm schizophrenic," Greg says, "not stupid. So you want to escape with me?"

I open my mouth to tell him that I was just kidding, but my tongue isn't cooperating and Greg is already moving toward the high-backed wheelchair in the corner, a relic of the days when I could move more than just a few fingers. He lifts me into the chair and straps me down securely like an astronaut about to blast off. Which is roughly what I feel like. He wheels me out into the hallway. Perky Two gives us a skeptical look.

"My brother," I say, rolling my eyes up toward Greg.

We exit the hospital through the back door to avoid the Security desk. I must be crazier than my new friend, but this is the most fun I've had in months.

"Where shall we go?" he asks.

"I'm an ornithologist," I say, "take me to the birds."

We move through the enormous parking lot, row after row of cars and SUVs interspersed with spindly potted trees. A group of smokers is huddled around a large boulder that marks the edge of the hospital grounds. The new Marlboro Country. They wave at us as we pass by. Greg blows them a kiss.

The day is warm but breezy and my hair, unaccustomed to such freedom, has gone wild.

"You look like my uncle's old sheep dog," Greg says, pushing the rebellious strands out of my eyes and gently tucking them in behind my ears.

“Maybe you should take me to the groomers,” I say, and we laugh until the smokers start to stare.

We head east in the general direction of the waterfront, where the hills are steep. We pick up speed down Park Street, each crack in the sidewalk threatening to launch me into flight. I dare Greg to go faster. The wind whips against my face the way it used to at the Bill Lynch Midway on my favorite ride, the Tilt-A-Whirl. It makes my eyes water. I can hear Greg’s breath, heavy and gasping, behind me. Fifty feet in front of me, traffic is moving into the intersection at Barrington Street. My eyes grow wide. I try to scream but something like a gurgle comes out.

Greg stops me by steering the chair to the left, onto the lush green lawn of the public library. The sudden change in direction and momentum causes the chair to tip sideways and I lay there with my cheek on the grass, still strapped in like an astronaut, laughing as heartily as my traitorous body will permit. Greg collapses beside me, too winded to talk.

“You okay?” I ask.

He nods. “Gotta get in shape if I’m going to hang out with you. Birdlady.”

We eat lunch in front of the library surrounded by men and women in business suits, drawn from their offices by the beauty of the day. They talk on cell phones and peck at laptops. A skinny teenaged boy with a nose-ring and a t-shirt that says “Save the Planet—Kill Yourself” leans against the giant bronze statue of

Winston Churchill. He asks passersby for spare change and then thanks them anyway, when they refuse. Winston Churchill appears to be crying, but it's only a trail of pigeon poop that happens to start at his eye. Greg gets us an order of fish and chips from The Chip Wagon—real French fries, hot and greasy, covered in salt, not pureed. We share them with the pigeons. Greg buys another order for the boy with the nose ring.

We spend the afternoon near Black Rock Beach, positioning ourselves between the Atlantic Ocean and the lush fall foliage of Point Pleasant Park. The smell of salt water mingles with the earthy scent of freshly fallen leaves and spruce trees. The birds are everywhere—black-capped chickadees, crows, American robins, blue jays, English sparrows, herring gulls, and mallards—*anas platyrhynchos*—with their glorious metallic green heads.

An elderly woman is hand-feeding the chickadees.

“Can my friend try?” Greg asks.

He pulls my hand, withered and curled like the hand of a mummy, up out of my lap. He holds it steady as the old woman fills my palm with sunflower seeds. The tiny birds follow without hesitation, pecking out their lunch, tickling my fingers. With their sharp beaks they crack the seeds open effortlessly, shells flying in every direction.

A flock of Canada Geese flies overhead, honking and squawking as they form themselves into a V. I close my eyes, letting the sound fold around me like a warm pair of arms, and for a few blissful moments I forget about the malicious disease that has disconnected me from my body.

I open my eyes. A ball of mucous has settled into my trachea. I'm turning blue. Greg gives me a thump on the back and I manage a weak cough. No good. Greg gives me another thump, harder this time. He loosens the straps that hold me upright. I'm getting lightheaded, I feel like I'm floating, and I must be delirious because I'm looking at a giant playing card and it is talking to me. It's the Queen of Hearts from *Alice in Wonderland*, only it has Dr. Lansky's face and speaks with his voice: "You have been found guilty of Mismanagement of Secretions," the strange chimera says, "a crime punishable by death."

But I will not have to serve my sentence today. Greg has managed to lean me forward in the chair and his blows to my back are more effective in this position. The mucous is dislodged and I can breathe again, for now. "Thanks," I gasp.

Greg's hands are shaking. He is as white as the hospital sheet that covers my legs. "We should go back," he says.

"Okay."

"I love you, Kathy."

“You hardly even know me, Greg.”

“But you are beautiful,” he says.

“Thank you, Greg,” I say, “so are you.” I try not to cry for fear of another mucous plug.

When we arrive at the hospital parking lot, we’re intercepted by a police cruiser with two young officers in it. The male officer asks Greg to get in the car and as they drive away I can see Greg winking and waving furiously from the back seat. The female officer is kind enough to wheel me back to 4-South, where the bleached blonde Perky One is in the midst of having a nervous breakdown.

“Where have you been?” she asks, pouting.

I give her my best Mona Lisa smile. “I escaped.”

But she is kind to me, as always. With the help of another nurse she gets me settled into bed. She makes sure I’m warm and comfortable and attends to my personal hygiene, those once-humiliating procedures that have now become routine. I tell her about my adventure and about the mysterious Greg (leaving out the part where I turned blue) and it almost seems as if we’re just two normal girls having a normal conversation, without a trace of bitterness on one side or perkiness on the other. I explain to her how to cure Mrs. Fenester’s teeth, which have become plugged again.

I'm surprised to see that *Priscilla the Warrior Fly Princess* is still here. Her strength is waning but she's still buzzing around and banging her little head against the window, for all her hundreds of eyes unable to see the barrier that stands between her and the fading light. She has managed to avoid the cobweb.

Perky One, whose real name is Martha, is getting ready to leave and asks me if there is anything else I need.

"Thank you, Martha," I say, "There is just one more thing. I'm a little warm from all the exertion and excitement. Would you mind opening that window a crack?"