

Sunshine in a Can

“She doesn’t have Alzheimer’s,” Sunshine’s mother, said. “She’s just hard-headed.” Wanda reached over and patted her daughter’s bare leg. “Just like you, honey.”

“She’s always been crazy,” Sunshine said, wincing out the car window. Where does her mother get-off? Comparing her with an old woman in an old-folks home who can’t even remember the way to the toilet? Who makes jokes like this?

“Well, I’m glad you finally came home to see Grandmother anyway,” Wanda said. “She loves you very much. But don’t be upset if she doesn’t recognize you, you hardly look the same.”

“Blondes have more fun,” Sunshine said, giving her hair a flip, “and who said this was my home anyway?”

Wanda slowed the car and turned onto Main Street. It had been two years since her last visit to Libertyville, and now hiding behind big, red sunglasses, Sunshine began to mechanically mark-off the same, worn-out sites from the car window: the Ace Hardware, BI-LO and the Wise Buy, Bremen’s Beauty Supply—where she bought the purple hair dye that led to suspension her senior year, and HobbyLand—the go-to place for junior high projects. But the shop windows looked empty at the Libertyville Air Mall, another random storefront door actually locked with chains, the strip mall’s parking lot almost vacant.

“You think Grandmother’s crazy because she chased you and your cousins with a spatula,” Wanda said.

“One minute flipping pancakes, the next chasing me with the spatula, calling me a chicken, bok bok bok.” Sunshine’s view from the passenger seat shifted to the McDonalds on the next block. “What happened to the playground?” she said, the life-sized statue of Ham-Burglar, his mask, wide-brimmed hat and prison stripes, her favorite growing up, suddenly gone.

“Oh goodness, I believe they had to change the look,” Wanda said. “It was bulldozed.” She inched the car to a stop at the traffic light.

“The creepy statute of Ronald McDonald bulldozed, that would have been fun to see.” Sunshine dug her black nails into her scalp, and then slipped her hand in her purse, felt for the square edge, resting her hand on the pack of Marlboros.

The next left onto Myrtle Street led to her elementary school. Sunshine felt an urge to see the school, to suggest a detour, but her mother busted-out with, “Look Sunshine! The muffler people are still alive.” Wanda momentarily released the steering wheel, waving with both hands to the muffler statues outside Mac’s Muffler Shop, standing on a patch of grass with their bright yellow oblong chests, square heads and exhaust pipe arms. “You played muffler girl, remember, walking like a robot.” Wanda said, waving again.

Every morning on the way to school Sunshine had put her face to the car window, waving in delight with both hands to the muffler mother and father, holding hands with their mini-wrench fingers, the boy propped on a baseball bat, wearing a real baseball hat, the muffler girl’s cheeks painted with red dots, pigtails of braided wires, all with lug nut smiles.

Why did her mother have to wave like that? “Wanda please keep both hands on the wheel,” Sunshine said. “Let’s not die before we get to see Grandmother who is about to die.”

“Don’t be terrible, honey,” Wanda said. “Now don’t they have muffler people in Florida?”

“You ever been hit with a spatula?” Sunshine said.

“Have you?” The light turned green, pulling the car forward, Wanda said, “You know you wanted to be a muffler girl. So cute. I’m not sure why you think you need to bleach-out your hair, and that short skirt—is that what they do in Florida?”

Sunshine was not about to tell her mother what they do in Florida—definitely it’s not arranging flowers. Incessantly Wanda worked long hours at Libertyville Flowers, all through Sunshine’s childhood, especially Valentine’s Day, Mother’s Day, prom nights, weddings and funerals, making herself famous on the radio with her signature speedy speech and high intonation, announcing, “There’s-beaucoup-bouquets-to-be-made” or “don’t-forget-to-call Wanda for-one-of-my-famous-bouquets” or “make-it-up-to-her WITH FLOWERS.” Sunshine couldn’t remember a day growing-up that Wanda didn’t just-pop-her-head-in-the-shop to check the love-left-in-the-roses, or that the chrysanthemums-held-their-heads-high, or ritually scanning the newspapers for events, weddings and deaths.

Will all the Mother’s Days ever wear her out? Wanda did look older, tired with flushed cheeks hanging over smile lines and that wobbling neck. Feeling her own neck, Sunshine promised not to let that happen. She raised her chain necklace, relieving the heft of the over-sized, gothic cross, she worn, not for religious purposes, she told her co-workers at Cheater’s, but as a fashion statement. She wondered if the weight of the cross would stretch on her neck skin. She remembered her grandmother’s neck always had a wobble, and in a housedress hanging clothes on the line, the backs of her grandmother’s arms fleshy and white, the cellulite jiggled in the sun. She would never be like that.

But if Sunshine suggested to her mother that she worked too much, Wanda always replied, “I never really worked that much until your father left, and then I had to.” And then Wanda would launch into the divorce story, beginning with Sunshine’s birth; the brightest-happiest-day, and Dan not there, probably out hunting-fishing-watching-a-football-game-at-the-bar, always anywhere but where he should be. So alone Wanda decided the baby name and had it on the birth certificate before Dan could object. Sure, Dan had argued, why not Jane or Karen? And how could he walk around town, everybody knowing your business, back straight, head high, with a daughter named like a hippie.

So the name choice sprouted the seed of marital strife. Sunshine had overheard Grandmother say too, that Dan was bitter, he had wanted a son, and that a shotgun had been at the wedding. But before she knew what that all meant, Sunshine had liked when her father called her Sunny. She remembered the souvenir he brought from Florida, a can with a picture of a palm tree and a woman in a bikini waving. The label read, “Genuine Sunshine in a Can!” Her father had promised to take her to Florida one day, but never did. Instead he remarried, moved to God-knows-where. That’s what Wanda said. But Wanda was one to talk, she never did anything. She still lived alone since Sunshine quit helping at the florist, quit community college and up-and-moved to Florida. In Florida, Sunshine lived in an apartment complex with a couple girlfriends. They worked nights at Cheater’s and during the day sat by the pool careful to hide bikini straps for an even tan. They planned pole dance routines and discussed new, professional names like Jackie and the Bean Stalk, Pepper Shaker, Dee-Lite. No, Sunshine would not tell Wanda what they do in Florida.

Wanda pulled the car into the parking lot of the White Oaks Nursing Facility. Sunshine noticed a small lawn with a paved path that led to a stone picnic table. A woman sat at the picnic table smoking a cigarette. She faced away from the building and parking lot, looking beyond a high chain linked fence to a barren, dirt field. Her brightly patterned hospital scrubs contrasted sharply with the surroundings.

Standing in the parking lot, Wanda handed to her daughter a bouquet of white daisies scattered with forget-me-nots. "You give the flower-power to your grandmother," she said. "And put-on a smiley face, there's not a lot of joy here, so don't be surprised. It's not the Holiday Inn."

Before the recent move to the White Oaks Nursing Facility, Grandmother had been in the old Holiday Inn on Route 5. Closed, the new owners turned the hotel into a residence for senior living, offering memberships for a set price. Each member had a private room and meal vouchers that could be used in the restaurant. In the converted conference center members gathered for cards, bingo and dances. Relaxing by the pool or on their personal balcony, members floated around, dressed for dinner, mingling as if they were on an eternal vacation. It seemed a perfect place, Wanda had hoped.

But Grandmother did not have a balcony, did not play games. Management informed her wearing a housedress to the restaurant broke the rules, so Grandmother stopped eating there and began smoking cigarettes after having quit for 20 years. Her room, situated on the ground floor, required a walk to the official smoking area, a lighted gazebo with benches, decorated with hanging flower baskets, a bird feeder and festive ashtrays. But the gazebo had a negative connotation among some of the members and stubbornly Grandmother smoked in her room. Under surveillance, staff confiscated her cigarettes multiple times. Cleaning staff witnessed her in the housedress at the gazebo picking through the decorative ashtrays for butts. Management informed Wanda and her brother their mother had the onset of Alzheimer's. They did not allow Alzheimer's patients a membership at the old Holiday Inn and gave Grandmother a two month notice to move out. Wanda and her brother had no options. Neither felt able to take-on Grandmother and anyway, Wanda told Sunshine that it was a temporary move.

Sunshine and Wanda walked past the White Oaks sign, silently along a hedgerow, a bramble bordering the sidewalk, leading into a single story rectangular brick building. Wanda rang a nurse on the intercom system and the big, double glassed doors released. They entered a long, broad corridor illuminated overhead with florescent lights. Inside a cluster of dilapidated wheelchairs assembled at the entrance, empty, waiting. The opposite end of the hallway high windows funneled glare along white walls and floor, giving the effect of walking into a long bright tunnel. Sunshine left on her sunglasses and pinched her nose in response to the sanitized odor. She let her hand skim along the safety rail as she walked behind her mother.

Along the corridor, doublewide metal doors propped open to expose the interior of the rooms, each large enough to be equipped with four single hospital beds, a nightstand each and a center table with four chairs. While some of the beds seemed occupied, folks also sat at tables, or some were involved in feeble movement, all interspersed with busy, loud-talking staff. This was not the Holiday Inn.

Wanda stopped at the entrance to a room, took a pause and said loudly, "Hi Momma, we're here!" Two other old women in the room both looked-up from their beds. Out of the hallway glare, another woman, miniaturized by a large metal wheelchair, maneuvered and pushed her way to the door and said to Wanda, "Glad you could make it, Grandmother has been quarrelsome today."

Wanda smiled, said hello and thanked the old lady, calling her Marvis. Wanda crossed to the corner where her mother sat on the side of a bed. Her grandmother's back hunched behind the neck and made it appear she could not raise her head. Sunshine stayed in the doorway, feeling out of place in the red plastic pumps and jean skirt. Holding the bouquet, the long tapered ribbons trailed down her leg. With her free hand Sunshine reached to hold the gothic cross.

"Momma, it's me, Wanda?" Wanda said, bending down, forceful in the whitehaired, old woman's face, as if being close might make it all alright.

Instead it perturbed Grandmother and she lifted her head so Sunshine could see her fierce eyes, and said, "You get out right now!"

Even with Wanda's exaggerated, lug nut smile, Sunshine knew her mother's eyes summoned tears. She witnessed it a million times. Then, even with the pressure of her hunched-back baring down, Grandmother raised her head awkwardly and twisted so she could look over Wanda's shoulder to the door and said, "Get out troublemaker."

Not sure what she expected. Not much had changed, Sunshine thought, a relief really. She decided to go to the picnic table outside and wait. Turning from the door she found the old lady, Marvis, in the wheelchair blocked her, trapping her against the door with the wheelchair.

"Calm down Momma, it's me, Wanda and Sunshine," Wanda said.

Grandmother said, "I know exactly who you are. You need to get her out of here. I call thief," pointing over to the door. "That old lady took my glasses."

"She gave them to me," Marvis said, looking up from the wheelchair to Sunshine. "I swear she did. She's in a terrible mood today."

"Crazy old lady," Grandmother said.

"Let's get you up, a wash will make you feel better," Wanda said, and she pulled her mother to her feet. Grandmother resisted as Wanda took her arm to guide her toward the room's communal restroom. Grandmother jerked free, and moved to the restroom slowly on her own.

In the doorway edging the big metal wheelchair into Sunshine's bare leg, Marvis said to Sunshine, "You can wash me next, dear."

Marvis's big plastic glasses sat crooked on her face. Her pale pink, papery-thin skin looked like a soft petal of a farewell-to-spring, and would most likely come off if washed. The old lady laughed. She must be joking, Sunshine assured herself. Surely Marvis did not expect Sunshine to wash her. Then Marvis said, "Where's my glasses?" The old lady's glasses, albeit crooked, already sat on her face, so Sunshine laughed, and that agitated Marvis. Louder she said again, "Where's my glasses?"

"On your face," Sunshine said, deciding to squeeze by, to escape Marvis, but she fine-tuned the big metal wheel, burying the rim into Sunshine's leg.

"Ouch, damn-it," Sunshine said, looking at Marvis and around for a nursing aide, her mother, someone, anyone to help. Marvis reached out and began clawing bird-like at Sunshine, as if to pluck her sunglasses off her face, pinching harder into her leg with the wheelchair. Sunshine smacked at the old woman with the bouquet of flowers, the ribbons tangling her hands. Seeing a pair of reading glasses on the center table Sunshine went for them, thrusting them at Marvis. Marvis took the glasses and placed them atop the glasses already on her face. Wearing both pair of glasses she adroitly wheeled the chair around, out the doorway and down the hall.

Sunshine tried to turn her focus around, to feel some relief, but her was mother sternly combing at Grandmother's bowed head with her tangled white hair.

"Momma, be still so I can do your hair," Wanda said, pulling on the white hair.

"I don't give a crap about my hair. I need a cigarette," Grandmother said.

Raising her voice, Wanda said, "You don't smoke, remember."

“Yes I do,” Grandmother said, “Remember.”

“Show Grandmother the daisies. Look it’s Sunshine with daisies and forget-me-nots,” Wanda said.

The old woman lifted her head under the pressure of her bent back, of Wanda picking at her hair, and grimaced. Sunshine suddenly she hoped her Grandmother did not recognize her. She heard a nursing aide shout from outside the door, warning Marvis not to free-wheel down the hall. Sunshine felt envy. She wanted to turn and run, to free-wheel to the eternal vacation. Instead, under her Wanda’s watch, Sunshine smiled weakly and offered up the flowers, broken stems, daisies dangling, the sensitive forget-me-nots crushed, cascading over.

“What have you done to my poor bouquet?” Wanda said, forgetting her mother’s hair, moving quickly to examine the flowers, using her fingers to salvage what she could, absorbed with the daisies.

“You didn’t see me, Momma, that old lady in the wheelchair almost amputated my leg,” Sunshine said, rubbing at the red mark on her thigh. Wanda did not respond.

Grandmother said, “Got a cigarette?” Sunshine realizing that her grandmother spoke to her.

“Now Momma,” Wanda said, “Remember, you don’t smoke.” Wanda stepped back and placed the flowers onto the foot of the bed, eyes beginning to water as she straighten the stems, arranging the flowers so they looked perfect again. Sunshine should reach out, touch her mother’s hair, help her wash the gray away, tell her blondes have more fun.

But instead, Sunshine felt in her purse, took out the Marlboros and shook one from the pack. She jutted her hip like they practiced in Florida, flexed her leg, and posed with the cigarette, holding it up like a rose up to her grandmother.

“Sunshine, smoking is bad,” Wanda said.

“You’re not saving her life,” Sunshine said. Leaving the room, she slipped the red sunglasses over her eyes and from the glare of the corridor she pulled a wheelchair from the ranks, spun it around, and moved to retrieve Grandmother.

Parked at the picnic table, Sunshine lite two cigarettes, and passed one to Grandmother. Sunshine took a deep drag and looked out pass the fence to the barren field.

Grandmother sucked the cigarette and blew the smoke and said to Sunshine, “Who are you a stripper?”

Her grandmother didn’t recognize her, Sunshine thought, she doesn’t know me.

Taking another drag from her smoke, Grandmother said, “What did Wanda expect, giving you that name.”

Sunshine said, “But what about the Alzheimer’s?”

At that her grandmother replied, “I forget.”