

Wanderlust

On the last morning of Lena's life, she woke herself when she yelled out, "Mama, mama!" It wasn't enough to rouse anyone at the nurse's station down the hall, nor bother her roommate Dot, curled up in a ball in her bed. The occasional shout from Lena never disturbed Dot, who didn't have a clue about where she was or even that she had a roommate. At least Lena still had her senses about her. They had moved Dot into her room the same afternoon Myrtle had died, and Lena hadn't seen her move or say anything in the two weeks she'd been there. The curtain between their beds was only partially drawn, and Lena watched Dot for a few minutes in the dark, the slightest of movements of her thin blue blanket the only sign that Dot was still here.

Her back ached, more than it usually did. She had fallen asleep in her wheelchair. More to the point, the nurses had let her fall asleep in her wheelchair. Even though that always left her back and neck stiff when she woke up, she liked waking up in her wheelchair. When she woke up like this, she didn't have to wait for the nurses to help her out of her bed into her wheelchair, and she could wheel herself around right away to see what was going on. Especially this early in the morning, when there was hardly anyone up and around.

Lena looked at the small dry erase board on the wall. Beneath the printed words TODAY IS one of the nurses had written with a brown dry erase marker SATURDAY, SEP 8 and below that were the printed words YOUR NURSE IS and TIFFANI in the same brown handwriting. Lena thought that was good – Tiffani usually didn't bother her too much, didn't make her do her therapy exercises, and certainly let her stay in her wheelchair as much as Lena wanted. But now

Lena needed Tiffani because she needed to go to the bathroom. She pushed the call button on the side of her bed. The light on the button glowed a bright blue as Lena waited for what seemed like a half-hour. Finally, there was a tap on her half-opened door, and Tiffani looked around the edge of the door.

“Miss Lena, did you need something?” Tiffani asked.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” Lena said. Even after eight months, she still hated to have to ask someone to help her.

“Sure,” Tiffani said. “You sure are up way early this morning,” she said as she rolled Lena to the door of the bathroom. Tiffani helped her smooth her gown out of the way and then put her arm around her thin waist, helped her out of the wheelchair onto the toilet, and then back again when she was finished.

“Did you fall asleep in your wheelchair again last night, Miss Lena?” Tiffani asked.

“I was watching *Diners, Drive-throughs, and Dives* and fell asleep,” Lena answered.

“You know it’s better for you to sleep in your bed,” Tiffani said.

Lena was irritated by the comment but ignored it. “I want to go outside today to the courtyard,” Lena said.

“Well, it’s still dark outside, Miss Lena,” Tiffani said as she slipped behind the curtain between Lena’s bed and Dot’s bed. “The sun is not even up yet. And besides, it’s going to rain

all day today.” Tiffani reached down to adjust the blanket covering Dot, pulling it up to cover her bare shoulder better. Lena looked at Dot, who gave no sign or reaction to the attention.

“Not raining now,” Lena said, looking out the window next to Dot’s bed. Dot’s bed was closest to the window, but the view was wasted on Dot. She didn’t mind her sister Myrtle having the view, but now Lena thought they should swap places with her and Dot. Why did Dot need the window bed?

“But it’s going to rain any minute now,” Tiffani said. “Let’s wait till after breakfast, and then we’ll see.”

Tiffani looked at the dry erase board and then wiped the information off with the side of her hand and pulled out a blue dry erase marker from her pocket. TUESDAY, SEPT 11, she wrote under TODAY IS on the board. Under YOUR NURSE IS, she wrote KELSEY.

“You’re Kelsey?” Lena asked.

“You know I’m Kelsey, Miss Lena,” the nurse Lena thought was Tiffani said. “Who did you think I was?” Lena didn’t answer.

Kelsey stepped out of the room. Lena waited a bit, then rolled her wheelchair to the door and looked down the hall towards the nursing station. The hall was empty of people but full of obstacles – medical carts and equipment scattered here and there in the long hallway. A mop bucket sat just outside the door to the chapel area. Lena was pretty sure that the courtyard was somewhere beyond the nurse’s station, maybe on the left. She liked the flowers in the courtyard – there was a stand of knockout roses climbing aimlessly along one wall and a few pink and blue

hydrangeas in an area near the open end of the courtyard near a large pine tree that provided some shade over the creaky white metal porch chairs.

The hydrangeas reminded Lena of her teenage trips to the Fontana resort in the hills of western North Carolina. She would get up early and sneak off with Myrtle and wander through the mountains around the resort, going up to an opening where Fontana Lake would spread out in front of them, reflecting a deep blue in the summer sunlight against the green of the surrounding pine forest. They stayed out in the hills till dark, watching the light disappear over the western edge of the woods. Then they waited and watched the light reappear in the forest one tiny firefly at a time, till the entire forest around them danced with light so thick they had to keep their mouths closed to keep from swallowing whole handfuls as they ran down the mountain back to the resort.

Lena eased out into the hall. She missed Myrtle the most out of all her six sisters. Myrtle would have helped her get past Kelly or Keelie or whoever it was saying it was going to rain and get her out into that courtyard with the roses and hydrangeas. But Lena was on her own now. Myrtle's funeral had been two weeks ago, but Lena didn't go. She didn't do funerals. She hadn't been to one since her father died almost fifty years ago. Funerals were all too much for her, the crying, the hugs, people coming up staring at the body in that box. Besides, you couldn't smoke at funerals anymore, which was another reason not to go. Lena's daughter Sharon would always sit and tell her about each family funeral, about who preached it and who came and who didn't. Sharon had told her all about Myrtle's funeral the last week when she had been in town to visit.

Lena rolled slowly down the hall and eased past the nurse's station. Kensley or whoever didn't pay any attention to her as she stared into her computer screen while looking at a stack of

papers. Lena's arms ached. She wasn't used to pushing herself this far in the wheelchair, and she still had another 30 feet to go to what she thought was the courtyard door, which Lena figured would be locked because all the doors were always locked. Myrtle had known the code for opening the door and getting out, but Lena couldn't remember it or even remember if Myrtle had told her the code. Myrtle was always better than Lena at keeping secrets. Lena could smell breakfast being prepared in the kitchen. Turkey bacon. Oatmeal. Burnt toast.

She put her feet down to help herself move towards the door as her arms got more and more tired, and her shoulders began to ache even more from the effort. She noticed one of the nursing assistants slipping back into the hall from the courtyard through the door, a pack of cigarettes and a lighter clutched in one hand, a few dark wet spots on her blue scrubs. She wanted to call out and ask her for a cigarette, but she didn't want to draw attention to herself. She slumped over a bit to pretend she was sleeping. The nurse assistant stood by the door, holding it with her hand as it closed behind her, keeping the springs on the door from slamming it shut. As it eased back closed, the stiff lock kept the door from completely closing, so when Lena arrived at the door, the door was just resting against the door frame, unlocked.

Lena leaned against the door and tried pushing it open enough to get her wheelchair started through the door, but the door was too heavy, plus it had a heavy spring that was keeping it closed. She felt a sharp pain in the middle of her back from pushing on the door, and Lena suddenly realized that she was sweating through her gown from the exertion of getting down the hall and trying to open the door. She pushed again, this time with enough force to bang the front of her wheelchair on the metal door, but it still wouldn't budge. Lena really needed some cool

air, as it had suddenly gotten sweltering in the hallway. She started to make one more effort when she felt the wheelchair began to move away from the door.

“Whoa, Miss Lena, where do you think you are going?” said a nurse who looked familiar to Lena, “You know I told you that it was raining outside.”

Lena wanted to respond, but the sharp pain in her back and arms kept her from breathing enough to say anything. She clumsily reached out towards the door frame to try and resist being moved away from the door and the courtyard and the hydrangeas and just being outside in the cool, dark air, but her hands missed as her wheelchair was turned back towards her room. There wasn't enough air in the hallway. She wanted to tell the girl, but she couldn't say a thing as she slumped back into the chair.

“We need to get you back home where you belong,” said the girl, whoever she was. The girl was wearing the loveliest blue uniform. It matched the blue hydrangeas outside the window they rolled by going back to her room, the same blue as the shimmering lake Lena could see as she stood with Myrtle high above it all, waiting for the lights to come out and dance all around her and Myrtle as they hurtled through the forest, weaving through the trees, waving their young and beautiful hands in front of their faces to clear their way home.