

The Ninth Floor

I unfolded the clipping one more time and rubbed my bruised fingers over the yellowing newsprint as if I could blot out the story if not the image. If I could cry, perhaps my tears could wash the words away; but, I know the truth would still burn holes in my mind and heart.

Wrenching breath from somewhere, I studied the caption for some answer, some reason, some way to dissolve into the scene just one more time and push the reverse button. I read:

PARKWOOD GAZETTE

Police and ambulance were called to the corner of Juniper and 5th Street last week where two people were injured, one fatally, in a freak accident involving bicycle riders and a parked City road maintenance truck. The two were participating with 130 others in the 'Tackle Sickle Cell Anemia' ride on Sunday. In the 19th mile of the 50-mile-ride, the riders collided as they hit a pothole scheduled for repair and crashed into the vehicle. Pavement repair had been halted over the weekend to accommodate the event.

I could make out our bib numbers: Hank's and mine. Now Hank's dead. First Caroline, now this! I tired to wrap my mind it. Caroline, I understand. She suffered so long. But Hank? Out for a fun ride trying to do something good. It doesn't make sense! Gone, just like that. And I

The Ninth Floor

couldn't even say goodbye.

An electric shock racked my body and brought me back to the here and now. I grabbed what's remaining of my right leg reflexively *Ah, Heck! Then there's that! Or, not that, as it turns out. One more nail! Now how am I going to get along with just one leg?* Suddenly the most ridiculous question entered my head: *Just where do all the amputated arms and legs go anyway?* I examined the elastic wrap that looked as though it was created in some gift wrap booth at Macy's – minus the ribbon, of course. I touch it with the same anxiety I used to approach Jake's mutt, Brute. *Dang! That hurts like all get out. I wonder how Sarge got along back in Iraq. Wonder what ever happened to Sarge anyway? Maybe I should look him up. After...well, after this...*

I brushed sweat beads off my forehead with the back of my hand and pulled my shirt away from my chest. *Okay! I'm left with two hands, anyway. That's something.* As usual, my peace was broken by a rhythmic knock at the door. I lifted my eyes to see young Mr. Clean standing there with his Howdy Doody smile. *Is this a hospital or a comedy club?*

“Hey, Verne,” grinned Eddie. “You ready to go up to Physical Therapy?”

Eddie's young and a former wrestler. It's no use trying make any excuses: nothing works with Eddie. Besides, what else can I do in this dull room but lie in this bed or sit in the recliner?

Eddie stood by while I transferred from the bed to the wheelchair. Staff here have been trying to convince me to not buy my own wheelchair saying, “We don't want you to get married to a wheelchair.” *Ha!* The loaner wheelchair of the day was huge. Caroline and I could fit in it together. *Right! Get it together, Verne.* Caroline's dead two years *If only I could see and hold her*

The Ninth Floor

one more time. Right again. Maybe in the next life. I just shook my head.

Eddie's more of an escort than orderly in the last few weeks making sure I get to my appointments on time. In the elevator, he pushed the #8 button and chattered all the way up to the top floor. I glowered at him and tuned him out. Instead, I dwelt on all my losses: Caroline, Hank, my leg, my job, my independence. I folded my hands—steeple-like—pressing my index fingers against my mouth trying to keep the corners of my mouth straight.

The very first time I arrived on the eighth floor, I was impressed more by the view than anything else. If I have to get out of bed, I may as well get this view. Windows on all sides display the most awesome scene; it goes on like forever. And it's always sunny.

This day, Veronica greeted me right at the elevator door blocking my view. She held her clip board in one hand and a case in the other—all business, this sister.

“Hi Verne. How are ya?”

“Fine. Let's get this over. I'm a busy man.” She knew I lied twice, but the fact is that the doc told me I can't leave unless I do this, so I look at it like it's prison and I got to do my time.

As I rolled into the gym a chorus of “Hi Vern.” greeted me from the other inmates. It sounded a lot like AA. I don't know them, but since we share this space, I waved. *What else can I do?*

The room is one huge gym and takes up the entire eighth floor. It's all action; noisy too, with counting, grunting and clacking of wall weights. Veronica used to come to my room to get me moving and to wrap what's left of my leg. That's where she taught me how to get out of bed and into a chair. Therapy in my room was quiet, except when I swore at her, or at myself. To her

The Ninth Floor

credit, she never swore back. She'd only say I'm ,“allowed some anger.” I'd call her my “physical torturer” and she'd just smile. Damn that constant smile! She flashes the most beguiling smile as if she has a secret.

Veronica walked to the parallel bars and waved me over. I followed like a puppy because I want the treat of going home. She squatted down facing me and pulled something from the case, resting it on the floor. “Your prepatory prosthesis is ready—back from the prosthetist just this morning. Jim asked me to start checking out the initial fit. He'll be by shortly.” She held the thing up as if it was a Christmas package and I'm a five- year-old.

“No way! Not that!” I shouted. My heart pounded in surprise at hearing my own voice. Stunned silence suddenly surrounded us. Everyone in the room stopped their exercise and looked at me. I couldn't have been more self-conscious if I just tripped over the power cord at the theater and stopped the movie. Almost as fast, the room became animated again. As a way of apology I offered, “I mean, I'm not ready yet.” I looked down sheepishly, though I don't know why. I really don't know these people and they mean nothing to me.

Veronica kept holding the damned thing, but smiled. She looked her usual up-beat self. “Sure you are.”

I couldn't figure if she was picking an argument or trying to re-assure me. “Your stump is healed and shrunk properly. The skin is intact and strong. Heaven only knows the massage has helped.” If my skin weren't so dark, I'd have flushed with embarrassment. Although it was therapeutic massage, it just sounded bad out loud, you know?

“Verne, Doctor Simon, Jim and I have all gone over how important it is for you to wear

The Ninth Floor

this early on. Your muscles are strong. You need to get upright soon to keep your circulatory and respiratory systems strong. And, you need to start putting pressure on the stump to keep it shaped properly.”

My intellect understood her reasoning. Nevertheless, my emotions protested, “It's ugly! It doesn't even look like a leg, let alone my leg.” Suddenly I felt foolish. *When did I ever care that much about how I look?*

“ Oh! I understand.” That time, I thought Veronica lied. *How could she possibly understand?* “Here, look a little closer.” She laid the thing on my lap. *Cripe! On my lap!*

She pointed to each of the parts. Fighting nausea, I tried looking away but it was right there in my face. “This is a dynamic response foot.” *Looks like a tiny sled!* “This is shock absorbing pylon.” *Looks a lot like my bicycle pump for heaven's sake!* “This the socket.” *Just like a big cup.* That's where your stump will fit. First, of course, you'll wear some soft socks over ...”

My stomach twisted, my face got hot, my hand went to my mouth and I dry heaved loudly. Veronica handed me a tissue then reached for a waste basket.

“You okay?”

“I guess.” *Lying again.* “ No, wait.” I choked up the truth about my feelings. “Do you have to call this a 'stump'?” I grabbed what was right of my leg and painfully hefted it up with quivering hands. “Stump' sounds like an old tree trunk: something whacked down in the forest that's becoming compost. My face burned and my chest heaved as I stared her down feeling self-righteous and condemned at the same time.

The Ninth Floor

She waited several moments. I'm not sure if she was waiting to see if I was done with my outburst, or if she was just contemplating an answer. Finally she said calmly. "Stump' is only a professional term. You don't have to use it. You could say just say 'right leg', 'remnant', 'residual' or 'leg' or whatever you want. I once treated a young girl who called hers 'Dollie' and a young boy who called his 'Hitch'. But you should know that the doctor, prosthetist, and even other patients will use the term 'stump'." She sat on the exercise mat next to the parallel bars waiting while I tried to reconcile my anger over jargon.

Exhausted and chagrined. I finally said, "Whatever! But I don't feel ready to put it on just yet."

"Alright. How about you and I do some gait and balance work in the parallel bars then."

I submitted and we spent the better part of the next hour with me walking in the bars on one leg. In truth it wasn't that difficult. Then she handed me some crutches and we repeated the same routine with those. Occasionally she would push against me and I would resist and walk against the force of her weight. For a little gal, she was strong.

The next day Eddie brought me up as usual. As soon as the elevator door opened Veronica motioned me to a corner of the gym where there were two other amputees—both wearing differing styles of prostheses. "Vern, meet Billy Joe and Georgia."

"Hey." I said, glad to see another dark face like mine.

Georgia was the first to speak, "Catch!" She volleyed the medicine ball with the word. I nearly fell over backward. *That sucker's heavy!* I tossed it back at her and she returned the favor to Billie Joe. We spent the remainder of the afternoon like that until my arms felt like they might

The Ninth Floor

fall off too. While we finished off bottles of water they told me about their injuries, and I told them my story—what I remember of it—though the entire day of the accident is still fuzzy in my mind. Our game and talk was a bright spot in my day; and through my new friends, I started to feel that I might be able to get along in my new body.

Suddenly the room got real quiet as a visitor entered the room. A darling little girl ran up to Georgia who met her with eager arms. After an embrace, Georgia looked up and said, “Everyone, this is my little girl, Jasmine.” Jasmine buried her face in Georgia's lap.

“Hi Jasmine,” greeted everyone in the room, including me.

As I turned away to give them some privacy I noticed Veronica had tears in her eyes.

I didn't ask anything, but Veronica offered anyway as her professionalism faded to personal for the first time. “I had a child too—once.”

She looked sad for herself and happy for Georgia at the same time.

I offered weakly, “Want to talk about it?”

“It would only break you heart.” She left it at that. So did I.

Eddie appeared and announced it was time to go.

The next morning, Eddie showed up on schedule and effervesced about the terrific day ahead for all of us. *Yeah right!*

Then he announced the only bit of real information I ever heard from him: “Veronica has news for you. And, bring along that newspaper clipping.”

As usual he chattered down the long hall and into the elevator. He pushed a button and we started up. When the door opened, I didn't see Veronica at first. This was a different room

The Ninth Floor

with an even better view. No parallel bars, exercise mats, weights, medicine balls or other people. There was no furniture at all. *So... she needs a private room to get me to wear the prosthesis. Okay I can play this game.* I rolled the chair over to one of the windows. The surrounding floor-to ceiling view was spectacular. I never saw anything like it.

Veronica spoke from behind me. I hadn't heard her come in and spun the chair around surprised. She sported her usual bright smile.

“Hi Verne, you look good.”

“Hi, Veronica. Thanks. How are you? Some view here. Where's everyone ? A slight apprehension in my voice must have amused here. She smiled even broader making her whole face glow.

“I have a special surprise for you Verne. I think you're finally ready. Did you bring that news article with you like Eddie asked.”

“Sure thing, right here.” I patted my shirt pocket.

Veronica set the prosthesis case on a table. I guess I was so enraptured by the view I didn't notice the table before. I wheeled closer.

“Looks like you're willing today.” Her voice rose slightly as if it was a statement she needed me to confirm.

I took a deep breath and admitted, “Yes, I'm ready. Lately I'd been thinking I can't fight this forever.”

“Good!” She said with determination as she opened the case and pulled out....

“Wow! It looks just like my leg! Now that's what I mean. Amazing how a prosthesis

The Ninth Floor

could look and feel just like my own leg. Glory be!” My heart fluttered and my body felt tingly.

“Exactly!” Veronica said. “And someone is coming now to walk on with you. She's right behind you.”

I turned around to look as the elevator door open, but sunlight streaming through the windows was so brilliant I could hardly see. Then I remembered the other thing that Eddie said. Twisting around facing Veronica I asked, “So is this great prosthesis the good news you wanted to tell me?”

“No. There's more.”

“Yeah, what?”

“Hank survived the crash; you didn't”

“What the ...?” I took out the article and re-read it. I finally understood.

I rose on both my legs and was amazed to see Caroline, more radiant than ever, motioning me into the elevator for our final ride together.