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The Tall One

He rolls the flower cart down the sidewalk. I watch him through the window. Six days a week, he goes by with his cart of flowers. He comes by just before visiting hours and stays until all the visitors have gone into the hospital. Many of them buy flowers and bring them to the patients. Especially, young fathers buy flowers.

Joanna brought me a bouquet the first day. I watched her through the window. I wanted to open the window and call out, "Don't buy the flowers. Save your money." But I couldn't get to the window. She brought the flowers in. A nurse put them in a vase and put them on the stand by the bed. After visiting hours, I told the nurse to take them away.

After the second bouquet, I told Joanna, "Please don't buy me any more flowers. They just take them away after you leave."

She will ask them about it. They'll say they do it on my instructions, and I'll deny that. Eventually, she will believe me. I don't want to confuse her nor bring her pain, but I can't explain it to her now. I'm already too close to the psychiatric ward to try to explain to people what I know they will not believe.

The psychiatric ward is down the hall, turn right.

I went in there once to visit a woman who saw me through the window and liked my face and made the arrangements. A pregnant woman, kicking heroin. She said, "You make me think of Jesus Christ."

"Only because I have a beard and long hair. Don't make the confusion."

"You are gentle."

"Gentle because I have no power. Christ's gentleness was from power."

"You think because your legs are gone, you have lost your power? Physical power isn't what power is about."

I look at the worker who monitors our visit. "Which of you is the patient, and which is the counselor?" He laughs.

A bouquet of flowers sits on the woman's bedside stand. It's hard for me to resist rolling my wheelchair up and knocking them onto the floor.

They say it will take me a long time to learn to walk well on artificial legs, but I will make liars of them. A very young woman comes from the psychiatric ward with her counselor. The precedent has been set, and she has permission to visit me if I want. "Sure. Come in. Sit down."

She said, "I flipped out on acid. I can't deal with anything anymore. Every time I have to do anything, I start crying. I want to be free, but I can't let go. What happened to you?"

"Bullets from an AK47 rifle. It happened a long time ago, but they keep whittling my legs off a few inches at a time. They're trying to save enough stump to fasten artificial legs."

Another day, an old man comes to visit his son, and he looks into my room, comes in for a minute. "What happened to you, son?" It isn't a polite question in a hospital, just like someone tells me they served five years in the pen, I don't ask what they did. But the old man doesn't know that.

"I followed my boss's orders to run a bulldozer down a grade when I knew it had bad brakes, and it rolled. I got clear enough to live, but not enough to save my legs. They had good insurance, and I'm set up for the rest of my life, easy street from here on."

He has a bouquet of flowers for his son, who was in a wreck. He looks at me and looks at the flowers in his hand. He is thinking he wants to give me some. I shake my head a little before he can complete his thought, and he doesn't finish the thought. He is going to go on down the hall and see his son. He says, "You be all right." It isn't a forecast, but an instruction, and I nod my head.

They're grinding my bones. They give me shots in the hips for pain. I think the name of the drug is Tall One. Yes. The tall one. It gives me tall dreams. I slip into a land I have never seen before, where the dreams are of fine silk and rainbow colors.

In the psychiatric ward, the pregnant woman says, "It's t-a-l-w-y-n. I've had it before. It's very much like heroin."

"Then I see how heroin can be addicting." I tell the nurse I don't want anymore of it. "I'll take the pain."

I can't take the pain. I can't take the pain. Where is my strength? Where is my power? How have I entered a world in disorder? I'll bear the pain. Bear it up like a standard.

They bring in a very old man. All day and all night, he sits up in his bed and lies down again, sits up and lies down. Don't you get tired? Doesn't that wear you out?

The nurses call him grandpa. "Grandpa, lie down and get some rest." He is still until they leave the room and then he's at

it again, up and down, up and down. He wants out of his bed, and he works at it. He gets into my blood. He is such an old man. He was strong and tall once. The tall one.

I slip off into sleep, and when I wake, he sits on the edge of the bed with his legs through the rails. He is so thin, he might get through. "Hey. Hey you. Hey mister. Lie down. If you get out of there, you'll fall, and that floor is hard. Hey, old man. Hey mister." He doesn't hear me. He doesn't see me. "Hey. Hey grandpa."

"Grandpa? Grandpa? Who you calling grandpa, you young whelp, whippersnap, you no kin of mine, no seed of my seed; don't you call me grandpa."

"Okay, but lie down. You'll hurt yourself." But he doesn't hear me again, and I hit the buzzer, and the nurse comes in the middle of the night. She says, "Hey Grandpa, where you going?"

"Going? I'm going out and burn me some brush."

She brings back a needle and shoots him in the hip. "That'll quiet him down." But it doesn't. All night long. Lie down, sit up, lie down. He isn't making any progress. He doesn't know what he's doing.

I slip into sleep. I wake. He has the pillows pulled down, and he raises his butt and sits on them. He's going to go over the top. Build a platform and go over the top. He does know what he's doing. They give him another shot and tell him, "If you don't settle down, we'll strap you in bed."

After things settle down quiet, he gets hold of the buzzer and presses it and holds it down. The nurse comes in at a run. She cocks her arm and is going to slug him, and I say, "He doesn't know what he's doing." She's forgotten I'm there, and she pulls the punch.

"What do you want, grandpa?" He tries to say, tries to say again, but she says, "What do you want, Grandpa?" and he can't remember what he wants, because she's rushing him. He gets the thought formed and starts to say it, and she says, "What do you want? What do you want, grandpa?" It breaks the thought up, and he has to start over again. What do you want? He knows what he wants, but it's hard to put it to words, and he never gets it formed.

His wife comes in the morning and brings him a bouquet of flowers. I don't want the flowers in the room, but what can I say? They are young lovers alone together, and I won't interrupt their communion.

The move him to another room, and he dies. I know what

happened. He made it. He got out of his bed, despite the drugs, despite the restraining straps, and he fell on the tile-covered, concrete floor, and that killed him.

He is free. His wife will go with him soon. They will be free together in high green meadows where real flowers bloom in the clean sunshine. "Grandpa, Grandpa."

"You ain't no kin of mine."

They come and go. Some of them die. Some of them get better. I wouldn't be here so long, but there are other things. Something in my guts has gone wrong, and they can't find what it is. Meanwhile, they keep working on my bones and fitting the legs. One day I will walk out of the hospital on metal and plastic legs.

The pregnant woman in the psychiatric ward wants me to lift myself out of my wheelchair and climb into her bed and enter her body, and yes, I want to do that, but the worker does not leave us alone, and it never happens. We say we will get together when we get out of the hospital, but that will never happen either.

Joanna doesn't come anymore. She would, but I have driven her away. I don't want her to see me. I don't want to see her. She knew me before, and I read in her eyes the difference, though she says it doesn't matter. If she can bear it, I can't bear to see it in her eyes.

I work the legs. Walk the corridor. Walk the corridor. They are amazed how quickly I learn. I have some things to do.

Up the sidewalk. Down the sidewalk. Around the block. The flower seller comes down the block, and I go back in. Not today. Perhaps tomorrow.

Tomorrow. I walk up to him, and he smiles at me. Then he's puzzled by what he sees in my face. Closer. I get closer. "You phony. You cheat." He backs up.

"What do you mean?"

"These flowers aren't real. You can't fool me. You think you're clever, but you can't fool me."

"What? Of course they're real. Look at that bee. Would a bee come to artificial flowers? It's feeding from them, that's how real and how fresh they are."

I grab the bee and crush it in my hand and open my hand and show him the springs and the tiny motor that were the bee. He looks at me and yells, "Help. Help me, someone. Help. A madman."

My arms, my hands, I have not lost the strength there. I hit him, hard, and then again. His eyes click and click and springs

and wires fall out of his jaws when I hit him again. Then I walk away as fast as I can. These steel and aluminum and plastic legs, they are still clumsy, but I walk rapidly downtown. All the traffic lights click and buzz and wink. They close in on me. I fight, but they are too many for me.

I wake up in the hospital bed. Free from here. I want to be free from here. The pregnant woman stands beside the bed and leans over me and touches my face. "What happened to you?"

"Booby trap. Land mine. Hand grenade. Rocket rifle. Machines gone amok, crushed in a rock fall."

A nurse comes in with a needle. "What is it?"

"We don't tell you what the medications are."

"Is it talwyn?"

She nods her head.

"Get it away from me. I don't want it."

She leaves.

"What happened to the old man?"

"He died."

"What happened to his wife?"

"She went with him."

"What happened to the flower seller?"

"He's all right. He's going to live. He'll be up and around in a few days."

She went out of the room. Tears ran down my face. The first time since the car went under the truck and exploded in flame around me. The pregnant woman slips her hand under the blanket and touches me, and I rise to erection.

"They'll come in."

"No they won't. The nurse is on our side."

"Whose child is in your belly?"

"It doesn't matter." She crouches over me and slides me up into her smooth wetness. Fever falls away from me, and I love her. She says, "You're alive, you see. You're still alive, do you know that now? You're still alive." She pants, and her round belly rubs against my belly. The child growing there turns, and I feel his motion against me, feel the heat of her blood, her sweat dripping on me, her vaginal fluids running out into my pubic hair.

In the morning, she comes in with the worker-chaperone. I love her. She is warm. She touches me lightly on the face. The worker doesn't know and won't know. She says, "I want to talk to you about Jesus Christ. He is the tall one, you know, the only true tall one."