

From Chapter 10  
The Handicapped Teacher

I had to fight with the orthopedist to remove the cast [on my leg from the last fracture] ahead of schedule, so I could attend the first meeting of the graduate assistants. What else could I do? I couldn't show up in a wheelchair with a cast on my leg. They might have changed their minds about the assistantship.

I'd walked very slowly into the meeting room. Everyone greeted me and congratulated me. I wanted to cry out with every step. I sat at the conference table with the brace locked at the knee, knowing I wouldn't have been able to bend and straighten my leg without crying out.

At the meeting I learned I would be assisting two different instructors, teaching two Beginning Italian classes. Language classes at NYU were intensive. They met five days a week. The instructor taught three days, introducing new grammatical points. The assistant taught two days, reinforcing the grammar, doing drills and going over exercises. The first day, the instructor and the assistant were to conduct the class together. I listened, hoping no one noticed my stiff leg under the table.

Since that meeting, I'd been having physical therapy. The pain was now bearable. There had been another meeting and a few phone conversations between instructors and assistants.

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I was standing near the door waiting for the instructor.

"Do you want to sit here?" The spindly young man with long, stringy, brown hair was pointing to a seat. He thought I was a student.

Just then, the instructor rushed into the classroom and motioned for me to stand beside him in front of the class. He began: "*Io mi chiamo Giuseppe Italiano.*" That was his real name, quite appropriate for an Italian teacher. A few students giggled. I'd memorized the lesson plan and felt very confident. Still, my heart was beating fast. Giuseppe, or Joe as he was known outside of the classroom, turned towards me and inconspicuously winked. I was grateful for that sign of encouragement. "*E lei come si chiama?*"

Were they wondering why I was on crutches? Did they think I got hurt or could they tell I was permanently disabled? Did they want to ask "what happened to you?"

We went through a brief dialog. Then Joe handed the written version to the students. He went to one side, I went to the other. We approached each student: "*Lei come si chiama?*" They caught on quickly and tried to say their names in Italian. We helped with pronunciation.

"*Carlo!*"

"*Margherita!*"

I shook each student's hand. "*Piacere!*"

Each time I let go of the crutch with my right hand, putting more weight on my left leg, I felt the pain shoot up from my foot to my hip, but I ignored it. I was okay. I felt relaxed. I was even starting to have fun.

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I couldn't believe how much I loved teaching. I was always nervous before I walked in, but once in the classroom, I relaxed and felt there was no other place in the world I'd rather be. My students liked me, I could tell.

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I also loved my office. The size of a closet, with no windows, but I loved it. I put a poster of the Trevi Fountain on the wall facing my desk. It covered the whole wall, that's how small the room was. There were two chairs, one for me, the other for a student. If two students came together, one of them had to stand, or sit on my desk.

I loved it when students came to my office. They came to get help with Italian grammar but always ended up telling me about their lives... I loved hearing it all.

Only once, a student started very politely, "If you don't mind my asking..."

I didn't wait to hear the obvious question. "I had polio when I was a child."

"Oh."

I was glad she didn't add "I'm sorry." She didn't seem to want more information.

"We all think you're great."

I smiled and opened the textbook to go over Italian verbs.

Even when no students came, I loved sitting in my little office, reading over the work we would be discussing at night in my graduate class. Sometimes I'd close the door to concentrate on my reading. But I could still hear students talking to each other in the hallway.

"Are you taking French or Italian?"

“Do you like your class?”

Did I recognize the students' voices? Were any of them coming to see me?

“And who is your teacher?”

“My teacher...”

I lifted my head from Dante's *Vita Nuova*, “The New Life,” and listened. He sounded like one of my students.

“She's the handicapped teacher.”

I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. I pushed against the desk to move my chair back just enough so I could reach the door and turn the knob to lock it. I was the handicapped teacher. That's how they thought of me. Not just the Italian teacher but the handicapped teacher. When I heard the knock, I held my breath. I could tell the student was trying to turn the knob. They all knew I never locked the door when I was in my office.

“I saw her just a little while ago.”

“Well, I guess she left.”

I waited for the voices to move away, then started crying. A few minutes before I'd been so happy. I'd felt I belonged in this department, in my closet of an office. I believed I was accepted by my students, well liked. “We think you're great.” I'd taken it as a complement. Suddenly, I suspected what the girl meant was: “We think you're great to be teaching even though you're a cripple.”

I could never be just one of the teachers. Like I could not be just one of the graduate students. Like I was never just one of the girls. *Ciunca*. I didn't know if I was sad or angry or both. Dante's *Vita Nuova* was still open on my desk. I picked it up and hurled it at the Trevi Fountain. Nothing was new in my life. This was how it had always been and how it would always be. No matter what I did, no matter what I accomplished, I would be known for my disability. I would always be the different one, the handicapped one.

“Well, hello stranger!” That's how my old friends greeted me when they saw me at the DIA meeting. I was embarrassed, but, at the same time happy to be with them. A lot had changed, including many of the faces. Even without Judy, DIA was going strong, while the first organization I had joined, PRIDE, had fizzled out. The time for pride had not yet come.

Judy had been gone for over a year. She was in Berkeley, California, the best of all possible places for disabled people. That was thanks to the work of a guy named Ed Roberts, who'd had polio and couldn't move at all, couldn't even breathe on his own. He used a respirator and slept in an iron lung, someone said. Ed and his friends, who were paralyzed like him, but probably could breathe, called themselves the rolling quads, and had been fighting to make Berkeley very accessible, curb cuts at every corner, ramps in front of every building. And now Ed had started some kind of center for disabled people. Judy was working with Ed.

“What kind of center?” I asked.

“An independent center,” my friend Susie said.

“An independent living center,” a man who seemed older than the rest corrected her.

“What kind of center is that?” I was curious to know more.

“I'm not sure,” Susie shrugged. “It's some kind of place where disabled people can learn to be independent.”

“Yes, be in charge of their lives,” the man said. “Ed says that, no matter how disabled you are, you gotta call the shots. You shouldn't have some doctor or social worker say you need to be taken care of, treat you like you're sick, or lock you up in some hell hole of a nursing home. Even if you can't move at all and need things done for you, as long as you decide who does what and how, you're in control, you can live your life on your own terms.”

“And I say you shouldn't have your parents or other relatives doing it all for you, thinking they know what's best,” a young guy interjected.

“If everything is accessible, you can live on your own where you want, work, get married, whatever,” the older man continued. “That's called independent living.”

It made perfect sense. Luckily, I could do most things for myself, but I remembered when I was a child in Sicily how dependent I'd been, and later in the big cast how I hated the way nurses and aids handled me. What help I got was always on their terms not mine.

“At the center in Berkeley, they have people like Ed who know the ropes and show others the way. And they fight to make things better and better.”

I wanted to find out all I could about what was going on in Berkeley and about Ed Roberts' work. I wished I could join Judy and Ed. But at least, here I was, at this meeting, among the people I felt most comfortable with.

I expected the older guy to run the meeting. But a woman in a power chair rolled up to the front. She had a round face and a twinkle in her eyes, and was using some kind of respirator. A ventilator, Susie said it was called. I wondered if it was similar to the one the guy in Berkeley used. Her voice was loud when she started talking, then, as she talked, it got lower, she stopped talking for a second and sucked on a hose held by a gooseneck near her mouth, and her voice got louder again. It was a bit disconcerting, but only until you got used to it.

A small woman came in as the meeting was about to start and sat next to me. She walked with braces and crutches much better and faster than me. She had a long braid and the biggest, brightest, friendliest smile in the world.

A main topic on the agenda was the telethon. I wondered if they were talking about a specific one? The Muscular Dystrophy one? United Cerebral Palsy?

“The telethon contravenes what our movement is all about. We want rights not pity,” the woman with the ventilator was saying.

I was getting more excited by the minute.

During a break I turned toward the small woman sitting next to me. She was wearing pants over her braces. Her pant legs had ridden up, and I could see her braces were just like mine. She was older than me. I asked her if she worked and she told me she taught math at the New Jersey Institute of Technology in Newark, New Jersey. I was so happy to hear she was a teacher. I told her I’d just started teaching Italian as a Graduate Assistant at NYU. Then I found myself telling her what had happened, how upset I’d been hearing a student referring to me as “the handicapped teacher.”

She flashed her amazing smile and leaned towards me. “Let these kids remember ten or twenty years from now that they had a handicapped teacher in college. Then they will treat the disabled people they meet with more respect.”

Her words made sense. Maybe it wasn't so bad if students saw me as “the handicapped teacher.”

I wanted to hug this woman who seemed so wise. But I didn't even know her name. I held out my hand and introduced myself, apologizing for not having done it sooner. She said her name was Frieda Zames. Frieda. I loved her name as much as I loved her smile. I repeated it a few times. Frieda, Frieda. Maybe what I liked was that it sounded so much like “freedom.” At that moment, I felt free – free to be myself. It was wonderful not to have to pretend, not to have

to work hard to belong. I was so happy to be sitting next to Frieda, so happy to be in this room with “my people.”

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