

From Chapter 2
The Best Hospital

Less than a month after my arrival, I sat with my parents in the admitting office of the Hospital for Special Surgery, in Manhattan, near the East River. My father struggled to answer questions, showing off the English he'd been learning in night school. My mother and I sat next to each other, anxious and confused.

"We have to wait before we can go up to the room," my father explained, when there were no more questions to answer. And we waited quietly, my mother and I afraid to talk to each other, as if we were in church.

Finally a nurse appeared. She was pushing a wheelchair. My father stood and started speaking in his tentative English. I was sure he was telling her we didn't need the wheelchair, because he could carry me. The nurse didn't understand or agree with him. She pushed the wheelchair right up to me and smiled. I smiled back and lifting myself with my arms, with a swinging motion, managed to sit in it.

I'd never used a wheelchair before, never even seen one. But the feeling of moving on wheels was a familiar one. My mother had pushed me in my baby carriage, and when I started middle school, my father bought me a bicycle with training wheels. He added a back to the seat, with a handle so I could be pushed.

I wasn't sure whether it was hard to get wheelchairs in Sicily, or whether my father didn't want to see me in one. He looked unhappy watching me get into the wheelchair. He rushed over and kissed me on the head.

"Don't be afraid of the chair. It's only until they cure you."

I wasn't afraid. As the nurse pushed me, I savored every second of the smooth ride. My parents had to walk fast to keep up with us. I couldn't keep my hands from moving down towards the push rims, knowing instinctively what they were for. The nurse must have guessed I was itching to push myself, because somewhere in the middle of a long corridor, she let go of the push handles and pointed straight ahead: "Go!" I knew exactly what she meant. And I knew exactly what to do.

Without hesitation, I took off. Arms pumping, wheels turning. Go! For the first time in my life, I was moving on my own. No one carrying me, no one pushing me. I could go straight

ahead. Or curve to the right, or to the left. I could go full speed or slow down to let my parents catch up. Stop and turn around to see how far I got. Then go again!

That day, in that long corridor in that American hospital, I fell in love – with the wheelchair. It was a heavy, ugly hospital wheelchair. Shiny chrome and green vinyl. But I loved it. Arms pumping, wheels turning. Go! On my own. Go! On my way. On my way to start my new life in America.

I was put on a floor of children and teens. Since I was thirteen, I went on the side with the teens. I felt very grownup.

This hospital was different from hospitals in Italy. It was a cheerful place, with colorful pictures on the walls, kids in wheelchairs racing and laughing in the hallways, music coming from the rooms. Some rooms had four beds, some had two. I went to a room with two beds.

“*Non aver paura, gioia*, don't be afraid,” my father repeated. But I was excited, not afraid.

Seeing the tears in my mother's eyes when she kissed me good bye, I reassured her: “*Non ti preoccupare*, don't worry! I like it here.”

My roommate's name was Rosa. She spoke some Sicilian which she had learned from her grandmother. My being placed with Rosa was no coincidence. The thoughtfulness of the social worker, who knew I couldn't speak English, was behind it.

Rosa had polio like me. She was older, already fifteen, and knew how to put on lipstick and set her hair on pink plastic rollers. She started teaching me English words: “*cuscin*o – pillow, *coperta* – blanket” making me repeat them until I pronounced them right. When I made mistakes she called me *babba*, dumb. She said her grandmother called her that, so I didn't mind.

I made friends right away. I was ecstatic. In Sicily I thought I was the only crippled girl in the world and here I found myself surrounded by so many disabled girls and boys. The first English words I learned were the names of their different disabilities. Some of the names were difficult for me to pronounce: cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, spinal muscular atrophy... I was glad when I found out I could use acronyms: CP, MD, SMA... The names of other disabilities sounded Italian and were easier to pronounce and to remember: dystonia, spina bifida, osteogenesis imperfecta...

“I don't understand how you can say osteogenesis imperfecta and not cerebral palsy!” complained one of my new friends, Jane – personally offended, since her disability was cerebral

palsy. To make up for the offense, I told her how easy it was for me to understand her. Because of CP, her speech was wonderfully slurred, so I grasped a lot of what she said, while I couldn't understand the other kids who spoke too fast. I was glad my disability was called in English the same as it was in Italian: polio. I didn't know what I would have done if I had one of those hard to pronounce disabilities. I figured polio was the best disability for me.

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In the room across the hall, there was a beautiful girl named Audrey. When I first met her, I thought she too must have had polio as a baby, since her legs were small like mine. But her disability was spina bifida. It had affected her from the waist down, so she had never walked, just like me. She had undergone many surgeries, and she was being taught to use braces and crutches in PT, though she wasn't at all eager to learn. Audrey and I were very grownup; we had been getting our periods for almost a year, we wore bras and didn't need to stuff them with tissues, and we both instinctively had a way of making people notice us. We were the same age and the same size, but didn't resemble each other. I had dark hair, she had blond hair. I had brown eyes, she had blue eyes. Yet some of the volunteers asked if we were sisters. The other kids called us the Bobbsey Twins and teased us because we were always together.

In the morning the one who got into her wheelchair first raced across the hall. Audrey had done her best to make her room more like home. The wall above her bed was covered with get-well cards. On the night table was her radio. On a small cart by the foot of the bed was her record player. Stacks of records and piles of magazines were on the window sill.

I loved listening to records with Audrey. I couldn't understand the lyrics, at first. I just enjoyed the music. But if the song was one I particularly liked, Audrey stopped the record, and repeated the words slowly. She used dramatic gestures, acted out funny scenes, or drew stick figures, whatever she could think of, until she made me understand.

I learned a lot of English words listening to Audrey's records. I learned about boyfriends and girlfriends, hugging and kissing, cheating, breaking up and making up again...

After only a week in the Hospital for Special Surgery, HSS for short, I knew at least a hundred English words, maybe more. The kids laughed at me when I made a mistake or, by mispronouncing a word, ended up saying something totally different. Because vowel sounds in

Italian are rather uniform, I had trouble distinguishing between long and short, open and closed vowels. So I might say "peel" instead of "pill" and instead of "bed pan" I'd say "bad pen."

My roommate, Rosa, couldn't stop laughing when, thinking I was asking for a "sheet," I asked the nurse for a "shit." She told everyone about it. They were hysterical. But I didn't mind being teased by my new friends. Their laughter came at me like soap bubbles, bursting and disappearing in the air. It didn't jab me like the Sicilian children's derisive laughter.

The American doctors, maybe a dozen of them, came to our floor in the morning, and checked each one of us but talked only to each other. They bent and stretched our legs and checked the incisions of those who just had surgery, while talking to each other. Their visit was called "rounds."

"Get ready, the doctors are making rounds!" the nurses yelled.

After the doctors left our room, I asked Rosa, "What did they say about me?"

"I don't know what they said about you. I don't know what they said about me either. I don't understand them."

"But you know English, Rosa!"

"Oh, they're not speaking English, believe me. They're talking medical mumbo jumbo."

I wanted the American doctors to acknowledge me, to notice how grownup I was, and how quickly I was learning English. I wanted to get their attention by saying something intelligent to them.

"What can I say to the doctors?" I asked Rosa.

"Oh, you can say fuck you!"

"What does that mean?"

"It's like saying *piacere*."

Piacere is what Italians say when they meet each other – pleased. It seemed the appropriate thing to say to the American doctors. And the word was easy enough for me to pronounce. So the next morning, when they all stood around my bed, I gave the American doctors my biggest smile, and careful to pronounce it correctly, I said: "Fuck you!"

One of the older, more important-looking doctors was talking. He stopped in mid-sentence. The look of shock on his face was not what I had expected. All the doctors seemed shocked, though the younger ones also seemed amused. One, in particular, was trying hard not to laugh.

I knew Rosa had tricked me. I wondered what I had said. I looked towards her, but her head was under the blanket. I wanted to pull the covers over my head too. But then the important-looking doctor started talking again and all the others turned to listen to him. They talked to each other as if I weren't there a while longer, then walked out of the room.

I expected everyone to laugh and make fun of me mercilessly. Instead the kids treated me as if I were a hero.

"You said fuck you to the doctors? Wow!" "I wish I had the guts to do that!" It didn't matter to them that I hadn't known what I was saying.

Audrey explained to me the full meaning of the word "fuck." She had to resort to gestures and drawings to make me understand. She couldn't believe how innocent I was for someone who looked so grownup.

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During the first two weeks in the hospital, I had my muscles tested, my bones x-rayed, my blood drawn several times. None of those tests were pleasant and some were painful. But what bothered me most was that a nurse or an orderly came to take me down for another test when I was having fun, listening to records or trying to understand a story someone was telling. When I got back on the floor, I was so happy to be with my friends again, that whatever discomfort I had endured seemed well worth it.

One afternoon, I was taken to a floor I'd never been on. A nurse told me to take my clothes off and put on a hospital gown. Then she left me sitting in my wheelchair outside a closed door. I waited until a young doctor came out, grabbed my wheelchair and pushed me into a big room full of doctors. Some I'd never seen before. Others I'd seen on our floor when they made rounds. I recognized the important-looking doctor who was shocked when I said "fuck you." He asked a lot of questions of the younger ones, some so young-looking I didn't believe they were real doctors.

I was lifted by one of them onto an examining table. It was so high I couldn't have gotten on it by myself. Still, the young doctor should have asked if I needed help before lifting me. They all looked at me. Some came over to the table to touch me. They made me lie on my back and bent and stretched my legs, while I kept pulling down the hospital gown trying to keep covered. Then they made me sit up again. One of the older doctors pushed on my back as he

talked. I understood the word "scoliosis." Some of the kids had surgery for that. They were in huge body casts, so they couldn't sit in wheelchairs but had to move around on stretchers.

Suddenly, I felt the hands behind me loosen the ties on my gown and push it off my shoulders.

"No!"

I thought I yelled loud but I didn't hear my voice come out. I crossed my arms to hold the open gown over my swelling breasts, which still felt unfamiliar. The doctors kept talking and touching my back and pushing on my shoulders. Then, one of the older ones grabbed me from behind under the arms, lifting me up. Another doctor held my hips down. The gown fell to the floor. I was naked. I shut my eyes as tight as I could to make all the American doctors disappear.

Then I was back in my wheelchair. My eyes were still closed, so I didn't see who got me off the table. When I opened my eyes, a woman doctor had picked up my gown and was helping me put it on. I had not noticed her before amid all the men. For a second her eyes met mine. I thought she looked embarrassed. Maybe even guilty. Why did you let them do that? I wanted to yell at her. But she looked away so quickly, I couldn't be sure what I saw in her eyes.

I raced to Audrey's room the moment I got back on the floor. She wasn't there. I went looking everywhere, wheeling so fast in and out of rooms, bumping into medicine carts, almost colliding with another kid, almost running over a nurse.

"Watch where you're going! What's the matter with you?"

"Audrey! Where's Audrey!"

Finally, Chantelle stopped my wild run. A fifteen-year-old with skin like smooth creamy chocolate and hair tightly pulled into a multitude of skinny braids, she had osteogenesis imperfecta and was small for her age but made up for her size with her sassy demeanor and her street smart ways. She swiftly got in front of my chair with hers.

"Stop, girl, before you kill somebody!" she yelled in her high pitched voice. "Do you wanna tell me what happened?"

"Where's Audrey?"

"You can't tell me? You can only tell Audrey? OK. She should be coming up from PT soon."

PT. That's where Audrey was, of course. I went to Audrey's room and waited, rocking back and forth in my chair, arms crossed over my chest. When Audrey came back, I tried to tell

her what had happened, but I couldn't think of the right words, and the words I thought of, I didn't pronounce right. I kept starting over with the big room and so many doctors. Audrey knew right away what I was talking about. She hugged me, and I buried my face in her long blond hair and cried.

"I know," was all Audrey said.

"But I'm angry!"

"I know."

"What they did was wrong!"

"I know."

"I know," Jane said also, when Audrey told her what had happened.

"They've done it to Jane many times," Audrey told me.

Rosa nodded. "You'll get used to it."

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At last, the doctors decided to start by releasing a tendon in my right leg and scheduled me for surgery.

I was wheeled down on a stretcher at 9 AM, smiling and waving goodbye to everyone. Audrey was still in bed. "Good luck!" she yelled from her room. I couldn't see her, but I waved to her just the same. "Bye, Audrey!" I was not afraid. All the other kids had already had surgery; now I would be like everyone else.

I was brought to a floor that had a strange medicine smell, and left in front of a big closed door. When doctors and nurses wearing green gowns and masks went in and out, I tried to look through that door. All I could see was bright light.

Then, a doctor and a nurse came over to me. The nurse held my arm and the doctor stuck a needle in my vein.

"Can you count backwards from 100?" he asked.

I hadn't learned to count that high in English, let alone count backwards. I wanted to explain but I fell asleep before I could say a word.

I woke up in a strange place, with glaring lights above me, and weird beeps and humming noises all around me. It felt as if my leg was in a meat grinder, flesh and bones being crushed and chopped and mashed into a pulp. I could never have imagined such pain.

I cried "*aiuto!*" help, and called for my mother, "*mamma!*"

The only words I could utter were in my native language. I couldn't remember a single one of the hundreds of English words I'd learned. A nurse's face appeared above me. She was talking to me, but I couldn't understand her. She gave me a shot and I went back to sleep.

The next time I awoke, I was throwing up, my whole body seized with violent waves, heaving and retching the most foul-tasting green poison. I was still in the recovery room, my leg still in the meat grinder. I felt terribly thirsty. But the English word "water" was nowhere to be found in my brain.

"*Acqua,*" I cried. "*Acqua,*" I begged. But no one answered. No one came over to me.

Then I was back in my room and my parents were there. Was it evening already or had they taken the day off from work? I was throwing up again and crying uncontrollably.

"*Mamma! Mamma! Che male!* How it hurts!"

My mother held me, while I strained to bring up more foul-tasting green poison. She wiped my face with a cool wet washcloth and put an ice chip in my mouth. And she cried right along with me. My father seemed also on the verge of tears.

Oh, no! How could I make my parents so unhappy? They had been through so much for me already. I had to stop crying. I was a big girl, not a baby.

"*Sto meglio,*" I whispered, "I'm better," and smiled to make sure my parents believed me.

When I woke up again, my parents were gone. But someone was holding my hand. I turned my head on the vomit-stained pillow and saw Audrey. I squeezed her hand but could only speak to her in my mind. Oh, Audrey, I'm so sorry. I forgot all the English words you taught me. But I'm so happy you're here. My mother always told me there was a crippled girl like me living in another town. I didn't know you lived so far away, in America. But I knew that, wherever you were, I would find you. Audrey, my lost sister, my beautiful crippled sister. I'm so happy I found you. I love you, Audrey.

The English words all came back to me within a few days. The pain gradually subsided. The nausea lasted a whole week. I chewed ice chips until my gums, my tongue, even my teeth were numb. When I finally could get out of bed and into a wheelchair, I was so thrilled I went racing up and down the corridor, yelling "Hello, everybody!"

Then I heard the music coming from Audrey's room. A few girls were in there and others came in after me. Audrey had stolen some fat magic markers from the recreation room. With a

red one she wrote on the brand new cast on my leg "LOVE, Audrey," as the girls crowded around, encircling me. They all signed their names and drew hearts and flowers until my whole cast was covered.

The day before, my parents had brought me a box of chocolates. We passed it around as we listened to records. Some of the boys joined us, and soon we were all licking chocolate off our fingers and shimmying and bopping in our wheelchairs. My stomach got a bit queasy from the chocolate, and I felt kind of dizzy shaking my head to the music. But who cared? I was so happy to be with my friends. So happy to be in America. So happy my father had found the best hospital for me.

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