

From Chapter 5
The Real World

[Audrey] had gotten a car on her birthday: a Mustang – bright blue to match her eyes.

"I'm so glad you live in Queens now," she said the first time she drove [from her home in Long Island] to visit me. "I don't think I'd trust myself to drive to Brooklyn." But she looked so sure of herself behind that wheel, she probably could have driven not only to Brooklyn but to Manhattan and even to the Bronx. She came over two or three times a week. She'd blow the horn and I'd come out of the house and get in her car.

We rode around for hours. Northern Boulevard, Utopia Parkway, cruising along, back and forth. If we were in the mood to speed, we'd get on the Long Island Expressway. Off one exit, make a left turn and get back on. Seeing us in the car, no one could tell we were handicapped. We were two hot chicks, a blonde and a brunette, out joyriding. Guys on the street whistled when we stopped at a light; from other cars some men blew us kisses, others made lewd remarks – the kind of behavior women in consciousness raising groups around the country were calling offensive and demeaning.

Not us. Audrey and I soaked in every lustful look. We savored every obscene word. I thought we were just having fun. But then Audrey started:

"All I have to do is park, get the chair out and they'll run the other way so fast! We're both beautiful, we could have it all, why do we have to be handicapped?"

I didn't have an answer to that question, but I don't think she expected one. She went on: "I don't want to live as a handicapped woman. I want to be a real woman, I want a real life, I want happiness. Don't you?" She did expect an answer to that.

I didn't know how to argue with her. I nodded in sad agreement. Of course I wanted a real life. Of course I wanted happiness.

"Why do we have to be handicapped?" Audrey asked again. And sometimes she sighed: "We'd be better off dead."

Whenever people said "better off dead" when talking about disability, I tried to shield myself by pretending I didn't hear. But I couldn't with Audrey.

"I hate when you say that! I don't like the way we're treated, but I don't want us to be dead. That's really scary!"

“Chicken!” Audrey muttered.

.....

Since the [St. John’s University’s] campus was not very accessible, I left my wheelchair in the car and walked with my braces and crutches. I struggled up and down steps. I walked slowly in the long corridors, praying I wouldn't get knocked down by a student hurrying to get to class. I fell at times, nearly dying of embarrassment. Half way through the semester I fell going up the steps to the library and hurt more than my pride. I broke my knee and ended up in a hospital in Queens.

This hospital was nothing like HSS. No children or teenagers. I was the only girl on the floor. The men there – the orderlies, the janitors, the interns, and some of the patients – all seemed quite appreciative of my youth and prettiness. I mentioned that to Audrey, when I called her to tell her what had happened.

“Of course, they don't know you're handicapped, they think you just have a broken leg.”

I didn't care what they thought. After being ignored by the college men at St. John's, it felt good to get some male attention. I flirted shamelessly.

I was only in the hospital for five days. The last night I was there I woke up from a deep sleep to see a man standing at my bedside. He had pulled the curtain halfway around my bed. But the light coming in from the open door was enough for me to recognize the good-looking orderly I'd flirted with in the evening. His penis was out of his pants. It seemed huge. He was holding it in one hand and his other hand was at his mouth, his index finger pressing against his tightly closed lips.

I was too shocked to utter a word. He smiled at me when he realized I was going to keep quiet but kept his index finger in front of his lips. He was stroking his penis faster now. I watched, not sure whether to be frightened or fascinated. Then he grabbed his penis with both hands, arched his back and semen squirted over my bed.

Oh, no! How was I going to explain the sticky sheet to the nurses? He smiled as he put his shrunken penis back in his pants, pulled up his zipper and went out the door.

I was discharged the next morning. The bed was left unmade. No one noticed the spots on the sheet. I called Audrey as soon as I got home.

"He didn't make you take it in your mouth?"

"No!"

"Or even in your hand?"

"No!"

"Would you have done it?"

"Audrey! Of course not! I didn't want him to do what he did!"

"But you didn't scream. You could have screamed."

She was right. Why didn't I scream? Did I like watching him? Would I have taken his penis in my hand had he asked? I had flirted with him, after all.

"That's true, I could have screamed."

"Oh, no, you don't have to feel guilty on top of it," Audrey's voice was suddenly soft and comforting. "It's okay. Men usually don't even see us. They don't think of us as women because we're handicapped. So we have to be glad for any attention we get."

.....

I called my mother to tell her I would be spending the night at Audrey's. Then we got all made-up and dressed to kill. She wore a skin-tight electric blue sweater and I wore a skin-tight hot pink one – one of hers. We put both our chairs in her car, which was always a feat, and drove out to a club that had no steps. She parked in the "No parking" zone in front of the door.

"You'll get a ticket," I said.

"Fuck it!"

"You have a foul mouth."

"I know." She laughed.

While struggling to get our chairs out of the car, we couldn't help but notice a group of young people on the sidewalk staring at us. I tried to concentrate on securing my leg-rests. Audrey, sitting straight in her chair, pushed her long blond hair back with a flick of her hand, raised her head defiantly and stared back.

"Like the show? Wanna give us a round of applause?"

I knew she was in top form.

We'd been to that club before but we'd never attracted so much attention as that night. Was it the skintight sweaters, the way we were moving to the music in our wheelchairs, or the vibes we were sending out?

Audrey started it. "If I wasn't handicapped, you could come home with me and fuck me all night," I heard her say to a guy with longish blond hair who'd bought her a drink. He must have whispered "let's do it anyway," because she said: "Oh, no, believe me, you don't want to risk falling in love with me! It would be very painful for you because nothing can come of it. A handicapped girl is like a nun."

I caught up quickly. I wrapped my arm around the arm of the guy who had just handed me a drink and whispered: "Isn't it a shame I'm handicapped? I could be dancing with you, rubbing my breasts against you..."

"Do you give money to the telethon?" Audrey was asking.

"If you give enough money, we'll get cured, and then you'll want us to be your girlfriends," I chimed in.

We kept the game going all night – or at least until our bladders got too full. Accessible restrooms were unheard of. When we couldn't hold it anymore, we had to leave.

"I'm gonna wet my pants in 5 seconds," Audrey whispered, as we rolled out the door.

There was a ticket stuck in her windshield wiper. She left it there. Once in the car, our chairs folded and jammed into the back, she handed me the jar she kept under the seat for emergencies.

"Don't you want to go first?"

"Too late for me."

I saw her pants were all wet. I peed in the jar, emptied it out the door, and we headed back to her house.

Audrey's mother had opened the foldaway bed for me. I got undressed quickly, took off my braces, and lay down. I was tired. I needed to get at least a few hours' sleep. I wanted to drive to St. John's in the morning and not miss my 9 o'clock English class. I unfolded the blanket Audrey's mother had left for me and got under it.

But Audrey kept moving around in her wheelchair, not at all eager to get in bed. She was still wearing her sexy electric blue sweater but had taken off her wet pants and underpants, and sat bare-assed. From her hips to her knees, her thighs, lacking muscles, formed a soft flattened V against the wheelchair seat. Her skinny legs lined with pink scars dangled, her bare feet, not quite reaching the footrests, pointing straight forward from surgically fused ankles. We both made a point of looking at our naked bodies in the mirror only from the waist up. But we were so

familiar with each other's body. Looking at Audrey's legs now was like seeing my own in a mirror.

She was fumbling with her jewelry box, which she had taken out of the bottom drawer of her dresser and unlocked with a tiny key.

"Want to see what I've got?" She didn't sound mischievous as she usually did when she asked that question.

"Sure." I was too sleepy to show much enthusiasm.

She took out a pill bottle and held it up to me. There were quite a few pills in it judging by the sound it made when Audrey shook it.

"What are they?"

She twisted the cap off and let some pills fall into her palm. She smiled as she stuck her hand in front of my face. It was full of red capsules.

"What are they?" I asked again.

"Se-con-als." She enunciated each syllable.

"Sleeping pills?"

She nodded, still smiling.

"Where did you get them?"

"From my mother. I ask her for one now and then, saying I can't sleep. And I steal one or two when I get the chance. I've been hoarding them for months." She spread them all out on her bed and started counting.

"How many do you think I'll have to take to die?"

"I don't know."

"I don't think I have enough yet." She shook her head.

Though still exhausted, I wasn't sleepy anymore. "Would you really do it, Audrey?"

"Do you want to live to be treated like a leper?" She was good at answering a question with a question.

"The guys at the club weren't treating us like lepers, Audrey."

"Did any of them ask you for a date?" She had a point there. "Men notice us because we're beautiful and act sexy. But that just makes us more freakish, don't you see? When they're attracted to us, men feel like they're not normal and they resent us for that. I guess if we were homely, things would be simpler."

She was playing with the pills, scooping them back into the bottle, then making them fall out onto the bed again.

"Oh, come on, Audrey! You make it sound like we don't have a right to be attractive. The way I see it, if men resent us, it's their problem." I pulled the blanket over my shoulders.

She sneered at me: "Oh, yeah? It's their problem? But we're the ones who will never have a real relationship, get married, have a family, be happy..."

I'd been learning about the women's liberation movement, had even read Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, so I proclaimed: "I don't need a man to be happy."

"Oh, excuse me! Are you going to become a lesbian? I doubt it would be any easier with women."

"Nothing wrong with being a lesbian, but that's not what I meant, Audrey."

"Oh, forgive me, I forgot, you're going to have a career! You think, when you graduate, they'll be waiting for you with all kinds of job offers. That's why you study all the time. Are you going to make the Dean's List?"

I didn't answer. Instead I asked again, "Would you really do it, Audrey?"

She had put all the pills back in the bottle and was putting it back in her jewelry box.

"What do you think?" Again she answered with a question. "Do you think I'm chicken like you?"

.....

My father didn't tell me how he found the new doctor. I knew he had been calling hospitals. We went to see him, and he said a series of muscle transplants might help. Since the muscles used to bend my legs were stronger than those needed to straighten them, they could be repositioned, so I could use them to lock my knees and stand. This type of surgery worked best on children, but with a lot of therapy, I might be able to get rid of the braces. No guarantee, of course.

Following the examination, his secretary explained that though the hospital expenses would be covered by Blue Cross, the doctor's fee was a little high... No problem, my father interrupted, he would make up the difference, work overtime if he had to.

What could I say? That I didn't want to get cut up anymore? That I wanted to take the Shakespeare course the next semester? Wasn't I happy to be given the chance to get rid of the

braces?" Wasn't I grateful to my father? I went into the hospital in the Fall of '66, as cheerful as ever.

....

I was in and out of that hospital for almost a year. I missed a year of college. I missed two big NYC demonstrations against the war. I didn't go to San Francisco during the Summer of Love. I did wear flowers in my hair, which was probably all I would have done had I been out. I had transplant after transplant. Four or five or six. My mind erased the memories of pain associated with the surgeries. Pleasant memories of my time there were retained: my mother spoon-feeding me her tiny meatballs in broth, my father reciting poetry in Sicilian, Sarah, my Blythedale counselor, visiting me and playing her guitar.

Other memories of that hospital would have been better forgotten. Being pushed in my chair to therapy by an orderly and feeling his hard penis pressing against my back and the nape of my neck. Waking up in the middle of the night because my breasts were being fondled or a man's hand was between my thighs.

I was young and enjoyed male attention, especially since outside of the hospital I didn't get much. Often I flirted without realizing I was doing it. I flirted with the orderlies, the x-ray technicians, the interns. Then, when they did things that shocked and humiliated me, I didn't know how to react and resist. I passively submitted, feeling it was my fault.

A cute intern often stopped by my room to tell me how beautiful I was. He asked what I was reading or what I was watching on TV. He said he wanted to take me out on a date when I got out of the hospital. I smiled a lot, told him he was cute.

One night, I woke up from a deep sleep – especially deep due to the sleeping pills the nurses generously and indiscriminately handed out every night. The intern was by my bed. My young body was responding to the skillful movements of his hands. Then he was on top of me and before I knew what was happening he was penetrating me.

When he was done, he lay on top of me for a few minutes, and I lay quietly under the weight of his body. Then he got up and left. I pulled a tissue out of the box on my nightstand and wiped between my legs. There was blood mixed with his sticky semen. My blood. He had gotten all the way inside me. I definitely was not a virgin anymore.

Was it rape? Or was there consent? I didn't scream. I responded while half asleep to his caresses. And I had been flirting with him. Was it "free love"? Or was I a slut? Everyone said I was such a nice girl, a cheerful girl. Such a good patient.

A scalpel or a penis. What was the difference? I'd gotten used to strangers touching me, handling me, manipulating me, doctors cutting me up, over and over again, inflicting pain. Pain or pleasure. What was the difference? Did it matter what they did to me? After all, what claim could I have on this defective, damaged, disabled body? Wasn't I supposed to be grateful to the doctors who were trying to fix it? Wasn't I supposed to be grateful to any man for any attention I could get?

.....

Audrey hadn't been to see me at all. And we hadn't been talking on the phone as much. I assumed she was busy in college. When I called her house, her mother answered.

She sounded surprised to hear my voice. "Audrey? Audrey's in the hospital."

In the hospital? What hospital? What for? Audrey was all done with hospitalizations. Her parents had long stopped being obsessed with the cure. Why was Audrey in the hospital? Her mother seemed reluctant to answer.

"Do you have a phone in your room? I'll tell Audrey to call you as soon as she feels better."

I gave her my room number and hung up. Only then did I remember the red pills. I doubled over in my chair as if I'd been punched in the gut. Oh, no! I should have warned her mother. But how could I have ratted on Audrey? She showed me the pills because we were blood sisters and she trusted me.

"Oh, please, Audrey, don't die," I repeated over and over. "I don't want you to die. I don't want you to leave me."

Her mother had said she would have Audrey call me. That meant she wasn't going to die. But why wasn't she calling me? I waited for three days, too afraid to call her mother again. I hardly left my room, because I didn't want to miss Audrey's call. But then, when the call came at 9 in the morning, I was so sure it was my mother who always called at that time, I answered in Italian. "*Pronto.*"

"I fucked it up, but I'll do better next time." Audrey's voice sounded weak and hoarse.

I couldn't talk. I held the receiver with both hands and cried.

Her mother had gotten up in the middle of the night, because she couldn't sleep, Audrey told me. She had looked in on her and noticed she was breathing funny. She'd awakened Audrey's father who had taken her pulse and immediately picked her up in his arms and carried her to the car. Still in their pajamas, her parents had rushed Audrey to the hospital where they pumped her stomach.

I listened breathless to Audrey's dramatic story. It was as if she wasn't talking about herself. She could have been describing the last episode of our favorite soap opera.

"Your parents must be so glad you didn't die."

"I'll have to plan it better next time."

"I'm sure glad you didn't die, Audrey!" My voice shook. I was afraid she'd get mad and hang up.

"I love you, Audrey," I whispered into the receiver.

"I love you too," she whispered back.

She came to visit me two weeks later, looking more beautiful than ever. Her hair longer and blonder, her eyes bluer and brighter. Everyone had been supportive, she told me. Even the psychiatrist she was now seeing was sympathetic. Her college friends all understood why she tried to kill herself. In her place, they too would want to die.

"But aren't your friends glad you didn't die?"

She didn't answer.

"I'm sure glad you didn't die!"

This time she answered. "I know." Her voice was dreamy, and as soft as melted butter. "If only life could be as simple as it was when we were at HSS with all the other kids. If only we didn't have to live in the real world."