

## **THE BEST HOSPITAL**

**By Nadina LaSpina**

Less than a month after my mother and I arrived in New York, I was admitted into the Hospital for Special Surgery. My father was triumphant. He had come to the US a year before my mother and I. He had found "un buon lavoro," a good job, doing construction, a job that provided good medical insurance to cover all the treatments I would need when I got here. He had found an apartment in Brooklyn "senza scale," without stairs, which he had furnished completely. And he had found what he kept repeating was "il migliore ospedale," the best hospital for me. He was totally convinced that the American doctors would cure me. "You won't need to be carried much longer. You're in America now," I remember him saying as he carried me into our new home that first day in the new country. "Presto guarisci. Presto cammini." Soon you'll be cured. Soon you'll walk. He liked to talk about how easy it had been to get me admitted into this American hospital, so unlike the hospitals in Italy. "No one asked me what I owned and how much money I had in the bank. They just took my Blue Cross card." And he would take his Blue Cross card out of his wallet to show it to me, proudly. His Blue Cross card --my ticket to being cured.

My mother was afraid. Afraid of this new country so different from Sicily, afraid of the tall buildings and the big wide streets, afraid to go out among people she could not understand, afraid of what the American doctors were going to do to her little girl.

I knew that the American doctors were going to hurt me. Whether they would cure me or not, they were going to hurt me. The doctors in Italy had always hurt me. How different could the American doctors be? So I couldn't fully share my father's optimism. But at the same time I didn't really share my mother's fear. I was too excited. I couldn't wait to find out what life in this new country had in store for me.

In the admissions office of the Hospital for Special Surgery my father struggled to answer questions, proudly showing off the English he had been learning in night school. My mother and I sat next to each other, anxious and rather confused. When there were no more questions to answer, we all sat quietly. "We have to wait before we can go up to the room," my father explained. And we waited, almost afraid to talk to each other, as if we were in church.

Finally a nurse showed up. She was pushing an empty wheelchair. My father stood up nervously and started speaking to her in his tentative English. I'm sure he was trying to tell her that we didn't need the wheelchair because he could carry me. The nurse didn't seem to understand him. She pushed the wheelchair right up to me and smiled asking something. I guessed that she was asking me if I needed help. I smiled back at her, shaking my head "No, I didn't need help," and I quickly got into the wheelchair by myself. My father rushed over to me and kissed me on the head. "Now don't be afraid. It's only until they cure you. You'll soon be walking."

I had never used a wheelchair. But the feeling of moving on wheels was a familiar one. My mother had pushed me in a baby carriage till I couldn't possibly fit into it anymore. When I was four I got a tricycle, though someone had to give me a push since I couldn't pedal. And when I was ten I got a real bicycle with training wheels. Again, since my legs weren't strong enough to pedal, I always needed someone's help to get moving.

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

Without a moment 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, then 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 ahead I got. Then go again! That day, in that long corridor in that American hospital, the first of the many hospitals I would be in, I fell in love -with the wheelchair. Oh, that particular wheelchair was nothing like the ultra-light, easy to maneuver, beautiful little numbers we have today. It was one of those heavy, slow, ugly hospital wheelchairs. Shiny chrome and green plastic. 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 already thirteen I went on the side with the teens. It made me feel very grown-up. I couldn't speak a word of English, but I started making friends right away. I was ecstatic. In Sicily I had 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 you could use acronyms: CP, MD, SMA... The names of some other disabilities almost sounded Italian and were easier for me to pronounce and to remember: dystonia, spina bifida, osteogenesis imperfecta... "I don't understand how you can say osteogenesis imperfecta and not cerebral palsy!" my new friend Jane, who felt personally offended since her disability was cerebral palsy, would complain. To make up for the offense, I would tell her how easy it was for me to understand her. Because of CP, her speech was wonderfully slurred so I could grasp a lot of what she was saying, while I couldn't understand the other kids who spoke much too fast. I was so glad my disability was called in English the same as it was in Italian: polio. I don't know what I would have done had I had one of those hard to pronounce disabilities. Polio was the easiest disability for me to pronounce. It was the best disability for me to have.

There were a few other kids who had polio. They all had leg braces. If they had just had surgery and their legs were in casts, the braces would stand at their bedside ready to go back on when the casts came off. Then they would go down to physical therapy, PT for

short, where they would practice walking on crutches. I was the only kid there with polio who didn't have braces. "Don't worry, they'll get you braces soon enough," my roommate Maria would tell me. Maria was older than me, she was already fifteen and looked even older. She knew how to put on makeup and how to set her hair on pink plastic rollers. She hated her braces with a passion. She hoped to be able to walk without them after her muscle transplant surgeries. She loved to talk about what she was going to do with the braces when she didn't need them anymore: take them to the Staten Island garbage dump, throw them in the east river, melt the metal with a blow torch... Maria spoke some Sicilian, which she had learned from her grandmother, so we could communicate well enough. She would teach me English words: "cuscino - pillow, coperta - blanket" making me repeat the word till I pronounced it right. When I made mistakes she would call me "babba," dumb. She said her grandmother always called her that, so I didn't mind.

In the room across the hall there was a beautiful girl my age named Wendy who had spina bifida. Wendy and I quickly became "best friends." We looked very different. I had dark hair, she had blond hair. I had brown eyes, she had blue eyes. Yet people would ask us if we were sisters. The other kids called us the Bobsey Twins and teased us because we were always together. In the morning the one that got into her wheelchair first would race across the hall to the other's room. Wendy had been in the hospital for over a month already. She had done her best to make the hospital room feel more like home. The wall above her bed was covered with get well cards. On the night table was her radio. On a little 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 Wendy. At first I couldn't understand the lyrics at all, just enjoyed the music. But then Wendy would sing along with a record and, especially if the song was one I particularly liked, she would repeat all the words slowly, pronouncing each word as clearly as possible. If I still had trouble understanding, she would use dramatic gestures, act out funny little scenes, or draw stick figures, whatever she could think of, until she would make me understand. I learned a lot of words listening to Wendy's records. I learned all about love and kissing and hugging and boyfriends and cheating and heartbreak and breaking up and making up again...

After only a week in the Hospital for Special Surgery, HSS for short, I could understand and say hundreds of English words. Oh, I would make lots of mistakes. The kids would laugh at me when, by mispronouncing a word, I ended up saying something totally different. Because vowel sounds in Italian are pretty uniform, I had trouble distinguishing between long and short, open and close vowels. So I might say "peel" instead of "pill" and instead of "bed pan" I'd say "bad pen." My roommate Maria couldn't stop laughing when, thinking I was asking for a "sheet," I asked the nurse for a "shit." She told every one about that. For quite a while, I had to put up with kids, and nurses too, lifting up a corner of the sheet on a bed and asking me: "How do you call this?" Hysterical. But I didn't mind being teased. I was too excited and happy about learning the new language and being in the new country and having so many new friends.

The American doctors, maybe a dozen of them, came to our floor in the morning, and checked each and everyone of us and talked to each other about each and every one of us. Sometimes they would bend or stretch your legs or, if you had just had surgery, check your incision, always while talking to each other. Their visit was called "rounds." "Get ready, the doctors are making their rounds!" the nurse would tell us. After the doctors left our room, I would ask Maria: "What did they say about me?" "I don't know what they said about you," she would answer. "I don't know what they said about me either. I don't understand them." "But you know English, Maria!" "Oh, they're not talking in English, believe me. They're talking medical mumbo jumbo."

I wanted the American doctors to acknowledge me somehow, to notice how pretty and grown-up 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 Maria. "Oh, you can say fuck you!" Maria answered. "What does that mean?" "It's like saying Piacere," she told me. "Piacere" is what Italians say when they meet each other. Pleased. It seemed like 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 and started talking about me, I gave the American doctors my biggest smile and, careful to pronounce it correctly, I said: "Fuckyou!" 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 his reaction to be. All the doctors were looking at me. All had the same shocked look on their faces. Though the younger doctors looked somewhat amused at the same time as they looked shocked. One of the younger doctors seemed to be trying hard not to laugh. I knew Maria had tricked me. I wondered what I had just said. I looked over at Maria 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 other doctors turned to listen to him. They seemed to have forgotten what I had said. They talked to each other, as if I wasn't there, a while longer and then they all walked out of the room.

I expected everyone to laugh and make fun of me mercilessly. Instead the kids treated me as if I was a hero. "You said fuck you to the doctors? Wow!" They all seemed to be in awe of me. "That's great! I wish I had the guts to do that!" It didn't seem to matter to them that I had not known what I was saying.

Wendy 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 ignorant I was for someone who looked so grown-up. In Riposto, when the neighbor girls came to sit with me out by our front door on summer evenings, they would sometimes start telling a dirty joke and talking about sex. But then they would look at me, as if suddenly remembering I was there, and look at each other, and stop talking. "Come on, why are you stopping? Finish the story," I would say. "We're not supposed to talk about this stuff in front of you," they would answer. "Oh, please, I'm old enough, I'm thirteen years old," I would argue with them. "But you're a cripple," *ciunca*, the Sicilian girls would say. And how could I argue with that?

Maybe disabled American girls weren't told that they weren't supposed to know about sex. The girls at HSS seemed to know all there was to know. Often, when they came to listen to records in Wendy's room, after bopping and shimmying in our wheelchairs for a while, they would all start talking. About sex. I missed a lot of what they said because I didn't know English well enough yet and because I was still an ignorant crippled girl from Sicily. I nodded and blushed and giggled right along with them, too embarrassed to ask them to explain things to me.

Some of the girls had boyfriends right there in the hospital. I had heard the girls whispering about the "things" Maria did with a seventeen-year-old boy named Jerry who had dystonia. Wendy liked a fifteen year old boy with polio whose name was Joe. She would drag me along to his room at the other end of the hall. They didn't do anything really, just talked and giggled. Maybe sometimes he'd take her hand as they talked. I would smile and look around the room, not understanding what they were saying and not knowing what to do. Joe's roommate Bob was fourteen and also had polio. If he was in the room he would try to talk to me and maybe take my hand. "Bella" he would always say to me. It was the only Italian word he knew. Wendy said Bob was crazy about me but I wasn't so sure of that.

During that first week in the hospital, I had my muscles tested, my bones x-rayed, and my blood drawn several times. I put up with it all. None of the tests were pleasant and some really hurt. Laying on a hard x-ray table trying to keep the hospital gown from opening up was embarrassing and uncomfortable. And it really hurt when they stretched muscles that were badly contracted. But what bothered me most was that a nurse or an orderly would always come to take me down to another test when I was having fun, maybe listening to records or trying to understand a story someone was telling. When I got back on the floor I was always so happy to be with my friends again, that whatever discomfort and pain I had put up with seemed well worth it.

One afternoon I was taken to a floor I had never been on. A nurse told me to take my clothes off and put on a hospital gown. Then she left and I sat in my wheelchair outside a closed door until it opened and a very young doctor came out. He grabbed my wheelchair and pushed me into a big room. The room was full of American doctors. Some I had never seen before. Some I had seen on our floor when they made rounds. I recognized the important looking doctor, who had been so shocked when I had said "fuck you." He seemed to ask a lot of questions of the younger doctors, some so young looking I couldn't believe they were real doctors. I was lifted by one of the young ones onto an examining table. It was so high I couldn't have gotten on it by myself. Still that young doctor could have asked if I needed help before lifting me. They all looked at me and talked to each other. Some came over to the table to touch me. They made me lie on my back and they bent and stretched and turned my legs while I kept pulling down the hospital gown to try and keep myself covered. Then they made me sit up again. One of the older doctors started touching my back as he talked. I understood the word "scoliosis" because a few of the kids had that. Some had had surgery for scoliosis and were in huge body casts, so that they couldn't sit in wheelchairs but had to get around on stretchers.

Suddenly, I felt the hands behind me loosen the tie-ons on my gown and push it off my shoulders. "No!" I thought I yelled so loud but I don't think my voice came out. I crossed my arms to hold the open gown over my breasts. The doctors kept talking and touching my back and pushing on my shoulders. Then, one of them, I think it was one of the older ones, grabbed my arms from behind and lifted them over my head, almost lifting me off the table. Another doctor held my hips down. I think the gown fell on the floor. I was naked. I shot 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 don't know 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 in the crowd of 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'm not even sure what I saw in her eyes.

I raced to Wendy'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?" "Wendy! Where's Wendy!" Finally Chantelle, a tall fifteen year old girl with spina bifida, with the most wonderful chocolate-colored skin and the most fascinating braided hair, stopped my wild run by getting in front of my chair with hers and grabbing my foot rests. "Stop, girl, before you kill somebody! Do you wanna tell me what happened?" I froze and stared at her: "Wendy. Where's Wendy?" "You can't tell me? You can only tell Wendy? OK. She should be coming up from PT soon."

PT. That's where Wendy was. Of course. I went to Wendy's room and waited, rocking back and forth in my chair, arms crossed over my chest. When Wendy came back, I tried to tell her what had happened, but I couldn't think of the right words, and the words I could think of, I couldn't pronounce right. I kept starting over with the big room and so many doctors. Wendy 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 Wendy said. "But I'm angry!" "I know." "But what they did was wrong!" "I know." "But there's nothing I can do!" "I know."

"I know," was what Jane said also when Wendy told her what had happened. And she hugged me. "They've done it to Jane many times," Wendy said. Maria just kept nodding. "You'll get used to it," she said in her serious grownup tone. "We all do." It was Chantelle who managed to lighten things up: "Girl," she said and grinned, "why didn't you say fuck you?"

My parents came that evening as they did every evening. They came by subway from Brooklyn, and could never get to the hospital before seven. Sometimes they didn't get there till seven thirty. My father always looked so tired because he had worked so hard all day. My mother always looked so lost, she missed her town and her friends and just couldn't get used to this new country. How could I tell my parents what had happened? I

didn't want to make them unhappy. Besides, I was too ashamed. And what would I have said? The American doctors looked at me naked? What could my parents do about it? My father had brought me to this country, had found the best hospital for me, so the American doctors could cure me. Was I going to say to him: I don't want to be cured because I don't want them to look at me naked?

After ten days in the hospital I had surgery. The doctors decided that they would start by releasing a tendon in my right leg. "Great! Once they straighten your legs, they'll give you braces," Maria said to me. I was wheeled down at 9 AM on a stretcher, smiling and waving "good bye" to everyone. Wendy was still in bed in her room. "Good luck!" she yelled. I couldn't see her but I waved to her just the same. "Bye, Wendy!" I was not at all afraid. All the other kids had had surgery, now I would be like everyone also.

I woke up in a strange place, with very bright 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 me, and called for my mother. "Mamma!" The only words I could utter were in my native language. I could not remember a single one of the hundreds of English words I had learned. A nurse's face appeared above me. She was talking to me but I couldn't understand her at all. I think she gave me a shot and I went back to sleep.

The next time I woke up I was throwing up, my whole body seized with violent waves. Heaving and retching up the most foul tasting green poison. I was still in the strange place, my leg still in the meat grinder. I felt terribly thirsty. I wanted to ask for some water but the English word "water" was nowhere to be found in my brain. "Acqua," I cried and cried. "Acqua," I begged and begged. But no one answered. No one came over to me. Acqua. If only I could think of the English word.

Then I was back in my room and my parents were there. Was it evening already or had my father taken the day off from work? I was throwing up again in violent waves, and crying, crying uncontrollably. "Mamma! Mamma! Male! Che male!" It hurts, how it hurts! My mother held me while I fought 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 all the while. My father seemed to be on the verge of tears also. Oh, no! How could I do this? How could I make my parents so unhappy? I had to stop crying. I was a big girl, thirteen years old, not a baby. My parents had been through so much for me already. I had to reassure them somehow. I fought with all my strength to stop crying. "Meglio," I whispered, "sto meglio." I'm better. And to make sure my parents would believe me, I smiled.

When I woke up again, crying and throwing up, my parents were gone. But someone was holding my hand. I turned my head on the vomit-stained pillow and saw Wendy. Oh, Wendy! I'm so sorry, I can't talk to you. I forgot all the English words you taught me. But I'm so happy you're here. I am so happy I found you. My mother always told me that there was a crippled girl just like me living in another town. I didn't know then that you

lived so far away, in America. But I knew that wherever you were, I would find you. And I did. Wendy. My lost sister, my beautiful crippled sister. I am so happy I found you. I love you, Wendy.

The English words all came back to me within a few days. The pain became bearable and then gradually subsided. The nausea lasted a whole week. For a whole week I chewed on ice chips constantly. Till my mouth, my tongue, even my teeth were numb. When I finally could get out of bed and get into a wheelchair, I was so thrilled I went racing up and down, up and down the corridor. "Hello, everybody!" I yelled and yelled. Then I heard the music coming from Wendy's room. She figured that was the best way to get me to stop acting wild. A few of the kids were in there and soon other kids joined us. Wendy had stolen some big fat magic markers from the recreation room. With a red one she wrote on the brand new cast on my leg: "LOVE, Wendy." And everyone else signed their names and drew hearts and flowers till my whole cast was covered. The day before my parents had brought me a big box of chocolates. I went and got it and we passed it around as we listened to Wendy's records. Soon we were all licking chocolate off our fingers and bopping and shimmying in our wheelchairs. My stomach was still too queasy for chocolate and I got a bit dizzy from 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 that my father had found the best hospital for me.

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