

"I am Wondrene Berry," she says. "And you are?"

"I'm Della Johns," I answer.

"Well, Della, this is the fifth nursing home I've been in in the last four years," she says. "I don't intend to stay here, so if you wanna get to know me, you'd better be quick about it 'cause I ain't gonna be here long."

I believe her, although I can't see how she intends going anywhere with that oxygen tubing shoved up her nose like it is, and what with the way she has to stop and gulp in air after every two or three words she speaks.

She smiles to light the room, flashing teeth so even and white that they must be dentures. She stands and rolls her walker across the room to the gigantic oxygen tank, and I sit on my bed and watch as she mounts the small tank on top of the large one.

"I'm a dead woman, and the liquid in this tank is my lifeline," she informs me. "They tell me I have end stage emphysema. If you ever decide you want to murder a dead woman, and you probably will before the day is over, just turn this knob here to zero." She winks at me, then points to a knob on the big tank.

"That makes no sense," I say.

She laughs, and the laughter drowns in the sucking and bubbling of her lungs that sends her into a coughing spasm so forceful I expect her ribs to crack.

When she is able, she lifts a lever on the small tank and the room fills with the hissing sound of oxygen. A mist spreads

is rocking like it wants to desert her, just run off some place and take a rest.

There are about twenty or twenty-five people in the day room sitting at tables, engaged in one activity or the other. The little albino woman, about four feet tall, is upon us before we see her coming. She stops to size us up, then brushes between us as she exits the day room.

Wondrene grips the handles of her walker and wheels herself around. "What the hell was that?" she asks.

"That's Zyma Root. You don't wanna mess with her."

Wondrene stares at me for a second or two, her eyes studying mine, then she nods her head and turns back to the day room. That's the one thing I like about Wondrene. She is no fool. She respects my knowledge, listens to my warnings, and takes heed.

There is a man sitting alone playing solitaire with a deck of old, worn-thin Bicycle cards. He is wearing black pants, a blue shirt, and black lace-up shoes. His hair is more auburn than gray, and he has more head than hair. He is pale like sickness, and so thin that the cuffs of his shirt sleeves keep sliding down over his hands. He has been targeted.

Wondrene rolls her walker over to his table. "I'm Wondrene Barry," she says. "And you are?"

He glances up, and I see that his eyes are a lonely gray-green. "I'm Reginald Leiberman," he answers.

Wondrene pulls out a chair and sits down. Monkey see; monkey do. I pull out a chair, too.

"Well, Red, how long you in for?" Wondrene asks, although

there is nothing red about the man, except the rims of his eyes.

I'm thinking that my roommate has been getting too many letters from her prison pen pals, but Red doesn't seem to find her question strange at all.

"Life," he answers.

"What they got you for?"

"Lung cancer."

"Bomber," Wondrene says empathetically.

She is breathing so hard that some of his cards began to waver on the table. He notices this, and she seeks to distract his attention.

"Me and my friend, Della, here live on the catch-all unit downstairs," she says. "We're looking to have some fun. You up to it?"

"What kind of fun are you thinking about?"

"Where's your room?" she asks. "Let's go in there and talk about it."

Red stacks his cards together and slides them into the tattered remains of a box, then he rises from the chair. I am impressed that he is able to walk without assistance from anyone or the aid of an appliance.

"I have a roommate," he says.

Wondrene nods her head. "I was counting on that."

"He's not a very pleasant fellow," Red says. "That's why I come out here -- to get away from him."

I bring up the rear as we follow Red past the nurses' station and toward his room. This time I am sure the nurse sees

us, but he seems to lack the strength to remove his feet from the desk and come after us.

Red stops at a door that would be the male ward on the other floors, but I guess things are different up here. We enter a spacious room with plush wine carpet, gold valanced drapes, deluxe recliners covered in a soft wine and gold fabric, two full-size adjustable beds, and an overhead light fixture with a ceiling fan.

"Well!" Wondrene exclaims. "The fucking penthouse."

I have suspected that she has the potential for profanity; now I am certain. She has yet to glimpse the disembodied leg with the gray sock and brown oxford that stands alone beside a night table. I can hardly wait to hear what she'll say when she spots it.

The bathroom door opens, and a medium built, black man with a thin, gray mustache and a bald head comes kangaroo hopping into the room. He collapses in a recliner, breathing rapidly from the <sup>exertion</sup> excretion of making the three foot trip from the door to the chair. He is wearing what looks like a terry cloth kilt that ends mid thigh of a normal right leg. His left side is a stump in a stocking cap that protrudes from beneath the cloth. Not that I'm looking for anything, but I do notice that there is not one impressive spot on his bare, wet chest. He has yet to realize that he is not alone in the room.

During our pause for recognition, Wondrene leans over and whispers, "Hide your feet, Della. Don't let him get a look at those feet."

I stifle a laugh that turns into a burp, and right away I know that I have made a mistake. My foolishness catches the man's attention, and he glares at the three of us, tugging at his kilt to hide his stump.

"Get the hell out of my room," he hisses. His face is a glowering mask of rage, and his voice is hard and demanding.

I am backing toward the door, dragging my quad cane. Red is following after me with his tattered deck of cards. Wondrene is moving forward.

"I'm Wondrene Barry," she says. "And you are?"

"I am the man who will break your neck if you don't get the hell out of my room right now," he answers.

Wondrene releases her grip on her walker and begins to undo the buttons on her pink, silk blouse. She steps forward until the nipples of her teenybopper boobs are eye level to the man, then she says, "Nakedness is nothing to be ashamed of. So we caught you off guard -- big deal. We're looking for friends and fun. You got any action under that skirt?"

I lift my cane and bring it down hard against the wine carpet, trying to open up a hole big enough to suck me in. Nothing happens, except Red gives me a quizzical stare.

Across the room, the man studies Wondrene's chest and his anger turns to awe. "That's incredible," he says. "How did they do that?"

"Nature did it, sweetie," Wondrene lies, and is immediately punished by spasms of productive coughing.

Nasty business, bad lungs.

Wondrene sits on the side of the closest bed to recover from her attack. We are all waiting for her to catch her breath, and when she finally does, the man says, "I see that you're sick, and I don't mean to be rude, but you've got to get out of my room. A man should be allowed to get dressed in private, and Reginald shouldn't have brought you in here."

"Aw, come on, Doc," Red says. "They're harmless, and we deserve a little fun."

"You're sick, man," Doc informs him. "You're dying with your sickness. What kind of fun can you have with two old, half-crippled women?"

"Half-crippled?" Wondrene questions, springing from the bed and gripping the handles of her walker. "Let me tell you something, Mr. Doc, you snooty little chest-fallen one leg old fart. We're leaving, but we'll be back tomorrow after lunch, and I want you to be presentable. That means have on a shirt, pants, a new attitude, and that peg leg over there by the table. You have yourself together."

Doc throws back his head and lets go a burst of laughter that follows us out into the corridor. I don't know what to make of him, changing like the weather, going from freezing cold to partly cloudy and slightly warm within a matter of minutes. I do know, however, that Wondrene has a temperament that can cool him down or warm him up, whichever suits her fancy.

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Maggie has come alone for her visit this time. She has brought a white flannel night gown for Wondrene because the weather is getting cool. The leaves will turn beautiful autumn colors and float through the air and drift to the ground, and I am going to miss it all, being so far away from the window.

Maggie tells me that the Guardian Society has been trying to recruit new members, but they aren't getting enough qualified applicants. She pulls out a two-page questionnaire for me to fill out, anyway, detailing the type of family I would like to have.

I am at a loss; I don't know what to put on this paper. I think I know what a family is suppose to be, but I'm not exactly sure, and I don't want to write down the wrong thing.

I was born the only child of parents so long deceased now that I can't even remember their faces. I was raised by an aunt whom I did not care much for. I married a man twice my age who tolerated me for two years, then left me for a younger woman. I taught our son, Tyrone, to be quiet and behave, the things my aunt taught me, the things that made him a stranger. My life has been comical; maybe I should apply for clowns.

There is a question here on past employment. I answer it first because it is the easiest question on the two pages. I worked forty years at the Lace and Rolls Towel Supply Company, folding sheets and reading magazines. I never missed a day. That should be worth something.

I glance up to see Wondrene smiling to light the room, the way she always does when Maggie comes to visit. "We have beaus

upstairs, Della and I," she says to Maggie. "Do you think you can find Della a decent dress, and maybe take her to the beauty shop the next time we go?"

"I think I can arrange that," Maggie answers with amusement in her voice.

"I love you, Maggie -- you, and James, and little Samantha. I couldn't have been blessed with a more loving family," Wondrene says so sincerely that I know without a doubt she means it.

Envy rises within me, heavy and green. I try to shut it down, but it fills my eyes and I can no longer see the pages in my hand, and I am frustrated by these pages in my hand. My mouth opens and begins to say things that I do not intend to say. "I don't want a family, Maggie. And I don't want a dress. I am quite content with the ones I have."

"It's okay, Della," Maggie assures me, like soothing a pouting child. "It's okay. We'll discuss it next week when I come to visit."

She takes the papers from my hand and folds them into thirds. She slips the paper into her shoulder bag, then her hand comes out with vending machine money for me and Wondrene.

I say I don't want it, but she leaves it on my night table just the same. I am trying to hide my jealousy and all the confusion I am feeling, but I think they both can see it.

Maggie leaves, and after she has been gone for two or three minutes, Wondrene turns to me and calmly says, "You're Aunt Jemima black, Della. You have big feet, a velcro wardrobe, and no game at all. You allow the aides to tuck your hair in braids,



and it's awfully unattractive. You need all the help you can get, and I don't understand why you said those things to Maggie."

It is the first time I have ever seen Wondrene angry. There is no frown on her face, and she does not raise her voice, but I know she is angry.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Apologize to Maggie, not to me," she responds.

She turns on the radio and the fan. She listens to music and allows the fan to cool her off, then she says, "It makes more sense that I should be with Red and you should be with Doc. What do you think, Della?"

"I don't want either one," I say. "What am I suppose to do with a man at my age?"

She grunts. "There you go again, turning down the things you need. Doc might make you sigh, or smile, or kick up your heels. He might make you laugh. Isn't that worth something?"

"I can't see him making anybody laugh," I say. "He's a mean old man."

"He's a scared and lonely man," Wondrene says. "He needs somebody, and so do you. I don't care what you do, Della, but I'm gonna attach myself to Red. I'm gonna feel what he feels and let him know I feel it. And I'm gonna be happy doing it."

"He's a white man," I remind her.

She chuckles. "I don't care if he's blue. He's dying, and it terrifies him. I can feel his terror. I want him to feel what I feel, too, that dying is not so bad or people would simply stop doing it."

I think that one over for a long time.

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Wondrene woke up early this morning and turned the radio on. I heard her say something about living down the street from some relative of somebody on the radio, and I heard her fill her small oxygen tank from the large one, but I haven't heard anything from her for a good while now.

I lift my head from my pillow and scan the room with sleepy eyes. I don't see her. I pull myself out of bed and check the bathroom. She's not there, either.

I find her in the day room, sitting at a table with Mary Reed and Mable. She beckons that I should join her, but I turn my head and go to my regular table. I have never joined Mary or Mable for anything. They might think it strange if I come wandering over to their table.

Wondrene and I are so different. I am not one to mix and mingle. I have spent my days here sitting quietly in my room, and my nights sneaking to the day room in search of the life that is missing from my room. Wondrene is disturbing the existence I have been comfortable with. I see it as not such a bad thing, but she is moving too fast.

The breakfast trays arrive, and Wondrene wheels herself over to our table. "Della," she says, "I'm gonna run for president of the resident counsel. What do you think of that?"

"That's nice," I answer.

She is bubbling with enthusiasm. "You'll be my campaign manager. We'll come up with a really good campaign slogan, then we'll hang posters on every floor. When I win, we'll have a party right here in the day room."

"I can't be a campaign manager," I say. "I don't know how."

"Would you vote for me?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

I think about this for a minute. "Well," I say, "you care about people. Everybody seems to like you, and you have a way of getting things done."

"Okay then," she says. "That's what you tell people. You just tell them why you think I'd be a great president."

I nibble at my toast and wonder who in the world will listen to me. No one ever has. I'm Aunt Jemima black. I have big feet, a velcro wardrobe, and no game at all.

Beneath the table, I rub my feet together and my shoes make a scraping sound. I had never thought my feet big until now. Wondrene has made me conscious of them, and now I can see where a size nine is mighty big for a ninety pound woman.

Wondrene has hurt my feelings, and I'm not sure I want to be her campaign manager.

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Doc is a moody man. Sometimes we come up here and he laughs

and talks with us, and sometimes he doesn't want to be bothered. Today he is quiet, but he has joined us at this day room table to play a game of cards -- bid whist. He is my partner.

I don't know why we're here. None of us are feeling worth a plug nickle. Red is drugged up on pain killers that I need for the arthritis in my knees. Wondrene declares she is coming down with her third case of pneumonia this year, and poor Doc is just depressed as hell.

We haven't touched a card for the last fifteen minutes. As a matter-of-fact, we haven't said a word to each other in the past twenty minutes.

Red begins to cry, and I change seats with Wondrene so she can be close enough to him to rub his shoulder, and Doc stares down at the table so he doesn't have to see Red's tears.

It is our silent consensus that we should leave this day room and adjourn in the penthouse. We rise as one, and I shudder to think how we must appear to others. We are a crying skeleton being held together by a dead woman with green tubing and a size nine life line, and a lopsided madman limping beside swollen, aching knees supported by a quad cane.

In the penthouse, Wondrene leads Red to his bed. They stretch out there together, and she cradles his head against her shoulder. Doc moves over to his own bed, rolls up one leg of his pants, and removes his artificial limb. He stands the prosthesis beside his night table, then pats the bed that I should join him.

I am standing on a sea of wine carpet, counting the years of life in this room. Three hundred. Red is seventy-five and Doc

is seventy-one. It strikes me odd that Wondrene is the oldest, but looks the youngest and seems to have more spark in her than the rest of us combined.

"Come on, Della, before I change my mind," Doc says.

My knees say go, and I say, "What the hell." I have learned, from Wondrene, to speak this way.

I am supine and motionless on Doc's bed, breathing only because I must. It has been umpteen years since I have lain beside a man, and I imagine that accounts for the quivers my heart is experiencing.

In a rare moment of tenderness, Doc covers my knees with an afghan, then he stretches out beside me. Our shoulders touch, and I guess it's all right. I make no effort to move.

"You were so mean to us when we first came to this room," I say, because I need to say something.

"How did you expect me to act when I was half-naked and you were standing there laughing at my leg?" he asks.

I smile, despite the fact that my arthritis is urging me to cry. "I was laughing at my feet," I say. "Wondrene thinks they're too big to belong to a lady."

He grunts, and I think maybe he agrees with Wondrene, so I change the subject.

"This is a nice room," I say.

"Yeah, it is," he agrees. "I got permission to have it decorated when I found out I was gonna be here longer than I thought. They had it set up with restorative equipment and devices that nobody ever used. Had me and Reginald stuck in a

room around there on the east wing. That's where the restorative junk is now."

Doc, whose real name is Leon Benham, gets comfortable with the sound of his own voice and begins to tell me how he had been a veterinarian until an automobile accident had taken his wife and his leg some seven years ago. By no means is he a poor man, he tells me. He had only come to this dumpy place because it was close to his daughter's house. Now every time he tries to leave, the doctors find something else to detain him.

"They taught me to walk with that prosthetic leg," he says. That took long enough, and when I finally got it together, they came in here and told me I had an enlarged heart. That kept me quiet for a while, until I convinced myself that a big heart wasn't such a bad thing. I was ready to leave again, had my daughter bring my van and park it in the lot. That's when they did lab work and started me on a blood thinner. I'd be eating when, without warning, my nose would bleed into my soup. Scared the crap out of me. This place is like a twilight zone. Once you're in here, you can't seem to get out."

It's not that I'm not interested in what he's saying; I am. It's just that his voice is warm and soothing. It relaxes me, and I find myself dozing in and out of sleep.

I am brought completely out of my relaxed state by the nurse. He has barged into this room. A knock would have alerted me, and there was no knock. He stares from one bed to the other, then his arms fly up above his head.

"What is this?" he shouts. "I don't know what you people

think, but my floor is not a whore house for the four of you. I should have known you were up to something no good. I want you women up and off my floor right now, and don't come back. You're all too old for this kind of carrying on."

Wondrene pushes the control button on Red's bed until she and Red are in a sitting position. Doc raises us up to the same level, and we all turn to Wondrene for guidance. She folds her arms across her chest and stares at the nurse, and we do the same. She smiles, and so do we.

The nurse is ranting and raving about the shame of it all, saying how we could all be thrown out of the home, and if it was left up to him, he'd put us out right this second.

Our backs are elevated and we are reasonably comfortable sitting here watching his real life drama. The only thing missing is the popcorn and soda.

The nurse goes on and on without a script, plot, or prompt, and we sit quietly watching. I feel Doc stir beside me, then I see his peg leg sail through the air. It misses the nurse by an inch. Damn!

The nurse charges toward our bed. He leaps over my chest, and, pop, pop, pop, jabs his fist into Doc's face three times in rapid succession. Blood pours from Doc's nose.

I move as fast as I can. I don't want Doc's blood all over me, and I need to find something to stop it. My feet touch the floor, pain shoots through my knees, and I see the nurse backing toward the door.

"Look what you've done," Wondrene says calmly. "You've cost

yourself a job, a license, and possibly your freedom. Was it worth it?"

The nurse says nothing. I believe he is as stunned by his behavior as we are. He stops, then moves forward between the beds, goes into the bathroom, and returns with a wet towel. He is hesitant, but finally he presses the towel to Doc's nose.

"Man, I am so sorry," he says.

"It's okay," Doc mumbles from beneath a flap of wet towel. "I guess I asked for it."

"Naw, man, you didn't ask for this. This shouldn't have happened," the nurse says, sincerely apologetic. "I don't know what got into me."

I turn to Wondrene to hear what she will say, but she pushes the control button on Red's bed and lets the head down. She says nothing, just nods her head twice, then turns her back to us.

I am puzzled. Is this forgiveness? Is it as simple as this? I am one who goes with the flow; it's all I know, but forgiveness has never been this easy in my life, and I am not ready to forgive what has just taken place in this room.

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We have been bad, the four of us.

The nurse, Edward Palmer from the third floor, has been fired and escorted from this facility by the police. Doc has filed charges against him, and has the threat of a lawsuit dangling over the heads of the heads of this place.



Wondrene says we could have screamed bloody murder up there in the penthouse, but what if we couldn't have stopped Doc's nose from bleeding. We had used the nurse to do the job he was paid to do, then we had blown the whistle on him. It warmed me to know that I had been part of such an intelligent plan.

The one bad thing to come out of all of this for me, thought, is the gossip. People have misconstrued what the four of us were doing in the penthouse, and I am ashamed to leave my room.

Wondrene comes and goes freely. She says she will not allow the envy of a few to disgrace or imprison her. She has just come in with mail in her walker basket. There is never anything for me, but Wondrene has letters from her pen pals. She places them on her night table. She'll read them tonight when she gets her wine.

"You are leaving this room tomorrow, aren't you?" she asks. "The voting is tomorrow, Della, and I need your vote."

Her opponent is Samuel Greely who lives on the east wing and wheels himself all over the place in a wheel chair. He is a friendly and intelligent man, but I think Wondrene will win.

"Why do you need my vote?" I ask. "You told me you were a dead woman. Who needs a dead president?"

"I can see you're in a mood," she says. "I want to be president; it's important to me. Don't you want anything, Della?"

"Yeah," I answer. "I want to hear my voice on the radio so you can say, I knew her when . . ."

"When she was my roommate and best friend," Wondrene says.  
"We'll have to get you on the radio."

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The president of the resident counsel is ill. The mobile x-ray people came this morning and took pictures of her lungs. Red has been down here four times, and Doc has been down once. We're all worried about her.

Wondrene speaks with hoarseness, and when she coughs her lungs quake and her entire body rocks against the bed.

The evening nurse, Trudy, comes in and takes Wondrene's temperature and gives her Tylenol, then she says, "Miss Barry, your x-rays show that you have pneumonia. I've spoken with Doctor Stevens, and he wants us to start you on 500 milligrams of Cipro twice a day. I'm sorry, but you won't be able to have your wine while you're on antibiotics."

Wondrene nods that she understands, and the movement of her head against the pillow appears the heaviest object she has ever had to move.

I leave the room when James and Maggie Roeco arrive. I catch the elevator to the third floor and knock at the penthouse door. Doc's voice calls out that I should come in, and I push open the door.

Doc is sitting in his recliner watching the evening news. Red is playing a game of solitaire at a table in the corner.

"She has pneumonia," I say.

"That's what she thought it was," Red replies. "How's she doing.?"

"The same."

"You think she'll pull through it?" Doc asks.

"Yeah, she'll make it," I answer, although I have my doubts.

They do not offer me a seat, but I know that I am welcome to sit if I chose to. I stand, taking in the furniture, walls, and colors in this room. I had thought this room was beautiful, but now it seems dull and uninviting.

"There's too much wine and gold in here," I say. "You need to open the drapes and air this place out. This room is missing something."

"Be quiet, Della. You're making me miss the news," Doc says.

Quiet is who I am. I am more comfortable with it than anything else in the world, but for some reason I feel the need to speak.

"I think we should pray for Wondrene," I say, and get their undivided attention.

Red abandons his cards, Doc clicks off the TV, and they both stare at me. I begin to pray.

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Wondrene has been taking antibiotics for five days and she still looks peaked and weak. She has decided today to get out of bed and sit in her chair. The window is up about two inches, and

the radio is tuned in to WZAK. The fan is oscillating on low, and she has it blowing toward the ceiling.

She is running me ragged. She has sent me to Mable's room for a crocheted lap robe that Mable has been working on for her. Mable is friendly and talkative. She proudly displays her arts and crafts and speaks enthusiastically about them. I am fascinated by her satin pillow cases with the embroidered hearts. I think I would like to make one for Doc and Red, in cream or white, to brighten up their room.

I return to my room with the lap robe, and sit on my bed to rest my knees while Wondrene examines her gift.

"I believe I can do this," she says. "Della, do you mind running around to the activities center to get me a hook and a skein of yarn?"

Off I go again.

I come back with the hook and yarn to find Wondrene napping in her chair. I move quietly to my bed, making every effort not to wake her, but the moment I lift my feet from the floor, she opens her eyes.

"I was sitting here thinking," she says.

Like hell you were, I say to myself. You were sitting there snoring.

"Tomorrow is the resident counsel meeting, and I won't be able to attend," she says. "You'll have to write a speech and present it for me, Della."

"Samuel Greely is vice president. Can't he give the speech?"

"No. He'll have his own speech. The residents need to hear something from me."

I sit on the bed with a pen in my hand and paper on my lap, wondering what to write. Wondrene's eyes are closed; she's sucking up oxygen, and she is no help at all.

Dear residents, I write, then scratch it out. That won't do. Fellow residents, I try, but that doesn't work, either.

"Did you hear that?" Wondrene asks.

"What?" I ask, glancing up and around the room.

"The radio," she says. "They're having a blues concert at the State Theater, and they're giving away tickets. You have to be the ninth caller. Pick up the phone, Della!"

I reach for the phone, Wondrene repeats the numbers, and I punch them in. The line is busy. I hang up and try again. Still busy. Wondrene is staring at me, and my heart is pounding madly. I try again, and this time I hear ringing on the other end. It rings and rings, then suddenly a male voice says, "WZAK, you're caller number eight." Before I can say anything, the line goes dead.

"Damn!" I say, and slam the receiver onto the cradle. I hear a snap.

"Did you hear that?" I ask.

"What?" Wondrene wants to know.

"I think I broke my wrist. I won't be able to write your speech."

She sees me holding my left wrist in my right hand, and she says, "That's your left wrist, Della. You don't write with your

left hand."

I can tell she thinks I'm joking, but she pushes the call button for the nurse anyway, and I hold my wrist until the nurse comes and examines it.

"It's not tender or swollen," the nurse says. "I don't think it's broken, but we'll get an x-ray to make sure."

Wondrene has fallen asleep. I pick up the paper and pen and try to write a decent speech, all with one hand. I've gotten as far as, 'Welcome ladies and gentlemen,' when the mobile x-ray man enters the room. He snaps pictures of my wrist, then he leaves, and I go back to my writing.

I think it is the responsibility of the evening nurse to present bad news, because she is the one who comes in and tells me my wrist is broken and they are sending me out to get a cast.

I begin to cry from the pain in my wrist. Funny thing is, it didn't hurt until she told me it was broken.

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I am depressed. Glenda, from the activities center, has been around here to tell Wondrene that the council meeting has been postponed until next week, after I've written what I consider an excellent speech. The skein of yarn I brought around yesterday has not been touched. I have nothing to show for my call to the radio station, except a broken wrist, and now I can't even make the pillow cases for Doc and Red. And if I had won those tickets, how in hell was I going to get down to the State

Theater? Silly old woman with silly dreams.

Doc and Red are camped out in our room, and I think sardines in a can could move about better than we can in this cramped space. Doc seems to think that I am his possession and responsibility. I don't know where he got that idea. He is waiting on me hand and foot, treating me like some wounded puppy from his animal clinic.

This half cast on my arm seems to have crowned me queen. Wondrene also keeps asking if I need anything, and I imagine if I did, Red would jump up and try to get it for me since he's waiting on Wondrene hand and foot.

Doc says, "If you wanted tickets to a show, Della, all you had to do was tell me. I can buy you a ticket and have my daughter drive you down to the theater. You want me to?"

"No," I say.

Doc is missing the point. The tickets are secondary to having my voice on the radio. Wondrene, I think, knows this, but she keeps it to herself, and I am glad.

The day nurse comes in to give Wondrene a breathing treatment, and she can barely squeeze through all of us to get to the machine, but she doesn't ask our company to leave. Wondrene does.

"We can't talk while this machine is on," Wondrene says. "It makes a lot of noise. Why don't you fellows come back later."

Reluctantly, they leave, and Wondrene winks an eye at me. She is starting to feel much better. She places the mouth piece

in her mouth and switches on the machine, and I am left alone with my thoughts.

I have a broken wrist, but I am in no pain at all -- not even in my joints. I could learn to like those new pain killers that the nurses are giving me. I should be satisfied, stretched here comfortably on my bed, but I'm not.

Wondrene finishes her breathing treatment and shuts off the machine. She turns on the radio. "Do you need anything, Della?" she asks. "I'm gonna write a speech for you while you rest. The next time they give those tickets away, you're gonna be ready."

If I ever get through, I'll know what to say, so I do not respond to her chatter, but that doesn't stop her from talking.

"Why does everybody avoid that little Zyma Root?" she asks. "She doesn't seem dangerous to me. I wouldn't want to live someplace where nobody talks to me. I think we should make friends with her, Della. What do you think?"

I try to remember why I have avoided Zyma Root. Because everybody else does, I guess, and I am one who goes with the flow. I have never said one word to the woman, but I never said much to anybody before Wondrene came along. I had never known that Doc and Red existed, or thought about going to the third floor. In four years, I had never been to the activities center before yesterday, although Glenda has been around here several times encouraging me to do so.

"I think we should make friends," I say. "Her name is Clair, and they say she's a messenger of death, but I'm not sure what that means. The nurses talk to her, and nothing ever



happens to them."

"That's settled then," Wondrene says. "The next time I see her, I'll invite her to our room."

"Maybe we should make friends with her in the day room first," I suggest.

Wondrene nods her head, and we fall silent, listening to Wondrene's many acquaintances on the radio.

I am in a light sleep when Wondrene's voice awakens me. "There it is, Della," she says. "They just said it. Be the ninth caller for those tickets."

I open my eyes, and they are the only things I move. Wondrene quickly deduces that I am not going to reach for the phone, so she picks it up and begins to punch in numbers. After about five minutes of punching the redial button, she hangs up in frustration.

See, my eyes say before I close them again.

.....

Wondrene has stuck a blank cassette tape in the recorder of her boom box. She is more determined than I to catch my voice on the radio. For that reason, the radio is holding us captive. We went to breakfast because they weren't giving away concert tickets on the Tom Joyner Morning Show, but now we're back and I don't think we'll be leaving this room any time soon.

I'm hoping Doc will come down today. He doesn't make me want to kick up my heels, as Wondrene suggested he might, but he

does make me laugh. He's a bigger liar than Wondrene when it come to telling tales about the animals he's treated over the years. He has a way of making them sound human, like they actually talked to him, and when Doc laughs about something, it's a full-hearted sound. I could bathe in his laughter and glow all day from the warmth of it.

Joan Wiggins, one of the nursing assistants, is going to put a perm in my hair this evening. I gave her the vending machine money that Maggie has been leaving me over the last few weeks, and Joan said she will buy a perm kit and hair roller and bring them in today. I haven't told Wondrene yet.

I want to look nice for Doc. I can't prop my boobs up like Wondrene's, and I can't shorten the length of my feet. There's a lot I can not do, but I've decided to work with what I can.

"I can't keep sitting here, Della," Wondrene says. "I've been in this room for ten days and it's time for me to stretch my legs. I wanna go upstairs to visit with Red and Doc, and I wanna introduce myself to Zyma Root."

"Her name is Clair," I remind Wondrene. "I think you should go. There's no need for the both of us to sit here."

She hesitates for a moment, then stands. "If they ask for the ninth caller, will you dial the phone?"

I nod.

"Promise?"

"I promise," I say.

Wondrene reaches the door, then she turns back and says, "You mark my word. The minute I step out of this room, they're

gonna ask for the ninth caller. Do you remember how to work the recorder?"

"I do," I say.

Wondrene leaves, and I smile. There's this warm feeling inside me today, like maybe I will be the ninth caller, and Joan will put a perm in my hair, and Doc will say how nice I look, and when this cast comes off my arm, I'll . . .

"The people's station, 93 FM, WZAK," a female voice on the radio says. "That's Usher, doing things his way. Right now I'll take the ninth caller at 555-1993 for a pair of tickets to a special blues event at the State Theater, featuring: Latimore, Blues Boy Willie, Clarence Carter, Sugar Blue, and Miss Lavelle White."

I'm thinking how special can it be without B. B. King, but at the same time I'm rushing for the phone. I push the record button for the cassette player, then I dial the number and get a ring right away. A male voice says, "WZAK, you're the third caller." He disconnects. All the time Brandy and Monica are going back and forth about who some boy belongs to. Wondrene knows them both, and I've heard this song a dozen times.

I push the redial button and get a busy signal. I push the button for a dial tone, then the redial button again. The phone rings, then a bubbly female voice says, "What's your name and where are you calling from?" The voice is coming at me through the telephone and out of the radio at the same time.

"My name is Della Johns and I'm calling from Cleveland," I say, matching her voice bubble for bubble, while shaking like a

leaf on a tree.

"Well, congratulations, Della. You're my ninth caller. You've won yourself a pair of tickets to the blues concert at the State Theater."

"I can't believe it," I say. "Thank you. I've been trying all week."

She laughs her radio laugh, and I think I am speaking directly to Kim Johnson. She says, "Would you like to send a shout out to anyone today?"

"Yes," I say. "I'd like to say hi to Wondrene, Doc and Red, Mary Reed and Mable, Joan Wiggins, the Roeco family, and everybody at Renwood Circle."

"And tell me, Della, what's the station that plays more music more often?"

"93 FM, WZAK," I answer.

A rap tune comes from the radio, and on the phone the woman tells me to hold on so she can get some information from me. While I wait, I push the stop and rewind buttons on the recorder.

I talk to the lady and hang up the phone. As soon as I do this, two of the day time assistants enter my room. The one says, "Della, were you just on the radio?"

"No," I say, and give her a look like I have no idea what she's talking about.

They both give me a skeptical stare, then they leave.

I play the tape to make sure it came out all right, then I take a seat on the far side of Wondrene's bed to look out of the window. There is a light drizzle outside, and I stare out at

bare trees, rain soaked leaves on the ground, and a gray sky above. Soon the holidays will be here and we'll get snow. I realize that I've missed the changing of a season without really missing it.

I have the tape ready to play when Wondrene comes down from the third floor. She sounds tired, and she is wheezing, like some of the pneumonia stayed with her. I quickly push the play button so she will think the tape is the radio.

Monia and Brandy are singing as Wondrene flops down in her recliner. She leans forward to make herself breathe better, and Kim Johnson's voice asks, "What's your name and where are you calling from?"

My voice, sounding great to my ears, comes from the speakers saying, "My name is Della Johns and I'm calling from Cleveland."

Wondrene glances over at me, but she is still wheezing and struggling with her breath, so she can't say anything.

It is three or four minutes after the tape has stopped that she is able to say, "You did it, Della. You did it, and I'm so happy for you."

A single tear rolls from her eye, and I can't imagine why.

.....

Doc keeps wrapping his fingers through my hair. "Never knew you had this much hair, girl," he says. "My goodness, that's a lot of hair."

He likes it, and he means well, but my scalp is tender and I

wish he'd stop. I place my arm with the cast on his arm so he can't lift his hand to my hair again.

The heat up here in the penthouse is not that warm and we probably won't be up here long, but we're trying to decide what to do with the tickets I've won.

Wondrene says she can't possibly go, and I can see where she's probably right. She suggests that Doc and I go, and have his daughter drive us down.

"I'll drive," Doc says. "My van is parked outside, and I drive it around the parking lot every week as part of my therapy. I don't see why I can't drive us."

"I don't think that's a good idea, Doc," Wondrene says. "When is the last time you've been out in traffic?"

"I can do it," Doc says stubbornly.

"I don't think driving is the biggest problem," Red says. "The problem is going to be getting out of here at eight o'clock at night without being stopped by the staff."

There is complete silence in this large, drafty room as we contemplate this, then Doc says, "We'll walk out like adults, after all, that's what we are."

"Think about it, Doc," Red says, being much too practical for me. "You could probably sneak out before they set the night alarm on the door, but how would you get back in? The doors are locked from the inside."

"Why can't we just tell the nurses we're going?" I ask, wishing things were that simple, but knowing they aren't.

"They have their policies and procedures here," Red says.

If they find you missing, they call the police right away. You wouldn't be hard to spot in that big van of yours, Doc."

"There's really no problem here," Wondrene says. "You need to stop being so stubborn, Doc. Have your daughter drive you. They can't stop you from leaving here if you're with a relative."

"I'm seventy-one years old," Doc says. "I don't need a nurse maid with me to take my woman out. If that's the only way to do it, then I don't want to go."

"We'll test the waters, see if there's someone here we can trust," Wondrene says. "If not, we have two weeks to come up with a plan."

I think my tickets will probably go to waste, may as well get up right now and throw them in the garbage, but we all nod our heads in agreement to come up with a plan, and Doc's set his face with determination.

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Maggie took Wondrene out for Thanksgiving dinner last week, and when they returned, Maggie told me that the Guardian Society has a family in mind for me, and she brought me a beautiful, lavender dress with a matching blazer. It fits me perfectly, and I am going to wear it to the resident council's party this evening. I am staring at my new dress and Wondrene is urging me to put it on.

"The party starts in fifteen minutes, Della," she says. "We need to get around there early to greet our guests."

This is a big event for Wondrene, so I slip the dress over my head and Wondrene zips it up for me. I try not to glimpse my feet because I want nothing to sour my mood this evening, and my cast is bad enough.

"Is Zyma Root coming to the party?" I ask, because Wondrene has not mentioned the woman since deciding to make friends with her.

"Hard to say," Wondrene answers. "I think she's bashful. I couldn't get five words out of her. She stood there and listened to me, but she didn't say much at all."

Our window is up about two or three inches. Snow and cold air are blowing through the open space, and still Wondrene is having trouble breathing. She coughs, and I see her grimace from pain, and press a hand against her rib cage. She moves over to her recliner and tilts the fan so it blows close to her face.

She coughs again and spits into a tissue, then quickly folds the tissue over, but her hands are not fast enough for me to miss the green against the white paper. I have never seen green come from a human body before.

"Do you want me to call the nurse?" I ask.

She shakes her head that I should not.

"Maybe you shouldn't go to the party," I say.

"It's my party, Della, and it's important to me," she says.

"Let's get on around there."

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Doc has been outside everyday this week, driving his van around the parking lot. Sometimes I come and stand at this back door to watch him, and he seems to be doing okay to me. Once I went out to ride around with him, but the restorative assistant said he didn't think it was a good idea -- liability and all that stuff.

No one knows that Doc and I are planning to escape this place for one night, except Wondrene and Red. Red is okay with it now, but Wondrene has told me time and time again how she does not think it is such a good idea.

Nobody seems to think anything is a good idea where Doc and I are concerned

"Wondrene," I say, when she tries to change my mind, "I have confidence in my man." That is not all the way true, but I feel good saying it, so I say it.

Doc parks his van, and he and the restorative assistant track across the snow to the back door. I open the door for them, and Doc winks at me before he gets on the elevator. I turn and head back to my room.

In our room, Wondrene is listening to the radio and teaching herself to crochet. "I'm making you a lap robe, Della," she says. Her cough is getting worse, and she's been trying all day to hide it from the nurses.

"I'll be old as Methuselah before you finish that," I tease.

She stops her crocheting to cough, then she grins and says, "You're right. I think I'll make you a muzzle instead. You're getting too mouthy."

"I laugh, then sit on my bed to watch her.

"Are you nervous about tomorrow night?" she asks.

I shake my head. "No. I wish the snow would let up, but I have confidence in Doc. We'll be okay."

"You would never have thought of doing this a few months ago," Wondrene says. "You've changed a lot since I first met you, and I like the change."

"I like it, too," I say.

We've planned everything out, the four of us. Doc and I were going to leave before eight o'clock when the alarm will be set on the door, but Red had pointed out that the nurses would miss us on their eight o'clock medication pass. Scratch that.

We have now devised a plan where I will sneak into the nurses' station while the nurse is passing medications on the east wing. I will switch off the alarm, Doc and I will leave, and Wondrene will reset the alarm. When we're ready to come back, we'll call Wondrene on the phone, and she'll shut off the alarm and open the door for us.

There's plenty of room for anything to go wrong, but for right now, that's our plan.

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Wondrens's secret is out.

The mobile x-ray man has been and gone, and Wondrene is down again with pneumonia. This time the nurses are giving her antibiotic injections. They're giving her breathing treatments,

and doing this thing they call clapping and postural drainage that is truly wearing Wondrene out.

Red was sitting down here with her until Wondrene moved her fingers to indicate he should leave. She's not saying much at all, and seems to be saving her words for me.

I'm standing here in my lavender dress and my black shoes with the velcro flaps. I feel guilty about leaving Wondrene like this, but she says she'll be okay and that I should go to the blues concert.

Earlier today she went to the vending machine to get herself a Coke. I think she did it just to show me that she's capable of holding up her end of our plan. She never took a single sip of the Coke.

There is a tiny flaw in our scheme from the onset. I'm dressed and ready to go, so now how am I suppose to get to the nurses' station and switch off the alarm without attracting attention?

"Go to the back door and wait for Doc," Wondrene says. "I'll switch off the alarm."

She pulls her weary body from bed and attaches herself to the portable oxygen tank. Together, we move toward the door.

"Have a good life, Della," Wondrene says, and gives me a hug.

"It's not my life, Wondrene," I say. "It's just a concert, but I'll try to have a good time."

She nods, and moves up the corridor. With my coat draped over my arm, I sneak toward the back door and nearly bump into

Doc as I turn the corner by the time clock. I peer around the corner, watching Wondrene. She waves a hand to signal that we are clear to leave, and I blow her a kiss of thanks.

Doc is looking handsome in his blue suit, black dress shoes, and the black hat that covers his bald head. He helps me with my coat, and we step out into a bitter cold Cleveland night.

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We are doing fine on the ramp where maintenance has scattered salt. It is a different matter, however, as we near Doc's van. The wind chill factor must be below zero, and the snow beneath our feet is frozen solid.

We are arm and arm crossing the parking lot, and it is hard to tell who is supporting who. I want to turn around and go back, but Doc's grip is so tight on my arm that I can only go forward, so I assume I'm supporting him.

The wind is turning us every which way but loose, showing no mercy, stinging my eyes and cutting through my wool coat. This is, without a doubt, the hardest thing I have ever tried to do -- crossing hard ice safely with a one-leg man.

"I can't make it, Doc," I shout, and the wind sucks my voice right on away.

Under the lights of the parking lot, I can see Doc's van. It seems close, but I don't think we'll ever make it that far. If I fall, which I am highly likely to do since my feet keep slipping and sliding, I'll probably break something larger than a

wrist. Nothing out here is moving, except me and Doc, and snow drifts making mounds against the parking lot fence. Nothing in this city should be moving, and if my knees get any colder, I won't be.

We reach the van, and Doc leans down to shout in my ear, "Do you think you can make it around to the passenger side?"

I nod, and release my grip on his arm.

The van is covered in a sheet of ice, and I can't use it for support, so I take tiny baby steps around to the passenger side and wait for Doc to let me in. It is taking him a long time and I'm thinking the lock must be frozen, but I don't hear him scraping at ice.

"Doc!" I call out, and get no answer.

"Doc," I say, "open this door!" The wind gives me a cold kick in my backside, but Doc gives me not a sound.

I am scared and miserable. My teeth are chattering and my knee caps are frozen, but I can't just keep standing here. In slower step than before, if that's possible, I retrace my path to the spot where I left Doc. I don't see him anywhere.

"Doc!" I scream. "Where are you?"

"I'm here, Della," he shouts back. "I'm under the van,"

"You're where?" I ask, sure that the wind must have distorted his message.

"I slipped on some ice. I'm under the van," he says.

"Well, come on out of there," I say.

He tosses his key out and they land in the snow at my feet.

"I'm trying," he says. "Open the van door."

I stare down at the keys and begin to sob. Even on the best of days my knees would not allow me to squat that low. "I gotta pee," I cry. "Take me back, Doc. I gotta pee."

"Calm down, Della," Doc says patiently. "Just get the keys and open the door. There's a blanket inside the van."

One of Doc's gloved hands is sticking out from beneath the van. I remove the wool scarf that covers my head and neck, then I dangle it down for him to see. He grips it, and I try to tug him out, but I feel myself slipping, so I stop.

Doc lifts the keys from the snow and tosses them up to me -- twice before I catch them. It takes several tries before the key opens the door, by which time I'm crying even harder, and I need a bathroom bad.

I steady my feet against the mounting board, then tumble over into the van. Doc is shouting orders up to me that I should put the key in the ignition and start the van, and that I should not close the door. I get myself into an upright position, and I can see Doc's hands on the mounting board, pulling himself up -- slowly pulling himself up.

I extend my right arm to help him, but he shakes his head and says, "Just get the van started, Della."

I remove my glove, rub my hand against my knee to warm them both, then stick the key in the ignition and turn it. The van comes to life right away.

Doc is almost in, so I move over to make room for him. He gets his back onto the seat, and I can see that he is struggling with his prosthetic leg. It is sticking out too far below the

cuff of his pants. I help support his back so he can maneuver himself into a sitting position. He pulls his legs inside and closes the door.

"Get that blanket out of the back," he says.

I do as I am told, and we wrap the blanket around ourselves. The van seems colder than the outside and the heat is slow to come, but when it does, it feels great.

Beneath the blanket, Doc's hands are moving, working with his leg. His hat is gone, his suit is a mess, but he seems to be okay. "Don't you ever breathe a word of this to anybody," he says.

"I won't," I say, although at this moment I don't care who knows what; I'm trying to figure out how we're going to get back inside the building.

"Hell of a concert, wasn't it?" Doc jokes.

I don't respond. My bladder has settled down and I'm warm, but I'm also worried. We're sitting here, possibly breathing in carbon monoxide, and there's an ocean of ice to cross to get back to the door. Once we get there, the door will be locked. We have no phone to call Wondrene, and if we ring the door bell, the staff will know we've been out. They may throw us out, or worse yet, tie me to my bed.

"I would try to move the van closer to the door, except that means getting out and scraping ice from the windows," Doc says, as if hearing my thoughts. "I don't think I can manage that."

"We can't keep sitting here," I say.

"I know," he agrees. He tries to roll down his window, but

it won't budge. "I've got my leg back in place, and I think we can make it back across, but let's just warm up a bit for right now."

"This is a diaster," I say.

"It's not so bad," Doc says. "It was touch and go there for a minute under this van, but it's okay now. Tomorrow when I'm aching all over from my fall, you'll have to rub my aching muscles. I'm looking forward to that."

Under the blanket, he takes my uninjured hand in one of his and gives it a gentle squeeze. I lean over and kiss his cheek.

"How long do you think we've been out?" I ask.

"About ten or fifteen minutes."

"I'm warm now," I say. "Let's try to make it back."

We decide we will knock at Wondrene's window, and get her to open the door for us. She'll probably laugh, but I can live with that.

.....

The window is up about an inch, the night light is on, and Wondrene is propped up on her bed. She is sleeping, and it appears a peaceful sleep. I hate to disturb her, but it's that or freeze.

I rap on the window screen with a gloved fist. The sound is not loud enough to awaken Wondrene because she does not stir. Doc knocks against the window frame, and still Wondrene does not move.



I am getting a bad feeling here.

Through the window, I scan the room, and my heart nearly stops. In the shadows by the door, Zyma Root is staring out at me.

"Oh, God," I groan. "Oh, God, no!"

Doc must think that I am freezing to death or something. He begins pulling at the screen, but he can't get a solid grip it. He pries at the frame of the screen with one of his keys. The key breaks, and he begins to pry with another. The frame gives just a bit, just enough to poke a frozen finger through. Doc is swearing hard enough to conjure up Satan, but he keeps working with the frame.

I have been staring in at Wondrene, and she has not so much as blinked an eye. Cast and all, I begin to pound on the screen until Doc tells me that I should stop before I cause the window to slip down.

He works his finger, and then his hand, up and down between the metal frame and the wood. The frame gives just enough for Doc to rip it off. Together, we raise the window. Doc tries to hoists me through the open space, but he goes down sideways in the snow. I can hear him mumbling profanities.

I brace my arms against the window sill, then wiggle my way through the opening, praying that the window does not fall down and crush me like a fly. I land head first inside the room, uninjured. I sit up to see a snow-covered Doc climbing in behind me. Zyma Root has watched all of this. Now that we are inside, she turns and leaves the room.

"Wondrene, you were right," Doc says, pulling himself up from the floor. "We should have listened to you."

Apparently, Doc did not see Zyma Root. He keeps talking as if he expects Wondrene to respond. He does not know that Wondrene is no more, but I know.