

GRATITUDE SHMATITUDE

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Let's face it; life is a struggle—for all of us—some worse than others. The big question is why is it worth it? Six months ago I wanted to die. Now I don't. At least most of the time I don't. But I still feel cheated. I've been allotted a poor substitute for a life that is just barely enough to make it worth the struggle. I do have a vibrant, active mental life, which helps.

Right now, for example, the philosopher Plato is sitting on my windowsill contemplating a vase of flowers my sister sent me. "I understand that your country will soon celebrate a significant holiday," he said.

I know my visions are in my head, and I respond to them in my head, but it's amazing how real they look. The drugs they give you in here are awesome.

"I've given up on Thanksgiving," I replied. "A bunch of pious hypocrites sitting around an extravagant feast professing their thanks for the simple things in life. 'I'm thankful for the sunshine.' 'I'm thankful for the trees.' 'I'm thankful for my wonderful family.' Give me a break."

"And yet, it is an excellent practice." He pointed one finger at the ceiling. "A day set aside for expressing gratitude. It builds character. Most virtuous."

"Gratitude Shmatitude. You and Aristotle. Always obsessing over character," I said. "You think one day a year will make a dent when the other 364 are dedicated to overt greed? America stands for instant gratification."

"All the more reason to have a day set aside to reflect on one's good fortune. One may gain wisdom from such reflection." He floated to the foot of my bed, looking smug. Egotistical jerk.

"So, you think I should reflect on my good fortune? What do I have to be thankful for? Not one thing. Nada, zip, zero and anybody who says otherwise is blind."

Plato nodded. "Is that why you declined the invitation from your friend Alice to dine with her on this holiday?"

"It wasn't that. The fact is it's embarrassing to sit at a table of normal people if someone has to feed you. I'd rather eat here at Pleasant Oaks where at least they have a whole table of people like me."

"Understandable." He stroked his beard. "Fortunate you have that option, isn't it?"

"I know where you're going with that," I said with a smirk. "Don't try using the Socratic method on me, Buster. I taught that stuff before I had my accident. I know who comes out on top in those dialogues."

"Time for breakfast, Miss Quinn." Bini, my favorite nurse's aide sailed in like a spring breeze and fastened my electrolarynx around my neck. "How are you this fine morning?"

"Miss B'Neesha Brown," I droned in the robot voice of my electrolarynx. "Did you. Change your hair?" Usually, her dreads hung in her face, but today she looked different.

"It's getting a little long, so I decided to pull it back with a scarf." She smiled as she got me dressed. Bini has a smile that will scar you eye tissue if you look directly at it.

"Nice color," I observed. "Peach is a good. Color for you." I've learned to be polite to people, but dispositionally I have a problem with Miss Bini Brown. Such a Pollyanna. Way over the top. But I guess that's what they want in a place like this: people who can look at some old half-dead cripple and say, "Why, Mrs. Picklehouse, don't you look adorable today! I love your new smock with those cute monkeys." That's Bini. She can do that.

"Well thank you, Miss Quinn." She lifted me out of bed and strapped me into my wheelchair. Then she crossed my arms on my lap as if I had put them that way. "I can't wait to hear about your day at the farm yesterday!" she bubbled. "Did you have a good time?"

"It was alright. If you enjoy. Riding around. In a cart. Staring at. The rear end. Of a horse."

"Oh, Miss Quinn, you're so ungrateful." Bini wheeled me down the hall to the dining room, doing little scallops and spins as if we were dancing. "Wasn't it fun to get out in the country, and feel that fresh air, and see your beautiful horse?"

"You seem especially. Effervescent this morning," I said, as she grabbed a flower from a vase at the nurse's station and stuck it in my hair.

"I'll tell you a secret," she whispered, "if you promise to be happy for me."

"Ok. I promise."

"I moved in with Carlos, so I won't have to work double shifts anymore." She wheeled me to the assist-table and tied a bib around my neck. "Remember your promise."

"That was sneaky." I narrowed my eyes, watching her hum a tune as she tied bibs on the other people at the assist-table. She knows I don't approve of Carlos. I'm sure he's a mercy killer, but no one will believe me, especially Bini.

“It’s amazing what a good night’s sleep with a wonderful man, will do for your disposition.” She beamed her blazing smile at me.

Not having sunglasses, I scowled and looked away. “If your attitude. Gets any more elevated. We’ll have to. Tie a string. Around your ankle. To keep you. From floating off.”

“Hark! What light through yonder window breaks?” My friend Miles made his usual grand entrance and advanced toward my table wearing a blue, velveteen doublet and a hat with a plume. “Tis the east and Miss Quinn is the sun. Speak fair sun and tell us of your grand equestrian adventure.” Old actors never die; they just turn their nursing home into a stage.

“Oh, yes!” Lorelei and Doris, sitting at the next table clapped their hands, Lorelei’s bracelets jingling on her arm. Lorelei had little green bows sprinkled through her white hair and wore a bright orange muumuu that made her look like a giant pumpkin. “Let’s hear about your trip!”

In stark contrast Doris wore a modest beige pantsuit and stylish square glasses with dark red frames. Doris used to sit at the assist-table, but she graduated. She’s going home soon, so she has a lot to be happy about, but no one else does. Yet, here they are, all laughing and smiling like they’re on a cruise to Jamaica.

What is with these people? I know the answer. Between the two of them, Bini and Miles have managed to infect the entire long-term wing of Pleasant Oaks with a toxic level of good cheer. Well, that and the communal dose of antidepressants.

“I’m busy eating,” I said.

“Good,” said old Howard, who sat next to Lorelei. “Horses, shmorses.”

I watched him stare at his eggs, no doubt developing a strategy to transport them to his mouth. His whole body trembled periodically as if he were receiving jolts of electrical current. He’ll be at the assist-table soon.

Miles grasped his plush velvet hat with the plume and pressed it to his chest. “In my younger days I would have dropped to my knees for this,” he mumbled to Lorelei, who giggled. “Ah, fair lady, wouldst thou grace us with the tale of thy wondrous quest? Our unworthy ears do long for the music of thy voice.”

“He’s not giving up, Miss Quinn,” said Bini.

“Ok! Fine! I had a *super swell* time! I got to watch. The halfwit riders. Practice for the. Stupid steeplechase meet. It was stinking. Awesome. Ok?”

Why couldn’t they just let me forget about it? A year ago, I broke my neck practicing for that very steeplechase meet and ended any possibility of a normal life forever. Totally paralyzed at 32 years of age. Why didn’t Alice

think about that when she invited me to the farm? I didn't need to be reminded of that.

"I feel. Sick, Bini," I said. "Could you. Take me. To my room?"

"I'll take her." Carlos walked up and squeezed my shoulders. "Is it bad? You need a barf bag?" He untied my bibb, looking dreadfully worried.

"No. Just a little. Nauseated. I'd like to. Get away from. The smell of food."

He nodded and wheeled me toward the door.

"Sure hope you feel better, Miss Quinn," Bini called out, causing everyone in the room to gawk at me. Well, let them stare. I need some time to myself. There's no privacy in this place. At least I can be alone while everyone else is eating.

"What are you. Doing here. At breakfast?" I asked Carlos as he wheeled me down the hall.

"I traded shifts with Harvey so I could be on days for a change."

"Aha. So you can. Sleep all night. With your new. Roommate, Bini."

I noticed a pause in his gait. "Wow. So, she told you about that, huh?"

"Bini and I. Are very close."

Carlos said nothing. Just wheeled me into my room and over by my bed. "You want to sit here by the window? I could open it a little for some fresh air."

"Yes, please." I gazed out at the banana tree and the fluffy Florida clouds.

"Is there anything else I can do for you? Something for your stomach?"

"I'm fine. Thanks." I watched him open the window, his face solemn. Carlos never smiled—at least not at work—at least not in my presence.

He looked at me with his eyebrows pinched together. "How did she sound?"

"Excuse me?"

"Bini. When she told you she moved in with me? How did she sound?"

How old was Carlos? He had to be twenty-five, but he looked like a little boy; those big black eyes imploring me to say what he wanted to hear.

"Deliriously happy," I said, rolling my eyes only a little.

He looked at the floor. Wait. Was that a smile?

"Um, would you like some water?"

"No, thanks. Just some. Alone time."

He glanced at me and nodded. "I'll check on you in a while," he said and dashed away.

Could I have been wrong about Carlos's murderous tendencies? He looked so sweet and shy, standing there gazing at his shoes. I have to admit my evidence against him might possibly be flimsy.

"Possibly flimsy!" Clarence Darrow appeared on my windowsill, a lawbook in his hand. "It's entirely nonexistent and inherently imaginary."

"He put something in my roommate's I-V bag the night she died. I saw him as clear as day."

"And right now, you are seeing me as clear as day, too, aren't you?" He peered at me over his half-glasses. "I look very real, don't I?"

"Ok. I get your point. But I'm telling you. I know the difference." It was very disconcerting. Could I be making a mistake?

He stuck his ugly face an inch from my nose. "How can you be so sure?"

"I can't explain. How I know. But I can tell." Actually, I wasn't sure anymore. Could I tell the difference between my visions and reality? I thought I could. Damn that Clarence Darrow.

"And you're willing to convict a man on testimony like that?" He shook his finger in my face. "I'd hate to have you on a jury."

"Oh, yeah? Well, you're not. Even real. Why don't. You disappear!"

"Hi Quinn. Who are you talking to?" My sister Paige walked to the window looking like a fashion model as always. Crap! Was I talking out loud to my visions now? That was a risky new development. And was that Paige or another vision? Oh, this was getting bad.

She looked at me with great suspicion and then glanced out the window. "Were you just arguing with the banana tree?"

"Of course not. Um. Just practicing. My electrolarynx." How long had she been standing in back of me? How long had I been arguing out loud? Damn that Clarence Darrow. "I like to keep. In practice. You know?"

Her eyes narrowed; then she smiled her selfie smile. "I'm so happy you've gotten used to it," she said as if she were placating a psychotic.

"Remember how resistant you were at first? I couldn't even get you to try it." She laughed and flipped her golden hair over her shoulder like someone in a shampoo commercial. "And now look at you! It's second nature!" She bent over to give me an air kiss. She smelled like something expensive, frankincense, maybe, with a hint of sulfur. This was no vision. This was the real Paige. What was she doing here after all this time?

"What brings you. To Pleasant Oaks?" I hadn't seen her in months. Not since our last big argument.

"Well, can't someone check on her only sister? I wondered how you're doing. If you need anything." She got up and closed the curtain that divided the

room. Then she trotted over on her six-inch heels and put her hand on my shoulder. "So how are you doing," she repeated.

I wondered why she did that, with the curtain. "I'm ok," I said. Was I ok? What did that even mean? Compared to what? Being fully functional? Or minimally functional? Or dead?

"Are you happy here, Quinn?" She looked at me like a puppy. Or maybe a lemur.

Was that a trick question? Did something of consequence hang on the answer? "I'm as happy here. As I can be. Anywhere. Given my.Circumstances," I said. How's that for evasion? "How are *you* doing. Paige? Are *you* happy? How's your job?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm getting married soon and moving to Arizona."

"Arizona! Woot! Congratulations!" I couldn't help feeling how appropriate it would be if the geographical distance between us matched the psychological one. Thousands of miles away. No more popping in unannounced. "Who's the lucky guy? Anyone I know?"

"No, I met him at a conference a couple years ago. We've been doing the long-distance thing; and last week I got a chance to transfer to our Phoenix office, so I took it."

"I'm so happy. For you, Paige. That's wonderful." I actually meant that.

"And here's the bonus. We found a fabulous facility for you, that's just minutes from Dustin's house. It's absolutely ravishing and you can even have your own single room."

"What?" Whoa, whoa, whoa! Let's slow this way down!

"We can't get you in right away because we have to wait for a Medicaid bed to come open, of course; but we put you on the waiting list and as soon as a bed opens up, we'll fly you right out there!"

"What if. I don't want. To go. To Arizona? I like it. Here. In Orlando."

"Oh, Quinn. You're always so resistant to change. It will be impossible for me to take care of you long distance. It's not feasible for you to stay here."

"I'm very. Self-sufficient. Here at. Pleasant Oaks. I..."

"It may *seem* that way, but I'm the one doing all the paperwork. I'm the one they have to call if they need to do anything or if there's an emergency. I'm the one who gives permission. I'm your only family, Quinn. Since Mom and Dad died, nobody else is in Florida."

"Well, not nobody. There are a few. Other people here."

"I meant family. I'm all you've got, Quinn, and I can't handle it from all the way across the country. I know you'll love it once you get there; and Dustin can't wait to meet you. Gotta run, Sweetie, but I'll be back in a few days. I'll bring pictures so you can see how amazing it is."

She shot another glance of deep suspicion in my direction. Then she smiled, blew me another air kiss, and pulled open the curtain.

There in the doorway were Lorelei and Miles, looking like they were going to cry. Just what I needed to convince my sister of the quality of this establishment: a visit from the Great Pumpkin and the Prince of Persia.

"Well! The gang's all here," said Paige, her smile fraying at the edges.

"We came to check on Quinn," said Miles. "She was a little peaked at breakfast."

"Oh? She seems better now." Paige edged out the door, eyeing the three of us like we might be dangerous. "Nice to see you all."

Lorelei wheeled up to me and grabbed my hand from my lap. "Oh, mah sweet girl! You can't go away and leave us, honey. Ah'd miss you so much. And you won't know anybody there."

"It doesn't. Look like. I have a choice," I said, angry tears welling in my eyes. "Brunhilda. Is in charge. Of my affairs."

"We'll figure out something," said Miles. "She can't force you to go to Arizona."

If only that were true. I sighed. "Don't you two. Have to go. To choir practice?"

Miles checked his watch. "Come with us."

"Like I'm. Going to. Sing," I snorted.

"You can do an electrolarynx bass." Miles wiggled his eyebrows.

"Go on. I'll see. You later." I shook my head. I couldn't bear the thought of leaving. I'd never find another pair of zany crackpots like that. They were the ones who pulled me out of my depression and made me want to live again. They saved my life.

No sooner had they left when Bini and my roommate Doris walked in and waved at me. I nodded and gazed out the window, thinking about my damn sister. She actually thought doing what was easiest for her was best for me. And she didn't seem open to argument. She had all the power. All I could do was try to talk her out of it. But how? Damn dictator.

"You need anything, Miss Doris?" Bini said. "Can I help you pack?"

"I don't have m-much," said Doris. "M-m-my husband took m-most of my things home yesterday, but I'm s-s-so glad you came by, Bini. I w-w-want you to have m-my laptop. I'm getting a n-new one and you can use this to t-take on-line courses. Don't ever give up your d-dream, Bini."

"Oh, Miss Doris, I'm gonna miss you." Big Bini threw her arms around Doris and almost tipped her over. "You're my inspiration."

“I’m going to m-miss you too, Bini.” Doris had tears in her eyes and so did I. “You’re like the d-daughter I always w-wanted. I’ll come to visit often. S-s-so, you haven’t s-s-seen the last of m-m-me. I’ll be back,” she declared, imitating Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Her husband appeared at the door and laughed at her joke. We all laughed. Doris always laughed at everything, especially herself. It irritated the heck out of me at first. I used to call her dimwit Doris (not out loud, of course) because she sounded so stupid learning to talk after her stroke and cackling like a Guinea hen at every little thing. But she overcame a lot, I have to admit. She gave Bini and me her card with her number on it. Tomorrow she’d be gone, and I’d get a new roommate. That’s how it works around here.

The next day Nurse Harper informed me that my doctor had changed my anti-depressant medication. “This one is milder and shouldn’t have those side effects you’ve been experiencing.”

“Side-effects?” So, my damned, despotic sister didn’t think I was crazy. She thought I was overmedicated. If only I could find a way to wring her scrawny neck. What business was it of hers? All my beautiful visions. Half my world—erased! Just like that. For one slip-up. It’s not like my visions were hostile. They were extremely helpful to me. At this point I not only did not want to go to Arizona, I didn’t even want to be in the same country with Attila the Hun. And she actually believed she was doing what was best for me. I had to fight it. But how?

The next day my new roommate got wheeled in on a stretcher. This one is on life support and has no visible functions. Why would they put someone like that with me? It’s so depressing. She has visitors, though. Soon after she arrived a young man, probably her son, came in and asked Bini to get her up. Bini lifted her out of bed and put her in a chair. The poor woman sat there staring at the floor while her son talked to her as if she could register anything he was saying. After a while he called Bini and left. Bini put her back in bed and reattached her I-Vs.

“Want me to wheel you somewhere?” she asked.

“No thanks. Miles is coming. In a few minutes.”

After she left, another visitor came. He had rosy, pink cheeks and a Bible in his hand.

“Hello, I’m Father Steve,” he said. “I’m the Pastor of the Baptist Church up on Asbury.”

“Hi, I’m Quinn,” I said. “What happened. To her?”

“Profound stroke. Her brain is basically gone, poor thing.” He walked to her side and took her hand. “She was such a fine woman. I’m so sorry, Jenny.” He shook his head, gazing at her. “If I ever get that close to heaven, I sure hope my folks will let me go the rest of the way.”

Talk about stunned. I never expected that to come out of his mouth. “Um, you mean. The feeding tubes?”

“I don’t blame them, of course.” He smiled at me. “It’s an excruciating decision. And most folks feel that removing the tubes is like starving their loved one to death. It isn’t really, but it feels that way. So, lots of people can’t do it.”

I nodded. “So close. To heaven. But tethered. To earth. By loved ones. Who can’t let go.”

He looked back down at her. “I’ll pray for you, Jenny.” Then he turned to go. “It was nice to meet you, Miss um Quinn. I’ll probably see you again.”

I thought about it after he left. So close to heaven. Maybe she was already in heaven. Why do we keep someone’s body alive when her soul is gone? When there’s no hope of recovery? My new roommate was a shell, a living shell. A body kept alive by tubes if you call that being alive. Oh, this was going to be so depressing. What could I do?

I brought it up at lunch and Bini was sympathetic. “They just put people wherever they have a bed. There’s no plan. You could ask Mrs. Havelock to move you,” she suggested. “But you need a place to go. That’s the catch.”

“Why don’t you move in with me?” Lorelei clapped her hands. “Mah roommate is so sick Ah’m always afraid Ah might disturb her. Ah’d love to share mah room with you.”

“Perfect,” said Bini. “Just tell Mrs. Havelock you wanna switch.”

“Sounds good. To me,” I said. “We’ll go. Right away.”

“I’ll go with you, ladies,” said Miles.

So, after lunch we set off to face the formidable director of Pleasant Oaks. Everyone was afraid of Mrs. Havelock. She was a large, stern woman with a perpetual scowl, who looked like a mean school principal. At least that’s how I remembered my school principal. No one wanted to get sent to the principal’s office.

It was Mrs. Havelock who confiscated old Howard’s power chair when he ran over Mrs. Benson. It was Mrs. Havelock who banished Mr. Worthington to the memory care wing after he skipped down the hall in his birthday suit sprinkling his urinal bottle about like spring rain. And here we were: the scarecrow, the robot woman, and the cowardly lion approaching the

great and powerful Mrs. Havelock without an appointment. Miles knocked on the door.

“What’s the worst that can happen?” He shrugged. “She’ll say no.”

“Come in,” she said.

I could see Lorelei trembling in her chair. Mrs. Havelock looked up at us with surprise as we entered. I don’t think residents came to visit her. Ever. She gazed at us over her wire rimmed glasses with her eyebrows pinched together. “Well?” Her mouth was a hard, straight line.

“Um, these two lovely ladies have a proposal to make about their rooms,” said Miles.

“Oh?” She shifted her icy gaze from Miles to me.

“I’d like to. Trade rooms with. Lorelei’s roommate. Mrs. Coleman. So Lorelei and I. Can share her room,” I said. “That is. We want to trade. Bed 14B. With bed 10B.”

She raised her eyebrows, perhaps startled at the sound of my robotic voice. “How does Mrs. Coleman feel about that?”

“Mrs. Coleman is. Barely conscious. So, she probably. Doesn’t know. Which room she’s in. Let alone care. Which room. She’s in,” I said. “And the same. Is true Of my. Roommate. Which is. Frankly, depressing.”

“So, in the interest of raising morale, a simple move would make both Quinn and Lorelei happy, at no cost to the facility,” Miles chimed in, oozing charm.

She gave him a withering stare. “And who are you, exactly?”

“Oh. I’m just Miss Quinn’s chauffeur.” Miles chuckled and demonstrated by wheeling me in my chair back and forth a bit.

“I see.”

“So, in terms of. Cost-benefit analysis,” I added to get back on track. “You can make. Two people happy. And no one. Unhappy. It should be. A no-brainer.”

Her eyes narrowed. That was probably not the best way to phrase our request. Dang it.

“I’ll take it under advisement.” She looked back down at her paperwork. “Thank you.”

We all stood there for a moment in suspended animation, but she didn’t look up. We glanced at each other. Miles shrugged, opened the door, and wheeled me out after Lorelei.

“Brrr,” he said. “I have the distinct impression that the esteemed Mrs. Havelock does not want to encourage residents to come knocking on her door with requests.”

I nodded. “I shouldn’t. Have mentioned. Cost-benefit analysis. I should have. Just brought. Her the broom. Of the wicked witch. Of the west.”

“Well, I’m not afraid of her,” Miles declared. “She has no reason not to grant your request. I’ll check back in a couple days. I can become a squeaky wheel if the need arises.”

“Mah Lord, mah Lord!” Lorelei fanned herself. “She convinced me not to come back.”

A week or so later Bini packed up my few possessions and moved me to 10B. Just like that. Good old Miles. It took less than an hour. If only my problem with my sister could be solved so easily. I just didn’t know what to do about it. She *is* my only relative and she has been in charge of my medical care, and my whole life, for that matter, ever since the accident last year. But it’s not like she comes to visit. We’re not close. How much paperwork can there be? And why can’t she do it from Arizona? First, she takes away my visions; now she’s taking me away from my friends. And I can’t figure out how to stop her.

Zinnia, our activities director, has started setting out pumpkins, gourds, pilgrim figurines, and cornucopias on all flat surfaces, including individual rooms. Chrysanthemums appeared on the porch and the nurse’s stations. The whole facility smells like pumpkin pie, a scent that has the virtue of being strong enough to cover Pine-sol. Our Zinnia loves holidays.

She came by to ask if I wanted my room decorated. I declined initially, but Lorelei convinced me to get in the spirit. So now I have two little pumpkins and a cornucopia on my windowsill—instead of visions. It’s a poor substitute, and it makes me sad to look at it.

Why is it that all the nice things people do now make me sad? Lorelei’s sweet giggle makes me sad. Miles’s zany costumes make me sad. Zinnia’s decorations make me sad because I know I’m going to have to leave them. How did I get so attached to this place when six months ago I hated it? Well, I hated everything then. I wanted to die. And now that crazy Miles and bubbling Bini and lovely Lorelei have coaxed me into a life worth living, my sister’s going to yank me out of it. Of course, she is. Life stinks. Goodness never lasts. I think Kafka said that—or maybe Poe.

Very soon Thanksgiving arrived and proceeded exactly as I predicted. It was a huge, extravagant feast, plates piled high with more than any rational person should ever eat in one sitting. Baked ham, turkey with dressing (two kinds), mashed potatoes with giblet gravy, three kinds of Jell-O salad (red, green, and orange), two different versions of cranberry sauce, sweet potato

casserole, cauliflower with cheese, green bean casserole, two kinds of corn relish, biscuits (only one kind) and three different pies (pumpkin, apple, and mince) with ice cream (vanilla only.)

Mrs. Abernathy led us in a thankful prayer, after which the floor was open to any who felt called to express their gratitude for their many blessings. And what do you suppose they were thankful for? The simple things, of course. I could have recited it for them. "I'm thankful for our beautiful old oak trees out front." "I'm thankful for our wonderful Florida sunshine." "I'm thankful for my awesome family here at Pleasant Oaks." Blah. Blah. Blah. It's a big room. I felt sorry for the poor folks down the line. It gets hard to think up original things to be thankful for. How much is there? Birds, clouds, Spanish moss, grass, flowers—hey, flowers can be individuated: daisies, chrysanthemums, azaleas, bougainvillea, carnations, pampas grass, poinsettias, our wonderful chef.... Disney World....

"What are you thankful for, Miss Quinn?" someone asked.

"I'm thankful. We only. Have to do this. Once a year."

"Oh, boo. Always the wet blanket."

"How about you. Howard? What are. You thankful for?"

I thought he'd say, "Gratitude, Shmatitude." He and I are the local cynics.

"I'm thankful for my lovely Lorelei," he said, his eyes moist with emotion. "Sweetest woman I ever met."

Who'd a thunk it? At the ripe old age of 93, grizzly, old Howard fell in love and went soft. I had to admit, that was kind of sweet. I looked over at Bini and Carlos trying to hold hands without anyone noticing. You'd think it was Valentine's Day instead of Thanksgiving. Little Cupid got confused. How was I supposed to maintain my jaded attitude? I know—I'll just think of my sister—Princess Paige the Potentate. That'll keep me properly soured.

Miles rose to his feet in a pilgrim costume to recite a gratuitously long poem relating our largely fictional legend of the first Thanksgiving. Miles never missed an opportunity to perform. It's surprising he could stand up after the meal we all ate. I, for one, was ready for a nap. I noticed several others nodding off during his recitation. Old Howard and Group Leader George engaged in a serious snoring contest. I was rooting for Howard since George had held the title for a long time. It was close; it might have been a tie.

The next day Zinnia collected all the pumpkins and cornucopias. Soon she replaced the pumpkin pie infusers with cinnamon ones and decked the halls with boughs of fake but festive holly embedded with twinkling lights. She strung these garlands along the nurses' stations and other counters, around

windows and doorways, and wound them up the posts of the front porch. She hung wreaths on doors and installed a family of inflatable snowmen on the front lawn. All true Floridians (most of whom were transplanted from northern states) make up for the lack of snow with legions of plastic decorations and multiple ropes of colored lights. The warmer the climate, the more garish the decorations. Anyone would think Jesus was born in Minnesota. 'Tis the season to be jolly, but I for one, felt stressed out. Miles said not to worry. It could take a year to get a medicaid bed. There were always long waiting lists, he said. But what if he was wrong. How could I convince my sister to let me stay here? No matter how hard I tried I couldn't think of any good arguments. I needed my visions to advise me, and my stupid sister had nixed that forever.

"Time for your Turkish bath, Miss Quinn." Bini floated into my room, as usual and said the same thing she said every day. "It's spa time." Since she spent half her time bathing people, maybe it made her feel good to pretend she worked in a spa. Or maybe she wanted us to feel like we were living at a spa. She sniffled a little as she wheeled me into the bathroom.

"Do you have a cold?" I asked.

"No, no, I'm fine." That was all she said. She got me undressed and gave me my shower without a word. She smiled whenever I looked at her, but that was it. She usually sang.

"So, how are you doing?" I asked when she dressed me and put my electrolarynx back on.

"Oh, fine," she said. I waited but that was it. Just kept that pasted on smile. Not Bini's smile. Who are you, lady, and what have you done with bubbling Bini?

"How are things. Going with Carlos?" I prodded, as she wheeled me back into my room.

She puckered a little at that. "Not too good."

"I knew it. What happened?"

"I don't want to burden you with my troubles," she said as she put on my shoes.

"Come on. We're friends, You can tell me."

"Oh, Miss Quinn. Carlos is so bossy." She started combing my hair. "I don't know if I can stand it. He's always telling me what to do. We had a big fight this morning."

"So much for. That honeymoon."

"He's worse than my granny. At least she didn't tell me to get rid of my car."

“He thinks you. Should get rid. Of your car?”

“He thinks it’s impractical.” Her combing got a little rougher.

“And is it?”

“I’m not getting rid of Thor.” She plopped on my bed and crossed her arms decisively. “I don’t care what anybody says.”

“Thor? Your car’s name is Thor? What does. Thor look like?”

“He’s a ruby red 2014 Charger with black detailing, an awesome stereo, and a GPS that sounds like Chris Hemsworth,” she said, her head held high.

“No wonder. Carlos is jealous.”

“That’s what I think.” She leaned forward. “He’s jealous. It’s just an excuse to call it impractical.”

“Is Thor paid off?”

“Well, no.” She scowled and returned to the task of combing and braiding my hair.

“How much. Is your payment?”

“Um...”

“Bini?”

“Four hundred a month,” she mumbled as she finished my braid.

“Yikes!”

She started making my bed as if it required physical force to subdue it. “Granny never objected.”

“Did you pay. Any bills. When you. Lived with. Granny?”

“Well, no.” She shook my pillows out of their cases like she really meant it.

“And now Carlos. Wants you to. Split the bills?”

“Not exactly.” She put the pillows in new cases with extreme concentration.

“What does he. Want, then?”

She sighed and checked my water pitcher. “He wants me to go to school.”

“Oh...which is exactly. What you, yourself. Always said. You wanted. He wants you. To follow. Your dream.”

She plopped on my bed with a pout. “I can go to school after I pay off Thor.”

“When will that be?”

“In four years.” She stared at her shoes.

“And Carlos doesn’t. Like that idea?”

“He thinks Thor’s unreliable.” She jumped up and paced around me, waving her arms like a wounded goose. “He said I should give him back before

the transmission goes out. He wants me to drive some ugly, old junker that he can buy cheap and keep running for me. He thinks Thor's gonna die on me."

"And you don't. Believe him?"

She scowled and looked at me with tears in her eyes. "Thor's an awesome superhero. Carlos is just jealous."

"I'm sorry. You're having such. A problem, Bini."

"I feel like a queen when I'm driving Thor. And now Carlos doesn't even want me to drive to work." She plumped up my pillows as if they were punching bags. "He says we should ride together and save gas."

"That does make sense," I said. "Maybe you can. Make a deal. To drive Thor. Every other day. Relationships. Require compromise."

"Oh. That's a good idea," she said as Lorelei came in the door. "Thanks for listening,"

After Bini left, I thought about what I could do. Probably nothing. She was going to make her own mistakes, like we all do. I related my conversation to Lorelei, who agreed.

"Maybe we should call Doris," she said. "If anyone can reason with Bini, it's Doris."

"Good idea. She left me. Her card. On the cabinet."

Lorelei found the card. "Ah didn't realize Doris was an attorney."

"Really?"

"It says 'Doris Carmichael, attorney at law'." She showed me the card.

"How about that. She never. Mentioned it." Dimwit Doris was an attorney?

Lorelei dialed the number and put her phone on speaker. We told Doris about Bini's infatuation with her very expensive car, and Doris said she'd come and talk to her next week.

Two days later my sister showed up, with pictures. I was sitting in the common room watching Zinnia and Carlos set up an eight-foot Christmas tree. It came in three pieces and already had its lights embedded in its branches.

Paige had on a short, gold tunic over high-waisted, white skinny pants and of course her six-inch heels, on her way to a Christmas party. That's Paige. She was always on her way to somewhere else—somewhere more important.

"I can only stay a minute, Sweetie," she said. "But I wanted you to see how incredibly Gucci this place is!" She pulled up a chair beside me with her tablet on her lap. When had she started calling me Sweetie? Had she been

doing that all along? Did she call everyone Sweetie, or just me? She certainly didn't do it before the accident. I would have belted her.

"Look here," she said. "Aren't the grounds magnifique? And this is the new wing."

"I want. To talk to you. About this, Paige," I said. "I don't want to go. To Arizona. And I don't understand. Why it's. A problem."

"But I told you, Sweetie, it's the paperwork," she glanced at me. "Just look at these rooms! Are they gorgeous, or what! Can you believe these are Medicaid rooms? They really know how to do things right in Arizona."

"But Paige..."

"And since they opened this new wing, they can take you next month. It's all set!"

"I don't. Want to. Go!"

"It's all arranged, Sweetie. I already booked your flight. You'll get to come to the wedding." She smiled her baby lemur smile. "I want you to be one of my bridesmaids. Don't you want to be in my wedding?"

What was I supposed to say? No? I closed my eyes and took a breath.

She patted my shoulder. "It'll be awesome. It'll be totally rad. I have to run, but here's their brochure, so you can read about it." She blew me an air kiss and disappeared. Poof!

I sat there looking at the Christmas tree, all put together now. Zinnia plugged it in and sure enough, it twinkled.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGHHHHHH!!!!" I screamed. I sounded like a flugelhorn. Zinnia and Carlos both ran to my side. "Just testing my. Electrolarynx," I muttered.

"Are—are you sure you're ok?" asked Carlos. "Want some water?"

I stared at him with narrowed eyes. "I want. To put. A hit. On my sister." I nodded my head toward the door. "The one in. The sparkly top."

Carlos squeezed his eyebrows together and blinked several times. He glanced at Zinnia as if she might have some idea what I was talking about.

"See that. Brochure?" I said.

Zinnia nodded and picked it up.

"I want you. To *burn* it."

"Burn it?" It was Zinnia's turn to blink rapidly. "Can't I just tear it up and throw it away?"

"Ok but. I want you. To do it *angrily*. I want you. To *rip* that thing. To bits. Totally shred it. And scowl. And stomp on it. A few times."

Zinnia tried but she couldn't do it without laughing. She's such a little pixie, she looked like Rumpelstiltskin having a seizure.

“Oh, Zinnia. You don’t know. What it’s like. I want to. Kick my feet. And pound my fists. I want to grab. That vase. And smash it. On the floor. But I can’t. Do anything. I would. Bang my head. On the wall. If I could. Ever get close. To a wall. I’m so angry. Yahhh!!!”

“That must be hard,” she said.

“I love this place. Zinnia. It’s my home now. The people here. Made me. Want to. Live again. I don’t want. To go to some. Other place. And I can’t make. My sister. Understand that. A month! Aghhh!! She’s flying me. To Arizona. In a month. What am I. Going to do?”

A week later, as promised, Doris came to Pleasant Oaks. She took Bini out for lunch. When they returned, Bini flew up to the porch from the parking lot, far ahead of Doris, a thunderous scowl on her face. She saw me on the porch with Lorelei and marched up to me like a disappointed child.

“Miss Quinn, I cannot believe you called Miss Doris to come and talk to me about my private business,” she said. “Our conversation was confidential. I thought I could trust you. But I won’t make that mistake again!”

She turned and stomped into the building. I closed my eyes and sighed. Then I burst into tears. It wasn’t the tiff with Bini, really. It was the looming deadline for my involuntary departure.

“Oh, Doris,” I whimpered. “Everything is. Going wrong. Lately.”

“Bini won’t s-stay angry.” Doris sat next to me and picked up my hand. “It’s n-n-not in her n-n-n-nature. Just give her s-s-some time.”

“I don’t have. Any time.”

“Her sister’s movin’ to Arizona next month and takin’ Miss Quinn with her,” said Lorelei.

“And she won’t. Listen to me. So there’s. Nothing. I can do,” I blurted.

“You can challenge her m-medical Power Of Attorney,” said Doris. “It’s obvious that you’re c-competent to m-m-make your own decisions n-now.”

“What?”

“Of course, she w-w-was in charge of your affairs after the accident. You w-w-were in a coma and then unable to communicate for m-months. But n-n-not n-now. You can challenge her authority and rescind her POA. You’re entitled to m-make your own decisions if you can.”

“How? How do. I do that?”

“I can f-file the papers for you. You’ll have to appear before a competency b-board, but the p-p-presumption is in your favor, n-n-not hers.” Doris raised her palm and smiled, her stylish glasses with the dark red frames glinting in the sunlight.

I couldn't believe I used to call her dimwit Doris. Back when she was learning how to talk and walk and use her hands, after her horrible stroke. No one thought she'd pull out of that. What a remarkable woman. And I gave her no credit at all. None.

"Doris, I'm. Overwhelmed. I don't have. Any money, but..."

"I'll c-consider it *pro bono* w-w-work," she said with a laugh.

My head was spinning. After more than a year of being totally incapacitated, having every movement, every breath determined by someone else, I was going to be in charge of my own life? And my attorney, the honorable Doris Carmichael, would see to it that my rights were respected? It was almost like being human again. But could it really be that simple? What if Doris was wrong? What if it took months to get a hearing? I was getting moved in three weeks! What if my sister objected? What if she appealed? Could she appeal?

Within a week Doris filed the papers, set up a meeting with the competency board, and notified my sister. Just like that. One week. On the appointed day Paige marched into the meeting room on her six-inch heels, wearing a surprisingly conservative business suit. She scowled but said nothing as the psychiatrist asked me questions that he had already asked me in private.

He started out asking me things like: Do you know who you are? What year is it? Who's the President? Apparently, competency is a fairly low bar. Then he shifted to matters we had discussed in our previous meeting.

Was it true that I was in the book club? It was. Was it true that I had started teaching a course in the humanities for the residents of Pleasant Oaks?

"It is," I said. "We are. Currently discussing. Plato's Dialogues."

The psychiatrist recommended that my sister's POA be revoked. The head of the board asked my sister if she had any objections. I held my breath.

"Only one," she said, and I steeled myself for the fight. She was on my turf now. I had rights. I had an attorney. She was not going to tell me what to do ever again.

"What if something should happen," she said, "some emergency? When you fill out that form for an emergency contact, whose name will go there? It can't be mine if I'm in Arizona."

Damn. What a reasonable point.

"That's a g-g-good question," said Doris. "But it d-doesn't go to competency. It just makes Quinn like all of us. I w-w-will be her emergency c-contact until she m-makes other arrangements."

“Alice,” I mumbled. “I’ll ask Alice.”

My sister smiled. “In that case, I’m delighted that Quinn can take care of herself. I just want to know that she’s safe.”

What a letdown. I was all geared up for a fight! But of course, she has her own life to live. It’s not like I have a trust fund or something. She had nothing to gain. Taking care of me just used up her precious time. No wonder she was always in such a hurry. She’s happy to get rid of me.

She turned to me with her baby lemur eyes and took my hand. “I do hope you’ll still come to my wedding. I really want you to be there. You’re my only relative, Quinn. We’re all we’ve got.”

Geez Louise. Could I be any worse judge of character? First it’s dimwit Doris. Then tyrannical Paige. In fact, she did everything for me. She got me in Pleasant Oaks. She got me the electrolarynx. If she hadn’t found me that electrolarynx, I wouldn’t be able to communicate my competence. I’d still be lying in my bed staring at the ceiling in angry silence.

“Thank you for all. You’ve done, Paige,” I said, long overdue. “Of course, I’ll come.”

“Who knows. Maybe you’ll like Arizona, and decide to stay.” She smiled her selfie smile and gave me an air kiss.

I nodded. It was a prospect I couldn’t imagine, but I didn’t say anything snarky. I didn’t even think anything snarky. People’s recent goodness was punching big holes in my picture of reality.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PG Smith is a retired philosophy professor with multiple academic books and articles to their name, in addition to their fiction writing.