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A Child of the World

Gail Semeca

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A CHILD OF THE WORLD

I was not born for one quarter; the whole world is my native land.

—Lucius Annaeus Seneca

By day's end, the ward stank of sweat and disinfectant. Mrs. Fernandez tossed and moaned in her bed just inches from mine; Crazy Mary wandered the floor, spewing threats and accusations. SnORES, raspy breaths and cries of pain pierced the rank air. Nine patients in the ward, all of us critically ill. Awake in the gathering dusk at Coney Island Hospital, I longed to be somewhere else. Anywhere else.

Closing my eyes, I heard the crunch of metal against metal in the car crash. I felt warm blood dripping down my face. I saw Dad storming the emergency room, the broken capillaries on his nose purple with rage. Morphine dreams. Words, images and sensations jumbled together in a kaleidoscope that wouldn't stop spinning. What was real? Not this ward, I hoped, with its drab green walls and creaking doors. Not this bed, where I lay on my back, unable to move. Not now, when I was just fifteen years old.

In the morning, an aide hoisted me onto a bed pan. Dutifully, I shat. Then I waited. Two hours with my hips on the metal rim before someone took the bed pan away. I sipped sugary sweet juice from the straw the Candy Striper poked between my lips and felt my tongue go fuzzy. I watched the lunch tray come and go, untouched, because I had no use of my hands. Paralyzed from the neck down, maybe forever, they said, definitely for now. I waited minute by minute, hour by hour, to be rescued.

Dozing again, dreaming of riding the waves at Jones Beach, I heard a motorboat so loud and close I went cold with fear. My eyes snapped open. Not a motorboat, not the beach. I was in bed, on the ward. A hydraulic drill? Why? Where? I floated my eyes up to the space behind my head and saw a dark face peering down at me through the din. "Bonjour," it said, white teeth flashing. "I am Dr. Basin. De Haiti." His eyes were bloodshot and a jagged scar descended from his forehead to his jaw.

The drill banged like a jackhammer, metal against bone, unceasing, penetrating my brain. "Stop!" I screamed. "What are you doing?"

"We must drill holes in the skull," he said, in heavily accented English. "For the tongs."

My lips went cold. "Morphine," I pleaded.

Dr. Basin raised his hairy eyebrow and exchanged the drill for a shiny steel instrument with two dagger sharp points. "Attende," he said. Wait, I understood. My high school French had taught me that much. But my French teacher was a pale Parisian woman, not a dark man wielding instruments of torture. French sounded wrong in his mouth.

"Please!" I whimpered. But Dr. Basin worked steadily until my neck stretched backward and a crushing weight pinned the back of my head to the pillow. I faced the grime streaked ceiling.

Dr. Basin snapped off his rubber gloves and tossed them into the trash. It might as well have been me that landed in that trash can. I couldn't see the device he implanted in my skull but I felt it pinch the skin on my shaved head. Somehow, it exerted such a powerful pull on my neck that even the slightest movement was impossible. I didn't know how the device worked, but I understood that it trapped me completely. "C'est bon?" Dr. Basin looked into my eyes, ignoring the tears. "Pour ta sante. Have faith."

I strained to understand. This black man with the scary scar and the shadow of a beard wanted me to trust him. This was 1968, when white society was on high alert against Black Power. In my Brooklyn neighborhood, black men couldn't walk on the streets without being harassed.

Yet here I was, in a thin hospital gown, at the mercy of a very black man. Drill in hand, he stood at my bedside. My blood had splattered onto his white coat. "C'est bon?" he repeated.

"Oui," I said. There was no other choice.

Mrs. Fernandez hadn't spoken or moaned or cried out for days. So when jangly, guttural noises sputtered from her throat, I called for help. The surly Irish nurse appeared, armed with a loaded syringe. Not for Mrs. Fernandez, but for me. She steadied the needle at my hip. "Listen," I begged. "It sounds like Mrs. Fernandez is dying."

The nurse's eyes narrowed and her lips turned down in a mean, stubborn line. "Everyone dies," she said.

I gulped some air in anticipation of the needle's stab but as it slid in, I felt nothing. Like last time and the time before that. I had to start believ-

ing it; it was undeniable. I *was* paralyzed. I was no longer the vivacious girl who danced and hitchhiked and demonstrated at the Pentagon with my best girlfriend, who'd walked away from the accident unharmed. I felt closer now to Mrs. Fernandez. Like Mrs. Fernandez, I would die. Possibly right here in this hospital ward, beside her.

Crazy Mary loped toward me. Positioning her bulky body against my bed rail, she leaned in so close that I smelled her foul breath. "What you got in your head, girlie? Does it kill the bugs?" There was no getting rid of her when she got started, her words tumbling out like popcorn. "You stole my cat!" She grabbed my nightgown and twisted the fabric in her fist. "You're bad!" Releasing the gown, she spat on my sheets.

"Ay, Mi amor, que lio!" Aurora, the pretty Puerto Rican aide, came up behind Mary and cajoled her into her bed. "Callate, mi amor. La muchacha esta durmiendo."

I exhaled. Aurora never failed to restore order to the ward. Her melodious voice calmed us. As she changed my sheet, she hummed. After she'd settled me in fresh linens, she sat at the edge of my bed and stroked my cheek. "Y tu, mi hija? Estas mejorando?"

"Si." I lied. I wasn't getting better, but I wanted to please the lovely and motherly Aurora.

The next day, Dr. Basin came onto the ward, accompanied by a dumpling shaped woman. "*Comment ca va?*" he asked. He skimmed his hand on my head, lingering at the places where he'd inserted the tongs. In halting English, he explained that the skin around the tongs in my skull might blister and a sore could develop on the back of my head from the lack of movement. "But you will heal," he said gravely. "A bientot!" He waved good bye and left the dumpty lady with me.

Her eyes darted around the ward and finally landed on the device in my skull. She cleared her throat and rushed through an explanation. The "Crutchfield tongs" in my head were attached to a pulley from which heavy weights were suspended. They hung behind me on a rope that reached nearly to the floor. She looked at the contraption, rather than at me, as she spoke.

Nausea rose into my throat. I spit out the taste. The woman ignored my reaction and went on with her speech. She told me the traction would knit my broken neck bones back together.

"The tongs shouldn't hurt," she said. "The nerve endings in your skull were damaged. You flew through the car window, you know."

Flew? More like smashed into and sliced by the window. “When will I get out this thing?”

Frowning, she said, “Patience, dear. We’ve just begun. Healing is a matter of months and years.”

“A month’s a long time for me.”

She dismissed me with a thin, strained laugh and patted my knee beneath the blanket, forgetting, I supposed, that I wouldn’t feel the comfort she intended. “We’re arranging a tutor for you.” Her forehead furrowed. “We’re trying, anyway. And I’m sending you some special visitors.”

“I have visitors.” Most days, some of my pals showed up with candy and chips and sandwiches. They played the latest Beatles and Rolling Stones tunes on their transistor radios. They told me which of their brothers or our friends had been shipped off to Vietnam. And who had fled the country to avoid it; my boyfriend was one of those. My favorite visitor came a few times a week, with his banjo and a concert of upbeat tunes. He’d been hospitalized with polio as a child in a city hospital just as bleak as this one. The polio had left him lame. It saddened me to watch him graze the bed rails for support as he walked in and out of the ward. I wondered if I would eventually walk like that, or if I would walk at all.

“These visitors understand your situation,” she said. “Young people like you, with spinal injuries. They’re in our rehab unit, learning to live with disability.” Her double chin wobbled as she said “disability,” each syllable spaced out as if she didn’t want to get to the next one. She reminded me of my mother, with that phony laugh and that hesitancy in her voice. Whenever Mom visited, she encouraged me to get better so I could make it to the Junior Prom. She’d giggle as she said it, like it was a ridiculous aspiration. And it was.

“Will I be disabled?” I asked. I tried to find the woman’s eyes, but she looked away, just like Mom did, whenever I asked about my prognosis. Mom’s evasions were annoying, but typical. She was usually polite and never direct. Dad would make all the decisions about my treatment, not Mom. In this situation, like in the rest of her life, Mom had no authority.

No tutor ever arrived. My friend with the banjo sang. Crazy Mary howled and cursed. Mrs. Fernandez died. Dr. Basin arranged for a piece of soft cloth to fit beneath the back of my head; a sore had formed there,

just as he had warned. Aurora checked the sore daily and adjusted the cloth.

“Attende,” Dr. Basin said, whenever he dropped by. “Time heals.”

On a steady diet of morphine, my mind felt like cotton candy. I floated from memories of dancing at a rock concert in Central Park to fears of a future in a wheelchair or worse. On a wintry afternoon, a month after Dr. Basin had drilled the holes in my head, one of the “special visitors” showed up. An orderly wheeled him to my bedside on a gurney.

The visitor, a black teenager with rage in his eyes, glared at me and asked if I’d been shot. “Car accident,” I said. “You?”

“What you think?” He snorted. “How’s your drugs? You got extra? Me and my boys looking to end this shit.”

The orderly guffawed. “Not in the script, bro,” he said, and wheeled the boy out of the ward.

On the night shift, Aurora gave me a sponge bath. She stretched my arms and legs as she murmured, “Que linda! Que joven!” I longed to feel her touch. “Estas mejorando!”

In the ward, the Stryker bed in the corner creaked in a slow turn to the right, then the left, massaging Mrs. Orozco’s broken back. She’d been in that bed since before I came. Like Crazy Mary, she was a long term inhabitant of that room, like a ghost in a haunted house. She should have died already, but like me, she was stuck here, midway between life and death. IV tubes dripped and hissed. Bells rang. Nurses squeaked in and out on their rubber soled shoes. Sometimes, they poked thermometers in my mouth and needles in my arm. My forearm turned black and blue.

Dr. Basin stopped by every few days, often with no agenda other than to comfort me. He checked the sore on the back of my head and sponged the crusty scabs around the tongs. His touch was gentle. I noticed the flecks of gold in his dark eyes and the faint smell of cloves that emanated from his mouth. When he spoke, I struggled to understand every word. I wanted to believe him. I needed to trust him.

Mom visited on Sundays. At first, Dad had accompanied her, but he quickly tired of the smell and the boredom of the ward. Sunday was his only day off, he complained. “And I’d rather not spend it in a shithole.”

So Mom came on her own, braving the long drive through Brooklyn and Dad’s demands that she be back in time to make him dinner. “This place depresses him,” she said. Lowering her voice, she added, “He’s not

used to black doctors. You know, he's like Archie Bunker."

In those days, Archie Bunker's television persona spewed intolerance. Dad and probably thousands like him embraced Archie's attacks on blacks, communists and hippies.

"Archie Bunker's not a nice guy," I protested. "Dr. Basin is."

"But he's black," Mom said, as if that concluded the case. "And he hardly speaks English."

"I understand everything he says!"

Mom gave me a withering look. "Dad doesn't." She glanced at the tongs. "And he's paying for all this. He doesn't like it one bit."

What doesn't he like, I wondered. The bills? The tongs? Me?

Mom spooned applesauce into my mouth. "You need to be more cooperative. Dad's upset."

She didn't say it but I sensed that Dad's "upset" was explosive. He wasn't a patient man. He'd probably reached the point where he had to act, for better or worse. The applesauce soured in my throat.

Dad appeared midday the following Tuesday, striding into the ward as if he owned it. His white shirt strained against his broad chest. Setting his fedora on the night table, he said, "We've had enough. Don't you think?" I looked at him quizzically. "This place is bleeding me dry. And doing nothing for you. I'm gonna have it out with these monkeys today."

"Sir?" Dr. Basin addressed my father. "You want to meet here?"

"Speak English," Dad said derisively. Dr. Basin *was* speaking English.

Dr. Basin pushed a button on his belt. "The administrator will join," he said.

A man in a suit, with styled salt and pepper hair, appeared at the door of the ward and walked toward us. "Good to see you, Mr. Seneca." He stretched his hand toward Dad, but Dad didn't take it.

"We're done with this place," Dad said. "I've had it up to here"—he indicated his throat—"with your bills. And your blacks."

I gasped and wished I could disappear. Dad's rants were all too familiar. Back home, I slammed my bedroom door to shut them out and sometimes I fought back. Once I'd slapped him and he'd returned the blow. "Stop it, Dad," was all I could muster now.

"Why the hell should I stop? These clowns can do an operation that will end this crap once and for all. But they make more money keeping you in here like a prisoner." He glared at the administrator. "The jig's up."

“Surgery is far too risky, Sir.” The administrator stepped toward Dad. “It can cause complete paralysis or even death. Our top neurosurgeons,” he glanced at Dr. Basin, “advise a more cautious approach because of your daughter’s age. They will not risk this surgery.”

Dad’s upper lip curled into a sneer. “If I were you, I wouldn’t let the blacks tell me what to do.”

“Dad!” I shouted. Didn’t he care that I’d bear the brunt of his vitriol when he went home?

“I’m moving her on Thursday. I found a hospital that will operate and get her out of this mess. You cooperate or I sue your ass.” With a wink at me, like we were conspirators, he left.

I felt too ashamed to look at Dr. Basin, but he cupped my head in his hand, as he often did when he checked the device, and let the warmth linger. It coursed through my skull and reached down to my neck. I longed for it to reach my chest and warm my heart.

Late that night, Aurora spoon fed me meatloaf and JELL-O, leftovers she’d smuggled out of the cafeteria. As always, I’d been unable to reach for my own dinner tray, and as always, Aurora intuited my hunger. “I’m leaving soon,” I told her.

She clapped her hands with delight. “Que bueno! Estas mejorando!”

“Maybe,” I mumbled. I couldn’t admit that nothing had improved except Dad’s mood. He had finally arranged for something to happen.

An ambulance crew bustled into the ward early Thursday morning, long before the doctors’ rounds and after Aurora’s shift. Without explanation, they shifted me from the hospital bed and onto a gurney, with the tongs still embedded in my skull. Crazy Mary watched, the only witness, the only person awake in the ward besides me. She cackled rather than saying goodbye. The crew wheeled the gurney through tiled hallways and into an industrial sized elevator. Nothing looked familiar; I’d been unconscious when I was admitted and since that night, I’d never left the ward.

It was exciting to be moving, to be going somewhere at last. Outside, the crisp winter air exhilarated me. It had been a year since I’d seen vapor billow from my mouth, since my face stung with cold, since I’d seen snow crowning the roofs of cars. Christmas lights twinkled. If the surgery went wrong, this might be my last Christmas. All right with me; I couldn’t imagine living with paralysis, or with my father. The months in the hos-

pital had ruptured my allegiance to him and shifted it toward the black doctor he disdained. Dr. Basin had accepted me just as I was, broken and slow to heal. But Dad insisted I recover on his timetable, even if that required a risky operation.

At Maimonides Hospital, I was pushed through a bright entry bay and into a room with only two beds. A window overlooked the tree lined street. A sprinkling of snow covered the oak branch nearest the window. The room was blessedly quiet. It smelled fresh; the window was slightly open. It was a much better place to die.

In these new and more pleasant surroundings, I waited for the surgery. But nothing was scheduled. I lay in the bed, immobile, staring now at a pristinely white ceiling. Roommates came and went quietly, pacified by pain medications. No one died. The nurses fed me every meal, bathed me every day, and maintained the morphine regime without interruption. But none of them hummed and none of them assured me that I was *mejorando*. I missed Aurora.

My high school was in the same neighborhood as Maimonides, so more people visited. Schoolmates, my friend who sold marijuana, my French teacher. She gifted me a tape recorder loaded with French exercises so that I could keep up with my class. I thanked her, but I couldn't operate the tape recorder without the use of my hands. I traded it to my dealer friend for three nickel bags of marijuana to be delivered when I got out. The trade seemed like a deposit on the future; no one was talking about my ever getting out. The banjo player continued his visits, but the nurses didn't let him play or sing for fear of disturbing other patients. Maimonides had strict visiting hours, from six to eight at night only, and the nurses enforced them. So I was alone most of the time, with my thoughts and my fears. I wondered how it would all end.

None of the nurses seemed to know the plan. Dad eventually filled me in. The doctor who had agreed to do the surgery and admitted me to Maimonides had suffered a stroke. Someone else had to take over my case and he needed time to evaluate it. "Just sit tight," Dad said. What else could I do?

A week later, a man in a camel hair sports jacket and a silk scarf introduced himself as my new doctor. "I take over for Cerulli," he said. "Your father is not very happy." A strong Russian accent coated his

words. I guessed that was the cause of my father's unhappiness. To him, Russians were the enemy, as surely as the blacks. And despite all his efforts, these were the people in charge of my health. "Call me Alexi," the doctor said. "We will come to know each other well." He touched my neck, my head, my broken collarbones and shoulders with soft fingertips. His nails were manicured and lightly polished. He smelled of musky cologne. After he examined me, he readjusted his scarf and said, "Very good. Young people heal."

Alexi came back after Christmas. With a sad smile, he told me that the surgery was too dangerous. "Spine is delicate as a cello string," he said. "You like Rostropovich?" His eyes lit up. "I play." He mimicked holding a cello. Tilting it toward the tongs, he said, "Some progress here. We give it more time."

Exactly what Dr. Basin had said. "Attende." Had he been right? Could time really heal my broken neck? "My father won't wait," I said.

He shrugged. "I don't operate."

"He's fed up," I pleaded. "He'll kill me if you don't do the surgery."

Alexi laughed. "He kills you? Or the surgery kills you. Some choice!"

"It's true," I wailed. He set his hand on my shoulder as tears stung my eyes. "What should I do?"

"Pray," Alexi said.

Pray? Weren't the Russians Communists? And weren't Communists atheists?

Prayer took me deep into the nightmare of being warehoused in the hospital, abandoned by my exasperated parents, and dependent on Alexi. The hard brilliance of his diamond lapel pin captivated me. What kind of doctor dressed in silk and diamonds? What kind of hospital refused to do the procedures it had promised? Where was Aurora when I needed her? In the hushed sighs of the IV machine next to my roommate's bed, I heard Aurora's voice. *Estas mejorando?* She wanted that for me. She believed it was possible.

When Alexi returned, he had a book in his hand. "No surgery," he said. "Poetry." He drew a chair up to my bed and opened the book. "Yevtushenko. A man with hope. Where there is no hope." In a deep and sonorous voice, he read aloud in Russian. I understood none of the words, but the rhythm pulled me along. A sense of possibility brightened

the room. With Yevtushenko, I imagined release. Alexi imagined with me. Together, we knew the sufferings of the world as it was, and together, we dreamt something better.

Alexi read to me for more than an hour. He returned the next day and read more. He would visit, I realized, for as long as it took for me to heal. As if by magic, the healing began. My toes tingled as Alexi read. Warmth flooded my chest.

Dad railed against Maimonides Hospital and fought with the administrators over the surgery. He insisted I waste no more of his time. But Alexi waited patiently for my healing, like Dr. Basin and Aurora. They were strangers to me, not relatives, not native New Yorkers like Dad. They were Haitians, Russians and Puerto Ricans, yet they cared for me like a beloved member of their families. In that year of waiting, I left behind my identity as my father's property and became a child of the world.

The sun shone brightly on the day Alexi wheeled me to the parking lot, where my mother stood, waiting to take me home. She looked disappointed. Tying a scarf around my shaved head, she said, "You look like a boy with that haircut." Alexi settled me in the passenger seat, making sure that the bulky neck brace didn't bump against the doorframe of the car. He placed his copy of Yevtushenko in my lap and squeezed my hand. I felt the warmth and the pressure and knew I would be all right.

When I was back in high school, set free to live, I couldn't dance or ride a bike or go to gym class, but I had plenty of time to look up the poetry of Yevtushenko. I decided that Alexi must have read me these lines:

I sing and drink
giving no thought to death
with arms outspread
I fall on the grass
and if, in this wide world, I come to die
then it's certain to be
from sheer joy that I live.