

MOTHER'S DAY

It is the first day of third grade. I am going to skip all the way to school. My flopping braids beat my back and my new yellow dress flaps against my legs. My arms drink September sunshine as I spring first on one foot, then the other. My mother calls to me from the porch. I turn back, but my mouth does not reply with the usual, "Yes, Mama?" I can't move my lips. The street, the houses, the sunshine, and Mama all fade into gray.

"Good morning," says a woman's voice. "How are you today?"

Where am I? I'm lying in bed with light shining on my closed eyelids. I must be awake, but it feels like a dream. I keep my eyes closed. I want to go home, one more time.

"Time to wake up, now."

I roll toward the voice and squint at the blurry form. I try to answer, but my mouth feels wrong and can't form the words.

"Wait, your teeth," she says gently. "There." I run my tongue and lips over the teeth. "And your glasses, Mrs. Johnson." She places something in my hands.

Eyeglasses. I put them on, and a face comes into focus: a young face, with soft, brown skin and dark eyes, long, black hair pulled back and pinned up.

"You're not my mama."

She smiles. "No." She holds out the nametag that hangs around her neck. "I'm Rosa, remember? I get you ready for breakfast every day."

"Yes, I remember now." And I do. I know Rosa.

She helps me dress, takes me to the bathroom, and settles me comfortably in a wheelchair. When did I start needing so much help? But it is reassuring to have Rosa's sure hands doing the helping.

"Do you know what today is?" Rosa brushes my hair. "It's Mother's Day. I think you'll have a visitor."

"Is my mother coming? She used to brush my hair like that."

"You have beautiful hair. It's still so thick. Your daughter is coming to see you. Isn't that nice?"

I picture a little girl posing in a new red dress. It will be nice to see her again. "Are you a mother, Rosa?"

"Sí . . . I mean, yes." She laughs. "Maria is eight, Jesus is five, and Carlito just turned three."

"Three children, imagine that! You shouldn't have to work on Mother's Day."

"They have a surprise planned for after work. And my own mother is in Mexico, so it's nice to come here and see you."

"That's sweet," I chuckle, patting her hand.

"There, you look lovely!" She gives my hair a final stroke. "All ready for breakfast."

She picks up a card from the dresser as we pass. "Who sent you this pretty card?" She shows me the picture of lilacs on the front. "'Happy Mother's Day, Grandma'," she reads. "'I'll see you when I get back from my trip. Love, Brianne.' Isn't that nice?"

It is nice. But who is Brianne, and why does she call me Grandma?

Rosa wheels me to a large dining room. It looks familiar, as do some

of the faces, but I have trouble placing their names. The room smells of beef and vegetable soup with crackers, even though breakfast is scrambled eggs and toast. I eat and make small talk with two old ladies seated at my table. I don't know their names, though they feel free to call me Elsie. One of them has such thin hair that she is almost bald. I feel vainly proud that my hair is still thick. Rosa told me so.

After breakfast, she wheels me back to my room. The blinds are open now and I sit in the sunshine, gazing out at the flowerbeds thick with blooming iris. Oh, to get my hands into the soil again . . .

"Happy Mother's Day," a voice calls from the doorway.

I turn and see a beautiful woman who looks like . . . "Mama?"

"No, it's Laurie, Mom." The woman smiles but looks sad.

"You look like my mother," I try to explain.

"I know I do." She kisses me on the forehead. "So do you. I brought you some flowers." She lays a bouquet of carnations, roses, and daisies in my lap. I lift them to my face and breathe in the spicy sweet freshness, a scent that carries my mind to so many gardens.

"Did you grow them . . . Laurie?" I ask, struggling to hold onto the name of this generous and beautiful stranger.

She laughs. "I don't have your green thumb, Mom. But I remembered that these were some of your favorites."

"Laurie . . ." I mutter. "I had a little girl named Laurie."

Wait. She called me Mom. Mom? The image of the little girl in the red dress returns. "Are you my daughter?"

She smiles, tears filling her eyes, and she kisses me again. "I'm glad you know me this week. Here, let me put those in water." She takes the

flowers, and I watch as she finds a vase, fills it with water, and carefully arranges the flowers. She is my daughter. I would know her anywhere. "There! I'll put them on top of your dresser so you can enjoy them from anywhere in the room."

"They're lovely, thank you." Then I laugh, a cackling sound that surprises me. "Do you remember, when you were just a little girl, the time you brought me a bunch of dandelions in a water glass?"

"And tripped and dumped the water in your lap? I'll never forget it as long as I live. Aren't you glad I'm not so clumsy now?"

"Yes, I am. What shall we do today?"

"I thought you might like to look at pictures," Laurie says. "I brought some albums." She wheels a tray table next to my chair and rests a large brown album on it. I open the cover and meet the gaze of a handsome, unsmiling young man.

"Who is that?" Laurie asks me, though I suspect she already knows.

"It's Papa," I breathe. "I haven't seen him since I was twelve years old." I continue to turn the pages, smiling at the pictures of a lovely woman with dark, bobbed hair and short, loose dresses. "There's my Mama," I sigh, smiling at Laurie. They have almost the same haircut, so I don't feel as stupid about confusing them.

"Who's this?" She points to a yellowed photo of a smiling little girl with long, dark braids, holding out the skirts of her dress.

"That's me in my new yellow dress," I answer without even thinking. "Mama made it for me when I started third grade, out of an old dress of hers. How I loved that full skirt!"

"Your hair was so long." Laurie traces the braids with her fingertip.

“I wanted to cut it, but Papa wouldn’t let me. Then, when he died, I kept it long, in his memory. How heavy it was, when I washed it! I didn’t cut it short until the baby was born. You, I mean.”

“Now, who is this handsome fellow?”

“Ah, now, if I could meet another as handsome as my Jack, I might get married again.” I cackle again. “It’s no fun, sleeping alone.”

Laurie laughs, but blushes and looks away. She shakes her head and returns her smiling gaze to the photo album. “I’ll leave this one with you, if you like.” She closes the brown covers. “How do you like it here? Do you get along with your roommate?”

I follow her gaze to the other bed in the room, but I can’t recall who sleeps there. I smile. “As long as she doesn’t bring boys back to the room, we get along all right.”

Laurie returns my smile, but she has that worried look Mama sometimes gets. She lays a blue-covered album in front of me. “Now take a look at this.” She flips quickly through colored pictures of chubby, smiling babies and gap-toothed schoolchildren to a pair of portraits. “Do you recognize your grandchildren?”

I peer at the photos: a bright-eyed, smiling teenage girl with long, curly hair; a serious-looking boy, a little older than the girl. I shake my head and blink my eyes. I can’t say I know them, but they look vaguely familiar. “He looks a bit like my father.”

This must be what Laurie wanted to hear, because she smiles. “And she looks like her own father. I wish they could have come with me today! But he has a baseball tournament, and she’s on a field trip to D.C.”

“That’s okay, dear.” I pat her hand. “They don’t want to sit around

with an old woman all day.” And what would I say to young people? Still, the boy does resemble my father . . . Then I remember. “I think she sent me that card.”

“Brianne did? How sweet of her to remember, even on her trip. I didn’t remind her.”

I try to say the right thing. “Brianne, yes. She’s a thoughtful girl.”

“Do you want to go outside?” my visitor says. I nod assent, so she gets my sweater. As she pushes my chair around the grounds, I admire the flowers and tell her the names. I nod and smile as she tells me news of people I don’t know.

The woman who looks like my mother returns me to the dining room for lunch. The room smells of vegetable-beef soup and crackers, but lunch is roast turkey and mashed potatoes. She eats lunch with me, cutting my meat for me, smiling and making small talk with the old ladies seated with us at the table. “What was your name again?” I ask before we leave the table. She doesn’t answer, but with tears in her eyes, she kisses me on the forehead and leaves.

Rosa returns me to my room and helps me into bed. “Is it bedtime already?”

“No, just an afternoon nap.” She pulls the blanket over me and pats my hand. “Sleep well.”

“Yes, Mama,” I murmur, closing my eyes and slipping quietly away. It is the first day of third grade . . .