

State of Mind

“Velma, I have a surprise for you today.”

I looked up from the book lying in my lap. A young woman knelt in front of me, smiling. I should know this face, so full of sweetness and kindness. I stared into her eyes, struggling to recall her name. *Heather—that’s it.*

“Let me mark this page for you, Velma. We don’t want you to lose your place.”

I watched her smooth-skinned, plump-with-youth hands gently mark my page and remove the book from my gnarled fingers.

“Here, I’ve put your book in the side pocket of your wheelchair, okay?”

I liked Heather. She hadn’t worked at the home long enough yet to take on the cloak of cold cynicism the others wore. She still exuded the warmth and pleasantness of someone who truly enjoyed being helpful...someone who sincerely cared.

Heather wheeled me out the main entrance door and rolled my wheelchair along the suburban sidewalk. I didn’t mind her constant chitchat. Her voice floated as a melody to my ears, and never carried a condescending tone. And she never became upset when I didn’t respond to her. I liked that best about her.

As she pushed my wheelchair she commented on the splendid weather, and exclaimed over the vibrant and lush violets, crimson reds and sunny yellows as we passed by rows of spring flowers. And she greeted everyone with “hello” as we passed.

My wheelchair slowed and Heather turned it off the sidewalk, to follow a winding pathway. She leaned close to my ear. “I thought we’d visit the park today. It’s such a lovely day to be outside.”

Heather slowed her pace and grew quiet as the path curved through the trees. I could hear the birds singing and a breeze rustling the leaves. Perhaps she took pleasure in the peace as much as I.

When we passed by a swing set, she stopped. “Oh—I remember how much fun the swings were. Did you ever play on them when you were a little girl? I bet you did. Do you remember, Velma?”

I liked the sound of the Heather's voice right now, the energy of it. I wanted to remember playing on the swings, if only to please her. I squinted at the U-shaped leather strap seat and sturdy chains. Little flashes of memory flitted by, I reached out in my mind to catch them, hold onto them...the schoolyard...our backyard when I was little...flying high in the air... giggling and laughing...the wind and sun on my face.

"Yes," I said, and felt Heather's hand on mine, a gentle squeeze before she removed it.

The swings moved ever so slightly in the breeze, encouraging me to come join them in play. I craned my head around to see Heather. She had turned to watch a group of children running and laughing, lost in her own memories.

I stared again at the swings...concentrating hard...so extremely hard. I focused on those swings until they were all I could see as I coerced muscles into action, pushed at the wheelchair arms, could feel the trembling strain in my arms. I gave one more heroic shove and felt my stiff body lifting from the seat, unfolding ever so slowly.

I can't stop now.

My back straightened, until at last I stood. I still stared at the swings, but now I noticed the smell of damp earth under the trees, the nearby Jasmine blooms.

My first few steps were wobbly, hesitant. So I took a moment to think. I dredged up my memories of running as a little girl. And the more I thought about it, the more I remembered...the lightness of my body, the freedom of knowing no bounds, my feet skimming over the ground, barely touching it. And the next thing I knew I was firmly planted in the swing seat, my hands gripping the chains, my heart thumping with anticipation.

Can I remember?

I began to tentatively swing my legs out forward, leaning my body back, then tucking them under me and leaning forward...back and forth...the chains creaking in time with the movement...back and forth...gaining momentum.

Yes!

I kicked my legs straight out in front of me. Then laughed out loud as the wind blew my hair away from my face. I felt the soaring height of my body, then the rapid sweep

backwards – the ground pulling away – and then rushing toward me again as I flew forward again, and then up into the air, higher and higher. I could look into the treetops now. I flew as a bird, free and loving life.

Whatever made me think I had to grow up and leave behind the fun of play, this exuberance for life? Was being old just a state of mind, as I had always heard?

Heather's voice called to me from afar.

I didn't want to stop, but I heard her call again, like a mother worried for her child.

I blinked—surprised to see Heather's face close to mine, eyes wide with concern. Long seconds flowed over me as my senses registered that I didn't sit in the swing at all, but the seat of my wheelchair. My hands gripped the armrest, not chain, and of all things, my own tears streamed down my cheeks.

Heather cradled my withered hands within the warmth of hers. "Oh dear, I've upset you. I never meant to do that. I'm so sorry." She reached up to wipe away my tears.

I wanted to explain she hadn't upset me. I wanted to reassure her these were tears of joy, for something I thought I had lost. Something she helped me find again.

But all I could manage were the words "surprise...good." I felt my mouth curve into a lopsided smile. I watched Heather's face brighten. She understood.

As Heather maneuvered the wheelchair for its return trip, I heard myself say, "Tomorrow...the slide."