

See The Girl

Her face was close to the window. She was a traveler, on her way to something brand new. She felt lucky that the Tri-Valley Medical Center was far outside town, in a suburb close to the city. She had never been in a city, but that was all right.

She saw the suburb first in a blur from the highway, through long, deep rows of fir trees, and slants of daylight and shadows that never repeated a pattern, but were always shifting and changing.

It looked as quiet as a village in a model toy railroad, with a feel in the air of a hush. There weren't factories. It was not the kind of neighborhood where people blew car horns as a way of speaking to each other. You could never hear people's television sets through their windows. You would have to be quieter out here than at home.

But still, it might be a good place to live. People at the clinic were going to say, "Ronda, we'll buy a new house for you and your mom, and we'll put it wherever you want," and Ronda would pick the suburb. The reason they would be saying this would be the healing. They would want to give Ronda a present, out of happiness and amazement. They would take up a collection to pay for it. The new house would look like the house in the book where the rabbit says goodnight to everything. But there would not be a bowl of hot mush, like in the story, which Ronda would find disgusting. The healing was still a secret.

The houses of the suburb were like racks in a department store of good coats, racks and racks of them, with aisles between them for browsing. They were different sizes, with different collars, buttons, pockets, and belts, but basically, they were all the

same coat, and it was all right that, when you bought one, you had to go through winter looking like everyone else, like you were going through life all together, wearing uniforms. Ronda's mom wouldn't like this at first, but she could learn to enjoy it.

The Tri-Valley Medical Center was all cement. The houses of the suburb were white, gray, shades of brown, light blue, brick-red, and the pinkish tone of brick painted over with white, as if the walls were standing there blushing. There were woodlots of high old spruces and pines. It smelled like Christmas. There were wide flat lawns, big yards, paved-over driveways, smooth roads. No one stuck out. No one had fights, or had a husband who was married to a bar stool, or went to court to get divorces, or had children who looked like lizards and trolls, like you saw all the time at the clinic.

The drive up north on the highway, straight up from the bottom of the valley, where the town was, was like driving up the side of a bowl. This was the best part. Just when it seemed to Ronda that she would never reach the rim, she'd be on it: all the trees looked higher, and the buildings and houses spread out, and the open spaces had opened up even more; and then the sky would come suddenly nearer.

The weather on the rim was so clear today, Ronda sat back and relaxed. "Flip it back, Mom!" she cried, and her mother reached up and pushed back the visor of the windshield. Then the clouds were so close, they were floating one inch above the steering wheel. This, Ronda knew, was an excellent sign.

Now she rode on her mother's broad back the way she liked it: piggy-back, or turtle-back, because that's what she was, with the casts on. She was partly a turtle. Ronda smelled her mother's sweat, and her hair. She was careful to not let her arms get

wrapped the wrong way around her mother's neck, and to not jerk back suddenly. She could travel long distances in this manner without a wrong move. She knew everything about holding on, and everything about flinging back her head to feel the air rushing by, and everything about pressing herself in, with her eyes shut tight, when the important thing to do was hide, so that no one could see her unless she let them.

She was on her way to being healed. There was a very short time to keep waiting, but she was starting to feel impatient.

"Faster, please, faster," said Ronda.

Why it was happening that this was the day she'd be healed, she didn't know. There was no particular reason. She'd been lying in her bed one night, looking out the window like always, but not at anything special, just the night. She had said to herself, as normally as anything, "Oh, when Leon takes my casts off this time, I'll be healed." She just knew it, like any other fact.

Leon Johnson was the cast-and-brace-man. He was strict, especially when he was using his saw. He had a list of parents who he allowed in the brace room, to stand by their children and hold their hands, but the names of Ronda's parents weren't on it.

Ronda didn't hold this against Leon. If she were him, she wouldn't let them in there, either. She was not afraid of Leon, although many other people were. He was old, and had enormous hands, and long, thin fingers, all crusted in the nails with bits of plaster, which sprinkled out as if his fingers were snowing. He wore a long cotton coat, buttoned up to his chin, and every time he saw Ronda, he said the same thing. He called her "my little mermaid." He said, "How come you don't have an H, like everyone else who has your name?"

It was a joke with them. "Because I got my name from a Ronald," she'd answer, and his eyes would open wide, in alarm and anxiety.

"Oh, my poor little mermaid, was it to honor the memory of Reagan?"

And Ronda would say, "Don't insult me." This was what she heard her dad say once, at a gas station, when a guy her dad didn't know struck up a conversation with him at the pump, and asked him if he voted Republican. The name of Ronda's father was Ronny Bailey.

"You're hurting me," said Ronda's mother. "You're digging your spurs into me. Cut it out."

"Ask me right, and I will," said Ronda. She could whisper directly in her mother's ear because that's where her face was.

"Ronda Rondalla Rondaronia," said Ronda's mother. "If you don't stop digging your spurs into me, I will throw you out the window."

"OK, Mom," said Ronda.

They were not really spurs. They were bolts on the heels of the leg casts for the metal bar she had worn every night since the surgery. The bar was exactly the width of Ronda's bed. The space between Ronda's legs with the bar on was a triangle, like a wishbone from a chicken, if a wishbone had a bottom line. The cast of each leg was stained a little. Some pee had dripped down accidentally, but there wasn't any type of bad smell. Ronda had swabbed her skin at the tops of the casts every day with cottonballs soaked with alcohol. The alcohol smelled like the hospital.

It was strange to call the part of your leg that runs down the back a hamstring. The name of Ronda's surgeon was Dr. Pellegrino. He wasn't the chief. He did not have

white hair, like chiefs were supposed to. Dr. Pellegrino was the one who went inside her, plucked her strings, and released them. They were still in her legs, though. "Ronda, your strings are too tight, so when we put you to sleep this time, I am going to release them." He was Italian. He never said "ham." He knew it was a stupid way to talk about bodies, but he may have found this out from the chief.

It used to be difficult to have to sleep every night on her back. Her bed was next to a window. Ronda knew exactly what the sky looked like, all gray and white combined, when it was almost morning. That was when the sky was most quiet; it looked like silver and snow mixed together. Then the stars blinked out. They still were up there, though. So was the moon. One night, and she will never forget this, the moon was at the top of her window like a silver banana.

The best of the stars, she felt, were the ones that made a W, which looked like a crown, a real crown. Was that why people invented crowns, in the old days, for kings and queens? Maybe. It would have been better, on the nights when the moon was like a face, if the crown of those stars was on its head. That would be something. But the moon wasn't ever near the W, in any shape at all, so Ronda put her own face there instead. Ronda had never seen herself so happy as she looked when she was up in the sky.

Except for the tiny bit of pee, the plaster of Ronda's casts, even after seven weeks, was as white as a clean piece of paper. Ronda did not allow decorations on her casts, not even a little drawing in magic marker by her dad, who was good at drawing helicopters, airplanes, X-wing fighters like on "Star Wars," rockets, hot-air balloons, and blimps like in the Super Bowl.

Ronda's mother was not a horse. She was a mother, and her name was Patsy Bailey. But Ronda liked it better when her mother was the one who brought her to the clinic. Her father would have pushed her in a wheelchair. This was because a man could get hernias from carrying children, and a woman could not. But her father would change his clothes from whatever he'd been wearing around his house; he would have fixed himself up. You would think this should have been the other way around, but it wasn't.

Ronda's mother said "cerebral palsy" like this: "ser-ree-brul *paul-zee*." Her father said, "*seh-rah-ball-paul-see*." It was another way that they were different, besides the fact that they lived in different houses.

Ronda's mother stopped cold. Someone was coming. One of the social workers who wasn't Beryl might have spotted them, or a doctor, or a physical therapist, or a nurse. Ronda waited to be shouted at. They were always saying to Ronda's mother, "Don't be carrying her like that! Don't be carrying her like that!"

It was Beryl, though, coming toward them from down the hall. It was good to see her. Beryl was the kind of person who, when you talked to her, she said, "Oh, I know what you mean," and you knew she was telling the truth, unlike many other people.

Beryl was the only person at the clinic Ronda's mother could stand. After she talked to Beryl, Ronda's mother did not walk away all knotted-up, all edgy, muttering to herself, as if her jaw hurt, "Goddamn professionals, I hate them all." Ronda's father felt the same. Even though Ronda's father lived alone now, Ronda always knew his point of view.

As for Ronda, she loved Beryl absolutely. When Ronda got down on the living room rug at home with her Barbies, Kens, G.I. Joes, Leggos, blocks, and Lincoln Logs,

and played the game of "Tornado At The Hospital," which could take a whole day, because before she wrecked it, she had to carefully, realistically build it, she made Beryl a doll she would rescue. Ronda herself played the part of the tornado. She would also save Leon, and the Ken who was chief, but not her own doctor, which her mother found unacceptable.

"You should show that Italian who operates on you some respect," her mother said, when he died. The dolls who represented Ronda's parents didn't always survive. She was sorry about this, but sometimes they were blown to the back of the sofa, they were thrown behind a chair, they were suffocated, they lost limbs, they were hurtled through the hall into the bathroom. Ronda tried to play fair. She had to be careful about never disfavoring one parent below the other, which could really upset them. Except for the secret that she was keeping today, she was not the kind of person who kept secrets.

"Patsy and Ronda, hey, I heard you'd be here today," Beryl said.

Beryl was a large-bosomed, big-voiced, short, heavy woman, and older than Ronda's mom, Her hair was all gray, but soft. Ronda was used to seeing it long. It used to hang down to Beryl's shoulders, all loose, streaming this way and that, like porcupine-hair.

But Beryl had a haircut—no, not just a haircut. She'd had it all cut off to almost nothing. Ronda had the feeling that, maybe everyone who saw Beryl should jump to their feet and salute her, but the haircut looked good on her.

Ronda kept looking at Beryl's hair. She had to, to be sure not to spill out the news of what was just about ready to happen to her. Ronda wanted everyone to be surprised.

She wanted to see what their eyes would be like—Beryl's, her mother's, everyone's—when she came out from the brace room, and they saw her.

Ronda's mother was complimenting Beryl for how she looked, and Ronda wanted to join in, but a woman's voice came over the intercom, saying, "Gertrude Stein to Admissions, please. Miss Stein to Admissions."

Beryl looked up at the ceiling; a flush came over her face. Ronda's mom said, "What's the matter?"

"That's me," said Beryl. "I'm going to kill her. I'm going down there, and I'm going to kill her. She's been doing this to me all day." Then Beryl turned around and walked away.

"See you later on!" cried Ronda. Then it was quiet again. "Drink," she said in her mother's ear. They were standing close to a water bubbler.

"If I had to bend down to let you get one, I would never get up again," said Ronda's mother. "And you know what would happen? Everyone would think we were twins, and I'd go out of my mind."

"You," said Ronda.

"Sweetheart, the kind of drink I want, it's not in there."

Ronda patted her mother's head. It was hot outside but the air conditioning in the clinic was on. Still her mother kept sweating. She was big. She was the biggest mother Ronda had ever seen. Her hair was so wet. Maybe she was *partly* a horse. Ronda tried to make her mother feel better.

"If you're very good, you can have a cold beer when we go home, Mom," Ronda whispered, and her mother said, "Don't be talking like that around here."

"But you're going to be happy," Ronda whispered.

"Well, after today, you'll be lighter," said Ronda's mom.

They started moving again. Ronda's mother had her same old brown canvas jacket on, and dungarees, and brown, scuffed-up leather boots, like a man's. Wearing those boots had been a big mistake. They were slowing her down. Ronda tried harder to keep her feet out, away from her mother's ribs. But she urged her mother on.

"*Hurry*," said Ronda. She thought about how, when Leon took her casts off the last time, and the time before that, and the time before that, and the time before that, her legs were all limp and grayish-white, not like real legs, but like fishes. They were scaly and hairy and strange. They were as skinny as goat legs, with a new set of scars, like marks branded into her skin, joining up with the old ones.

Was that the right number of times? Ronda counted up all her surgeries. She ticked them off with her fingers, at her mother's neck, but not so that her mother felt it. It was right. The surgery on her strings had been her fifth.

Her fifth! That was the number of stars in the W! That was why today was the day!

"Oh," Ronda said to herself. She could not believe she hadn't seen this before. If she could have let go of her mom, she would have thumped herself on the head.

What would she look like? She could not imagine how her legs would look today when Leon was through with her. As part of the healing, the scars could have all disappeared. If they hadn't, though, it wouldn't matter. She had decided to not be fussy about details, and to not be expecting the impossible.

Soon it will be over. She'll come out from the brace room. Someone will cry, "Look at Ronda, she doesn't have C.P. anymore!" That was how most people said it, "see-pee," which Ronda found repulsive, but, from now on, she wouldn't care.

A stir would rise up in the hall, with everyone craning their necks to catch sight of her. The big double doors outside the waiting room would open up a little wider, by themselves, with a whooshing. She would pass through the doors so quickly, it would seem that her feet were only air. She would know how to do this. She had practiced in her mind. She would quietly sit by her mother again. Her mother would be crying and gasping, both at once; she would throw back her head and make really loud noises. But Ronda would not be embarrassed. The people who hadn't been healed yet would turn to her and say, "Way to go, Ronda Bailey." They would say, "We're not jealous of you."

And the white-haired chief of Orthopedics, who never came into the waiting room, would come. He would come out to see her himself. No one would resent the special treatment. Everything would become very quiet. He would look all around until he saw where she was sitting, and he would stroll to her, and the expression on his face would turn softer, not at all how he normally looked. He would bend to kiss her hand. He would hold out his arm to her. A light would come into his eyes.

"Congratulations," he will say. "Where would you like your new house?"

Oh, and Beryl would be in there as well. Beryl and the chief would walk with Ronda together, like the mother and father of Sleeping Beauty. They would walk all around the waiting room.

After the healing, when Ronda gets up from her chair, her body will be curving and straight, both at once, as if a line and a circle had joined together, somehow. Then

everyone will be looking at her. If they clapped and cheered for her, she would know what to do. She would bow, way down low, and stand up again even straighter, because her legs will have learned how to hold her, and there she will be.

They had reached the last hall before the brace room. It felt as if a great rush of air had entered Ronda's ears. She held on, though. There was one minute left to keep waiting. "Giddy *up*," Ronda said to her mom.