

He lay prone on the stretcher, face down. The white sheet that covered him from the waist made his bare shoulders look big and strong. Soft blond hair framed a pair of sea blue eyes that were twinkling at me. He was 21 or 22, I guessed, and about six feet tall.

The stretcher was raised to a level for him to make eye contact with visitors when they entered the door. A pillow was placed under his chest, extending out to allow a soft surface for his elbows when he was propped up. I noticed both were bandaged tightly with what appeared to be thick layers of gauze with an ace bandage wrapped around them. I would learn later, that this was to prevent pressure sores.

“So what do you want?” he asked.

“A friend told me about you and I just dropped by to get acquainted,” I explained, taken aback by his abruptness. “I’m Dottie Brosch, the Director of a Recreation Program for the physically challenged here in Tampa, and I wanted to give you a personal invitation to join with us every Monday night from seven to nine. We’re going to have a varied program to meet the interest and abilities of all types of people. I thought you might enjoy it.”

“Humph,” he snarled, as he looked at me with disgust. “And just how do you think I could join you? In case you haven’t noticed I am paralyzed. I broke my neck a few years ago in a diving accident,” he explained. “It happened in 1949 when I went to a Sunday school picnic. Wish I had never gone with them to that lake afterwards.”

I looked at him with compassion and dismay. Perhaps he was right I thought, as I wondered what activity I might be able to provide for people like him who were totally paralyzed and could not even pick up something with their hands.

He seemed to be reading my mind. “But don’t waste your pity on me. I can do a lot more than meets the eye.”

“It must be awful to lie in bed all the time and to not be able to move. I can’t begin to imagine...”

“Don’t try,” he interrupted, “‘cause I do move.”

“I don’t understand.”

“See that tree out there? When the wind blows the limbs and leaves I move with them.”

I looked across the room, through the door of the next room and in the distance I saw the limbs of the tree to which he had referred.

His eyes took on a dreamy look as he continued. “You’d be surprised at the things I can dream up when the wheels in my head start turning. Are you familiar with the big high bridge they are building across Tampa Bay? I read about it in the

newspapers and watched on TV as it was being built. I became obsessed with a desire to see it in person. But I learned long ago that some things are out of reach for quads (Bob's shortened use of the word) so I developed some techniques all of my own; one of those tools is imagination. Now I just hop on the back of a bird flying by and tell it where to take me. This often works for me; I just imagine that it happens, as silly as it may sound to you."

"Silly!" I exclaimed. "What wonderful brain power you have. That is absolutely grand. Anyone who can dream up solutions to their problems like that has a leg up on many others who have two good arms and two workable legs. Given a choice, I would settle for your brain power any day of the week."

"Well, people who don't dream might just as well be dead," he went on with a big grin breaking across his face. "Sometime I will tell you of my really big dream. It concerns my ambition. I have it all figured out as to what I want to do with the little bit of time I have left on this earth. You may not know this but I have all ready outlived what the doctors had expected from me. Quads don't have a long life expectancy, you know."

"I didn't know that but I sure would be interested to hear about your plans. Feel like telling me now?" I settled into the hard, platform rocker and awaited his answer.

"For openers," he began, "I will find some way to build or buy a big brick home with plenty of windows in my room. I want to see either the sun come up in the morning or go down in the evening; I have almost forgotten what that looks like. I will hire nurses to work around the clock to cut down on my mother's workload. I am getting too big for her to handle," he boasted. "I can't do a thing for myself. She has to feed me and bathe me and turn me every two hours to keep down pressure sores. I'm really a load for her to take care of by herself."

While he was talking I surveyed the immaculately clean room. There were only two small windows, one of which was blocked with the small air conditioner that was whirring away as if struggling to get air. A slatted blind hung from the other window. His stretcher and a stainless steel table seemed to consume most of the room. A small army cot lined one wall, neatly made up with sheets and a pillow that still had the imprint of his mother's head where she had slept the night before. A single faded platform rocker and a tiny footstool with needlepoint cover was parallel to the third wall, leaving only space for a medium sized wicker basket filled with odds and ends of knitting threads. The floor was covered with worn linoleum that was clean enough to eat off of. His bed was centered, facing the door.

"Well, Bob," I said, "With wheels in the head like you say you have and with dreams like yours, there will be no stopping you. With your determination, good things are going to happen. I know your dream will come true. Just keep the faith," I told him softly.

"Faith!" he shouted at me. "What has faith got to do with it? Don't go preaching to me."

I stared at him in disbelief as he went on to tell me he did not believe there was a God. And if there was, He could not be a just and loving God. "I didn't do anything to deserve this. Why would He let this happen to me?"

I was too stunned to give him a quick reply. Finally, searching his angry eyes for understanding, I admitted that I didn't have all the answers. I too didn't know why.

"Well, thanks anyway, for not giving me a bunch of fiddle-de-dee answers," he said, calming down.

While staring hard into my eyes, he suddenly asked, "Who are you anyhow? And what do you want with me? Are you a Therapist?"

I smiled at the suggestion before answering with a firm "No."

"A nurse?" he asked.

"Wrong again."

"Bet you are from a church," he persisted.

"No, Bob. As I told you before, I am a recreation director. I work with the City of Tampa Recreation Department and I am trying to organize a recreation program for disabled people. We are meeting the recreational needs of most of our citizens, but before now, nothing for people like you. And I feel that you and others with similar challenges should have some fun too."

"Well, what makes you think you can teach me how to have fun? Can you show me how to ride my bike and deliver papers again? Can you show me how to take my girl to the movies or to play soccer?"

He stared defiantly at me.

As my eyes swept over him I could not help but stare at the long, healthy-looking form lying under the tightly fitted sheet and I pondered the things he had told me. They seemed to have come from the depth of his soul. I thought about his big dreams and plans for his future.

"Don't you think you would enjoy being around more people instead of being shut in all the time?"

"Look Lady," he snorted. "Let's get this over with. For your information, I have not been out of this house for five years except when I went to see the doctors and besides, I wouldn't be able to do anything if I did go. Obviously you don't know much about quadriplegia.

"No, I'm afraid I don't know much about quadriplegia," I admitted.

"Well, don't feel bad about that. Very few people know how to spell it, and even fewer know what it does to the human psyche. So you're not alone in that."

"I'm not interested in what you can't do, Bob," I injected. "I'm just interested in what you CAN do."

"It would be foolish for me to go to a recreation center and frankly, I am not interested." I felt like a pendulum on a grandfather clock as I tried to keep up with his mood swings. While searching for the right thing to say, I blurted out: "How long are you anyway?" (I had meant to ask how long he had been in this condition.)

"What a stupid question" he exclaimed. "I WAS six feet TALL before my accident and I guess I still am. That is tall mind you, and don't say I'm long. I can tell already that you are looking at my condition and not seeing the real me.

I saw my mistake and my words hung in the air between us.

"I'm sorry, Bob", I quickly replied. I rose to my feet and prepared to leave. "I'd better be going now, but I really am glad to have met you."

"Yea, I'll bet"

"Hope to see you again soon." I could see he was still angry.

"Mom and I never did like do-gooders anyway," I heard him say into his pillow as I turned to leave.

"Do-gooder," I exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

"Aw you know. We get do-gooders coming by all the time; Gives them something to talk about when they go out with friends. They always ask what they can do for me, yet it would never cross their minds to offer to baby-sit me and give Mom some time away from chores or to do the shopping for her. She has too much to do, but little do they know what it means to be shut in with no one to help out. "

"Do-gooder!" I exclaimed, turning to face him again. "Is that what you think I am?" He grinned at me, knowing he had bested me.

I had gone but a few steps when I heard him say in a gentle voice, "Call before you come the next time."

I walked to my car with tears flowing freely from my eyes. How sad that such a handsome, smart fellow was so helpless. Over and over again I heard those awful words, *do-gooder*, and I did a quick personal analysis. *Was he right? Why did I think I could teach people like him to have fun?*

But after all, fun was my business; maybe I should just be satisfied to help able-bodied people. I was good at that; I should let well enough alone and forget this idea of a truly recreational program for the physically challenged.