

# The Handicap Stall

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Not long after Poppa left, Mother and I went to the grocery store. I was in the back of the buggy, riding like I was at the helm of a ship. I was tiny back then. Many people thought I was six, but I corrected them.

“No. I am nine, thank you.”

“Isn’t she precious?” they said.

Mother shrugged and absently pushed the cart ahead. In the produce aisle, she inspected fruits and vegetables. Indifference flitted across her narrow face. Poppa used to do all the grocery shopping. If I offered commentary, she usually tilted her head and pursed her lips. It was the same look that accompanied, “Are you talking back to me?”

Instead she asked, “What do you think of string beans with white potatoes tonight?”

I hated string beans. She didn’t know this. Poppa did the cooking too. And I was going to tell her. I was going to say, “NO. I don’t like string beans.” Instead, a shrill, ear-splitting scream emitted from somewhere deep inside me.

A look of shock swept over Mother’s face, but only for a split second. She then furrowed her brow, placed her fists on her hips and settled her scant weight on each foot. My mother was a straw woman. She was the color, the shape and the heft of straw. But she towered over me in the buggy. Fine strands of splitting salt-and-pepper hairs stuck out of her white scrunchie. When she shook her head in disbelief, her ponytail swayed with it.

She grabbed my jaw, pinching it in between her index finger and thumb.

“Shut up right now! SHUT YOUR MOUTH!”

A small crowd of midday shoppers, middle-aged women in smocks, sweat pants and sweaters, started to form around us. Mother, embarrassed by the on-looking strangers, threatened me.

“I will slap you,” she snarled.

But I still screamed. No pauses or stops, not for words or deep breaths. I only got louder. I drowned out the whispers, reproach and the insults hurled

in low tones at Mother’s back. One on-looker hesitantly leaned forward to grab me, but something held her back and kept her from reaching out to soothe me.

I clutched the buggy so tightly that the next day I had little square patterns imprinted on my palms. Mother yanked me from the buggy and carried me under one arm to the women’s bathroom, parting the astonished crowd. No one dared to follow. I writhed and twisted. Her bony wrist dug into the flesh on my side, securing me against her ribcage. She marched into the handicap stall and removed her belt. Her frantic fingers, the digits on the hands that always shook, were steady and sure as she unfastened the buckle.

I was wearing my favorite yellow gingham shorts. My exposed legs were the easiest targets. She struck me so hard and so long, my legs bled. My screams were choked out with sobs. She flung me to the opposite end of the stall and crumpled onto the toilet seat, belt still in hand like it was a new limb. I sank to the floor. The blue tiles were cool against my burning legs.

She stared at me, her heap of a child now stunned and silent, eyes glazed the same way they’d been the day she birthed me. The day the nurses carried me away because she was still addicted.

She burst into tears, deep wounded sobs that matched the haunting sound of my screams. Maybe she finally realized what a mess she’d created.

“I’m so sorry. I am so sorry.” She said it low.

I flinched when she fell on the floor and knelt before me. She grabbed my sandaled feet in one hand. Her large black eyes scanned mine looking for light, a spark, a signal I was still there, encased in that tiny deflated body. I was. I stared at her, making notes about her face. Her nose was my nose and her eyes were my eyes. I looked so long, she became blurred and out of focus in front of me. She searched my face for a sign that we would walk out of the stall unscathed.

She didn’t find it.

The backs of my thighs made a soft sucking sound as she gathered me up from the blood stained floor.