

The Rose Garden

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“It’s your day to go downstairs to the rose garden, Rose,” Nancy, my kindhearted and encouraging recreational therapist said as she entered my hospital room. “You ready?”

“Yeah. Mostly, I guess,” I said back.

Only four weeks prior I crashed my car, where the impact broke my neck at the C4-C5 vertebrae and paralyzed me from the chest down. I was initially groggy with limited consciousness, but as I became more aware, I started to process my surroundings and my new state of life, including the brace that held my head, neck, and shoulders straight; the tracheotomy; realizing that I could no longer move my legs or hands or most of my arms; and I’d be wheelchair-bound.

I was often plagued with the thought that I would have people constantly staring at me and thinking I was incompetent since I was so new to paralysis and a wheelchair; I didn’t want to be looked at as anything other than the smart, outgoing 16-year-old I was only weeks before. However, when a nurse told me about a rose garden on the first floor, I knew I had to see it because, raised in the country, I loved being outside in the beauty of nature – absorbing the fresh air and letting the sun freckle my face and shoulders, while highlighting my red hair. This was the first time *I* decided to leave my fifth floor room on the Pediatric Rehab Unit, not being prompted by a therapist or going out for a test or scan. It was a big step for me. The appeal of the rose garden – described as a quaint, open-air garden filled with a variety of lush rosebushes in the spring and summer –was too great, despite being the gloomy early March in Indiana and for whatever unknown reason that motivated me.

Not only did I have to reconcile the intimidating thought of leaving the comforting solitude of my hospital room in a wheelchair and in the body that I couldn’t feel or move independently anymore, but leaving meant preparation. Nancy had to schedule a time for a nurse to go with us, considering when they both would not be booked with the other patients’ needs, as well as find a time when I was not working with physical, occupational, or speech therapies, schooling, meetings with the psychiatrist, or any personal care routines. We also had to tote a portable suction machine in case I started coughing. Without it, if I got into a coughing fit, I could aspirate or choke since I had the tracheotomy and my lungs were so weak. On top of all the planning, the nurses told me I could not stay outside very long because it was a cold and rainy

day, yet thinking about fresh rain on my face made the trip more enticing. I hated being weighed down by so much preparation and restriction.

I finally made it to the first floor with Nancy pushing me wrapped up in two large hospital blankets, draped in white from shoulders to feet. I never would've left the house like that before, but I had determination within me to finally meet this place; I already felt a kinship and thought of it as my own garden. We turned down the long hallway that connected the professional building of Methodist Hospital to the medical building: floor-to-ceiling windows on either side. The nurse who told me about the garden said that most people never noticed it because of the inconspicuous glass door that blended in with the rest of the hall. Indeed, it was not very noticeable at all. As the nurse held the door open, Nancy and I went outside.

My ears immediately picked up on the rush of the traffic from the highway just beyond the towering brick walls, while the cold seemed to grab my eyes. And what was remaining of those beautiful bushes was not attractive at all. The few leaves left lingering seemed to shiver as they clung to the thorny sticks and spirals all exposed to the wintery air. I was disappointed that there wasn't any rain or even sprinkles from the gray skies anymore, only the wet cobbled path that led around to a couple different concrete benches. Regardless of the grim appearance, I loved it anyway. I didn't mind being among *those* roses; I could still see what they once were and soon would be again.

"It's colder out now than it was when I came in this morning," Nancy said, rubbing the outside of her arms. We'd only been out for a few minutes and I was cold as well, but I enjoyed the fresh air and didn't want to go back in the stuffy, sterile hospital.

"I'm okay. I don't think it's that bad," I lied. I missed going out and complaining about the bitter temperatures and even scraping the stupid frost off my windshield.

"We'll just head toward the door then. We have to be getting back anyway," Nancy said, slowly pushing me around the path.

I just want to feel one raindrop, I thought directly to God as we approached the door. I was so far out of my normalcy that I didn't pray regularly. I knew family and friends and churches all around our rural county were praying for me to heal, but all I did was live each day, trying to figure out if my own dreary life of immobility and dependency would eventually transform into something more beautiful and worth living. Sometimes it felt like my life would never flourish again.

“I know you’ve been struggling to go out of your room, Rose. How was it going down the hallways just now?” Nancy asked sitting next to me on a bench. Her sincere tone was more comforting than my assigned psychiatrist because she talked to me like a friend, not like another patient on the list.

“Everyone stared at me. I knew they would,” I said.

“I know. I thought I saw a couple people looking your way, but they’re going to be curious,” she said, offering comfort. “It might be hard to think about now, but I’m sure you’ve glance at people that looked differently a time or two as well, don’t you think?”

I nodded my head, but I wasn’t comforted by it as I sat there in my own despondency. I didn’t want to be viewed as one of those kids in a wheelchair that only moaned or was looked at or treated like a baby.

“I know you’ll have changes to get used to and that takes time, but you just have to try step-by-step,” she said as she stood up. “And you know, it’s about that time. I know you have to be cold by now because I’m freezing. Your nurses are going to kill me if I return you as a blue ice cube in this wheelchair.”

“Wait one more minute before we go inside,” I partially pleaded now only a couple feet from the door. I looked up to see a swirling mess of light greys in the sky before closing my eyes to take a slow deep breath through my nose, filling my lungs to savor the cool, fresh air. With my eyes still shut, a single raindrop landed directly on my forehead.

He listened. Among enduring all the therapies, adjusting to a wheelchair, tolerating a new body, and accepting a life-change I’d never imagined, God was there all along, watching over me and listening to me. With that one drop, God Himself whispered *I am here* when I needed the reassurance that life would mend and He would be with me in every moment.