

2nd place, non-fiction

Helpless

by Chris Strickling and Joyce Dawidczyk

Cora thought she was God's gift to this poor crippled lady. A gift that no white woman deserved. Five days a week, she came to the house early in the morning and stayed until noon, more or less. She was accustomed to doing simple chores like shopping, cooking and cleaning. She'd been the Black Domestic to the White Missus in five different states, working in houses already so clean it was hard to stay busy all day. But ever since Cora moved to Texas and signed up with the home health agency as a personal attendant, things had been different. Now she spent her mornings in a drab, sparsely furnished inner city house that whispered "barely middle class" to her each time she made the short walk up the rickety ramp to the front door.

Frankly, she was disappointed about the whole thing; the salary, the assignment, the servitude – again. Just walking into this place made her heart beat a little faster, made her palms a little sweaty. Long time ago, she'd given up trying to figure out how it is that after all these years of working in other people's houses she went home to a small apartment owned by a nameless white man. These days, it seemed like there was something caught in the dark, damp territory of the back of her throat and it came spewing out in the angry words she said, whether she wanted it to or not, whenever her new boss lady talked down to her.

The new job required Cora to bathe and dress a woman who could not do these things for herself, and put up with a steady barrage of complaints that were hard to understand because her new client, Joyce, talked like she had marbles in her mouth. This kind of talking was new to her.

"Never heard nothing like that before," Cora said to one of her cousins, "except for that older boy of Anna Mae's back in Tallahassee, and he didn't have the mind that this woman does."

This woman noticed everything, had a plan for everything, and she'd hold you to it. Joyce complained every time Cora forgot to put the footrest of the wheelchair down or pull the support socks all the way over her knee. The complaining made Cora want to do less and less.

"How am I supposed to get it perfect," she'd fume, "when I'm still learning? She's ungrateful," Cora told her sister as they unloaded groceries from the back of the pickup, "and she's got no respect. But I do my job, I made a promise and I keep my word."

Joyce wasn't the only one who knew how to complain. If Cora found wet clothes in the dryer, left by the night attendant, she always took the opportunity to complain, "Nobody does any work around here but me." On more than a few occasions, Cora had exclaimed, "I feel like a slave!" when Joyce soiled the bed and asked her to clean it up. And, whenever Cora found dirty dishes in the sink or had to repair the shower chair because the night attendant lost the chest strap, she'd stomp down the hall to the room Joyce called "the office," stare straight into Joyce's eyes and declare, "Those other people who

come here are all lazy and they're not fit for the job."

To hear Cora tell it, she was the best attendant Joyce ever had. Cora would never say it flat out, but Joyce knew what she was thinking. Joyce could hear oddly distorted stories being told about her in the kitchen, a place that Cora imagined safely out of Joyce's hearing range.

"Poor woman," Cora would tell the neighbor, "if Joyce didn't have me to take care of her, I don't think she could stay in her own home." Once Cora whispered, "She's absolutely helpless, you know," to Joyce's niece as they stood in the open doorway of the living room, "I hate to think what would happen to her if something ever happened to me."

What Cora saw as the helplessness of Joyce's disabled body was the simple daily grind of physical need. Cerebral palsy takes a toll on a body, not to mention the breast cancer and the stroke. It was enough to make the simplest things, like getting into and out of bed, impossible. For Cora, every morning brought the same drill: reposition Joyce in the bed, wash her arms and legs, survey her private parts to make sure she was clean down there, wash her face, pull on the clothes, work the long tube of the Foley catheter through the leg of her loose fitting pants. Cora had to learn exactly where to place the sling of the hydraulic Hoyer lift to make it safe and comfortable for the transfer out of bed, and just how far back to position the tilt-in-space wheelchair seat as the lift was lowering so that Joyce's head would land on the head support. It was a lot to take in, and the rolling and lifting made Cora's back hurt. She didn't want to do it, didn't want to be that close to someone else's body, but she needed the job. Her husband of 37 years had recently had a stroke, now they only had Cora's income to live on.

The house itself was anything but welcoming. It was smack in the middle of a declining neighborhood in the older part of Austin, Texas. The feeble attempts at landscaping begun by the previous owner had long since failed and loose shingles threatened to fall from the roof any minute. But, most importantly to Joyce, there was a bank, an ER, a Chili's and a major bus line within rolling distance. At 47, living alone in her own home, Joyce had arranged the house to accommodate her outlaw body. She'd moved a hospital style bed into her large bedroom, had someone hang a shelf on the wall and mount her television there so she could watch from bed, and equipped the room with all kinds of remote controls so she'd have a room that was all her own, everything accessible.

There was a tiny guest room full of empty boxes and old files, and an office where Joyce went to write, to pay bills, send faxes to the pharmacy. Able-bodied visitors to the house had no place to sit because Joyce had removed all of the furniture to make room for her wheelchair. The fake wood kitchen table, which had no chairs, was set at just the right height for her use (and her use only).

"Most of my friends bring their own chairs," she'd tell people who asked about the chairs, "if you're uncomfortable, go get a folding chair from the garage." If you went out there, you'd find that all the interior doors had been removed and were resting against the back wall, waiting for a time when somebody who could walk might need them. For a time when somebody gave a damn about privacy.

“It’s my house,” Joyce half shouted to Cora when she complained about having to use a bathroom without a door, “I’m the one who lives here, not you.”

On days when Cora got to work on time and got Joyce up and in her chair before 9:00 a.m., Joyce would eat a quick breakfast and load up her purse with the spare change from the kitchen table, throw in some chewing gum and at least one can of Coke, check to see that she had the electronic door opener for her front door, then strap the cell phone into its case on the arm rest of her power wheelchair, lock the windows, turn the air conditioner down to save money, and speed down the ramped entrance at her front door out into the world at top speed (which was approximately 8 miles per hour). She had things to do. Always. Things a helpless person wouldn’t do.

Like beauty pageants. When she was in college in Illinois, her home state, Joyce competed in the Ms. Wheelchair Illinois pageant on a dare from her dorm mate. She won “Miss Congeniality” by repeating “Isn’t it great to be alive in America today?” to every person she met, her tongue so far in her cheek that it left a rough spot in the soft pink tissue of her mouth. That was the last time anyone would accuse her of being congenial. After graduation, she moved to Texas on her own, leaving her big Catholic family behind because she wanted to live in a place where she could be outside all year long. Then came the Master’s Degree in Social Work and a full time job for over a decade helping people get out of nursing homes. She wore a shirt that said “Free Our People: Our Homes, Not Nursing Homes!” In the 80s, she became one of a handful of noisy, sometimes rude disabled activists who pushed Austin’s public transit authority into making it possible for people like her, who negotiate the world from a seated position, to ride the city bus. Whether it was parking her power chair in front of bus to make her point, or writing newspaper articles about disability rights, she was out in the community every day, kicking up trouble. In 1992, two years after the passage of the ADA, she sued the manager of her condo for failing to provide a wheelchair lift into the pool on the property, and won. At the 10 year anniversary celebration for the ADA in 2000, she was named “Disabled Employee of the Year” for her work with a local advocacy group.

Cora could never have imagined Joyce as an active community presence and she never bothered to ask a single question about the awards that lined the walls of Joyce’s small office.

The truth is, Cora could not imagine much at all. Life had tired her out. She wanted to do the absolute minimum of work each day: make a small breakfast, run a load of laundry, mop the kitchen floor, get Joyce out of bed and up in her chair. Period. There were some days when just doing that seemed heroic. The physical work was hard for her. Her hands were strong, but occasionally failed her when arthritis swelled her joints and made it hard to hold onto things. Though she was only in her mid 50s, her back hurt all the time. Her tired feet smacked the tile floor with an irregular rhythm, the lingering limp from an old injury.

Joyce wasn’t much better at imaging Cora’s life or asking questions. What she saw in Cora was the able body, what she felt when she looked at Cora was her own vulnerability. Joyce’s body was the one that folded at the waist, relentlessly, recklessly. Cora’s body worked the way it was supposed to. Joyce had hands that never obeyed orders, feet that kicked out from under her without any provocation. Cora’s

step was steady. Joyce's back writhed against the plane of the custom molded backrest of her wheelchair, wearing a track in the fabric there, pressing against the foam. Cora could sit anywhere. When Joyce spoke, she made sounds that were sometimes intelligible words, sometimes not. Hers was the body that spit and sprayed out parts of every meal onto the floor, the countertop, her shirt. The dance that played out between Joyce and Cora was determined by something deeper than skin color, more complicated than "I'm your boss." There was so much need; Joyce's need for help she could count on, Cora's need for the job. Both of them needing respect that they so often didn't receive. And, like all attendant care relationships, the awkward intimacy required when one person takes charge of another person's physical care. Joyce needed Cora to be The Reliable One, the One Who Cares, so she was willing to imagine Cora that way, at least until the trouble started.

Cora came to view herself as indispensable through a well oiled habit of editing reality, a practice of remembering only what fit into her idea of their situation. She would forget taking the twenty dollar bill from Joyce's kitchen drawer, or the Vicodin from the bedside table (after all, her husband needed it). The weekly time sheet entries listing "20" in the hours column when she had barely worked 12, those were details too tiny to concern Cora. Offering her nephew the box of Godiva chocolates that Fran had sent to Joyce seemed like a small additional tax that Cora levied for her services. Stuffing Joyce's new shirt in to the bag of laundry she'd brought from home, "Well," Cora mused, "she'll never miss it." It wasn't that Joyce didn't notice these indiscretions, she did. It was just that she'd had so many attendants, and they all had their flaws. And once in a while Cora would do something surprising, like the day she stayed late to go to the doctor with Joyce because she was worried about the fever. Maybe she did care.

The delicate balance between friendship and animosity that they'd achieved in their brief time together changed abruptly one Wednesday evening when Joyce's catheter bag sprung a leak: all over the tile floor in the kitchen, on the carpet in the hallway, in a small puddle by the side of the bed. It was the alone time in between Cora's shift and the evening attendant's hours, but Joyce had a neighbor to call.

"Uh, Debbie," she started, "I'm in kind of a mess over here," Joyce began.

"Joyce?" Debbie asked. "Is that you?"

"Yes," Joyce said, remembering that people have a hard time understanding her on the phone. "Need some help. Could you come over?"

"Give me a couple of minutes," Debbie reassured, "and I'll be over." Debbie lived in the house next door with her aging Mom and Dad, and her two girls.

Debbie took care of all of them, all the time. Joyce would often call over there during the time she was alone in the house, needing something. She imagined that when the phone rang, everyone would sigh, and one of them would say, "Wonder what Joyce needs this time." But, every time, Debbie would be there in a few minutes, willing to do whatever Joyce asked her to do. This time, she came over to contain the spill until the attendant could take care of it. When the Wednesday night guy, Evan, showed up, Joyce showed him the leaking bag and asked, "Can you change it for me?"

“Well,” he stammered, “I’ve never done that before,” he said shyly.

“I can show you how,” Joyce reassured, “it’s not that hard.”

When he gloved up and went to check things out, he determined that the bag wasn’t leaking. It was just that the clamp on the drainage tube was open. So, he emptied the bag, closed and double checked the clamp, did the other chores he needed to do, and left.

Cora arrived the next morning and found the catheter bag floating in a bedpan full to the brim with cold, murky urine. She could see a good sized hole in the bag.

“I don’t understand why you keep that guy!” she complained. “He just wrapped the bag up and left it for me to change.” And with that, Cora was off on her three favorite tirades: “Nobody but me does any work around here,” “I’m just a slave!” and “All those other people are lazy and not fit for the job.”

The tirades had started to take up valuable space in the house, each one seemed to occupy a room. When Cora was in the “I’m a slave” room, all she could talk about was the abuse she suffered. Joyce pictured Cora walking down the hallway to the next room where everyone was “lazy and not fit for the job” and remembering all the times her work had been undervalued, every time she’d had to pull up the slack for someone else. The “nobody but me does any work around here” room could have been the office, because it perpetually needed cleaning, or the master bathroom, which always had either a leaking faucet or a spill on the floor. The low hum of resentment and resistance pulsed in the hallways every day. Some days it was louder than others, but it was always there, waiting to be unleashed.

“I bet you didn’t tell him to change the bag,” Cora said with a measured disgust in her voice.

“You don’t know what happened,” Joyce retorted. “Slow down, it’s not like that.”

“Well, what the hell is it then?” Cora replied, irritated.

“Evan thought it was just the clamp,” Joyce started, but before she get much more than that out of her mouth, Cora cut her off. “Why are you even bothering to defend him? He doesn’t do anything!”

Joyce took a moment to decide what to say next. “Why are you assuming that you always know?”

“Because I do!” Cora replied. “I’m the one who keeps your house going, and if it weren’t for me, you’d have to go to a nursing home!”

“You can’t talk to me that way,” Joyce interrupted, “I’ve been living on my own for twenty years and whether it’s you or somebody else who helps me, I belong here.”

Cora didn’t know exactly what to say to that. Things got quiet. She left the bedroom for a minute, as if she had something to fetch. When she got back, she said, “I don’t get paid enough to do this work,” as she backed away from the bed pan on the floor. Joyce just let those words hang in the air, wondering what would happen next.

Cora went to the closet. “What do you want to wear today?” she asked.

"I don't care, maybe the blue jeans with the elastic," Joyce began, "and that flowered shirt with the short sleeves."

Cora dressed Joyce without saying anything else, sliding the pants on over the damaged catheter bag.

"Aren't you going to change the bag?" Joyce demanded. Cora didn't respond. Joyce asked again.

"You're not going to put that new bag on, are you?" and to that, Cora responded with a high and mighty jerk of her head and said, "Well, he didn't put it on, so why should I?"

It only took a minute, one of those minutes that seem to last a long time, for Joyce to screech, "Oh, Jesus, just change the fucking bag!" in her loudest, harshest voice.

"You see?" she says. "Nobody else gets this from you," Cora retorted. "I stand up for my self and I get all the grief."

"You call this standing up for yourself?" Joyce shot back.

Joyce managed to keep her body motionless on the bed. "What grief am I giving you?" she said to Cora, "I've been more lenient with you than I should have been."

"Lenient!" Cora shouted back, tossing one of Joyce's shoes onto the floor. "You're on me all the time, nothing's ever right with you."

"I say lenient because I've let you get away with taking my money and my meds, with doing less than you should," Joyce explained, "because I wanted this to work out."

"I can't believe you're saying this! You're accusing me of stealing now?"

"I know you've been stealing," Joyce asserted.

Another period of silence passed between them, then Cora sighed and said, "I'm tired of it. I'm tired of being the one who always gets the grief from you. Every part of me hurts, it's not fair, and I'm tired of this whole shitty mess." And then, without another word, Cora repositioned Joyce, pulled down the jeans and began to switch out the catheter bag so that Joyce would be clean and dry all day. There was no more talking after that, just Cora doing what she had committed to do and Joyce trying not to get herself stranded any further.

Once Joyce was dressed, they went to the kitchen where Cora made the usual breakfast: a bottle of orange juice, a granola bar, a cup of instant hot chocolate.

It was 10:15 a.m. Cora grabbed her purse and asked if there was anything else she could do. Joyce knew that she was supposed to say, "No, that's it for today," and then Cora would say "See you tomorrow." That was the drill. But today it was different.

"There is one more thing that I do want you to do." Joyce said, "Give me the key to my house."

Cora repeated that back to Joyce. "Give you the key?" she asked. "Give you the key?"

"Yes," Joyce insisted, "Give it back to me."

"So," she said, pausing, "you don't want me to come back tomorrow?"

"That's correct," Joyce said, quietly.

Then Cora fired her last round: "See, I speak my mind and I get shafted. I say what I need to say and I get burned. Other people get away with doing nothing."

Joyce said to her, "I know, you're just tired. You're tired."

"You'll never find anybody as reliable as me."

Joyce nodded and said, "I know."

"Or dependable," Cora added.

"I know," Joyce continued, wondering how much longer this would go on.

And then Cora handed the key to Joyce, turned and walked out the door. Joyce half expected her to slam the door like she usually did, but this time, Cora closed it very, very softly. Joyce rolled down the hall to her office to call the home health agency. The whole house was quiet, the hum in the hallway was gone.