

Jaime sets the tray on the bedside table and moves it in front of me.

I'm sullen. "No one else in ICU has to eat."

"No one else in ICU is conscious," she replies, with an indulgent smile.

Lucky dogs.

Jaime, my nurse, has soft brown eyes in a kind face that's framed by frizzy, dark brown, shoulder-length hair. Twenty days ago, completely dependent on her, I hadn't even known her name as I took inventory of my destroyed body.

"That doesn't look so good," I'd remarked, assessing my right-upper bicep, black like a charred piece of driftwood.

"It's just bruised," she said. "It will heal."

"That's one hell of a bruise," I said, as if this were all normal for me.

"What's wrong with my legs?" I asked.

"They're broken," she said. She might have been speaking about the weather. *Yes, today is sunny and very nice. Yes, your legs are broken.*

"Both of them?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

Would you like fries with that?

Now, 20 days later, I can't imagine being here without her.

I only remember bits and pieces of the day or two after I was run over by the car. Jaime fills in the blanks: "I waited with you in room 18 while staff and equipment were gathered for your first trip to the OR."

"Was I conscious?" I ask.

"You were in and out," she says. "You asked me if you were in heaven."

"What did you tell me?"

"I said 'no,' and thought to myself, if this is heaven, we're all in trouble."

At her revelation, the right side of my mouth turns up. Almost a smile.

At 20 years old, life as I knew it has ended. My body has been irrevocably altered by severe leg injuries—to escape the pain, boredom, and reality of my situation, I have regressed to the age of 10, possibly 14. In the early days after my admission, the nurses would refer to me as "the leg," but by now I'm sure they're calling me "the brat." Because I am.

I plod through lunch, endure my second dressing change, and as I contemplate my limited choices to pass the time until dinner and the next dressing change, Jaime enters with a mischievous look on her face.

"Want to get out of this room?" she asks.

"Really?" My face brightens, then falls. "How?"

She gathers up the wires, tubes, and machines my body



The Brat

A patient remembers a nurse who hung in there.

now requires and fastens it all to the bed. She drapes a large square sheet of plastic over my leg, throws open the glass doors of my room, and pushes my bed into the corridor. The wheels roll on the nondescript carpet. We pass through the giant gray double doors that lead out of the ICU and stop in the corridor just before the entrance to the OR. Sun shines through four bay windows.

Jaime moves my bed parallel to the windows. The view isn't much, just a fenced-off area cleared for a construction project: dirt and a chain-link fence. The mesh of the fence looks like a larger version of the skin grafts on my leg.

"That will be the new physicians and surgeons building," Jaime informs me. The sun streams through the glass and, like invisible ribbons, floats down onto my skin as if to provide

me with the human contact I have been denied for the past weeks.

I watch people and cars move along the less than busy street. It's so colorful: red, blue, green, bathed in the yellow of the sun. I reach out and touch the warm glass. One of my blue machines erupts into shrill beeps. I ignore it. Jaime punches buttons and the shrieking stops. I take a deep breath and exhale.

There isn't much to look at, but it's enough. The corners of my mouth turn upward as I lie in front of the tall glass windows, basking in the sun's rays.

"Is that a smile?" Jaime teases.

"No." I give her a playful glare before I break into a grin.

For a moment, as I gaze out the window doing something normal, I am just a kid. It is a reprieve and a reminder of another world, a world I still think is within my reach.

It was Jaime who took me on bed walks to see the babies and cajoled me into an air bed to avoid pressure sores, Jaime whose boys drew me pictures, Jaime who was always patient, Jaime who I trusted and relied on.

Twenty-four years later, asking about her recollections for my memoir, I included a question I wasn't sure I wanted answered: "I was so awful. How did you get stuck with me?"

"I volunteered," she replied. "I liked you and wanted to help you recover. I also liked challenges, and your case from the standpoint of your wounds was challenging."

I smiled. She *chose* me. ▼

Tiana Tozer, a former Paralympic medalist and humanitarian aid worker, is a writer and public speaker. She lives in Portland, OR. For more information, visit www.tianatozer.com. Reflections is coordinated by Madeleine Mysko, MA, RN: mmysko@comcast.net. Illustration by Eric Collins / ecol-art.com.