

Ramped

LISA PETERSON

Two years ago Victor had an accident. He was working the first shift on a Wednesday. Just like any other day he and Duane were hanging out along the west wall of the warehouse, enjoying the last few moments before the workday started. Duane made some foul remark about the new desk girl, Victor was laughing. Then commotion, lights, people in his face ripping at his clothes and fading voices. He was in an ambulance and awoke in a hospital bed. Everything after that was a haze of doctors and bad news. The end result was paralysis from the hips down and life long disability from the company. He later learned that a co-worker had backed up a forklift, pinning him to the wall. It could have been worse. That's what everyone said.

Victor sat on his porch fiddling with his half smoked cigarette. The air was stale, not like Spring at all. On the other side of the front door his family was celebrating. His wife and daughter had been planning this for months, they had all yelled, "Surprise!" as he rolled through the door after physical therapy. It was no surprise to him though, he had overheard a dozen conversations on the planning of the event. He'd have rather spent his sixtieth birthday alone in the corner of a bar. Victor could hear one of the grandkids crying inside and decided to light another cigarette.

There was a time when he would have just left and gone to the hardware store because he needed some screws for that loose leg on the dining room table or hinges for the bathroom cabinet. He could stretch his escape for over an hour as he wandered the store and stopped on his way home for a Slurpie. Those days were over.

He studied the ramp that led from the porch down to the walkway across the lawn. He remembered the humiliating day his son, David, had measured the width of the wheels on his chair. The next day, the sawing and hammering echoed through the streets, announcing the arrival of his ramp. Of course he needed it, and everyone in the neighborhood already knew of his condition. He just wished it could have shown up quietly one morning without all of the commotion. Maybe there was some adult equivalent to the Tooth Fairy. She knew how to do things discreetly; he would leave his legs under a pillow, and she would gently slide a ramp next to his front porch while everyone slept.

Victor heard someone rattling the front door, it had never been an easy door to open, especially for the grandkids.

“Franpa?”

He subtly put out his cigarette to the right of his chair. “Janny?” It was useless to attempt to turn around.

“Franpa! Mama says time for cake!” The three year old made a skip like move and was standing at his knee. She searched the same excitement for cake on his face. Not wanting to disappoint her, he smiled, and shook the damp mood he had been accumulating.

“Well let’s go in then, do you want to ride on the roof of the bus?” She nodded and crawled up in his lap. He carefully lifted her onto his shoulders. “Hold on, we have to make a U-Turn.” Victor honked and vroomed and made all the right sounds as they motored their way to the kitchen where everyone had gathered.

The song was always too loud and the room was a blur of faces. He couldn’t see his wife but he could hear her somewhee near him, her singing voice was achingly identifiable. January, still on his lap, made the first attempt at the candles while Victor swiftly blew behind her. With the candles out, she pressed her round hands together and

again searched his face. She was his sixth grandchild and the only one he liked. The first two were twins and they showed up like a hurricane. His wife and daughter planning baby showers and the church people donating chairs with belts and bags of clothes that smelled like bleached shit. Then they were born; and the babies cried non stop, if not one then the other. For some reason they were always at his house, along with his exhausted daughter and her hopeless boyfriend. Victor's wife would flutter around them all, pacing and coddling. She was clearly happy to be needed. Not Victor, he wanted his quiet house back. Those two boys never stopped tormenting everyone, even now, at age ten, or twelve, he wasn't sure, they were chasing the cat around, one with hand cuffs and the other with a doll stroller. After them came the first grand daughter. When he saw the tiny pink shirt that read "The princess has arrived!", he understood how this would unfold as well. There were two more, less notable as they were muted by the energy of the first three. Six years went by before January came along. She was the only one who knew him in the wheelchair. All the others, they had seen him go from a man who could chase them to a man who would run them over instead. Janny didn't know any different, she came with a serene simplicity and that he could truly appreciate.

She slipped off his lap, beckoned by the cake slice her mom was going to share with her. Janny was replaced with an unmanageable paper plate containing a bright square cake slice sliding all around on it. He scraped off the neon blue frosting to avoid the panic he might feel if his shit turned green from consuming it.

Someone had tied three balloons to the back of his chair. Probably those damned boys. David walked by. "Hey! Take these off my chair." Without saying anything David began to work on the knots. "Dave?"

"Yup?"

"Why did you put the ramp facing off the front of the porch?"

“What do you mean?”

“My ramp David! Why is it facing the grass and not the driveway?”

“I can’t get these balloons, let me find some scissors.” He sighed and walked away.

Forty minutes passed, the chaos continued. He sat there and watched everyone, satisfied that they were finding this as unenjoyable as him. Victor chuckled to himself, then barked for his grandson to take this plate already.

January was at his knee again.

“Franpa?”

“Janny?”

“Franpa, do you have any karters?”

“Karters?”

“Yes, karters.”

“Say it again honey?”

“Karters....karterrrs....for buying gum from Izbell.”

“Ahhhh. Ha! My wallet is on the little table next to my bed. Can you get it for me?” Typically he would never encourage a three year old to chew gum, especially not inside his house. Today he did not care.

She had to look for it twice but when she found it he gave her a dollar.

“Now you tell Isabelle this is for four pieces of gum okay?” She nodded with big eyes and ran off screaming for Isabelle.

“David?”

“Oh, sorry, I forgot the scissors” He began to walk away again.

“Wait. I want to know why the ramp isn’t leading to the driveway?”

“I don’t know dad, I built you a fine ramp, you have been using it for almost two years.”

“I wanted the ramp facing the other way.” He grumbled

“Let me ask mom where the scissors are.”

Victor rolled back out to the porch. If he had made it, it would have stretched out a little further and not been so steep. It would have been rather simple actually, the railing was held in by wood screws and could be removed in one piece. Then he would add a few boards to the top of the ramp making it slightly longer. Then fasten it to lead to the driveway. This made him wonder where his tool box was, it had been too long since he had used it. He tried to picture the interior of his garage in his mind, he hadn’t been in there for so long, it was a vague image. He pulled a dollar bill from his wallet and used it to make a few crude measurements of the porch and the railing. A car drove by. Dusk would hit in about an hour.

He listened to the muffled commotion within his home for a moment. Then he slowly descended the ramp and continued to the sidewalk. He faced his chair towards the house once more. He had been outside for at least twenty minutes and no one had noticed. Victor wondered how much longer before they realized his absence. Maybe they wouldn’t.

It was only about two miles to the gas station and another half to Lowes. By car, fifteen minutes. By chair, maybe an hour. He made it to the end of his street and awkwardly maneuvered his chair off the sidewalk and onto the gravel shoulder. The balloons flapped behind him and he cursed his grandkids. The gravel was slowing him down

so he placed his chair on the two lane road, if a car hit him he would only feel it from the hips up. He let this thought entertain him for a minute. After the accident he would have dreams of being cut in half, his lower half would be running far ahead, while his upper half just sat there and watched.

A pickup truck was coming at him, Victor felt like he was participating in some sick form of chicken. The truck waited until the last second then swerved around him. The space between the truck and the chair was so small that it hit one of the balloons and made it pop. Victor began to howl with the laughter of a crazy man, a man who just might be indestructible.

By the time he reached the 7-11 he was exhausted. The Slurpie machine was not set up for someone of his height, but he managed to make himself one anyway. He decided to rest for a bit out front and enjoy his Slurpie. He had another half mile to Lowes, not too far and all sidewalk. What he hadn't considered was how he would get back. He wondered if January would be there still. The two balloons left on his chair had began to deflate. The sun was sitting low as well. Time to move on.

It only took another ten minutes and he was there. Lowes. He plowed through the parking lot not paying any attention to the cars. Once inside he paused to take it in. "Sweet Christmas," he said to himself. Towers of tools and wood, nails, plumbing, flooring, lawn mowers and grills. It smelled like fertilizer and caulking. "It's been too long."

Remembering his mission he proceeded in.

"Dad.....DAD!" They were behind him, hollering. He kept going until David was beside him slightly breathless.

"Dad, what the hell are you doing?!" They both stopped and stared at each other. "We didn't know where you went and we were searching all over the house for you!" Victor continued to look at his son in silence. He

was feeling small and he didn't like it. "Mrs. Thompson called mom and said she saw you out on the street." David was clearly annoyed. He did not want to be the one here dealing with his dad.

"I'm fixing my ramp." He watched David's face crumple up in judgment. Victor turned away and continued towards his destination. He knew David wouldn't leave him here, but if he did he didn't care.

"God damn it Dad." He heard him say under his breath. "Let me call mom and tell her you're fine. I'll help you get whatever it is you think you need."