

Excerpt from “Was it Spectacular? A Memoir by Anne B. Thomas

In Dr. Rafferty’s office, at the Monterey medical complex, all of his medical degrees are displayed in gold metal frames. His desk and chairs are sleek Scandinavian teak wood with sand colored cushions. Contemporary, light splattered paintings cover all the walls. Off the hallway outside is a giant Koi pond and huge hanging cement disc flower planters. Everything here is sleek and modern. Everything except me.

Sitting behind his desk Dr. Raferty asks me, “So why are you here today?” as if I’m annoying him. As if I’m here to sell him something.

I take a deep breath, “I have another urinary tract infection.”

He places his hands together on his desk and clasps them in a half-hearted effort to feign interest, but quickly changes position to straighten his wide Armani tie.

“They’re very frequent,” he says, as he glances absently at the calendar splayed on his desk.

“I know.” My shoulders curl inward. I don’t want to be here anymore than he wants me here. I’d love to be healthy. I’d love to never see another doctor again. Especially him. For the last seven months since the accident, my life has been nothing but doctors.

Shuffling through my file he asks, “Have you had anymore small strokes?”

“No. Thank goodness.” Another chill moves through my body. God that was scary, the headache, not being able to speak. I’m too young to have a stroke.

Suddenly he closes my file, shifts in his seat so his back is straight and his shoulders squared. He lifts his head, looks me in the eyes, and says, “I’ve seen a lot of you these last few months.” His voice, like his eyes, is flat and I feel pinned down like a man in a straight jacket.

“I know.” Childishly, I look around Dr. Raferty’s office to avoid his eyes. “They told me in Rehab the first year would be hard as my body adjusts to the broken spinal cord.” I bring my eyes back to his. Appealing for understanding from someone who should already know all of this. He remains erect, immovable. A minute passes by in silence. Then two. I wonder if I’m being dismissed and should leave his office when he says, “I think you need to seriously consider checking yourself into a nursing home.”

“What?” My stomach falls like a sudden elevator drop. Bile rises in my throat. All I can picture is my Great Aunt Vange, sitting up in her bed, in a public nursing home in Bridgeport, Connecticut. There is only a partial curtain for privacy, a long line of beds down both sides of the room, smelling constantly of urine and disinfectant. That cannot be my future. “Are you serious? I’m only 18.”

With his hands firmly clasped together, he says, “That’s right, which means you will live a long time and be a burden on your family for the rest of your life,” he pauses, “Unless you check

yourself into a nursing home.” His face is rock hard, his posture all sharp angles, his opinion firm. This is cold medical science at play.

“But I just fought my way through Rehab, I’m going to make a life for myself, I can’t be locked away and have my world limited to a nursing home.” I’m fighting back tears. “My family loves me.”

“And if you love them, you will do the right thing and go into a home.”

I can feel my insides start to heave. The tears are now burning at the back of my eyes. This is a nightmare that never ends. I’m trying so hard. I’ve already lost everything. My body, my friends, my dreams and now he wants to take away my freedom too and any hope I have for a future.

I tell him, “I’ve gotta go,” then spin around in my wheelchair, grope for the door knob through blurry eyes, open it and leave before I break down.

I push myself down the long corridor, not looking at anyone. I don’t want them to see my face. I pass the koi pond and push open the doors to the outside. I look at my watch. My sister Marilyn will be here in ten minutes. I find a corner of the building that affords a little privacy and I let go. I shudder and gulp as tears of anguish and fear pour down my face. I don’t want to go into a nursing home. I’m too young. I’d wither and die surrounded by the smells of illness and bodily functions gone awry with no privacy, no control and nothing to look forward to but mail, family visits and outside food. Zero to do except watch a shared TV, read books and stare out the window, in the company of decaying old people.

But I don’t want to be a burden on anyone either. I physically choke at the thought. I hate being dependent on Marilyn and the rest of the family for rides and assistance. I’m humiliated by the fact that I can’t control my bowel and bladder. I’m everything Thomases are not. We’re strong, self reliant and independent. I can’t be weak and needy. I have to be tough. Anger rises to replace my shame. How dare he tell me to shut myself away. I still have a lot to offer. I’m still me. This broken body does not change who I am, just how I express it. My arms stiffen with the vitalizing force of fury. I will prove him wrong. I will do everything everybody else does. I don’t care how hard I have to work to get it. And I’ll do it without ever asking for help.