

ROOM
203C

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Room 203C
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*“Just a little help gives you a little hope
and a little hope can build a dream...”*

PROLOGUE

The old man shuffled slowly across the tiled floor, his keys jangling against the leg of his green pants, the noise harsh in the quiet space. Lowering his lanky frame, he stooped under the yellow tape and stared at the warning signs. They were posted everywhere; a reminder that the floor was under construction. There were boxes of tiles, piles of wood, brick and metal scattered in all directions.

Shrugging, he pushed his cleaning cart ahead of him as he had done so many times before. It was strange to see the whole floor empty of beds, machines, medical staff and of course, children. Stopping at a door he reached into his pocket, slipped on his eyeglasses and peered through the small window set into the wood above the room number. Staring through the misted glass he reached for the one key in his collection that fit the lock on the faded wood entryway.

His fingers found the strangely shaped key and inserted it into the lock. The key turned easily and he grasped the knob in one hand and pushed the door open. The light went on automatically once his body passed the sensor near the door. It was the only modern convenience in the small room.

The old man gazed around the small space as though seeing it for the first time. In the center of the room sat a child sized table with two chairs that he had built out of maple. He remembered the nights he spent, sanding and staining the wood until it was smooth

to the touch. His eyes flickered to the cabinets and drawers he had built into the natural recesses of the walls.

He walked to the nearest cabinet marked "Games for long days" and slid open the top drawer. His wrinkled face shifted as he smiled at the collection of games, the cardboard covers worn with age and use. He closed his eyes, remembering himself standing in Mendelson's Toy Shop.

Mr. Mendelson was walking toward him, smiling, but Max could see the man's eyes focused on his twisted left hand. Mendelson stopped and looked at the collection of boxed games Max held in his good hand.

"Max, what brings you here? What's with the pile of games?" Mendelson slipped his glasses from his eyes to his forehead and held his hand out for the board games.

"Hello, Mr. Mendelson," Max replied handing over the boxes and moving his twisted left hand into the back pocket of his uniform pants. It was a motion he had repeated thousands of times in response to staring eyes.

"I am buying games for the children in the hospital," Max continued as he reached into his front pocket for the money he kept folded in there.

"What, are you their parents all of a sudden? You are a garbage man in that place, Max," Mendelson said as he walked to the counter, placed the games down and began to ring the cost into the register.

"I am part of the maintenance staff, Mr. Mendelson. I am not a garbage man," Max replied softly.

"Maintenance, schmaintenance, Max. You have no business..."

"...Here is twenty dollars, Mr. Mendelson," Max said quickly, interrupting the lecture. He laid the bill on the counter and scooped up the games with his twisted hand. "I don't need the change," and he spun around leaving the storekeeper muttering.

Max opened his eyes and he was back in room 203C, his hands resting on the top game in the open drawer. With a sigh, he turned

and crossed the small space and sat heavily into one of the small chairs.

“So hard to catch my breath these days,” Max said aloud and his hand, once so misshapen, reached for the names carved into the table top. *All these children*, he thought as his fingers felt for the grooves in the wood that spelled their names. *They all had a story. I wonder if...*

His thought never completed, a sharp pain rocked his chest and Max slumped forward and fell from the tiny chair.

It was many hours later that the construction crew found him in the small room. The men tried to revive him but soon realized he was dead. Phone calls were made and police reports filled out in triplicate. Max was placed in an ambulance and taken to the city morgue. There was no next of kin, no family to notify, only a phone number which went to an answering machine.

Scheduled for an unmarked grave at Potter’s Field, Max was placed in a city hearse five days after his death. The driver signed the necessary paperwork and got into the vehicle. He had just put the big car in gear when two police cars and a large black SUV with lights flashing pulled up in front of him.

The driver got out and walked towards the big black car when one of the police officers approached and told him to get back in his vehicle and follow the police escort.

“Who is this guy?” The driver stammered out. “I thought he was an unknown stiff headed for Potters.”

The officer shrugged and said, “Some friend of the Mayor is all I know. Just get in the car and keep up with us.”

The driver nodded and went back into the hearse. He glanced at the paperwork again and scratched his head. “Maxwell Strengher, no known family,” he said to himself as he drove behind the police car. “Who the heck was he?”

1

1944

The wheels of the stretcher bounced along the pitted sidewalk as the ambulance workers pushed it swiftly towards the hospital doors. The small boy on the stretcher tried to see where he was but he could not sit up; every movement hurt. He could hear his mother telling his brother Aaron to run to the shul and get his father.

Large wooden doors swung open and an antiseptic smell filled the boy's nose. Figures in white passed by his eyes as he wheeled further into the building. Finally, they stopped moving and the men who had been pushing him lifted him from the narrow stretcher to a small bed. Bright light filled his eyes when he stared up so he turned his head to the side and looked for his mother.

She was talking to a woman all dressed in white; white shoes, white stockings, white dress, even a white cap on her head. He heard his mother say his name and his birthday. Someone began to remove his pajamas and stuck a thermometer in his mouth. There was a sharp pinch in his arm and so many voices all talking at the same time. The boy began to cry and the whole room began to spin. He heard someone saying, "Shh...just sleep now." Then everything went dark.

The boy woke up in a small room all by himself. He tried to sit up but his legs would not move. He reached for them but only his

right hand touched his legs, his left hand didn't respond. He tried to move his hands out from under the stiff white sheet but only his right hand obeyed. Pulling down the sheet with his one hand he saw his left hand was twisted in a strange position. No matter how he tried the boy could not get it to straighten out. Pain began to shoot up and down his legs and he started to cry.

The door to the small room opened and a woman in a white uniform came bustling in.

"There, there, young man," she said. "No need for tears. Your mother and father are meeting with Dr. Adams and they will be here shortly. I am Nurse Connors and I will be taking care of you. Let's get you ready for the doctor, shall we?"

The nurse began to remove the boys dressing gown and helped him to urinate into a bottle. She washed him gently and replaced his gown. Glancing at his legs and his twisted hand she made a tutting sound and placed his head back on a pillow.

"What shall we call you young man? Do you have a name?"

She reached for his chart which hung on the wall above the boys head. After reading silently for a few moments, the nurse pursed her lips and stared at the boy.

"So you are, Maxwell and you are six years old," said the nurse.

The boy nodded solemnly and then stared off behind the nurse. His eyes widened as he saw that outside of his little room was a much bigger room, bigger than his father's shul. The room was filled with rows and rows of children all encased in metal boxes that were connected to machines that made strange noises.

"I believe I will call you, 'Max.' That is a much easier name, don't you think?" The nurse asked as she stepped closer to the bed and blocked his view of the ward beyond the door.

"Why are all those boys and girls in those metal things?" Max asked.

"They are getting well, Max, just like you will. Don't you want to get well?"

Max nodded. "My legs hurt and my hand is broke and twisty," he said.

“That’s all to be expected, Max. Dr. Adams will explain it all to you when he comes by,” the nurse replied as she moved toward the door.

“Why am I by myself in this room?” Max asked.

The nurse paused at the door, “Your father, the Rabbi, wants you to have special food from home. No hospital food for you Max, so we had to put you in here to make sure you don’t get the wrong meals.”

Max watched as Nurse Connors left the room and stopped at one of the beds where a boy in a metal container was waving his hand through a small opening in the side of the metal. Max could see something was stuck on the boys face and he was having trouble talking. Whatever was stuck to the boy’s face connected to a long clear tube that disappeared into one of the machines next to the bed.

He tried to see further into the big room but stretching made his legs hurt so he stopped. From his position, it seemed like all the children he could see had the same tube things on their face. As Max watched, more nurses appeared and they walked around the big room stopping at different children. Some of the nurses carried basins of water and others had hospital gowns for the children. Fascinated, Max could see the nurses reach inside the metal containers, wash the children and change their gowns without taking them out of their metal beds.

His legs began to hurt worse than before and Max began to cry. He wanted his mama or even his papa...somebody to come and help him. He was still crying when Nurse Connors came back into the room. This time she was with a tall man wearing a long white coat. The man looked at Max but he didn’t smile. His face was very serious, like his papa at shul. He had very little hair on his head but he had a mustache under his nose and a bright blue bow tie.

“Well, well,” said the man.

Nurse Connors looked at the man and said, “This is Maxwell, Dr. Adams. He is six years old and his father is a rabbi.”

“Maxwell, eh, I see, well, hello, Maxwell. I am Dr. Adams and I

will be taking care of you. I met your parents yesterday and I spoke to them just a few minutes ago. Your father left to go to his synagogue but your mother will be in to see you soon.

I am going to take a look at you Maxwell, so stop your crying and lie still," Dr. Adams said as he approached the bed.

Nurse Connors gently pulled down Max's sheet and stepped back so that the doctor could get closer.

Max watched the doctor touch his twisted hand and felt his hands along his legs. He tried not to cry and Nurse Connors wiped his face with a cloth. The doctor spent a long time examining his body, sometimes he stopped and wrote some words on a piece of paper that was clipped to a small wooden board. He pulled a stethoscope out of his white coat and listened to Max's chest.

He handed the board with the paper to Nurse Connors and looked at Max. Max felt his heart beating very fast and he began to cry again.

"Here now, Maxwell! Stop all these tears," Dr. Adams said loudly as Nurse Connors came closer and put Max's sheet back on him. "Do you want to know what is wrong with you?" The doctor asked in a softer tone.

Max sobbed and nodded as Dr. Adams sat on the edge of the bed. Nurse Connors wiped his face again and helped him blow his nose. The doctor reached under the sheet and pulled out Max's twisted hand.

"This hand and your legs have been touched by a disease we call 'Polio.' Have you ever heard of polio before, Maxwell? No?" Dr. Adams asked as he looked at Max who was shaking his head from side to side.

"We have many children here at the hospital who have polio, Max. We are working hard to help them to feel better again but it takes some time. All the children you see in the next room are in machines to help them breathe easier. The machines are called 'iron lungs.' You will get one too before this afternoon. Nurse Connors will set it up and show you how it works. If you do as we say, you

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will get better, Maxwell. Don't you want to get better?" Dr. Adams asked as he stood up.

Max nodded and the doctor smiled. "Nurse Connors will go and get your mother, Maxwell. You just do as you're told and everything will be fine."

Max watched as Dr. Adams walked away. Nurse Connors tucked his twisted hand back under the sheet and she patted his head.

"I will be right back with your mother, Max," she said as she left the room.