

Against the backdrop of noisy Paralympics success, Bella D'Arcy Reed vividly describes in 'Flowers' a quieter and arguably more profound moment of achievement as one young woman is offered – and understands she cannot refuse - the unexpected hand of friendship.

Andrews Cowan Judge Essex Short Story. Competition Finalist 2013

Flowers

Anna stopped outside the kitchen, thirsty for coffee. Several staff members and patients inside were excited about what they'd seen on television. "Ellie winning another!" "Yeh!" "Wow!" Words overlapped, spoons jingled in mugs, biscuit wrappers crackled. A room warmed by people comfortable with each other. Anna snatched her hand from the door.

Turning without skill, the tyres of her institutional wheelchair squeaked on the smooth wooden floor. Passing the day room, she saw Judy, one of the care workers, listening to Tony, a young man whose legs had been amputated after a car crash. He was describing the wheelchair basketball, throwing his arms about, laughing. Judy laughed too. *Wasn't there anywhere in this hospital free from the Paralympics?* Anna skidded away, cross, thirsty.

She stopped at the water cooler and drank two plastic cups full. Two people with files in their hands passed her, talking. *Don't talk to me.* She dropped the paper cup into the bin, twisted the wheelchair around. *I want to go home.* The relentless Paralympics commentary from the TV room curled round her. *Panic.* There was a niche in the corridor where a fizzy drinks dispenser used to be, next to a window, looking out onto the garden. She backed into it, tight against the angle of the walls. *Breathe- one – two – three – I want to go home!*

"Wu-hey!" Another gold medal.

How did they, hundreds of them, become athletes? Even, how could they learn just to live with disability? How could Tony? *How could she?*

Beyond the window glass, flowers danced, bright in the sun and tall grasses waved. Flowers didn't know they were going to die, they just... *were...* Humans knew about death. *People wouldn't let you die even when you wanted to.* Anna gripped the arms of her wheelchair. *Breathe. One – two –tears.* Gulping tears.

"Beautiful isn't it? The garden?" A woman stopped beside her. "The Olympic Park was on television yesterday, just like this, flowers and grasses. Acres of them. Such a lovely idea." Anna fumbled for a handkerchief. She wanted the woman to go away. She wanted to stop crying. She wanted to go back to how it was.

The woman put her hand on Anna's shoulder.

"Have you been out into the garden?"

'Course not: to go outside, you have to be able to ... Stop crying!

"Why not come out with us? Have you got time?"

Time!...lifetime... 'time marches on'...march... Haa!

You have to be able..

"When the Olympics are over, we're going down to the Olympic Park so I can smell the flowers and feel them. Can't wait!" The woman's hand was still on her shoulder. Stop prattling about flowers....

You have to be.

Anna blew her nose loudly. She heard another sound, like – a dog's claws?- soft - on the floor. She looked sideways. The dog, a chocolate Labrador, looked at her with gentle eyes. It had harness.

You have to.

"All right Willow, we're going into the garden and this lady is coming with us."

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