

FORTY-TWO TILES

By Shannon O'Neil

There are forty-two tiles on the ceiling in my room. Seven across, six down, forty-two anyway you look at it. They are rectangular in shape, and although at one time, I believe they were white—perhaps a lovely shade of eggshell if you will—they are now the faded yellow of a smoker's smile. Four of the forty-two tiles have stains on them, three blotchy brown stains that look like spilled coffee, and one mysterious half-circle of black that is oft the object of my curiosity and intrigue.

Because of my bad memory, which is both a curse and a blessing at times, I count these tiles on a fairly regular basis. Sometimes it's because I don't remember how many there are, though I am vaguely aware that I have counted before. When I do count, sometimes I just count the numbers and rows and multiply to find my answer, but more often than not I can't remember my multiplication tables well-enough for math of that nature, plus it takes up more of my time to count each tile individually.

To be fair and honest, though, I have to amend my original statement to say that there are forty-two tiles on *my side* of the room, the boundaries of which are defined by the railing that guides the privacy curtain, and the wall of the bathroom that separates me from the door. I assume that my roommate, Glenda, has the same amount of tiles hiding somewhere behind the faded green fabric that divides our worlds.

Each morning when I wake up, just as I did today, I stare up at these forty-two tiles and wonder when my world shrank from the endless city streets to the inner yellow walls of my new fortress. Though it does me no good to ponder such a thing, there certainly comes a point when one cannot possibly keep their mind from wandering into the unkempt quarters of their own head.

“Good mornin’ Miss Gracie,” comes the familiar, loud voice of my nurse, Melinda. The sound of her greeting rolls through the air to my ears, always breaking up the thoughts inside my head—usually mercifully so.

“Morning,” I say back to her, though my voice is always a little weak at first. She shuffles over in her white tennis shoes and oversized scrubs that are the color of toothpaste, which contrasts sharply with her coffee-colored skin. She’s all smiles this morning, as usual, bearing once more the plastic black tray of food that I look forward to and dread at the same time.

“How you feelin’ this mornin’?” She asks me in her thick, southern drawl. Although I don’t have my glasses on and thus can barely see past my own bedrails, I know every facet of Melinda’s appearance without having to open my eyes at all. She’s a big woman with an even bigger heart—she’d have to have one in order to work in a place like this. She’s always dressed the same, always has her short black hair pulled back into a skin-tight bun that I think must constrict the flow of blood to her head. She never wears any make-up, but I don’t take much notice. Her smile is giant and genuine, and she brings joy to my day.

“I haven’t felt around to find out yet,” I reply, clearing my throat so I can raise my voice. I’m always one with the quick humor, most people call it sharp, I just call it being a smart-ass.

“Well let me know when you do,” Melinda says as she moves to the end of my bed. She’s pretty good with the quick humor, too. I can’t see her for a moment, my eyes refocusing on the forty-two tiles over my head, but I know she’s reaching for one of the cranks beneath the footboard of my bed that allow her to raise my head so I can eat. Apparently technology hasn’t found this place yet, these beds are nowhere near what they have at the hospital (at least from what I can remember). If I could find some way to get behind the high countertops that surround the nurse’s station at this place, I wouldn’t be surprised to find typewriters and a telegraph machine hiding back there.

When Melinda finishes adjusting my bed, I try to situate myself a little better in order to eat my breakfast. At my age, any movement is intentional, painful, and slow. Still, she is patient while I use my fists to move my butt back a little and shift my legs. Once I am finished, she hands me my glasses, which I slip onto my

face without any effort at all. Sometimes I think I must have grooves on the sides of my head made especially for my wire rims to slide into.

“Here’s yo breakfast, Miss Gracie.” Melinda slides the table over the railing and in front of my chest. Although I know with the accuracy of a seasoned fortuneteller what it’s going to be, a little part of me hopes every morning that there might be something different.

“Don’t they know how to cook anything else in this place?” I demand. Melinda just laughs.

“You start cleanin’ yo plate and we’ll see about changin’ yo meals,” she replies. I wrinkle my nose at her because she knows as well as I do that I’ll probably never clean my plate—not unless I start hiding the food in my bed sheets, which is something I’ve been thinking about a lot lately.

Laid out before me on a white circle of porcelain, are foods that more closely resemble colors than anything that’s actually edible. The yellow bumpy stuff is, supposedly, scrambled eggs, while the large mass of something hard and brown is supposed to be a biscuit.

“That thing is the size of my head!” I exclaim, pointing at the alleged biscuit. Melinda laughs again, the music of her soul filling the room to capacity. She gives my pillow a little fluff before venturing over to the other realm that is Glenda’s half of the room. With great reluctance, I unwrap the plastic silverware on my tray and feign an attempt at forcing down a little of the food before me.

You’d think that if a place only cooked one thing for breakfast every day, that at some point they would achieve a level of perfection in their cooking. How hard would it be to master the art of Bisquick and eggs? And yet on most mornings this excuse for a meal tastes even worse than it did the day before, even when I find that statistically impossible. Still, when it’s all you got you eat it whether it tastes like rubber or not, not just because your hungry, but because you’ve heard the voices outside your room throwing around words like “feeding tube” too often.

Melinda returns, blending into the privacy curtain for a moment before materializing beside my bed again. She reaches across me and opens my carton of milk, then sticks a straw in both the carton and the cup of water next to it.

“Eat up now, Miss Gracie,” she says with that big smile of hers.

“For you, I will,” I reply. Sweetness comes naturally to me, though most of the time I don’t use it.

Melinda bounds out of the room in the quick shuffle she sustains every day. I choke down a few bites of egg, which could use every grain of salt the ocean has to offer, and then wash everything down with a swig of milk.

“How’s your breakfast this morning, Glenda?” I call out to my neighbor. If she hears me she doesn’t respond, which I don’t expect her to. She rarely, if ever, speaks to me, preferring instead to lose herself in the world of the Discovery channel which she keeps at a volume even the deaf men in the dining room at the end of the hall can hear clearly.

I become full long before even the slightest dent has been put in my meal, but then it’s only been a few days since they started letting me eat solid food again, after my last bout with illness. I know Melinda will be angry with me when she comes back, though she’ll hide it as best she can. I wish I could eat more, maybe if they served something a bit more appetizing I could, but most mornings I just can’t muster up the energy or the desire to force down more than a few bites.

With more energy than should be necessary for such a small task, I shove back the bedside table and let my head fall back and rest on the pillow behind me. My eyes close, and moments later I’m asleep again, lost in a world of nothingness not that far removed from my daily life. My nap is brief however, interrupted when Melinda returns to remove my breakfast tray.

“You don’t want no mo?” She asks. I shake my head wearily.

“Not right now,” I reply. “I’m full.” She smiles, not the big smile before but a slightly smaller one.

“You’re not mad at me, are you?” I ask cautiously. The smile widens.

“Miss Gracie, I couldn’t be mad at you if I tried.” I smile back and she ventures out of the room again, back into the sleepy hallways and fluorescent lights. From somewhere far away, I hear the beeping of someone else’s machines, the steady drone of televisions trained on everything from BET to CNN. This time when I close my eyes, I don’t fall asleep, but instead I just listen to the noises of this place that I now call home.

Some time later, maybe hours, maybe minutes, I get that familiar feeling and start pushing back the sheets on my bed and inching toward the railing. A clip on my nightgown triggers a switch that calls Melinda into my room before I can potentially get up and hurt myself any more than I already have.

“You got to go to the bathroom?” She asks as she lowers the side rail. I nod. I can’t remember the last time I went to the bathroom alone, which once again I feel is both a blessing and a curse. If I could remember I would long for the familiar freedom of such a thing, but the fact that I can’t makes me pleasantly ignorant to that particular feeling. Melinda gives me a hand and what seems like days later, I make it out of the tiny tiled bathroom and back to my bed. But instead of lying back down, Melinda suggests I get in my wheelchair for a while and pay a visit to my friends on the porch. Although I hate to leave my forty-two friends on the ceiling, I can’t deny that I enjoy the slight change of scenery.

“Let me put my housecoat on first,” I tell her. She retrieves my blue housecoat with the big pink flowers from the cabinet by the sink with my name on it. It is familiar enough for me to know it’s mine, but not enough for me to know how I got it or where it came from. Nonetheless, she helps me slide my arms through the short sleeves and then stand up so I can wrap it around me and fasten the buttons. Once again, I can’t remember the last time I wore something that pulled over my head instead of buttoning all the way down, but perhaps pullovers are a bit overrated.

Melinda pushes me down the hall, past the nurse’s desk, and on toward the wing for the permanent residents of this place—though you’d be hard pressed to tell a difference. They may tell me I’m only in here

temporarily, but when you haven't seen home in so long that you can't remember what it looks like, temporary becomes an ambiguous adjective.

All along the hallways, standard issue black wheelchairs just like mine line the plastic chair rails in a sick interstate traffic jam of sorts. The occupants of these stationary chairs usually stare off into space, muttering to themselves, drooling on themselves, hardly aware of whether they're going or coming. On occasion we pass someone whose eyes don't give way to a completely devoid land beyond, someone who is kind enough to offer me a smile and a look of understanding. The rest of them look like they may as well be dead already, further proving that this place is merely a waiting room for heaven.

Melinda punches a four-digit code into the security panel beside the door, preventing a deafeningly loud alarm from sounding to alert the other nurses that someone has escaped. Once the alarm is deactivated, she pushes me on through the double doors and out onto the newly tiled patio. The space isn't very big, filled with five warped old picnic tables littered with ashtrays that, ninety percent of the time, are completely full. Most of the porch is shaded by a large oak tree, which separates this place from the county golf course beyond.

"There's my girl!" cries my best friend in this place, who also happens to be my former roommate, Bea. She raises her hand and waves, causing the cigarette smoke rising from between her fingers to create curved lines in the air. I wave back, glad to see another familiar face, while Melinda rolls me closer to Bea, and her friend Frannie, who like to sit out here and smoke.

"How y'all doin out here?" Melinda asks them. They nod and smile, their eyes saying what their mouths never do. We're doing just fine sitting here, confined to our wheelchairs, looking at the same scenery we do every day, just like we were yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that...

"We're good," says Bea. Melinda smiles and nods in return, then tells me she'll be back before lunch to take me to my room.

"How's everything going in my old stompin' grounds?" Bea asks after Melinda's left.

“Good,” I reply. “I tried to speak to Glenda again this morning, but she didn’t respond.”

“Oh she’s just new,” Frannie explains. “The new ones never talk at first, they think they’re too good for this place. Give her a few more days and she’ll get desperate for the social interaction.”

“Well I think she gets all the interaction she needs from that TV.”

“She still got it turned up loud enough to make deaf people in here shake?” Bea asks through a puff of smoke. We all have a good laugh and settle back into our chairs—actually, Frannie doesn’t have a chair she has a scooter, and a bright yellow one at that. She’s the envy of all the residents in that thing, a motorized scooter with a wire basket on the front she carries her purse in. She can’t walk because her two strokes and one heart attack have limited the circulation to her legs, even though she’s only fifty.

“How’s Bernie doing?” I ask her. Frannie shakes her head and smiles.

“Haven’t seen him in a couple days, he’s been avoiding me in the dining hall.” She exhales and a wave of gray smoke the color of her short, straight hair floats across the porch to an old man hunched over in his chair. Bernie is Frannie’s husband. They wed last spring in the dining hall, her in her white housecoat and him in his black, silk robe. After they kissed beside the drink machine, they rolled out together—her in her scooter and him in his wheelchair. Someone even tied white, crepe paper streamers to the back of their vehicles with a little sign that said “Just Married.” For a while they lived together in room 57 at the end of my hall, but she got tired of his snoring, so she moved out. They still see each other though, usually at least once a day, and she wears her wedding and engagement rings faithfully every day.

“How ‘bout you Gracie? You seen Alberto around?” I blush, despite being an old woman long past my prime.

“No I haven’t seen him,” I reply shyly.

“Come on Gracie, you’d better go after him before one of these old bags snatches him up!” Bea says as she lightly slaps my hand. Alberto is one of the newer residents whom my two friends have been trying to “fix”

me up with, if you can call it that. He's ninety-two, just like me, and cute for a little old man. His son comes and visits him on Sundays, and despite his appearance (long ponytail, skin like leather, thick green tattoos on both arms and legs), he's very nice to his father and to us. He always brings his dad a huge Cuban cigar, about the size of my arm, and the old man always smokes it on the spot, puffing away until that thing is nothing but ash long before the sun goes down.

"Speaking of those old bags," Frannie begins, stubbing out what's left of her cigarette in the nearest ash tray and leaning forward onto the handlebars of her scooter, "did you see that woman in the dining hall yesterday with the red lipstick on?"

"I saw her!" Bea cries. "Who you think she was trying to impress?"

"Beats the hell out of me," Frannie replies. Bea just shakes her head.

Bea is in her late seventies, the victim of diabetes, heart failures, strokes, and God knows what else. Just like everyone else here, she's not a resident for one reason alone, she's got a whole list of ailments longer than Alberto's weekly cigar. To most, she would fall far short of beautiful; in fact some might say her appearance could have made Ray Charles flinch. She does have a bit of a beard, and though her legs are usually covered in bandages because of her sores, her gnarly feet, blood red in color with thick, curly yellow toenails are usually exposed. But I'm far past the age where I care about outer beauty—hell I try to avoid mirrors for fear of what I probably look like half the time—so when I look at Bea I just see my friend. Someone who loves me, someone who cares about me.

"Clara! You're back again!" Frannie's exclamation forces me to move my head in the direction of the door, where an old woman with long, stringy gray hair is hobbling onto the porch with her silver walker. The woman looks up when she hears her name and smiles at us, unable to wave without taking a nasty tumble. She shuffles toward us with caution and concentration, arriving a full minute after we spotted her and immediately collapsing into a seat on the nearest picnic table. She slides her walker aside, which has been decorated with a

handmade purple bag with big flowers on it that hangs off the front, her name written across it in the glittery puff-paint that my granddaughters used to decorate their t-shirts with.

“Afternoon, ladies,” says Clara. She reaches for her own pack of cigarettes that she keeps in the pretty purple bag.

“I think it’s still morning, Clara,” Bea tells her. Clara shrugs her narrow shoulders and leans toward Frannie who offers her a light.

“Who gives a shit,” she says, her words poking through a thick cloud of smoke.

“Is today your day to cuss like a sailor?” I ask her. She shakes her head slowly.

“I cuss like a sailor every damn day,” she replies.

“Did I hear that you tried to escape again last night?” Bea asks. Clara nods this time, her gnarled fingers plucking the cigarette from her lips then holding it at a steady shake just a few inches from her mouth.

“Made it all the way to the fourteenth green this time,” she says proudly. Clara’s tried to escape nearly a dozen times in the four years she’s been here, but has so far been unsuccessful. Her first several attempts were made by wheelchair, which proved impossible when it came time for her to wheel herself over the mounds of the golf course that shelters us from the main road. After she flipped one chair in a sand trap, she decided to wait a while until she was strong enough to start using a walker before she tried to escape again.

“Maybe next time will be the one, dear,” says Frannie.

“Don’t patronize me, Frannie. One day I’ll finally bust out of this shit hole and when you get that postcard from Hawaii with my name on it you’ll know that while you’re stuck here I’m on some island shacked up with a steamy cabana boy named Marco.” Clara has quite the imagination.

“You will of course write to us in detail so we can experience your adventures vicariously, right?” I ask. Clara nods and leans over to whisper in my ear.

“Gracie, I’d let you come with me. These other broads, they’ll never know another place but this one, but you and me? We’ve got it in our blood. They can only keep us tied down for so long.” She winks at me before returning to her cigarette and I have to smile. Though I know I’ll never try to escape with Clara, just the thought gives me a little more strength in my bones.

The four of us sit back then and enjoy the silence, the three of them puffing away on their cigarettes while I take in my surroundings once more. Along the edge of the porch, a short band of beautiful plants in rich colors of red, green, yellow, and blue, form a gorgeous border. Before I got myself in this place, I used to be quite the gardener. Now the only plants I see besides these are the ones that people bring me and leave on the countertops in my room to cheer me up. I dream of one day taking them all home to plant along the front of my house, but a part of me knows that day will probably never come. Suddenly realizing that my thoughts have once again brought me down, I jerk my head up from the flowers and interrupt my friends’ thoughts.

“Alright, who’s gonna loan me a cigarette today?” I ask them. They all shake their heads and laugh.

“Gracie how many times do we have to tell you, you don’t need to start this now?” Bea asks. I slump a little in my chair.

“But they smell so good, can’t I have just one drag?” Bea shakes her head a little more furtively this time.

“Well you just sit back and enjoy the smell cause that’s all you’re gonna get, okay? Trust me, you don’t want to start smoking now.” I shrug my shoulders and look around again. I ask my friends to give me a cigarette every day, and every day they say no. Just like everyone else, they want what’s good for me, for my health. Well, I’m ninety-two years old and I think I should be able to eat, drink, and smoke whatever I want. Otherwise, what’s the point in making it this far?

Melinda comes out a short while later and after I wave good-bye to my friends, she wheels me back to my room and helps me into bed. One day I might be able to eat in the dining hall with all the other patients,

but not until I get off the special diets they've kept me on—first the clear liquids, then the soft foods, now the hard, bland ones.

“Here’s yo lunch, Miss Gracie. Enjoy.” She plops the tray down on my table and I wrinkle my nose.

“It’s the same as yesterday,” I tell her, in case she doesn’t know.

“I know that baby, but you gotta eat it anyway. It’s good, just try some for me, okay?” Melinda waits at the end of my bed for me to take a bite. I stare down at the colors in front of me—a light brown, chunky-textured stuff that they call chicken, along with soggy green cylinders that’s supposed to be snap beans, and a mound of smooth white stuff topped off with a dark brown juice that I think could be mashed potatoes and gravy. I reluctantly unwrap my silverware and select a bite of white and brown that I force into my mouth. I roll it around for a little while, hoping to satisfy Melinda, but she doesn’t budge.

“Come on now, swallow it. It can’t be that bad.” I choke it down just so I can talk back to her.

“You don’t have to eat it,” I reply. She shakes her head, but keeps that smile firmly planted on her cheeks.

“Eat up, Miss Gracie. I’ll be back in a lil’ while to check on you.” She disappears through the door and a force a few more bites down before giving up. I lay back against my pillow once more, my head eventually drooping to the side as my eyelids fall and sleep draws near. Before I can get too far into my nap, however, Melinda returns.

“You ain’t gonna eat no mo?” she asks. I jerk my head up and look at her.

“I’m too tired right now,” I reply.

“Tired from what?” She asks. “What’ve you done to be tired?” I shrug my shoulders.

“Well I’ll leave the tray in case you work up some mo energy later. Want to watch some TV?” She reaches for the remote control on my nightstand and clicks on my television. Glenda is apparently taking a nap, because I can’t hear the usual sounds of her TV wafting into my half of the room.

“I don’t really care about TV, much,” I tell Melinda. She flips the channels anyway and eventually settles on an episode of one of my favorite shows, “Murder She Wrote.”

“You wanna watch this?” I nod and she leaves the remote on my bed where I can reach it—not that it matters. That little black box has more buttons on it than a Angela Lansbury’s typewriter, and I don’t know what any of them do. Still, I sit back and watch because if nothing else, it breaks up the monotony.

Later in the afternoon, after I’ve put away a little more of my lunch and taken a nice, long nap, Melinda comes in to ask if I’d like to go down to the dining hall for karaoke before dinner. I try to make an excuse as to why I can’t go, but somehow I can’t come up with one, so before I know it I’m back in the wheelchair.

The dining hall is the biggest room in this place, making my lone room look like a tiny cavern. With big lights and high-ceilings accented by the brown and gold striped wallpaper, it adds a bit of flair to this place that I have to say is pretty nice. Today, the tables have been moved aside so that everyone can see the TV and small stage that have been set up at the front of the room for karaoke. Instead of rows of stationary chairs forming an audience, a mish-mash of wheelchairs crowd the large room of patients and nurses. Melinda spots my friends and carefully maneuvers my wheelchair over to where they are, just to the left side of the stage. She leaves me with them, turning without saying a word and slipping to the perimeter of the room with the rest of the nurses.

“Hey Gracie,” says Bea. “You just missed Alberto, he did a wonderful rendition of ‘Old Rugged Cross.’”

“Oh really?” I ask.

“Oh yes,” says Frannie. “He had us all in tears.” She wipes at her eyes with a crumpled tissue while a young man takes the stage.

“Next up,” says the young man, reading off a small index card, “Is Patty from Room 75 with ‘I Will Survive.’” Two male nurses lift Patty’s wheelchair off the ground and onto the low stage that sits barely a foot of the beige carpet. The other young man who appears to be leading the program, wheels her to center stage and hands her the mike as the music starts. We clap along, and even sing a bit when she hits the chorus. Though

her voice isn't very strong, Patty does her best to rouse the crowd and when she finishes we give her as much applause as we can muster.

The next singer, Al from Room 32, takes the stage with his walker and makes a feeble attempt at Tony Bennett's "I Left My Heart In San Francisco." Those patients who are deaf or nearly deaf, suddenly seem blessed, as those of us who can hear try to subtly cover our ears, as Al drones on. Halfway through the song, he forgets the words and, unable to read the screen without his glasses, decides just to start over. Fortunately, the man in charge jumps on stage and takes the microphone away from Al before people start trying to hurl their canes and walkers at the stage.

I have to say, this place is very good with the entertainment most of the time. We have bake sales, reading groups, craft projects, and lots of other things that keep us occupied, but mostly just help us to pass the time a little quicker than usual. This particular program lasts right up until dinner, leaving the dining crew to scramble around putting tables back in place while the nurses act like cowboys steering a large herd out of the way. Melinda returns me to my room just in time for my third meal of the day to arrive.

This time, she doesn't have to watch over me to make me eat. My stomach is growling and so I am left with no choice but to ingest the colors before me. When Melinda returns to remove my plate, she is thrilled to find it more than half-empty.

"It was good, huh?" She asks me. I shrug.

"It was here, that's all I can ask for these days."

Some time later, Melinda comes in to check on me and I ask her to turn out my lights for I am ready for bed.

"Good night, Miss Gracie," she says.

"Good night," I reply.

Once she has left the room, I begin yet another familiar routine.

Every night, after I can finally say that another day is gone, I lay awake for a while and think. Not because I want to, but because I don't usually fall asleep easily (at night anyway) and as I said before, the mind wanders where it wants to.

Lately my thoughts have been centering around the idea that most people, after a certain age, become invisible. They become fixtures in places like this, quite simply faces without names. People come and go from the outside world, gliding through the hallways with purposeful strides because their busy days lay waiting outside those front doors. They may glance over at the patients that line the halls, but they don't really *see* them. They assume, for purposes of their own egos, that these people they see were born exactly as they appear—with wiry blue hair, wrinkled skin, and bony limbs. These outside people don't stop to think that each person in one of those wheelchairs in the hall has a family, a life beyond the walls of this place. Most importantly, the people in the chairs, the people like me, have memories. They may not recall what they ate yesterday (though they will when dinner comes around again today) but most of them remember what it was like to be a child. They remember family gatherings, weddings, birthdays, and funerals. They remember the people who've touched their lives, the places that they've been, and the person that they used to be.

The people I choose to surround myself with now—Melinda, Bea, Frannie, even Alberto—they are my friends because when they look at me, they actually *see* me. I am not invisible to them, as they are not to me. In reflection, maybe we should always choose our friends and companions based on those who are able to see past our daily facades. Maybe if I were to give advice to my granddaughters, I would tell them not to waste their time on the people who look at them as just another person, just another fixture in this fast-paced world. But then maybe I'm just old and crazy and too tired to think straight.

With a long sigh, I let go of my thoughts and turn my eyes to the ceiling. I wonder how many ceiling tiles there are in my little space? Have I ever counted them before? It seems like I have, but even if I did I don't remember how many there were. Since Glenda is already snoring somewhere on the other side of the curtain, I

know sleep won't be coming to me anytime soon. I guess that leaves me no other option than to count those tiles on my ceiling...