

Tangled

by **Flo Gelo**

Nella, my forty-eight-year-old mother, sits at the edge of the bed. Her legs hang over the side, her feet cool as she likes them. The white, shiny, threadbare bed sheet, aged from hundreds of hot-water washes in steam boilers, lays tangled across her lap. Her dry callused feet reveal the circular indentation on the right side of her heel. I want to lift her, embrace her tightly and carry her from this bed to another time, before.

A similar late summer day, forty-two years earlier, the air is hot and humid. There are no ceiling fans to circulate the air in this Brooklyn row house. Nella, age six, hugs her beloved "Dr. Seuss" and lifts herself onto the pillow that her mother uses to cushion her elbows when she leans out on the windowsill to talk with neighborhood friends. Nella clumsily lifts her legs over the pillow to face outward, sliding down and turning to sit on the fire escape balcony. Admonished that she should not lean against the open crate of ripe red plum tomatoes that sits on the floor of the fire escape, she defies all warning, as is her nature. She leans too far, her body tipping. Her tiny arm reaches but her fingertips slip from the iron step ladder that leads upward to the next landing. She begins to fall, grabs instead the edge of the wooden crate. Time stops. The child falls through the well-hole opening in the balcony floor and plummets past the grape arbor—two flights until impact.

A tangled bundle lays in a heap on the hot cement. The slender canopy of Elm, motionless against a cloudless sky, provides scant shade for the fire rescue team that lifts and transports Nella to the Brooklyn Hospital Center that will be her home for many months to come. What is blood and flesh and what is plum tomato are indistinguishable. The child does not open her eyes. The nurse quickly removes Nella's clothing and washes away both blood and tomatoes to reveal cuts and bruises to her right side and

swelling on her forehead and eye. Her knee has a large, deep gash. They clean her wounds with saline gauze and disinfect with iodine. A limp and twisted foot dangles from her tiny ankle.

Nella's mother sits in the waiting room. She learns that her daughter will survive this fall but may never walk again unaided. Nella's right knee is dislocated. Her right ankle is broken, she has a growth plate fracture extending to the lower end of the tibia and her heel bone is shattered. She is in surgery. The doctor will maneuver the broken bones into approximate alignment and cast her leg and foot in place to hold the bones in their correct position. Nella will remain in the hospital for several months so that her doctor can monitor her recuperation, treat inflammation and prevent infection.

Months later a flood lamp brightens the center of a large amphitheater as Nella awkwardly stands, assisted by wooden crutches. News reporters are present and flashbulbs pop as Dr. G describes in detail the innovative surgical procedures that allowed this young child to bear weight and possibly walk again. I imagine her then, anxious and weary but happy to be in the spotlight on this day of her seventh birthday—happier still when a large round frosted cake is carried into the room. The cake is held by young nurses wearing white hats and holding multicolor balloons. The next day, Nella's wide eyes and smile are captured on the front page of *The Brooklyn Beacon*. In a smaller photograph, Dr. G. accepts an award in recognition of this monumental surgical success.

Today, I see my mother as she sits on her bed tangled in sheets and fear. No photographer seeks her picture, no doctor stands in the bright light of triumph. Ten years of living with and fighting cancer are coming to an end. A miracle no longer awaits her, only fleeting moments of comfort and fragile hope. Now I am the child falling through an opening, plunging from a great height, waiting for the impact.



Flo Gelo was born in Brooklyn, New York where she lived until her early teens. She has published a series of stories about growing up on Madison Street. This story reflects on the last days of her mother's life. In hindsight, Flo's mother's illness and dying were formative and influenced Flo's professional life. She has published numerous articles in professional journals about illness, death, and dying.