***The Memories of Cicley Adler***

Her hand, dotted with tiny brown freckles, blue veins showing through the paper-thin skin, was pressed against the window as her pale blue eyes gazed through the glass. Her eyes were focused beyond the grassy area behind her building to the edge of the wood line. Scanning the trees, she marveled at the different ones, calling them out in her mind; pines, oaks, and maples were scattered along the edge in no apparent order, their bare gray and brown branches were a stark contrast to the golden sky. She felt the coldness of the window from an invisible draft, withdrew her hand, and tucked it into the pocket of her pink and green plaid house coat. She continued to scan the yard, her eyes methodically moving, as if looking for something, however, she was not sure what. The grass had completely lost its green, lushness, turning brown and resembling the consistency of hay. The leaves on the trees had fallen long ago. She briefly remembered workers with loud blowers on their backs, causing the leaves to swirl round and round like a slow-moving tornado. She could see them dancing, the reds, oranges, yellows, mixing together as they floated through the air.

“What do you think she’s looking at?” Emma whispered as she peered into the room.

“I’m not sure. She stares out that window every day.” Betsy responded, frowning.

Emma Jones and Betsy Helms were LPNs at the Willow Winds Nursing Home in Elm, Maine. The Elm Regional Hospital reassigned them to the nursing home when the pandemic began because they needed more staff to assist with the COVID patients. They met at orientation and became fast friends, working the same shifts. Emma and Betsy enjoyed working in the assisted living section of the nursing home, taking in the slower pace compared to the hustle and bustle of the hospital. They loved spending time with the residents and listening to the stories they would often share.

“Has any of her family come to visit?” Betsy wondered aloud, as they continued walking down the hallway toward the lounge area.

“I don’t think I’ve seen anyone come by for her. Just so sad.” Emma had a soft spot in her heart for all the residents but had a special affection for Cicley Adley, who had been a resident of Willow Winds for three years. Cicley intrigued Emma primarily because she never spoke. Emma always wondered why.

A thin smile formed on Cicley’s face under the pink and green plaid mask covering her chin to her nose as she overheard Emma and Betsy. She had become very fond of those girls and thought of them as her granddaughters. Emma and Betsy were in their 20’s, she was not sure of their exact age. Emma had long brown, wavy, hair and green eyes that twinkled when she laughed or smiled. She recalled when Emma had gifted her the beautiful mask, she now wore every day.

“Miss Cicley, I made this mask to match your dress. Would it be okay if I helped you put it on?” Emma had slowly walked over the threshold and into her room. She could tell Emma was apprehensive, holding the handmade mask in her slender hands. She noticed Emma’s fingernails were painted a pale pink shimmer. A much better choice than the obnoxious hot pink from the week before. Cicley nodded, beckoning the timid young girl to come closer. Emma held out the mask so she could see the vibrant colors and admire the workmanship. She gently removed the standard paper blue mask the staff equipped the residents with several times a day and handed it to Emma. Taking it, Emma quickly crumpled and stuffed the mask into her scrubs pocket. She let Emma put on the new soft mask, looping the straps gingerly over her ears, brushing her grayish white hair aside so it wouldn’t get tangled. As Cicley inhaled, she could smell something floral and wondered if Emma had washed it after it was made or was it the lingering scent of the soap on the young girl’s hands.

“There!” Emma exclaimed, her eyes sparkled as she put her hands on her hips, admiring how perfect she had matched the fabric to Cicley’s dress. “Well, I hope you like it and I’ll check on you later.”

Cicley’s eyes glistened as they stared, watching Emma stroll out of the room.

Cicley touched the mask, taking in the softness of the cotton material as the memory faded away.

Her mind wandered to Betsy, who was a short, thin girl with blazing red-orange hair that reminded Cicley of a beautiful sunset. Betsy had freckles across her pert nose and a creamy white complexion. An aspiring baker, she would always sneak in some treats. Cicley chuckled softly as she recalled Betsy’s attempt to make cranberry pecan scones.

“Hey lady! How are you doin’ today?” Betsy paused outside her door carrying a basket with triangular biscuits neatly wrapped in cellophane, tied with a bright red ribbon, tucked in a gingham cloth napkin. She shyly motioned for Betsy to come closer, curious to see what kind of goodies Betsy had made this time.

“This week’s assignment was scone making. They’re cranberry pecan.” Betsy handed her one of the packages.

“I hope you like them. Let me know what you think!” The plastic crinkled as Cicley’s fingers moved over the scone, finding the smooth velvet ribbon, and offering her signature nod. She left the room, swinging the wicker basket as she went. Betsy always had a bounce in her step and her presence brightened the darkest room. Her baking on the other hand was something to be desired. Cicley giggled as her taste buds remembered the horrible texture of the scone, her mouth had dried up like the Sahara Desert after the first bite! She felt guilty throwing the remaining piece in the trash, wrapping it in tissues to disguise it.

“A work in progress”, Cicley thought, “maybe one day Betsy’s baking would improve.” She wished she could show Betsy some baking tips, as she reminisced of the days she used to bake cakes, pies, and other desserts for her family. Then Cicley realized it had been weeks since Betsy had brought in any more goodies. Maybe she had given up? Betsy was whimsical like that, moving from one fancy to another, never sticking with one thing for too long.

Cicley peered at the twin reflection staring back, taking in all the imperfections; the deep crow’s feet around her eyes that had deepened over time, firmly cementing their place on her skin. She always hated that name for them, instead thinking of them fondly as laugh lines because each time she chuckled her eyes would wrinkle around the edges. She marveled at how each line had a story or two to tell. Her eyes took in the age spots sprinkled over her sun-kissed cheeks, too many to count now. They appeared after all the years she tended to her award-winning flower gardens. She missed her time volunteering with the Elm Garden Club and showing them the newest rose or gardenia, she had acquired. Her eyes grew cloudy as she lowered her gaze to the fresh thin jagged scar just above her top lip. She shuttered as she remembered falling in the dark, hitting her face on the corner of her nightstand, so much blood. She winced as she felt a burning sensation where the four stitches had been.

She could tell as the beams of light streaked through the trees, the sun would be setting soon, and she dreaded the eminent darkness. Just then, she saw a young man step out of the woods. Stoically, he stared at her, his eyes boring into her soul. She felt a chill, her body involuntarily shivered, like entering a cold lake on a hot summer day. She pulled the collar of her house coat closer, an attempt to trap her warmth and keep the cold at bay. The young man wasn’t a stranger; however, she couldn’t place where she knew him. Cicley peered closer, her breath creating a fog on the glass. Absentmindedly, she swiped it away with her sleeve. The young man was wearing a white button-down shirt and suspenders attached to a pair of black trousers. He had shaggy brown hair that swept over his forehead. As she continued to study his face, it appeared his mouth formed into a familiar smirk. At that moment, Cicley’s heart fluttered like the wings of a butterfly, beating in her chest. Her pale rose lips curved into a smile as she recognized the young man. It had been months since he had come to visit her and she had wondered with utmost sadness where he had gone, why he had disappeared. All her patience for his return had finally come to fruition.

“Daniel”, she mouthed his name so no one could hear.

“Cicley, it’s time for dinner. Would like to walk with us?” Cicley flinched, startled by the female voice and before she could decipher who was speaking, she watched Daniel turn on his heel and disappear back into the woods, the trees enveloping him until she could no longer make out his silhouette.

“WAIT!” Her heart screamed, wishing he would’ve stayed just a bit longer. She sucked in her breath and a deep sigh escaped, releasing the fleeting moment of joy she had felt like a deflating balloon. Her shoulders sagged as she turned around to face the voice behind her. Allowing her feet to take over, she solemnly walked out of her room, closing the brown oak door behind her.