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Written by Susan Nussbaum

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Good Kings Bad Kings

SUSAN NUSSBAUM



ONE WORLD

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For Taina

Yessenía Lopez

My *tía* Nene said three is the magic number and when three things happen to you that are so, so bad and you feel like the whole wide world is just throwing up on your new shoes, don't worry. Your bad luck is about to change.

And I am sitting inside a room that smells like a urinal toilet at a place called the Illinois Learning something something. It's only my second day here and would you believe these people already got me in the punishing room? So this is three.

My name is Yessenia Lopez, and before they stuck my butt in this place I went to Herbert Hoover High School in Chicago, Illinois. I went there on account of I am physically challenged, and they send the people which have challenges to Hoover. They send people with physical challenges, but also

retarded challenges, people been in accidents like brain accidents, or they're blind or what have you. I do not know why they send us all to the same place but that's the way it's always been and that's the way it looks like it will always be because I am in tenth grade and I been in cripple this or cripple that my whole sweet, succulent Puerto Rican life.

My last day at Hoover was the beginning of all hell breaking loose. I was going down the hallway like usual minding my own sweet business when Mary Molina comes straight up at me and real, real close she says—

No. I cannot even say the words to tell this story. That's how bad those words was that that bitch said to me. But I looked in that horsey-looking face and said, "You trifling *desgraciada sinvergüenza*. You want to confront with me? You gonna pay the consequences."

That wasn't the first bad name she called me but it was gonna be the last.

Tía Nene told me if anybody talk down on me or talk down on the people of Puerto Rico or get up in my face like they think they better than me, I need to kick that two-faceded person's ass. I told Tía Nene before she died—okay, not really before she died, it could have been I told her after she died when she was already up in heaven with the Lord Jesus—that I would always remember her and always remember everything she taught me. I told her in my mind before I left for school on that very day that I hope she knows I always want to make her proud. Then I imagined Tía Nene kissed me on

the top of my head and said, "You do what you gots to do and have a good day, *chica*."

My mother gave me to my *tía* Nene on the day I was born into the world. My *tía* was more my mother than my real mother ever was. I even look like my *tía* because I gots big eyes and long, wavy hair and my real mother gots tight, curly hair and little, beady eyes. And my skin is more darker like my *tía*'s—not dark dark but just dark—and I am more curvaceous even at my young age, just like Tía Nene. I called my *tía* my mother and she called me her daughter and that's that.

After school was over I went outside to where all the buses was at, waiting to load us up and drive us home. The fumes coming out the buses looked like big white clouds because it was cold. You could see the breaths coming out the mouth of all those pupils just like Indians sending smoke signals. Everybody was all bundled up in coats and hoods and it was hard to see who was who but I knew to look in the little yard next to where the buses line up. That's where she always goes. That's where I saw her.

First thing I did was wheel right up on her, pull my footrest up offa my chair, and grab onto that hair to hold her steady and whack her acrost the head, and then I pushed her right offa her chair. But I'm still holding her mop in my fist, so when she went down I had a big clump of that ugly-ass hair in my hand and she was screaming her Mexican butt off. Then I hop down offa *my* chair and sit right on top of her and pin her down to the ground. By now I can feel a bunch of pupils

around me, everybody shouting, trying to get close, trying to see what's happening, and all of them yelling, "Fight! Fight!" and she's trying to push me off and hit back but she couldn't land more than a scratch on my face. But that was all I needed 'cause when I wiped blood offa my cheek I felt everything rise up in me and I lifted my footrest high up in the air and I gave her a *thwack*! Then blood starts trickling down from her mouth and the cheering goes higher and I raise up the footrest again *thwack* and again *thwack*! Then Veronique, my best friend from fourth-period hygiene, busts through the crowd and starts yelling, "Yes-sie! Yes-sie!" till it sounded like every challenged person in all of Hoover was shouting my name and I gripped my footrest real tight and felt my arm raising up high in the air—and then a security guard grabbed my wrist hard and yanked the footrest out my hand and drug me up on my chair and pushed me inside to Mrs. Maloney's office.

I looked down at myself and I had blood all on my pink overalls which I was wearing that day and under my nails. I felt my cheek 'cause it stang from her putting her claws on me.

Mrs. Maloney kep' asking me why did I do it, why did I do it, you know? And I told her the truth. I got no need to lie. I said, "Because she called me a Puerto Rican bitch."

I'm not sure if getting three months at Juvie for aggravating assault counts as the number two bad thing that happened or the number three bad thing. I'm pretty sure Juvie was number two.

The number one bad thing was when my *tía* passed into the next life. So it could be the number two bad thing was going to live at St. Francis Home for Young Women where they sent me after my *tía* died. St. Francis was a pain but it was okay. It was a whole lot better than living in a foster family with a bunch of people who could be freaks and rapers. So I'm gonna have to say, Juvie was *definitely* the number two bad thing. And this place, the one I'm in at this very moment? This Illinois Center for Cripple whatever, is three. This is where I got put after I got out of Juvie.

And I'm sitting here in this urine punishment room because that pimple-headed heifer Benedicta, my quote roommate, stole one of my teddy bears out my collection I won playing body-parts bingo, so I chopped up her blanket. Or I started to until some bald dude interrupted. It's not like she was in the bed at the time.

I only been here two days but I already hate it. Even worse than Juvie. But I can't talk no more now 'cause I see cigarette smoke all outside the window of this punishing room, so it must be that bat Candy come to get me. Candy's a houseparent. That's what they call them here. After she sucks that thing to the nub she'll open the door. That's what the boy from on my floor said when they was pushing my chair to the elevator. I guess he's been in this room hisself a time or two.

Okay, I got a question. If three is the magic number, then do you get three *good* things after you finish with the three

bad? Or just one good thing and then three bad things again? 'Cause if that's how they work it, then it is not fair. Or what if another thing happen that's bad? That's four bad things in a row, so that can't happen, right? I wish I knew to ask Tía Nene for more details at the time.

I wish I knew to ask Tía Nene a whole lot of things.

Joanne Madsen

The ad was posted by the Illinois Learning and Life Skills Center, or ILLC. I was immediately captured by the awkward acronym. ILLC is a state-run nursing facility for adolescent youth through age twenty-one. It's just like a regular nursing home, but instead of locking up old people they lock up young people. They were looking for a data-entry clerk. Not really my thing, but then again I don't really have a thing. Data entry sounded like the kind of job that would satisfy my lack of ambition. No one really thinks about the data-entry clerk. Do they? Data entry allows one to soar beneath the radar and avoid the usual workplace Sturm und Drang. Not that I wouldn't work hard. I always work hard. When I'm working.

Of course the longer you are unemployed, the more they want to know at job interviews why you were unemployed for so long. And though my family has never seemed to progress beyond the denial stage as regards my quadriplegia, there is such a thing as job discrimination. People will see me coming through the door, wheelchair awhir, and momentarily freeze. Then they will marshal their resources and nervously reach out to shake my gimpy hand and smile enthusiastically while they mentally feed my résumé to the shredder. My family said I am my own worst enemy and I have to be more assertive and perhaps I should go back to school for something I can do. They also said I blamed others for my disability. What does that even mean? Do they think we're living in a made-for-TV movie?

I'm rich. Not mad rich but I am a multi-thousandaire. I'm like Rockefeller compared to 99 percent of the rest of the disabled people on earth. There are poor people and then there are poor disabled people. One of those things sucks, but both together suck stratospherically.

I was hit by a bus a long time ago. The No. 8 Halsted. But the CTA paid me generously to apologize for hitting me, which is why I enjoy my lavish lifestyle of jetting off to exotic locales whenever I feel like it. And I do feel like it from time to time, but frankly, what with the inspections of one's privates for explosive devices, the prospect of a broken power wheelchair in areas where local crips travel by wheelbarrow, and the ever-present dread of traveler's diarrhea with no

wheelchair-accessible bathroom for miles, traveling is no vacation. Let me say only that the world, Earth, is not a hospitable place for crips.

My job is way far away. South by southwest. Back of the Yards neighborhood, so called because it's next to the old Chicago stockyards. Hog butcher of the world. I'm a North Sider, so I could take the bus to the Red Line but I'd have to take two more buses after that. The No. 8 Halsted Street is a straight shot. So here I am. The air is humid with irony.

My duties are mostly typing. There must have been dozens of far more appropriate applicants. People who type with all ten fingers, for example. But for the first—and I feel certain only—time I think I got a job *because* of my disability. It's well known in crip circles that the best place for a crip to get a job is a place that's swarming with other crips. So I applied, emphasizing my computer skills, which are pretty good, and how important it is for disabled youth to see disabled adults in the workplace. Places like this love the idea of role models. There was no haggling over the miserable pay either, as money is no object for me. No salary could possibly be too low. They could pay me in rat turds and I'd happily put them in my wallet. What I needed more than money was human interaction.

Recently, over the past five years or so, my world had been shrinking, slowly but quite surely. At first I'd take little "breaks"—just not leave my apartment for a day. But my breaks started creeping up to, say, five or six days in my apartment

with no outside contact. Not including my personal assistants and the Thai Palace delivery guy. I didn't have cabin fever. I certainly was not agoraphobic. I just behaved as if I was.

Sometimes I imagine there is an entire subpopulation of people who live out their lives in nine hundred square feet of space. The TV plays, the *pad woon sen* is delivered and consumed, the sun comes up and goes down. One day our subculture will be discovered by Ryan Seacrest and one by one we'll be sniffed out by German shepherds and burst in upon by lights and cameras and forced to attend a mixer. With each other.

Then one night I caught a glimpse of myself in the bathroom mirror and stopped. I realized that I'd been in self-imposed solitary at that point for nine days or possibly ten or eleven. I asked myself if I was prepared to look back at my life when I was old and know I had wasted it. I determined at that moment to rouse myself out of my complacency. And here I am on the Halsted, on my way to work. And that's the inspirational true story of how I overcame my disability and became a contributing member of society.

My first week I learned that people refer to ILLC as "ill-see." Emphasis on "ill." The Illinois Learning and Life Skills Center may not sound like the name of a nursing home, but that's how they work it. Naming these places is all about misdirection. ILLC might sound like a fun after-school program with arts and crafts and barbecues but it's just a place they put disabled kids that struggling parents and the state don't know

what to do with. Inside, it smells, sounds, and looks like your standard-issue nursing home. Same old wolf but in a lamb outfit.

I've worked there only a week. Taken on the whole—eighty young institutionalized crips—the situation is pretty depressing. But somebody's got to do data entry for almost no money, so why not me? The kids here are called patients. The woman who runs the place goes by the supersquishy name Mrs. Phoebe. She calls the kids her children or her angels. Ick.

I'm about as messed up physically as any of the kids, but I don't have any mental disabilities. Most of them here have both. For instance, in addition to spina bifida or cerebral palsy, they have some kind of intellectual disability or maybe a few learning disabilities. A few have psychiatric disabilities. Some of the kids were taken out of abusive homes and they're traumatized by that. The biggest difference between the kids and me is that I'm a whole lot luckier. I mean, I just work here.

Most of the kids are chair users, but they have manual chairs. Quite a few are too gimpy for manual chairs and should have power chairs so they could get around on their own, but it's against the rules. That's unofficial. The official practice is that everyone who needs a power chair gets one. But just the other day I asked why this one girl, Mia, didn't have a power chair, and Mrs. Phoebe said Mia wasn't ready for a power chair. But I'm looking at her, she's planted in this one spot all by herself, can't move an inch on her own, can't talk to

the other kids, has to wait for a staff person or one of the kids who can walk to notice her so she can get a push. Mia looks about as ready for a power chair as anyone I've ever seen.

After I got hit by the No. 8, I went through a rehab process and they finally gave me my first wheelchair. It was manual. No matter how hard I tried I couldn't do more than push myself a few feet on a smooth surface. Carpet was like quicksand. People had to push me everywhere. I'd end up staring at a fern or getting my feet smashed into a wall or being held hostage in the middle of someone else's conversation. I could see where I wanted to go but was powerless to make it happen.

Maybe because no one is paying attention to Mia, she's captured mine. She seems a bit tired and a little wary. She's a pretty girl, Mexican, with a thick black mane tied into a high, messy ponytail.

The good news about Mia is she has a boyfriend named Teddy. He's this skinny, pale blond kid who wears a suit—I mean a real suit with a jacket and everything—every day. And a tie. The suit is always wrinkly and food-stained and one pant leg is usually scrunched up higher than the other, but he is dead serious about wearing this suit every single day. Sometimes he'll take his jacket off and then you can see his little plastic fireman's badge on his shirt. I love this kid. He wears glasses with lenses so thick they make his eyes look like planets. Teddy is a nonstop questioner—he talks a lot and he's really outgoing and friendly and totally unruly, so he annoys the adults but makes the other kids want to be his friend.

Unlike Mia he has a power chair, so he's constantly moving. Sometimes he attaches Mia's chair to his with a piece of bungee cord and they roll around together.

I have my own little office with a desk and a too-tall file cabinet. There's a window but I think it actually sucks light out. It's an unwindow. It's placed at the very top of the room, right next to the ceiling, and the glass is opaque. I have a computer and plastic trays filled with handwritten files that I'm supposed to enter into the computer. I can only type with two of my fingers, one on each hand, but I'm used to it and I'm pretty speedy. I have some other duties too, all tasks I have no interest in doing, but I don't mind. Dissatisfaction with my work makes me feel more employed.

After I enter the files in the database, I'm supposed to keep them updated, so I'm beginning to know a little about the kids I see in the halls. I know Teddy has an intellectual disability as well as a physical disability. His IQ is 74 but that's hard to believe. He's so smart. Mia is a ward of the state and has lived here since she was eleven years old. She was sexually abused by her father and has cigarette burns on her arms and back. All this I type into the computer.

Some of the things people write in the files are subjective nonsense. A certain kid "acts like a baby" or "is evil." I do not type it in. Poetic license. I have to put in IQ scores because the first page of every kid's database info includes a place for IQ, right up there with name and age. I hate doing it. It's just that I've been here only a week.

I never get home before 7:00 p.m. First thing I do is wash up really thoroughly and then sit in front of the fridge eating whatever I see. If I have wine I'll pour myself a glass, but I don't have wine because I haven't had time to pick any up. I've forgotten how much energy it takes to actually do something all day without liberal napping throughout. So I drink a lot of water, tilt back, and look around me and think how much I love my apartment and my CD collection and the trees just outside the window and my wok and my futon couch, even though I can't sit in it because I can't transfer by myself. When you spend your day in a noisy, stinky nursing home filled with people who have no choice but to be there, you become more appreciative of your eclectic dish and coffee-mug collection and your wall of oak bookshelves including two entire rows of classic science fiction and a whole shelf that slides out just for your *Oxford English Dictionary*. It's all in the luck of the toss between living in a cozy apartment with a view and living in an institution where someone's asking you about your bowel movements and you have to go to bed at seven o'clock every night no matter what.

No one works at nursing homes unless they're scraping the underneath of the bottom of the barrel. The kid thing makes it easier though. People think there's nothing more horrifying and depressing than a disabled child, but even when kids are all messed up and spazzed out and needy as hell there's still a ton of good energy coming off them. They're so funny and surprising and they are who they are.

It may not be everyone's idea of a dream job. To severely understate. But when I wake up in the morning I have a destination. If someone should happen to ask what I do, which of course no one ever does, but my point is, I have an answer. I work in a nursing home.