

Sundowning

I catch only a glimpse as she passes my room. The new girl. She wears scrubs, pink colored like all the rest, but the way she moves is somehow familiar. I stretch around the Pill Pusher, trying to see, but he blocks me.

“Take your medicine, William,” he prods me. “It’s nearly time for supper.” He mixes whatever it is with a spoonful of applesauce, stirring, quickly stirring, as if the taste, the bitterness of whatever is in there will dissolve as he whips it into the fruit. *Hah*, I think. *You take it.*

Instead I say, “What is it?”

“Same as always. Tylenol – ”

“Don’t need it.”

“—and your antidepressant pill.”

“Don’t need that, either.” I push the small paper cup away, knowing he will spoon the applesauce up and try to trick it into my mouth.

“Remember yesterday, William? You had a problem with Hap, didn’t you?”

“I don’t like him.”

“Well, if you take your medicine those things won’t happen.”

I try again to see around the Pill Pusher, hoping for a good look at the new girl. “I still won’t like him.”

“Well, that may be, but the doctor still wants you to take this medicine.” He pauses. “And you, of all people, should know how important it is to follow doctor’s orders.”

I hate it when he resorts to this sort of blackmail because it works. I grudgingly open my mouth and he shovels it in, then hands me a short glass of water. I grimace at the grainy, bitter taste and try, like every day, to hurry with the water. I have to use both hands. They tremble as I pull the glass to my mouth, and it makes me angry. Every day it makes me angry.

Perhaps I need the pill after all.

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They are singing as I wheel into the dining room. Happy birthday to some old fart passing another unwanted milestone. Somebody drooling down the huge terrycloth “napkins” they hang around our wattled necks. Or somebody who has nodded off, using sleep to escape the stench of institutional food. Or somebody, like me, whose mind is fuzzing over like a rotting peach, somebody whose here and now is growing increasingly hard to recognize.

Roslyn, the fat Italian in pink, parks me at my place. I am the last to arrive at the table. Roslyn, at least, is not singing. I shake my head at their false cheer – don’t they notice that none of *us* have joined in? Just the staff singing, the girls in pink, the boys in blue. I scan them: no new girl.

My tablemates are all men. We are outnumbered here by seven to one or maybe more, depending on who’s died. We eat in companionable silence. Rudy rolls some red grapes into a wad of used Kleenex, his heavy face stiff with concentration, wets the

whole mess down with his cranberry juice and stuffs it all into his mouth. He chews for a long time. Dutch, next to me in his three-piece suit, shakes his head and laughs at Rudy, nudging me to watch. Dutch is 103 and still seems to enjoy himself. He shouted at me once that he is past the anger. But even though he's deaf as a driveway, he can still walk, can still eat solid food, can still move his bowels in privacy.

He can still think.

I work my way through the pureed puddles of food on my plate simply because it is all I have. Potato salad, I think, pureed salmon loaf and some unnamable vegetable, green today. There is always fruit cocktail, though, and I savor the textures, soft as they are. I can chew the wet cubes of peach, the wedges of pear, the scarce sweet globes of cherries.

My daughters tell me I have to eat like this because I have a swallowing problem. I purse my lips. Of course I do. I've had it for a long time, since the first small stroke. Some of everything that travels past my tongue slides down my trachea instead of my esophagus. I've coughed for as long as I can remember, had severe bouts of aspiration pneumonia, but my body, unlike my mind, is not ready to go yet, and fights to stay here.

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After dinner there is another in an endless series of Bingo games. I can't abide it, the mindless numbers, and Roslyn, who knows this, wheels me back toward my room. Hap is in the hallway. He is a toucher, and reaches out for my knee as I roll by. I slap him away and he calls after me, "Where's your sense of humor, Junior?" He calls me that because I made the mistake of telling him once that there was a William Senior long ago.

William Senior. He died in a place like this. Alone, like me. I suppose my infrequent visits across the state to see him set the tone for my own children's lack of attention.

I am nearly through the door when a sound makes me jerk upward, reach for the door jamb and stop Roslyn from shoving me through. A laugh, so familiar, so dear it brings tears to my eyes. Abby!

No, no. It can't be. She is dead, buried last year. I remember the bitter cold, standing at her graveside, my daughters weeping and some minister I didn't know saying words I wish I could believe.

But it *is* her voice, her laugh! After sixty years of marriage, I ought to know. When I insist, Roslyn tells me I am wrong. It is just Effie's daughter, down the hall, visiting.

"Take me," I command.

She does. As we pass door after door, I sniff for Abby's perfume but catch only the normal body odors of this place and, on top of them, the salmon, which has a long half-life. Abby's voice, though—I can still hear it. The closer we get, the more certain I am. The part of my brain that used to be a surgeon, of course, tells me not to be so stupid, but my heart wishes so very much that, against all reason, I feel my pulse quicken.

Let it be Abby.

Of course, it is not. Effie's stupid daughter, a cow of a woman with huge dyed red hair, stares at me as she hangs winter clothing in Effie's closet.

"Hello, William," she says, mocking me in Abby's precious voice.

I close my eyes, feel shame wash through me. I clench my teeth and, without a word, Roslyn wheels me back to my room.

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The new girl's name is Kim. A farm girl. I remember she has brothers, several, I think. She told me that so I wouldn't be fresh with her, she said. She makes me laugh. She smiles, kids with me, pats my shoulder. She looks very good in pink.

I have asked Kim not to do my bath. Twice a week they strip me, wheel me into a shower and hose me off. Two of them, one to scrub and rinse, one to hold me up from the chair when it's time to wash my ass. They try to make light of it—"let's clean the old undercarriage," they say—but it pulls the anger up. Degrading, dehumanizing. It reminds me of the army, delousing all those years ago in the South Pacific. I don't want her to see me that way.

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I think of her as my second wife. We have not even been dancing, so nothing is formalized between us. I have no ring to give her, and even if I had taken Abby's when she was buried, my daughters would never allow me to give it to Kim. I feel, though, somehow energized by her presence, Kim: her smile, her long, graceful neck and the way she punches me lightly in the shoulder when I kid with her. She likes me. I know it. When she is here, the days fly along. When she is not, they creep and groan and move like we do, the inmates in this place. When she is here, I will even play Bible Bingo if she wants me to.

Sometimes she comes to my room to watch TV with me. When things are slow, she says, but I believe it is because she wants to be here, with me. We watch things she

likes, though I can't follow the story of her favorite program, "One Life to Live." There are too many people, all of them evil. Instead, I watch her as she watches them. She is so lovely, so much like Abby.

I remember her at the nurse's station on Fourth Floor, the surgical suite of Minneapolis General Hospital, leaning over the desk, flirting, smoking, laughing. We stole alcohol from the pathology lab one night. I felt daring, invincible. We laughed about that night for years, the heist, the two-day party, the depth of the hangover. I wonder who knew how Abby got the key. Gabe Lockhart, for sure, and maybe Elsie, too. I ask her, but she says, "William, it's Kim. You remember, don't you? Abby's not with us any more." She takes my hand. "It's hard. I know."

I refuse to look at her. The people on screen are plotting yet more evil, and I feel caught in their web.

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The laughter makes me curious. The nurses' station is full of balloons and piles of packages and people in pink. I check the window. Green grass means it can't be Christmas. Perhaps a birthday. I buzz, and Black Boy eventually comes to help.

"What're they doing?"

"It's a going away party. And a wedding shower," he says. "I wasn't invited. Do you need to use the bathroom?"

"No. Who's getting married?" I ask.

"Kim. Do you know which one she is? She's only been here a year."

"Yes." I cannot help but clench my teeth. "When?"

"When is she getting married? Next week, I think. What do you need?"

“Nothing.” Too weak even to turn my wheels away from him, all I can do is order him out.

#

She comes to see me to say goodbye. She brings her young man along, though I don't want to know him, don't want to see her with him. She cries a little, kisses me on the cheek. Talks about their honeymoon, somewhere in Mexico, and why they are going to Minneapolis to live. School. His school. I try to hold onto her hand, memorize how she looks and feels.

My mind has already messed it up.

Roslyn comes to wheel me out to the terrace. I will sit there with the others, sun warming our thinning tissues. The old women will try to talk to me and, like always, I will ignore them. Dutch will shout “AFTERNOON, WILLIAM,” and I will shake his hand, just like every other day.

The Pill Pusher stops us in the hallway, though. “Time to take your medicine, William.”

“What is it?”

“Tylenol—”

“Don't need that.”

“—and your antidepressant pill.”

Oh, Abby. I miss you so.

For the first time since I have been here, I reach for the cup.

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