

Being Good About It

by

Aimee Loiselle

· Table of Contents ·

Part I Aspirations

1 Orientation

John

Part II Apprenticeship

2 No Avoiding *[included]*

Viola *[included]*

3 Floating

Randall

4 Ripped

Gertrude

Part III Acquiescence

5 Questions

Herman

6 More Warnings

Edna

7 Restraints

Marilyn

Part IV Accidents

8 The Fall

Gordon

9 More Hiding

Dora

Part V Consequences

10 Disagreements

Mildred

Part VI Arising

11 Departures

Milo

12 Push and Pull

Part II · Apprenticeship

2 · No Avoiding

As I stepped out of the rinse room onto Roberta and Kiki's conversation, I was thinking about my sore ankles and where I could go to put my feet up. The rinse room didn't have anywhere to sit. So I decided to find another place to hide from the patient call bells and the nurse who always had some little thing for us to do, like she couldn't ever get a patient off the toilet.

I'd already sprayed my dirty diapers, plus a few others, and satisfied my curiosity poking through the cabinets. The tongue depressors and gauze pads weren't that interesting, but the colostomy bags were something new.

Roberta was standing with Kiki by the handicap restroom. Her voice sounded urgent but hushed, so I only caught a few words before Kiki saw me and shifted her eyes away, shaking her head once. It was an alert. A message for Roberta to stop talking.

"... and since he's doing that to Gail, their relationship becomes my—" Roberta twisted her upper body to see who'd appeared behind her. Her face carried the chill of stone.

I was clearly intruding. I froze, and the latch clicked shut behind me. It sounded loud and permanent, like an ancient door sealing off the cursed musty tomb. I didn't know where to go. I wasn't on my way to anything in particular. Looking around for something productive, I saw Florence asleep in one of the vinyl chairs. Her glasses had slipped to the tip of her nose.

The sight of Kiki on Lincoln was unexpected. She was the black woman at the timeclock who'd ignored me that first night—and every subsequent time she'd seen me in the breakroom. I could tell she didn't like me. I thought she was misguided about that, but she worked upstairs on Roosevelt so I tried not to worry about it. She made me uncomfortable though, because I really wanted her to like me. It was important to the impression I had of myself, that I was different than my father.

As usual Kiki didn't say anything. Her large bamboo-hoop earrings glinted as they swung against her neck. They were impressive and showy. I'd seen earrings like that in music videos, but nobody at college wore them. Not even the African-American students. Kiki crossed her arms and I noticed her

fake nails, plum and lavender. Her ring finger had extra sparkles. Intricate work had also gone into her hair, which was set in a variety of perfect curls that broke into long loops at her neck.

“Hi,” I said.

“Beth.” Roberta sighed and smiled. “You must’ve had a lot of rinsing to do, I didn’t see you go in there.”

“Oh. Yeah. It was a lot,” I said. Kiki was silent, she didn’t look at me.

“All done now?” Roberta asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. I’m just going to . . . check on something.” I forced my feet to lift and drop, lift and drop. They felt as big as Ronald McDonald shoes as I walked past Roberta into the north hall.

“She the new girl you got,” Kiki said to Roberta.

“That’s her,” Roberta murmured.

“She musta been rinsin for a while.”

“You know how that goes. She’s still learning.” I heard a light humor in Roberta’s voice, and it stung. I’d made it a whole week, which impressed me at the time. I felt like I deserved a pat on the back because I had other options but chose to work at the nursing home instead. It was easy to feel indignant when I didn’t consider the money I was saving for college.

“White girl’s gettin her hands dirty for once,” Kiki said.

The phrase caught me off guard. *White girl!* That was what Kiki thought of me! I kept walking and suppressed my irritation. I was white, but I didn’t think I was a *white girl*. White girls were the ones who had air conditioning and their own cars and credit cards from their parents. I worked. I was paying for college, I cleaned dirty trays in the cafeteria after other students dumped them on the conveyor belt. I wasn’t like the *white girls*. Not the way I saw it.

“She’ll get the hang of everything,” Roberta replied. “If she lasts long enough.”

“Mmm hm. Wish we got a new aide, but Liberty Home’s so damn cheap. Last girl we got quit. Remember that little thing with the braids done like . . .”

As I moved down the hall, Kiki’s voice was lost in the sounds of television and snoring and gibberish. The doors offered themselves up in front of me, and I thought of Beatrice and Helen. They were silent and immobile in the last room, which meant I could rest my feet without either of them bothering me.

But just when I reached their door, I heard my name.

I looked around. Nobody was in the hall, so I took another step into the room.

“Beth. In here, with Viola.” Pat was waving from the room across the hall. The overhead light wasn’t on, but a mauve television glow washed along the creamy walls. It flickered and cast shadows over Viola’s knickknacks and lace, silk flowers and satin quilting.

Most patients on Lincoln had small portable televisions, the type that distorted the edges of the picture. Not Viola. She had a nineteen-inch tv perched on top of her dresser. And she not only had the dresser, nightstand, and hospital table provided by the nursing home, but also a white vanity, decorative shelf, and mint-green Victorian chair that must've come from her old house.

The 7-to-3 aides supposedly lifted Viola into a wheelchair every day, but I hadn't seen her anywhere except bed. She spent the evenings in her floral nightgowns and quilted bed jackets with tasseled afghans over her feet. Her dyed orange hair was molded into tall stationary curls, which convinced me that she must receive an Aqua Net treatment every morning.

The first time I had seen Viola, Gail was helping her with bedtime. Viola was almost naked at the time, the nightgown and covers folded back to reveal her delicate puffed flesh. Gail stood by the bed with a towel in her hand, but she was watching the television while Viola ran a washcloth over the dimpled rounds of her breasts and arms. I heard a double beep and Alex Trebek told one of the contestants to pick again.

"Hey. Sorry. I just um, I just needed a lift," I said. I felt embarrassed for Viola, but she didn't snatch at the covers or anything. It almost seemed like she wanted me to see her. I stood there, and Viola reached down between her legs with the washcloth and I wondered if that was a normal thing to do with two aides standing in the room. Gail didn't seem to think anything of it. So then I was embarrassed that I found the whole thing peculiar and fascinating.

Gail nodded. "Sure, I can do it."

She laid the towel over the bedrail, but Viola reached toward her with one pale hand. "Before you go do that dear, can you get my behind. Then while you're gone I'll fix my nightie and put the cream on my face. Did you get the jar of—? Oh yes, here it is." Viola looked at me as she continued, "I try to do as much as I can. It's good to stay active. Right Gail? I don't want to be a bother."

"Sure Viola," Gail said.

Viola tipped to her left side and held the washcloth over her hip for Gail. "Make sure to get in there. I had a large bowel movement earlier."

"I'll be with you in a second, Beth." Gail rested her left hand on Viola's hip and pushed. Viola's soft arm trembled as she pulled herself forward with the bedrail.

I had wanted to stare. Peeking for a second as I pivoted at the door, I had let my peripheral vision catch sight of Viola raising her right thigh a couple inches. "Can you get in there dear?" she had asked, as if she were inquiring whether Gail wanted milk with her tea.

The memory involuntarily flipped through my mind after Pat called me into Viola's room, but Viola was fully dressed when I entered. "Come and join us for a minute dear," Viola said and pointed to

the tv. Her nails were coral pink. “I like to get to know all you girls, and we’re just watching the Oprah show. Pat’s so good to spend time with me.”

“Oh come on now Vi. It’s not so bad. Her daughters and sister come to visit every week.” Pat placed a hand on Viola’s arm. “Beth, you make sure to take real good care-a Viola. She’s a special lady.”

“Okay, I will.” I smiled and tried to keep my attention away from the television, but it was a flickering box of magic distraction. “I was gonna check on the patients across the hall or something, cuz I finished rinsing.”

“Yeah,” Pat said. “If I get any time, I like to see how Vi’s doing.”

“Do you want a candy dear?” Viola swiveled her torso toward my side of the bed and opened the drawer of her nightstand. It was filled with candy. Butterscotch in golden cellophane, miniature candy bars, red licorice nubs. A child’s glittering dream. “Pat dear. Take another. What do you want?”

“I’ll have a couple gum drops, thanks.”

“Beth, take a few for later. Something sweet for when you’re feeling tired. When you need a little pick-me-up.”

“No, I’m okay thank you.” I felt odd about taking candy from a patient. Mainly because the idea of it was a little gross—in those early weeks everything inside the nursing home seemed tainted by the incontinence and decay—but also because it didn’t feel right. Later I’d be dropping by to see Viola whenever I needed a little pick-me-up. It was a good deal for both of us. She got some company and I got a sweet break from the nursing home.

“Take one,” Viola said. “Some of these hard candies here. What about strawberry.”

“Okay, sure. Thanks then.” I dropped the candy into the pocket of my white skirt, a long prairie-style number from my sophomore year of high school. The cotton fabric was creased from being folded in a brown paper bag with my other clothes for the Goodwill. After I had left for college, my mom never dropped them off.

“Thanks Vi,” Pat said before tossing a green gum drop in her mouth. She stood watching Oprah with her hand on the bedrail. I figured it would just take some time for me to get comfortable with all the patients, like Pat was.

“As long as you’re both here, could you give me a boost?” Viola asked. “Then I can use the bedpan. You’d be such a help.”

Her request triggered an instant skepticism—I saw Viola’s game. The candy wasn’t generosity. It was a lure, a little emotional leverage. And it offended me because I considered myself a good aide and not some cheap beggar to be bought with candy.

“Sure, we can do that for ya,” Pat said, her eyes lingering on the television. “Aaaaalright. Beth, you stay on that side, okay? Have ya done this before? When the patients push with their feet.”

“Oh, yeah. We did it in training.” I wanted to return the strawberry candy before boosting Viola. I didn’t like feeling its plastic wrap crackle in my skirt as I lowered the bedrail. But instead I kept it and ate one in Beatrice and Helen’s room, after I gave Viola the boost.

Pat was chewing away on her purple gum drop. Viola smiled and I inhaled the powder she sprinkled all over herself. It smelled like the potpourri my grandmother bought at the surplus store. Pat and I each hooked an elbow into Viola’s armpits, our backs cranked over the edge of the mattress. “Wait a minute girls, let me get my footing,” Viola hooted as she wriggled back and forth.

“I thought we were supposed to lower the bed when we lifted or—” I started.

“Oh no dear. I can’t be flat on my back, not even for a minute. I can’t breathe, I almost faint.”

“It’s okay Beth.” Pat raised her eyebrows and her voice, “We can boost her like this cuz Viola pushes with her legs. Right Vi?”

“I always try Pat,” Viola replied. “You know I try. I have my feet dug right in.”

“Alright then. One, two, three,” Pat counted. We both jammed our weight down through our calves. My muscles contracted into taut cables as I squeezed Viola’s bicep and tried to carry her toward the top of the bed.

“Push Viola push,” Pat huffed.

“I did. I did,” Viola cried. Everyone released and I stepped back from the bed. The crook of my elbow was damp. “But now I’m lopsided.”

“What was that Vi?” Pat asked, the words plopping from her mouth like curdled milk.

“I think you’re a little stronger than Beth dear.” Viola was slanted toward my side of the bed. “If you could just switch and try it one more time.”

Switch, I thought. Switch? This isn’t my fault old woman.

“One more time,” Pat sighed. She jammed her chin way into her throat and added, “But that’s it. Right? That’s it.”

“Of course. Absolutely dear.”

“Maybe we should pull the covers down so I can get a look at the way you got your feet.” Pat reached for the top of the comforter, but Viola smashed it to her bosom.

“No no, now. You don’t have to do that, I don’t want to get a chill. I’ll push with my feet. You know I will dear.”

“Alright then, but you better set your feet good this time.” The brief exchange seemed like a skit the two of them had done many times, as performers and as their own audience. Oliver Hardy and Lou Costello. “You ready Beth?” Pat asked.

On the second try, Viola held her breath and groaned as she pushed into her heels. Her body worked with mine instead of dragging against it, and her head rose past the pile of pillows. Everything clicked and the weight dropped out of my back. Viola released her breath in a gust that smelled of coffee and warm meat.

“There we go,” Pat said with a smile, but she snuck me a wink as we fixed the covers. It made me feel like an insider, like we had some secret on Viola. I took it as a sign that I had broken through, I wasn’t just the new girl anymore. I clicked the bedrail into its slot on my side and moved to the foot of the bed.

“Yes that’s much better. Much better,” Viola said, kicking her feet around under the blankets. So I started toward the door. “It’ll be easier for me to get on the bedpan now. Pat you’re so good to me.”

“I know Vi, I know. Don’t worry about it,” Pat said. “Do you need the big bedpan or the little one?” Her voice was relaxed again.

“The little one dear, I just need to tinkle. You’re so wonderful to do this. It really is God’s work, you know,” Viola said. “Thank you Beth, you stop by anytime dear.”

I glanced back. “Okay, thanks.”

“Since you’re still here Beth, could you help me over?”

I stood in the doorway, sensing the serenity of Beatrice and Helen’s room across the hall. But Pat came out of the bathroom with the bedpan and I couldn’t just walk out.

I returned to the far side of the bed and lowered the bedrail. Viola reached her smooth fingers toward me. I grabbed her forearm, pulling her hand to the side of the mattress. As soon as she had a grip, I brought her weight to rest against my hips. The quickness of my movement made her gasp.

The rush of control passed through me again, like it had when I’d pushed John onto his side. I could have eased my body away from the bed and tipped Viola over the edge of the mattress. She wouldn’t have been able to do anything but cry out as she wobbled against my legs.

Pat held the bedpan on the middle of Viola’s butt, below my left hand. “Thanks, Beth. Okay Vi, come back down. Let’s make this quick, I gotta go to break.”

“You’re all done now, right?” I asked Pat.

“Oh yes dear,” Viola answered. My lip curled in an instinctive warning before I was able to catch myself, but Pat didn’t notice. Her attention had already returned to the tv.

“Yup,” Pat nodded. “We’re all set.”

I left and walked to Beatrice and Helen’s room with my eyes forward, all my intention in that direction—I didn’t want to give anybody the opportunity to ask me for anything else. And I had about twenty minutes to fill, since Martie and I went to break after Pat and Roberta. They were first for all the breaks: short break, dinner break, and last break.

The domed overhead light went on when I flipped the switch. As usual, Beatrice was sitting in her chair and staring straight ahead. Her thin marbled legs descended from a green-checked housedress into brown socks and black lace-up shoes.

I looked at her and at Helen. The top of Helen's head was sticking out from the sheets, her hair in the same red elastic. I felt I should do something, so I decided to take Beatrice to the toilet before sitting on her bed to rest my feet. We were supposed to do it, and it was good for her. Guilt worked on me like that. It was another emotion I confused with real caring while actually keeping everything about me.

Beatrice stood when I touched her elbow. As she stepped into the bathroom, she raised her foot very high, like she was expecting to trip on something or head up some stairs. Then she walked straight to the sink and stood in front of the mirror, her hands hanging at her sides, eyes on her face. She did not seem interested or delighted or concerned. She merely stared.

Rather than rush Beatrice to the toilet, I stood next to her. The stark light and gray-brown tiles made the bathroom feel like an interrogation cell for suspicious persons. I put my face next to Beatrice's, bending down since she was only five feet tall. We touched cheeks and her skin felt soft despite the lines and wrinkles. Her lips twitched, her eyelids jumped as she looked toward me in the mirror. I gave her a big smile, my best kindergarten-school-picture smile. It was supposed to make her feel special and noticed.

She brought one of her hands up to my face. An inexplicable feeling of amazement and gratitude held me for a brief moment. Like we were the only two people in the entire wide universe completely aware of each other.

Then the moment broke, and her hand moved away to her hair.

Bea patted her gray curls like she was freshening up, on her way back to a party. She glanced down at the sink and started moving her hand over the faucet and around the drain, as if she had a cleaning sponge. Finally she put her palm under the faucet and flicked her hand like she was splashing.

There wasn't any noise, but her lips were moving. She finished rinsing the imaginary cleanser and dried her hands. While they twirled around each other, Bea looked in the mirror again. Her eyes seemed more clear. She saw herself. She saw herself in a mirror somewhere. The image of her watching herself was so weird and beautiful, I felt enamored of the work, the patients, the place, myself. The bathroom was so quiet I heard the suction of her rubber soles against the tiles as she shifted her weight.

Bea startled when I put my hand into the crook of her elbow. She had a question in her face, her eyebrows squeezed together. "Good job, good job with the sink. But let's see if you need to use the toilet. Okay?"

It was easy to get her ready for the toilet because she was wearing a loose housedress. All I had to do was sweep the hem onto Bea's shoulder and unsnap the diaper, which fell to the floor. Then I

waited for her to take a seat. But Bea reached down for armrests like she was at her regular vinyl chair, like there was the usual support. Her body swayed and tipped backward. Her feet sliding from underneath her as all her weight teetered toward the white porcelain tank. She realized the emptiness and fear pulled at her eyes. There was nothing she could do to stop the fall.

An electric charge hit my body, holding me for a miniscule split second before propelling me into motion. All my muscles jumped. I lunged and grabbed onto Bea, my arms hugging her into my chest. She was bony and tender in my grasp.

I heaved our weight back onto me. Her feet swished over the floor, but I held her and then lowered her bottom on the toilet. “That’s it, you’re okay,” I said. Her face was pinched into a silent cry, but she glanced around and patted the metal safety rail and spun the toilet paper.

My nerves buzzed from the panic. Every neuron lit up.

Bea’s hands kept moving. They ran along her legs and began to tug at the housedress swept up over her shoulder.

“No no. You can leave that there for now.” I leaned forward and moved her hand away. “We’re not done yet.” That was when I noticed the round turds. They were sitting like little dark eggs in Bea’s diaper, which was open between her feet on the bathroom floor.

“Oh jeez.” I flung my head back. “Don’t frickin tell me you got a dirty diaper. You never have a dirty diaper.” I dragged it from between her shoes and folded it, holding the ends to make a poop satchel. “Wait here okay? I’ll be right back with a clean diaper. Wait here.” I assumed I could leave Bea alone on the toilet. She didn’t need a restraint in her chair.

Since I didn’t want to be late for break, I rushed down the hall, dropped the turds in the rinsing bowl, and left the dirty diaper hanging over the splash guard. I whipped past the linen cart and grabbed a clean one.

“Okay,” I said loudly as I walked into Bea and Helen’s room. “I’m back. Did you—” I cut myself off as I reached the bathroom.

Bea was staring in the mirror. There was a trail of pee dribbled from the toilet to about a foot from where she was standing.

She ran her fingertips along her cheekbones as she studied her face. I could see myself, tall and straight, over her shoulder. She mumbled in a way that sounded Italian even without words and water filled her eyes but didn’t come out.

I tossed the clean diaper over my shoulder and pulled three brown paper towels from the dispenser, using my sneaker to run them across the floor.

“Beth. Beth are you down there?” Martie shouted from the hall. “I’m going to break. You coming?”

“Oh shit. Let’s go, let’s get the diaper on.” I wiped through Beatrice’s crotch with a ball of toilet paper and snapped the diaper in place. “Here we go.” With a slight prompt, Beatrice returned her vinyl chair and sat down, but there was anxiety in her face.

“They’ll come get you for dinner soon, alright?” I moved away from her. She watched me. “They’ll get you to the dining room in a few minutes.” I jogged into the hall. “Hey. Hey wait, I’m coming.”

Pat appeared in the bright spot by the nurse’s station. “Martie just left. She’s down by Washington.”

“Oh. Alright.” I slowed but trotted every couple steps. No matter when we left, we got fifteen minutes for short and last break. But I didn’t want to sit in the breakroom by myself. Without the other women, without the voices, cigarettes, and garish soda cans, it was like sitting in a dusty cinderblock. Cobwebs and everything.

When I got to the breakroom, Martie was reading a book at the third cafeteria table. I thought of it as the *fLOTSAM table*, where aides sat if they didn’t have any friends. Martie had been at Liberty Home for almost year, which should have made her more like the regular aides, but she still sat at the third table.

Kiki was at the first table with a black woman from upstairs, and they were both smoking cigarettes. A single green pack sat on the table. The gold around Kiki’s neck was dense and textured. On one of her chains there was a large nameplate flecked with diamonds. I couldn’t read it, but it looked too long and intricate to say *Kiki*.

I walked to the third table and sat facing the breakroom door, my back to the refrigerator. I stared out the window and rummaged through my bag for my cigarettes. I was glad I smoked. It was something to do, and it gave the break more urgency—*we needed to have a cigarette*. The slats of the vertical blinds were yellow from the smoke. Outside a split sky hung over the few cars in the staff parking lot. Large gray slabs of thunder cloud slogged toward us, wiping out the afternoon blue.

Engrossed in her book, Martie was undisturbed by my presence. She didn’t lift her head. She was cute, with round eyes and soft cheeks. I couldn’t tell if Martie was black or mixed, whether she was African American or another ethnicity. Her skin was even and warm, like creamy coffee without any imperfections. And she always wore her hair in a ponytail, swept into a bunch of corkscrew curls. I looked down at the cover of her thin paperback. It was the Greek play *Medea*.

“That’s pretty serious reading,” I said. I figured Martie would talk to me. She usually wanted to chat, which I appreciated as long as we didn’t talk about where I went to college.

Martie laughed. “I know, right? Mr. Williams does not give his students a break. It’s the last week of school and he hands out a summer reading list for next year’s AP English. This play, one by

Shakespeare, and some poems. But I've got to do well in that class for college, so I'm starting early." She closed the book over her finger, and I regretted bringing it up.

Martie was one of the local high school girls who worked at the nursing home year-round. She was enthusiastic and talkative and friendly, but unlike the other girls—who chatted about tank tops and trips to Hampton Beach—Martie discussed college applications and the Peace Corps.

Yet I'd managed to keep where I went to college a secret from her, as well as from everybody else at Liberty Home. I'd spent most of my life balancing my noticeable success in school against the wary interest and conditional approval of my family and their working-class friends. So I knew I didn't want to talk about Brown in front of the other nurse's aides—especially if Martie was going to make a big deal about it. I saw what being the nursing home nerd had done for her, and I hoped to get off the flotsam table at some point during the summer.

"AP classes are a lotta work," I said. "You go to Springfield Central right? They had a good softball team. Always a tough game when we played them." I thought I was changing the subject to sports.

"Yeah. They have a good AP program too, which I like because my parents can't pay for college. So I'm also taking AP Calculus and Biology. I want as many free credits as I can get."

"Mm," I nodded. Martie's comments brought us too close to the subject of where I went to school. So even though we probably had a lot in common, even though she was making her own way to college like I had, I ditched the conversation.

Dark spots appeared on the bleached asphalt of the parking lot and a few rain drops hit the double-glass window, running down and leaving a trail of tiny odd-shaped beads. I smoked my cigarette and imagined what my boyfriend Jeremy was doing at that moment. Probably making copies for some finance lawyer—he said he did that a lot at the investment bank. It sounded boring, but his father had told him the job would help *build his resume*.

"Did you hear that a couple girls from your training class quit this week?" Martie asked.

"Really? You know who?" Four of the trainees had vanished before we even finished the class and another had declined to start her shifts. I wanted to know about any other flops.

"They both worked 7-to-3. I think this girl Valerie quit yesterday, and then her friend Sonia didn't come today," Martie said. "I heard they went to Classical High School together, graduated last year."

I smiled, remembering the two of them with their notebooks and careful questions, the fury on Valerie's face after John hit her. They hadn't made it two weeks. I remained victorious in some sense, in the petty scorebook of my mind anyway.

I finished my cigarette and stamped it out in the orange ashtray. It was pouring rain outside. The muted sound of its thrumming filled the breakroom. Martie closed her book and put it in her backpack. Kiki and the woman from the first table stood up.

“Aren’t you going to stay a couple more minutes?” Martie asked.

“Nah, I’ll just go back with you,” I said. “Dinner carts are probably there already.”

As soon as Martie and I crossed from the service hall into the lobby, the sound of the rain disappeared. We neared Washington, the first wing on the first floor, and heard the faint noise of dinner trays being unloaded, the rattle of silverware on hard plastic. Tawanda, a regular aide from the second floor, was digging through Washington’s linen cart when we walked past. “Hey Martie, you workin Washington tonight?” she asked.

“No, I’m on Lincoln,” Martie answered.

“Well, I’m takin these vest restraints,” Tawanda said. She was a beautiful slender woman with dark skin and lean muscular arms. “The aides’re probably in the dining room, but I got to go. If you hear them complainin about it, they can just come see me on Roosevelt.” Although taking linens from another wing was a major violation of the informal rules, Martie and I just nodded. Washington didn’t need restraints because the with-it patients lived on that wing, where people still dressed in regular life clothes, ate off regular flat plates, and checked their calendars to know what day it was. No matter how much the regular aides liked another aide, if she worked on Washington she didn’t earn the same respect. Women who pleased people worked there, which was the reason they could endure those patients and their repetitive demands. In the mind of the other aides, it was a hassle but it wasn’t real work. Tawanda pointed at me. “You one-a the new girls right? Only a few of you left from that fancy certification class.” She smiled. “That’s alright, that’s cool. We can use you.”

“Yeah, well, it’s hard but . . . I’m getting the hang of it.” I nodded and shrugged and looked down the hallway like I was cool as a chilled cucumber, sliced and served in a little whitebread sandwich. But her words rang inside my head. I took them as further evidence of my triumph.

“Alright then. See y’all,” she said and headed for the elevator.

When Martie and I reached Lincoln, Roberta was walking Florence toward the dining room, where the patients who could feed themselves sat whether they were out-of-it or not. As long as they remembered how to use a spoon or fork, they were there. Pat was in the activity room setting up some of the patients who needed to be fed.

I wheeled John to the activity room and put his gerichair by the window. He ate better if he wasn’t with the group at the cafeteria table, and the rain outside was fresh and beautiful. Distant maple and pine trees tossed with the wind. The silky petunias around the tiny back patio were tattered. The whole world looked tormented and vivid.

“I think he likes watching the storm,” I said to Pat. “He actually looks happy.”

“He does, doesn’t he? Who knows what’s goin on in that head of his,” Pat said. “Oh Beth, you left a dirty diaper in the rinse room. Right? I didn’t want you to forget, or it’ll be dried up when you rinse out later.”

My smile locked and emptied. My teeth were still showing, but my lips became wooden. They didn’t want to move. “Yeah. I didn’t have time before break, but I was gonna do it.” I couldn’t believe it.

John folded his hands on the tray and appeared to be watching the stream of water running into the square grate in the parking lot. A pulse of lightning filled the window.

“I just wanted you to know Beth,” Pat said. “If the shit dries, it can be hard to get off.” She arranged a towel across a patient’s chest and walked toward the dining room. “I’m gonna help Roberta across the hall if you guys’re set in here.”

I snuck to the rinse room with the hope that maybe Roberta had decided to spray out Beatrice’s diaper. It wasn’t a big poop. Nothing. A few smears. I’d rinsed out diapers left by other aides that were much filthier.

I shoved the door open, and there hung the diaper. A knot twisted in my chest until I felt bigger and lighter than I was. I wanted to march into the rain and through the parking lot, to the trees that grew in the field between Liberty Home and the valve distribution company. I imagined watching the other aides try to get through bedtime without me, their exhaustion.

Instead, promising to never rinse anybody else’s linen, I flopped the diaper against the splash guard, yanked the hose from its hook, and sprayed water all over the inside. It spurted everywhere, water on my hands and on the floor. I didn’t wring out the diaper before hurling it, saturated and dripping, into the large canvas bin that the laundry ladies picked up twice a shift.

Viola

I wonder what's for supper. It must be coming soon if the Oprah show is over. Now let's see. We already had the meatloaf. And the macaroni and cheese. Well, I hope it's the open-faced turkey sandwich. We haven't had that in a while, and it's good with the corn niblets if they're not overcooked. The best supper is the roast chicken. And for dinner, it's the scoop of tuna on a green salad with soup and potato chips, even though the kitchen never gives you enough tuna. Or enough potato chips.

It'd be nice if that new girl brought my tray. That new girl, what is her name . . . it begins with a B. Becky. Let's see. Beth. Yes, that's it. Beth. I don't think I've heard her last name though. She really hasn't properly introduced herself. I'm not like the other patients here, the poor dears. So a little effort at decent manners would go a long way. When Pat called her over this afternoon, it would've been nice to have a little introduction. It's not hard to say, hi my name is Beth so-and-so and I just started on such-and-such. Really.

Must come from a good family though, if she's going to be a nurse. It's good work for a young girl before she gets married. Maybe even after she's married nowadays, what with all that's happening. I wonder where her family is from, if they go back in this area. They probably have a place here in Granfield, or maybe Hampden. But she's certainly not from Rockfield, not with those clothes. Oh my no. She might be a decent girl, but she's not from a Rockfield family.

She obviously doesn't iron either. Doesn't even keep the skirt on a hanger for Heaven's sake. If she was my daughter I wouldn't let her out of the house in an outfit like that. I think all the girls should wear nice uniforms, like Roberta and Pat. Especially considering this place says it's the top nursing care facility. Really. A uniform certainly makes Pat look sharp and professional even though she needs to lose a few pounds. And just look at that Oprah. She dresses to the nines for every show. I bet that yellow and black suit she wore today cost a pretty penny. It's nice to see a colored lady dressing up like that, taking good care of her appearance. And if Gail and Roberta can come in with their clothes bleached and pressed, Beth should be able to.

They're such nice ladies—not at all like the colored people around the bus station in Springfield. Not at all. When Hank died and Annette took me to pick up her son, it was just terrible. Nobody should have to face that when they're picking up relatives for a funeral. Those people playing their music, children wandering around and mothers yelling. I didn't know what to make of it, and Annette saying it was all their cultural expression. Cultural expression, what does Annette know anyway. She was also the one who said it would be good for me to get out of the house—sometimes I have to remind myself that she's my daughter. All I wanted to do was sit by Hank's things. By the highboy with his boxer shorts and undershirts, his pressed handkerchiefs, and the little drawer with his money clip and cuff links and silver

lighters. The watches. All except for the good watch that I'd taken to the funeral home with his suit. That gray suit I liked best, with a red tie, and the black shoes even though they said they didn't need them. I couldn't stand to imagine his bare feet under the casket. Of course it's ridiculous, but it seemed like they would get cold. Oh dear, my sweet Hank.

Well. Yes. Now Pat told me she bought a special watch for working here because she has to wash her hands so often. I noticed that new girl wasn't wearing a watch. Just those silver rings, which aren't really appropriate. Especially not that ring she had on her thumb. Of course a wedding band is acceptable, but nurses really shouldn't be wearing rings other than that. And Beth didn't stay to help me off the bedpan either, although she took the candy well enough. Typical attitude of kids these days.

I could certainly use my supper. But those people in the dining room always get their trays before the rest of us, and that isn't fair. They get served while we have to wait, and if we need something nobody is here to get it for us. I have to check for salt'n pepper, ketchup, mustard, and cream'n sugar every night, especially with the new girls. But I never get impatient, I understand that they work hard. This is good work for a girl, God's work.

I think I'm going to need a little boost when they bring me my tray though, just to get the weight off my lower back and get the blood into my feet. They're so cold all the time. Unbelievably cold.