

Being Good About It

by

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This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book, because it deals with the feelings of women...

Virginia Woolf

Rejoice, o young man, in thy youth... and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.

Ecclesiastes 11:9

Boot Camp

1 · Oriented

When I ran the wet washcloth between his legs, John swung at me. Hit me right in the nose, and the instinct to smash him rushed from inside me. It was a raw dark urge with nothing to stop it. Nobody was watching, and John had severe dementia, spoke only gibberish.

I'd like to say some respectable values that my family had instilled in me blocked the impulse. Or the ideals from a year of elite liberal-arts education swept the brute instinct away. But I was alone and nineteen and not really alert or ready.

Before I go into detail, I should take you back. So you understand the context, because you probably don't know much about working in a nursing home. See, I was just home from Brown for the summer, trying to make money for college. I took the job as a nurse's aid because of the pay, but I also liked to say it was a good job, helping people. Of course I must have had some fascination with the bizarre and unfamiliar. Or I wouldn't have done it.

My family was regular, nothing special. Like, when I got home from Brown University, my mom was making pork chops with mashed potatoes and canned cranberry sauce. She was spraying a frying pan as I walked through the breezeway with my older brother, who'd been sent to pick me up at the bus

station in downtown Springfield, his eyes still weak and soft from whatever he'd been using that afternoon.

"Beth," my mom called. "It's so good to have you home, so good to see you." She wiped her hands with a dishtowel before hugging me.

Gary snuck past. "I'm gonna take a nap," he said. "Let me know when dinner's ready." He still lived with my parents after dropping out of Westfield State at the end of his first year.

"Okay," my mom said. "It'll be about an hour."

"I'm gonna put my bags away," I said and stepped toward my room. The house was a ranch. Regular maroon. Three bedrooms at the end of a short hall. "I wanna change out of these clothes, the bus was crowded." I had also been out drinking until four in the morning, so I'd sat in my own film of boozy sweat during the three-hour ride from Providence.

"Alright, get comfortable. You probably want to get ready for tomorrow too. But I'd like to hear about the end of your classes and final tests," she said, lifting the lid from a pot of boiling water. "So get settled and come on out. You see that me and your father went to Uncle Jerry's for the car?"

"Yeah, I saw it." My uncle always had a couple random cars in his driveway. He was lending me a silver Ford Taurus for the summer. "Thanks, that helps a lot. I'll probably go over to Hilary's later. After dinner."

I went to my room, dropped my suitcases, and stared at the alarm clock. I didn't want to think about setting it for 5:30 in the morning for the nurse's aide training. I didn't even get up that early for school.

The whole nursing home thing had started over spring break. While most of my friends from Brown were traveling to Florida or Colorado, I'd gone home to look for a summer job. And Hilary mentioned a girl making two dollars above minimum wage as a nurse's aide. I had latched onto the guarantee of hard cash and applied at three nursing homes. Brown was expensive, and financial aid only covered part of it.

A few weeks later, the nursing director for Liberty Home had called to say I had a job if I did the new certification training in May. She also said I was welcome to work at Liberty Home whenever I was in Granfield. Even for a weekend. Because she was always looking for aides. I was in denial or something. I didn't want to recognize what that meant about the job, about the conditions and turnover. I was too busy convincing myself that being a nurse's aide was an important responsibility—you understand how we do that when we want something. And the conviction stuck because I wanted to focus on other things, like my boyfriend Jeremy at his parents' big gray house, my hope to study abroad in London, my wish for a real career in law or advertising.

So I leaned over, set the alarm for 5:30, turned up the volume, and stopped stressing about it. Then I put on a clean t-shirt and joined my mom in the kitchen. When my father got home from the warehouse, he patted my arm and continued on with his routine: knocking loudly on Gary's door before changing into jeans and sneakers. I was mashing the potatoes when Gary came into the kitchen rubbing his eyes.

"Beth was just telling us about her history test," my father said.

"Fascinating," Gary said. "Let me guess. There were names and dates."

"Just take a seat," my father said and pointed to the opposite side of the laminate table.

"It's not that big a deal," I said. But I did feel gorged with information and ideas and stories. I had all my revelations. Discoveries really. I wanted to share everything, and I didn't want to talk about it with them at all. "I had a ten-page research paper too, for my culture and media class. With footnotes and all that."

"Culture and media," my father said as my mom placed a large plate of pork chops on the table. I didn't remember seeing any fried pork chops at Brown. "We're spending good money for a class called 'culture and media'?"

No, we are not spending good money, I thought. But I didn't say anything. My parents gave me \$2000 a year toward college. An amount I didn't want to put down, although it left me hungry. There were students whose parents sent \$2000 for a semester's allowance.

My mom brought out homemade brownies for dessert, and we all cleared the table. When my father bundled up the greasy bones for the garbage can in the garage, I said a quick goodbye and followed him out.

I wanted to go hang out with Hilary. She was excited to see pictures of Jeremy and hear about the house parties at Brown, plus she had her own basement bedroom where her parents never bothered us. We sat on her big messy bed and drank diet soda, and she was impressed Jeremy's father drove a Mercedes.

"Kevin's still working at the amusement park for the summer," Hilary said and shrugged. "I'm staying at the health club, I get the discounted memberships for me and Kevin. It's alright. You start at the nursing home tomorrow, right?"

"Yup. Seven in the morning for the first week, cuz that's the only time they have the stupid training."

"Aren't you nervous?" she asked. "You know you have to see old people naked and stuff. And like, clean them and change their diapers. My friend said it was weird, but then she got used to it. I don't think I could do it though."

“I guess I’m a little nervous, but it can’t be that bad. I mean, it’s taking care of people. Old people who need help and everything.”

I wasn’t going to let on to Hilary—or to anybody else—but just beneath my hard thin confidence, I did feel uneasy. Probably because way down I knew I was deluding myself—people didn’t care about nursing homes or the elderly. We just pretend they do, because it’s the decent thing to do. It makes everybody feel better.

Now, of course, I realize I was too young and timid to have the compassion needed to really care for the patients. I realize I was more curious than I was concerned. But I completed the five days of training, and it showed me that I could get the patients cleaned and out of bed or washed and back into bed. I could see their frail bodies without flinching.

So that gives you some context for me and for what happened with John.

It started in certification training. The first two days were just an RN talking and introducing instructional videos in the Conference Room-Chapel of the nursing home—we watched how to rinse dirty diapers and use a kidney pan for spittle.

Then on Wednesday, the RN trainer announced that she’d made arrangements for us to get a resident up from his morning nap. The reaction in class was mixed. Most of the trainees didn’t want to do it, they wanted to see somebody else go first. We all wanted to see—there was that sideshow quality to the training, we knew strange sights were being held just out of reach.

I figured I wouldn’t be chosen because other girls asserted themselves, greeted the RN trainer everyday. Like Sonia, Valerie, and Sheila. They were young but not in college yet, working temp jobs and at a dry cleaners. All three were interested in becoming nurses, so they wore uniforms, bought binders for their training manuals, and asked questions about everything from recording bowel movements to cleaning fingernails. I listened attentively, as I did in every class, but it sounded like common sense. I thought the nursing home couldn’t possibly be a challenge, not after a year at an Ivy League college.

So I was looking forward to the demonstration but mostly relaxed as we walked back to class from our short morning break. Other women showed various degrees of anticipation, like one lady who glanced around with flickering eyes and another declaring she was *not ready for this shit*. When the trainer appeared, she told us to leave our things on the conference table and gather by the door. “Ready everyone?” she asked, and paraded us out of the Conference Room-Chapel and down the main hallway of Liberty Home.

She stopped abruptly in front of a patient’s room. “As you will see, John is an 83-year-old man with incontinence and dementia,” she said. “However, he is physically mobile and requires a belt

restraint. We need to wake him, get him clean and dry, and lift him into his gerichair, just like we practiced this morning with the training mannequin. Beth and Valerie, why don't you set up by his bed."

I was standing at the back of the group with my arms folded, waiting. The trainer said my name. *Beth*. My lips parted. I looked up from the plastic number plate by the door. *Not me*, I thought in her direction, *what the hell are you doing?*

"You'll need to get linens first," she said in a jovial voice, like she was offering me the chance to fly to Paris. I looked down to the linen cart by the nurse's station. "But I have rubber gloves and a lift belt here for you."

When Valerie and I returned with a couple diapers, a few washcloths, and three hand towels, the other trainees parted widely. A man lay asleep on his back in the second bed. Only his face was visible, his mouth hanging open like a ghost's.

Valerie immediately moved between the two beds and pulled the hospital curtain with a flourish. "Very good, Valerie," the trainer said. "We have to be mindful of the residents' privacy." I slid into position on the opposite side of the bed, but rolled my eyes. I felt compelled to direct all my self-consciousness into contempt for Valerie's flamboyantly obedient behavior.

"Oh," Valerie said, waving the washcloths. "These need to be wet." She bounced toward the bathroom.

I stood watching John, hoping that we wouldn't find poop in his diaper. He was gaunt. His skin was like a shroud that had melted onto his skull. I hoped his penis wouldn't get hard or something when we washed him either. I really didn't want to look at it in front of the other trainees. My mind went to thinking about boys or men I'd seen naked. I tried not to imagine them—my friend Andy during a game of truth-or-dare, a pervert who had exposed himself outside the community center, my serious boyfriends Dave and Jeremy.

"Now we can untie the restraint," Valerie announced.

A sticky yellow mucus was caught in the deep ridge along the side of John's mouth, but I knew from the training videos that we couldn't work on a patient, not even to wipe his cheek, until he was fully awake. Seeing the glob dragged a retch to the back of my mouth and I wondered if I could do the job, if I could endure such close contact with everything that came out of people. The space around me seemed to ripple, like time had missed a second and was trying to catch up. Then I leaned over John and rubbed his shoulder, and I felt the rush of facing the hideous and being good about it.

"Hello. We're here to get you up, okay?" I said loudly while holding my smile.

"Aahh oohh oh." John snapped up, his arms flailing. He almost slapped Valerie's arm and she recoiled. The mucus on his face vibrated.

“Oh, yes. Okay,” the trainer said in quick snippets. “So I see John is *very* active, but remember what we worked on. For soothing and lifting.”

I could tell from her tone that the trainer was surprised, that she probably didn't even work at Liberty Home, that she was basically an RN who did trainings at different places—you know when a flash of realization tilts the whole perspective. Suddenly her authority diminished. My stake in Liberty Home felt more legitimate, even though she was the nurse and I was only a summer aide.

At the same time, I kept seeing the goo and was amazed at my ability to calm John despite my revulsion. I thought I was incredible, like Mother Theresa or Audrey Hepburn. I hugged his shoulders and pressed him flat on the bed.

Next Valerie fussed with the sheet, tucking it between John's legs until it only covered the leg in front of her. Then she paused, her signal that it was my turn to do something. I was to open his diaper. And expose his penis. She gave me a tight-lip smile, the washcloth draped in her hand like it was a silk scarf, like she wasn't setting me up at all.

I carefully folded John's worn oxford shirt over his stomach before approaching the cloth diaper, which looked heavy with moisture. “Very good so far ladies,” the trainer said. Her head nodded in my peripheral vision.

The middle of the diaper felt dense and warm, even through the gloves, so I yanked it down between his thighs with one fast jerk. The uncircumcised penis sat in his crotch like a bloated larva, white and damp. I had never seen an uncircumcised penis. I almost pointed and said *he's not circumcised*.

It was a plain soft penis, lacking mystery or promise, no threat. I could have bobbed it in my hand. But the testicles were worrisome. The purpled scrotum seemed about to disintegrate and abandon the testes to the raw cooled air.

My eyes met Valerie's as I set both hands on the bedrail. Stillness. Now it was her turn, she had to use that washcloth. The other trainees stayed completely silent as she set her face with a pleasant look, eyelids slightly raised, and ran her splayed hand around John's crotch.

When she was done, I rolled John away from me, onto his left side, and he grabbed the far bedrail and clanged it. “I'll hold him over for you,” Valerie said and handed me a fresh wet washcloth. I really wanted to tell her *fuck off, you finish it*, but the trainer didn't comment.

I looked down. There was a watercolor stroke of brown on the diaper, and a smear of poop in the folds of his scrotum. My throat convulsed, and I had to stop thinking about what I was doing. I shook the washcloth open and lifted John's butt cheek. It was an ordinary learned action from years of watching women and girls—mothers, babysitters, aunts, grandmothers, friends—wiping kids' butts. Somewhere under the baggy flesh, tiny strips of his muscles clenched.

“You’re doing great, John,” Valerie said. Her voice hung over us like a fuzzy pink ribbon as we lowered him onto the new diaper and slipped pants over his ankles. “That’s it, we’re just here to help you,” she said. “Don’t worry, you’re clean and dry now, right?”

Her sweet voice continued as she walked to my side of the bed, where she dragged his legs off the mattress and I lifted him into a seated position. “There we go. Look at that, all ready to get in your chair. We’re almost—” She stopped as soon as John whacked her in the cheek.

Pressing her hand against the side of her face, Valerie stood with her back to the other trainees, who didn’t see the furious reaction flash over her. The whole thing was such a surprising comeuppance, I almost laughed.

“It’s okay Valerie, stay with it,” the trainer encouraged.

But John grabbed in the air with his free hand and got a hold of Valerie’s wrist. His face grew red as he jammed his teeth together. “Eeghhh errhh.”

Valerie tried to pull her arm away but John lurched. I caught him against my chest, and we were all stuck, like three uncomfortable players in a game of Twister.

“Let me get my arm in there,” the trainer said. “I’ll get him.”

I stepped out of her way, and she held John with both hands as I peeled his fingers from Valerie’s wrist. Each one of his fingers looked delicate, as if the flesh had evaporated, leaving only dry bone and gray veins, but they were strong and clamped onto her arm. Valerie didn’t say anything.

When she was free, she stumbled back. The trainer moved to where Valerie had been. “You get him on that side Beth, I’ll get him on this one. We don’t have time for the lift belt.” I followed her lead and wedged my arm into John’s armpit. “One, two three,” the trainer counted.

John screeched when we lifted him, but I concentrated on keeping my arm firm. I felt strong. We were carrying his weight.

The trainer pulled up his pants and we sat him in the gerichair. I didn’t look at Valerie. I didn’t smile although I’d been better, I’d been able to do it all the way, from start to finish. I wrapped the restraint around John’s waist and tied it behind his blue vinyl chair.

“Valerie, why don’t you slide the tray on,” the trainer said.

When Valerie slid the tray over the arms of the chair, she was leaning away from John while I plucked a tissue from his nightstand and wiped the mucus from his jowl. Although my stomach contracted as the tissue smeared through his stubble, I folded it and wiped again.

“Good work ladies. Good first effort, right everyone?” The other trainees nodded, but a few looked queasy. Two of them wouldn’t show the next day. “Beth, why don’t you get John into his slippers so we can bring him to the nurse’s station. Let’s go everyone.”

Valerie walked ahead of me as I pushed John's chair down the hall. She ran a hand over her forearm. The trainer patted her shoulder, saying something close to Valerie's ear. I smiled to myself, straightening my arms against the handle of the gerichair. John's head bobbed with the vibrations. *I got this patient out of bed*, I thought. *I did it*. Although John shredded that confidence a few days later, at that moment, I felt victorious.

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Of course I thought I was totally ready for the summer. I'd completed five whole days of training and received my assignment for the Lincoln Unit. Other girls hadn't even made it that far—so I drove to Liberty Home for my first 3-to-11 shift, checked my face in the rearview mirror, and walked right into the breakroom.

But nobody said hello. None of the women at the three cafeteria tables spoke a word to me. They continued to chat with each other, eruptions of cigarette smoke bursting from their mouths. The small room, which had two sealed windows on one side and two snack machines on the other, was filled with the gray haze.

I hurried to the beige refrigerator at the back of the room, pushed my paper bag onto a shelf, and turned to leave. I glanced around but didn't recognize anybody. The women's faces and hair blurred above their white outfits. I could've joined them for a quick cigarette, but I didn't know where to sit and couldn't stop worrying about whether my underwear showed through my white pants. I didn't want them to notice I was nervous, so I just walked out of the room.

The service hall was a short bright area with a dingy bulletin board and the official timeclock. I scanned the timecards and quickly found mine—someone had used a blue marker to write my name and ID number on the top. It looked temporary and unusual next to all the ones with computer-printed labels.

Kiki, who you'll see really didn't like me much, came out of the breakroom as the digital clock pulled my timecard behind the dull silver screen. She had shiny curls and a round pretty face with thick eyebrows and cupid lips. She walked past me to get her card from the metal rack. I loosened my shoulders, slumped a little weight on my hip like I was relaxed, just punching-in as usual, not new or overwrought in the least. I noticed she was black, but pretended I didn't. At the time, I thought that was the best approach, really tolerant and worldly. And I didn't want to react like my father, or even my mother, although she hid it better.

The clock emitted sounds like a dozen tiny metal feet tapping. When it stopped, the hum from the fluorescent bulbs reverberated off the painted concrete walls, making our silence more palpable. I smiled as I stepped out of the way, Kiki remained blank. Her lips, shaded with a glossy plum lipstick, didn't move.

Two other women got in line behind her, but I just nodded. After years of listening to my father and guys at the warehouse, I knew not to act like a regular on my first night. But I was sure the aides were happy to have me on staff. Marilyn, the nursing director, had said I would be a big help. I'd gone home to Massachusetts to work at Liberty Home—although most of my college friends were traveling or doing internships or waiting tables at a beach—so that I could help. And to make money for school. None of the summer jobs I knew about paid as much as the nursing home.

I was still under the impression that my ability to get John out of bed demonstrated some special aptitude for the job. I was gifted. Like I had always been. That was enough to get me out of the service hall. As I cut across the rear corner of the lobby, I noticed the receptionist in the booth by the front entrance. She shook her long blonde hair while listening to a middle-aged couple wearing business clothes. An elderly man in a red windbreaker sat alone on one of the faux French couches, his hands wringing and wringing around each other.

I continued toward Lincoln. It was the second unit on the first floor, and the one where John lived. I walked past the Conference Room-Chapel, where we had watched the videos and taken notes, and stepped through the double doors. Heavy beige doors held open with industrial magnets. They marked the threshold onto the units, where the colorful lobby carpet ended and beige linoleum spread down the hallway, into every room, like Ovaltine dumped from an enormous vat.

I immediately noticed Pat standing at Lincoln's nurse's station, but I didn't want her to see me, to catch me walking like I'd dropped through a vent into the wrong place. It was my first night in the nursing home, and the place felt different than it had during the previous day shifts. Fewer patients sat along the main hallway. The afternoon sun that drifted through the windows seemed worn—too weak to really intrude on the fluorescent glow. Visitors were heading out rather than coming in, like the building was being unloaded and those of us left behind were in for lockdown.

The further I moved past the threshold, the more I sensed the smell. It wasn't like a hospital. Hospitals smell like the hydrogen peroxide and antibacterial ointment in my parents' medicine cabinet. Not the nursing home. It was stale despite the vapor of cleaning agents and bleach. The ammonia scent was bitter and heavy, and I felt like I was inhaling minuscule bits of dead skin.

I moved to the right side of the hallway, and my fingers grazed the wooden railing. Blank open doors staggered along both sides, but sounds came just within earshot and fell, dropping to the floor behind me as I passed.

“—said that we were having a barbecue next week but I'm not going out—”

“—come here, come here, come here, hey come here, come here, come here—”

“—try it and you'll see that no detergent powers out stains—”

“—daughter called from Chicago on my birthday. Chicago. Where she—”

Liberty Home clearly wasn't going to be a place where I could just drift in and blend. It was an alien place with language and habits I didn't know. But sticking to the right side of the hallway allowed me to walk up without being watched. When I reached the intersection with Lincoln's north-south hall, I stopped next to the linen cart. The bright lights gave the recessed nurse's station the look of a church sanctuary, a place of command and deference.

Pat was leaning on the counter, her wide oil-drum body propped on tip-toes. She was a white woman with ruddy arms and a few swollen veins wriggling down the back of her left knee. Her polished white nurse's shoes had thick marshmallow soles.

A woman who I couldn't see was sitting at the desk and calling out patient names like a military roll, so I turned my attention to the linen cart. You know, like I was comfortable and browsing. The plastic cover was swept over the top of the cart, revealing the four metal racks filled with all the linens I'd learned about in training. Shower and bed blankets. Pads, each one stiff from a plastic lining and stained with yellow shadows. Cloth diapers, large and thick and also discolored, which was still disturbing then, until I got used to it. White sheets, pillowcases, towels, and washcloths next to several stacks of the blue hospital gowns we called johnnies.

Random items were strewn on the bottom. Belt restraints for around the waist, vest restraints for over the chest, and pelvic restraints for under the crotch. There was a large canvas seat with reinforced trim and metal bars for the Hoyer lift crane. In the far corner, three ankle braces lay with puffy heel pillows, synthetic lamb's wool, and a few elastic straps with velcro.

“. . . Edna and Louise, Frank and Carl, Beatrice and Helen. That's all of em."

Pat nodded, plopping onto her heels. "Yup, that's the whole mess. Now we gotta keep these assignment lists in a special drawer or we'll lose em again. If this girl actually shows up, she's gonna need these for a while."

Gail chuckled and stood up, placing four slips of paper on the counter. She was a young black woman with a narrow face and distinctive almond eyes. Her hair was combed into a short spiky ponytail. I honestly hadn't expected many black women to work at Liberty Home because it was in Granfield, where I'd grown up. A small town of white people. But it was a pleasant surprise, another opportunity for me to shine. "I don't even know why we bother," Gail said. "But I guess some of us are crazy enough to stick around."

Their doubt startled me, like the sudden sound of screeching tires with splintering glass. It wasn't the welcome I'd anticipated. Their expectation of failure didn't fit with the view I had of myself, not when I was on-time and trained and gifted.

So I took their doubt as a challenge, and I'm stubborn. In that instant, I resolved to finish the summer and stay at Liberty Home no matter what happened. There was no way I was going to switch to

some lame job at the mall with my cousin. Plus I wanted that \$6 an hour. The rest of the summer—the desolation and peculiar beauty, the friendships and humor, the accidents and investigation—all flowed from that decision, which had seemed so clearheaded and simple.

I stopped bouncing my heel and hooked a thumb under the strap of my bag as Gail noticed me by the linen cart. Jerking my face into a smile, I took three steps forward.

“I think this is her. You Beth?” she asked.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “The trainer told me I was working this unit.”

Pat turned around. Everything about her was an exaggeration. Her thick black eyeliner and mascara were applied so heavily, they left speckles on Pat’s powdered cheeks. The fabric of her uniform plunged into crevices of flesh under her chest and around her waist. I didn’t see any sign of her skeleton, of her bones.

“Hey, how ya doin. Come on over, we don’t bite. I’m Pat and this’s Gail. Roberta should be here any minute. She’s the fourth aide tonight, and all of us have worked here a long time, so if you got any questions ask any of us.”

I nodded during her pause and pushed the strap of my bag further onto my right shoulder. My brain was silent, like it had reached that blank groove at the end of a record album. They stared.

“Well. This is your first night, right?” Pat continued. “So you’ll do first rounds with me, then you’ll get list three for bedtime—that’s the easiest one. But we’ll do last rounds together so you don’t feel like you’re in over your head. I gotta send you to do some-a the patients by yourself though, or we won’t finish on time. Promise to give ya the easy ones.”

Her words took a second to process. “But . . . the trainer said there was gonna be five aides on each unit during our first week,” I said. “That way we’d have like, an orientation period with shorter assignments or something.”

Gail and Pat both laughed. The trainer obviously hadn’t known what she was talking about. I looked down at my feet and tried to smile like I didn’t mind their cackling. Their open mouths and squinty looks. My white leather sneakers, an old pair I’d worn in high school, looked flaky and dry compared to Pat’s polished shoes. I should’ve listened to my mom and bought new sneakers, but I wanted to save all my money for school. I ran my hand up and down the strap of my bag.

“That’s a good one,” Gail said. “Marilyn gettin five aides on a unit. Now Marilyn’s the nursing director you know, and she makes all them decisions. She don’t put five aides on a unit for 3-to-11.” Gail shrugged. “But the woman has no shame. I wouldn’t be surprised if she did tell your trainer she was gonna do that.” Gail wasn’t wearing makeup. Her dark skin was smooth and even, with a glow of orange under the surface.

“Liberty Home doesn’t spend money that way, you just gotta get used to it,” Pat said. “They’re always cryin broke while we’re down here making 6.25 an hour.”

“Shit. Those fuckers make us work short all the time just so they don’t have to break out the cash. Most they do is pay overtime for extra shifts and doubles,” Gail said.

They didn’t talk like the trainer, who’d been upbeat and professional. They didn’t talk like Marilyn, who’d been congratulatory and formal. I figured Pat and Gail were just testing me. They wanted to see if I could take their dose of reality, but I wasn’t going to let them rattle me.

“Well, we should throw our bags in the kitchenette and get started. Here let me show ya.” Pat stepped around the counter and I followed her to a door behind the desk. “This’s where we keep all the stuff for the patients’ snacks, but I put my pocketbook in here too since the door is locked. There’s too many busy hands around the coat closet. That’s an interesting bag you got. Looks like it’s from the army.”

“Oh, yeah.” I almost said thanks. “It’s from an army-navy store.” I grabbed the gray canvas bag with one hand and slipped the strap off my shoulder.

“My husband Bud was in the army,” Pat said.

“Really?” I didn’t have anything else to say. In my mind, the army was napalm and families that moved around a lot and screaming sergeants. I didn’t understand why anybody would join.

The kitchenette was a narrow room squeezed behind the desk, next to the coat closet and med room. It was rather dismal—an ancient microwave and a toaster surrounded by crumbs. A battered mini-refrigerator on the floor. Near the metal sink sat a tray heaped with brown plastic coffee cups, two plastic bowls of mush, and a sectional plate of half-eaten food.

“What the hell is this. Gail, Gail check this out,” Pat spun and shouted into my face. “They left a full tray in here again.” I stepped back as Gail appeared in the doorway. “We’re gonna have to get room-to-room checks if they keep pullin this shit. There better not be any crap anywhere else. Sorry Beth. Here put your bag in this cabinet. That one in front has bread, tea, Sweet’n Low, some animal crackers, saltines, and jelly packets. There’s usually butter packets in the refrigerator with the milk’n juice. The nurses keep apple sauce in there too, but that’s for meds. And none of the patients are ever supposed to be in here.” Pat ended the tour there. “Just look at this shit from breakfast and lunch. I am sick of pickin up after them, like we don’t have anything better to do.”

I tried to muster some exasperation, but the tray didn’t upset me at the time. It seemed easy enough to take it to the kitchen or add it to the dinner carts later. I hadn’t felt the weight of those simple tasks, I didn’t understand their cumulative power.

“I even asked em if they got everything.” Gail pointed at the main hallway with her hand high above her head. “That bitch Diane walked outta here with her nose in the air like she’s all that. The

kitchen staff needs to hear about this right now too, cuz they get heated if the breakfast stuff ain't put away before dinner, and I don't feel like hearin it."

Pat herded us from the kitchenette as she stomped toward the desk.

I heard voices coming from the med room. "28, 29, 30 31, 32 digoxin. And there are the three packs that came in the delivery. Ready for . . ." The day and evening nurse had wheeled the med cart to the doorway, blocking themselves in with the pills and liquids, capsules and ointments. The cart was beige plastic. A small lamp rose from the top on a bendable coil.

"I'm leavin a note for 7-to-3 right now. And we should say something to the day nurse since she's still here." Pat snatched a piece of scratch paper and leaned over the desk. She pressed her weight onto her left hand and I saw a wedding band embedded in her ring finger. "What's the date? Yeah and we should both sign it. Oh, you too Beth, if you wanna."

"That's okay." I walked toward the front of the nurse's station.

Pat didn't say anything else. I told myself I didn't care—the whole thing seemed rather petty. Who cared about a tray of dishes. There were bigger concerns in the world, I had bigger concerns. About graduation requirements and study abroad and glasnost and apartheid in South Africa and better orgasms with Jeremy. I didn't want it to matter so much that they weren't asking me to sign a stupid note about dirty dishes.

"Alright," Pat continued, "so Gail, I'm gonna say that we found a lunch tray . . ."

I grabbed the scrunchy from my pocket and pulled my wavy brown hair into a ponytail. Neither Pat nor Gail said anything to me as they wrote, so I focused on the main hallway and struggled not to itch at the elastic band of my pants, an old pair with a wide waistband and pockets stitched to the outside. The pants made me look like a hobo, but I refused to spend any money on a uniform.

Running my hand along the counter, I stole a few glimpses of Pat and Gail to compare what they were wearing. Pat had on a uniform, a one-piece dress with luminescent buttons, a rounded collar, and empty belt loops. Faint coasters of stain showed at the armpits.

Although Gail wasn't wearing a uniform, her white pants were thick and ironed flat. Her shirt was a nurse's top with front snaps, little metal donuts around white centers, and her bulky white socks were puckered above spotless leather sneakers. She was also wearing a lot of jewelry. Rings with heavy edges, glittering bits of diamonds.

I fiddled with one of my simple silver hoop earrings and eyed the bracelet on Gail's wrist. It flashed her name in a swirl of gold. Another broad stream of gold wriggled across her collarbone. The necklace was three times as wide as the gold chain I'd bought in tenth grade with money from babysitting and cleaning offices. I didn't wear gold chains anymore though, or my sapphire ring. People at Brown

didn't wear gold like that. They mostly wore silver and big earthy stones and etched toe rings with expensive brown sandals. But I felt a vague longing when I saw Gail's jewelry.

I paced to the linen cart and glanced down the main hallway for the third time. A patient with purple scabs all over her nose was scooting her wheelchair toward the dining room, one hand on the railing and both feet inching along the floor.

"You're here for the summer right, now til the enda August," Pat said from behind me. I returned to the counter and rested my forearm on top. "Yeah, for the summer. Plus I'm gonna work at Thanksgiving and Christmas."

"You a college girl then," Pat said.

"Yeah."

"You go for nursing?" Gail asked.

"No." I assumed they'd respect me more for planning something else as my real career—not nursing, not a traditional woman's job. I was so wrapped up in all my greater potential I didn't see the insult. "I'm probably gonna major in political science."

"What the hell ya do with that?" Pat said. It was the same question my father asked every time we talked about declaring a major.

"I'll probably go to law school. I wanna be a lawyer and work with people who're having problems." My father told me I was full of pie-in-the-sky baloney and warned me that some people couldn't be helped. They were just bad, like the people my brother hung around with. But not my brother, although he was the one buying drugs. "I wanna defend people and their civil rights, make sure they get fair treatment and stuff," I said.

"Bud thinks you can't change a criminal. He says we should just lock em up and throw away the key," Pat said. "I don't always agree with him, but sometimes it's true."

"Lawyer is good money though. Real good." Gail nodded. "Why you workin here then?"

Their lack of enthusiasm was disappointing. "This seemed like a good job for the summer. You know, helping older people. It's a good thing to do, more than other jobs." I thought for sure Gail and Pat would respect me for that.

Gail laughed. "That's the shit right there. Ooh my, tell me who'd wanna be up in here if they didn't have to?" She held Pat's arm for a second. Her body swayed with an amusement I didn't understand. But it strengthened my resolve. I didn't think Liberty Home was so hard and I wasn't going to break.

"If you wanna know the truth," Pat said, "I don't think I could do another job after this. I'd probably get bored, and I love the patients too. They can drive me crazy, but God bless em, they're like family. But I don't know about this bein a good thing."

Nobody said anything for a couple seconds. “How old’re you?” Gail asked.

“Nineteen.”

“You got a college boyfriend?” she asked.

“No, no. I’m not—” The lie came out fast, but I stopped. Because I had a boyfriend, and his father worked for an investment bank in Manhattan and his mother was an art dealer and they drove up to visit Jeremy in a convertible Mercedes. But I didn’t want to take it back, I didn’t want to explain. They didn’t need to know. I couldn’t have explained my denial anyway. I hadn’t moved past the contradiction of being both proud and ashamed of Jeremy at the same time. Proud and ashamed of a lot of things.

“Here comes Roberta,” Pat announced. “Now we can get started.”

“Hello ladies,” Roberta called. “We got four tonight?”

“Sure do.” Gail pointed at me. “This is Beth, one-a the new ones.”

Roberta glanced to the ceiling and smiled. “Praise God,” she said in a soft voice. She was a tall black woman with round cheeks and heavy arms. Dark circles held her eyes deep in her light brown face, and her wide feet sloped to the sides of her nursing shoes, which looked like they were going to split from the pressure. A hard bulky textbook rested in the crook of her arm and a plastic-wrapped plate of cookies sat on top. “So, Marilyn gave us one of the new certified girls. Good to meet you Beth, I’m Roberta. Here ladies. I brought some cookies from the party we had at school today.”

“Ah jeez Roberta. Just what I need.” Pat peeled open the plastic wrap and picked out two cookies. I thought she was going to hand one to me. “Help yourself Beth, then come over to the linen cart and I’ll help you load up.”

I didn’t want a cookie. I didn’t like oatmeal raisin, which was all that was left since Pat had taken the two chocolate chip. But Roberta was watching and Gail had already taken a bite of hers.

“Don’t forget to grab some rubber gloves, Beth.” Roberta took a box from the desk and set it on the counter. “Fill your pockets now and you’ll be happy later.”

“Mmhm.” I nodded, lips closed over a mouthful of the dry cookie.

“Roberta’s goin to school too, gettin her LPN,” Pat said as we gathered around the linen cart. I smiled, but I thought Pat was a little confused. An LPN program wasn’t really college. “How does it feel, Roberta?” Pat asked. “You’re almost done now.”

“I am too tired to know. All these years have come down to this, God willing. I am in His hands. But Jamal can’t stop talking about it. The poor man. He thinks I’m going to go back to cooking and cleaning like I used to. I’m happy though, real happy. And I couldn’t have done it without him. I am truly blessed.”

“You’re lucky that he—” Pat snatched my hand away from the washcloths. “Don’t bother takin any-a those. I’m gonna show you a better way.”

“Okay. Then I just need a lift belt.” You know I felt knowledgeable as I said it.

“Sure,” Pat sighed.

Roberta laughed. “Give her a break. It’s her first night, and a lift belt isn’t going to hurt anybody.”

“Not gonna finish eleven patients at bedtime with a lift belt. But there might be some on the bottom there.”

I didn’t want to take a belt, not if they thought it was stupid, but I couldn’t get out of it now without looking pathetic. They all watched as I rummaged through the bottom shelf and found a single belt sitting under a piece of foam eggcrate. I decided against wearing it around my waist like the trainer and the aides on 7-to-3 had done.

“You lift without the belts?” I asked.

“Yeah, we just hug the patients under their armpits. Here, gimme those.” Pat laid her diapers and pads on the large plastic hamper and yanked mine out of my hands. Without a word, she reached under my armpits, hooked her elbows in, and clasped her forearms across my shoulder blades. Her bosom enveloped my narrow chest and buoyed me up as she squeezed and lifted. “Then pivot and put em where they gotta go. Jeez, you’re light as a feather.”

She dropped me back on my feet. I felt small and floppy.

“Take the lift belt, Beth. You might have the time to use it,” Roberta said before turning to follow Gail down the south hall.

Pat handed me my stack of linens. “Sure, if ya want to. Go ahead.” I reeled in the belt’s metal clasp as Pat tromped into the north hall. “I like to start at the far end and work my way back. It makes me feel like I’m getting somewhere. So we’ll go down here and do Beatrice and Helen first.”

I pushed the wheeled hamper and followed Pat to the last room. I did my best to ignore the throbbing in my ribcage that surged into my neck and fingertips. I told myself I was ready to do the job, I was ready—but I just wanted to watch Pat do everything.

Pat walked to the far bed without stopping in the bathroom to wash her hands like the trainer had told us to do. So I walked with her. There were no lights on. No television, no radio. Just the standard issue: two hospital beds, two hospital tables, two nightstands, two dressers. Stepping past the bathroom, I was surprised by a woman sitting in a chair with her knees together and her feet flat on the floor.

“Oh. Hello, hi there.” I brought my face down in front of hers. Only her pupils moved.

“Come over here first,” Pat called. “Beatrice won’t say anything to you anyway. Nothin personal, she’s just out-of-it. And this is Helen.” The bed in front of Pat was almost flat, just a mound of blanket. “Hi Helen. How are ya? Helen’s out-of-it too. Totally out-of-it. Let’s get these off and see what you got.” Pat swept the sheet and blanket into the air and flung them to the foot of the bed.

It was not a person. It was a pile of weathered branches bent into the fetal position, with a dried apple head stuck on top. I stared. I felt oddly thrilled and didn't know what to do about it. We hadn't worked on anybody like that in training. One patient might've been that contorted, but Sonia had merely cranked up the bed and held a straw so the woman could sip a strawberry protein shake.

"Should I pull the curtain?" I asked.

"Nah. Nobody comes down here." With one flick Pat had Helen's johnny up by her neck.

I bit my lip. The trainer had instructed us to never expose a patient, to always keep a sheet covering part of the body. I glanced at Pat's face, but she was focused on Helen.

"Makes you wanna drink your milk huh," Pat said. "The ones like this are in a lotta pain too, on a lotta meds. Hah honey?" She ran her hand over the strings of Helen's milkweed hair, which were pulled into a red elastic. "Helen's good to start with cuz I can show you a few things."

"Okay," I said—but seeing Helen so exposed, I felt a twinge of pity. A feeling that I confused with actual caring. I brushed the johnny away from her chin and pulled it over her chest.

"Oops, yeah. Don't wanna cover your face, right Helen?" Pat said.

Helen was lying on her right side with her rounded back close to the bedrail in front of me. Each of her hands was clamped on a nubby washcloth and there was a pillow beneath her clenched knees. Her body curved toward her stomach as if her bones were being pulled into her belly button with fishing line. Although her muscles and tissue were almost gone, I noticed a scar that looked like it came from a c-section.

Pat pulled the unsnapped diaper away from Helen's belly. Sparse white hair didn't hide the stretched mauve edges of her vagina. "Helen's only wet but I'll show ya how to wash with a towel anyway." Leaving the sheets down, Pat walked to the bathroom. "Get the water warm, not too hot. They have sensitive skin and you'll burn em with water you think is just fine." Pat wet one end of the towel and pumped out two squirts of pink soap from the wall dispenser.

Trying not to let anything show on my face, I followed Pat to the bed. She rolled Helen toward my side and pulled out the damp diaper. "She's light enough so I can do this by myself, but watch. You wash the patient with the wet end of the towel." Pat spread the towel over the palm of her hand and rubbed it along Helen's crotch. "Then you dry em with the other end. No washcloths, less to carry."

My hips tilted away from the bed, away from the rough work of Pat's diligent hands. Helen's face didn't change. No flinch, no acknowledgment. "Throw it or roll it up in the wet pads," Pat said. "You know the rest, right?"

"I thought we weren't supposed to put laundry on the floor?" I pushed my voice high and soft, into a question. I had a wordless sense that I should keep suggestions to myself, where they were

pleasantly entwined with the idea that I was going to do everything the right way, I was different. “The trainer said we’re supposed to set it on the bed.”

“Nobody does that. It’s gross. As long as we don’t throw a dirty diaper open on the floor, there’s nothin unsanitary,” Pat said. “There we go Helen. She needs to be turned too, but she’s light.” Pat reached one arm under Helen’s shoulders, the other under her knees.

“I can help. I can lift on this side.”

“Nah. Look how light she is.” With a short sigh, Pat lifted Helen a couple inches, drew her closer, and put her down. “Pull the diaper up and we’re done. She doesn’t move so you don’t have to snap it—it’d just dig into her skin. Try pickin her up, see how light she is.”

My hand ran along Helen’s back. I grimaced as her skin dragged over her sharp spine and a crunchy age spot rubbed my forearm. I tried to put my weight into my legs before tensing my arms. But all the pull went into my back. My neck locked and the air huffed out of my lungs as I picked her off the bed. There was a crinkling sound from Helen’s body, like a smashing of potato chips. I let her down.

“Her back cracked, that’s all,” Pat said. “Now we lean her on her side. There ya go, and use this pillow to prop her knees. They told you this is for bed sores, right?”

“Yeah, we had a whole thing on that.” Deep wrinkled indentations from the wet diaper covered the skin on Helen’s right side. The red spot on her hip was the size of a tea saucer.

“You check Beatrice while I throw this stuff in the laundry. She stands so just lift her skirt to see if the diaper’s wet,” Pat said and walked into the hall.

Beatrice stood when I touched her elbow, but she didn’t look at me or say a word. I reached under her skirt and unsnapped the diaper. She was dry. She sat down as soon as I touched her shoulder.

“We’re supposed to take her to the toilet but we don’t have time tonight,” Pat said. “You can go do John now, get him into his gerichair. He’s in the room next door. He’s also really light and can put some weight on his legs. Just sit him up and lift under the armpits like I showed you. Or with that lift belt. He’s mostly out-of-it but he can make a fuss, so be quick. I’ll be across the hall with Viola if you need anything.”

“Okay. So I’ll go . . . there.” The adrenaline from starting my first shift had already dissolved, and my experience with John and Valerie made me question whether I’d be able to get him up. I didn’t want to get him out of bed alone.

But I damn well wasn’t going to ask Pat for help. I wanted to prove to everyone I could get through the summer and I was a good aide.

“You’ll need to have a half-wet towel for him,” Pat said, walking across the hall. Her permed hair bunched against her neck as she shouted, “Viola dear, how ya doin today?”

No light or sound came from John's room. He was lying in the same position as the first time I saw him, with his mouth open. I was not ready to wake him up. He was going to yell. He was going to need me to touch him.

I clutched the linens to my chest. The room seemed bigger without the huddle of trainees, and in the quiet open space I noticed frames hanging on John's side. They were simple, yet they seemed extravagant. All the other items in the room were functional: sleep or storage or sitting or serving. But not the picture frames. I liked that someone had hung them. They seemed charming, and I liked the chance to look, to see into his past. Into his real life.

I walked to the three frames hanging above the dresser. One showed John as a young man, a large oval face, full lips, and narrow shoulders. He was wearing a cap and gown, but the black and white had faded. The diploma yellowed in his long smooth fingers. I recognized John in the second one, a wedding photograph with the name *DECARO'S* stamped in gold in the lower right corner. John was sitting in a chair, his wife stood beside him with a hand on his shoulder. They were next to a large fern in front of a curtain. His suit was dark and linear, her dress was plain. But the bouquet brimmed with many different flowers, curving and delicate.

In the third frame, I saw John. He was holding a rudder at the back of a sailboat. He had a jaunty smile and a baseball cap, but the lines alongside his mouth were deep and the skin drooped under his chin. A wedge of muscle still cut along his right arm. The image was a little ridiculous, a little too much like the Kennedys or something, but he was happy.

The two frames near John's bed displayed diplomas, an Amherst College BA and a Harvard JD—a Harvard fucking JD. Heavy calligraphy with swoops and sharp edges sliced over the paper. *John William Leggett*. It was impressive and elegant. I stared, unbelieving and resistant. The prestige, but I looked to the bed and saw John. *This was it?* I thought. The hours, the studying, the late nights and six-figure paychecks, the long meetings with hushed secretaries, the belts and suspenders and wing tips.

I didn't get it. He should've had someone to take care of him, or the money for someone to take care of him. What was he doing at Liberty Home? He didn't even have his own furniture. I forced my mind back to the boy in the cap and gown, the man in the wedding suit, and the baseball cap. I tried holding onto those pieces of his existence—John was a Harvard lawyer, the top of the legal field. Ever since my junior-high counselor met with my parents, my dad had talked about Harvard. His tone had been full of hope and suspicion and revenge and pride. I'd have to tell him that the first patient . . . the first patient whose balls I washed went to Harvard. I smiled. Wrinkled old Harvard balls, my initial brush with greatness.

Then there was no more avoiding it, I had to get John into his gerichair. Pat expected me to do it.

I went to the bedside and bent over his sallow face. The thought of pinching his nose, like my brother used to do to me when I was sleeping, flashed through my head. Only once—for less than a second.

No one had shaved John's face that morning or washed the large crumbs of sleep from his eyelashes. I remembered the poop smear and pulled on a pair of gloves. Waiting in the bathroom for the water to grow warm, I gazed in the mirror. I turned my head to the side. My bangs had grown a little too long, the freckles on my nose had already come out for the summer. My collarbone showed at the base of my neck like a slender tree root.

On the way to John's bed, I plotted how I might be able get him up. I realized that I couldn't use the method from training, because doing it myself meant I had to start without waking him. I would have to rush through as much as possible before he was alert.

I squeezed the small lever and released the bedrail. With my hand as a guide, the brown metal gate quietly swung to the right. John was still asleep. His breathing made no noise, but his chest moved slightly. Sneaking my fingers under the sheet by John's neck, I kept my eyes on his face. Still asleep. Still breathing. He didn't give me any reason to get Pat.

The sheet and blanket flew off his body in one ripple, and before John opened his eyes I had the wet diaper unsnapped. Just as he started to moan, I pushed to roll him. He tilted slightly but stopped hard.

I'd forgotten the belt restraint. It was holding him and cinching his waist, which caved under the pressure like a tube of clay.

"Oh shit," I said. "Shit, shit, shit." I squatted and pecked at the knot, but my push had yanked it tight. And the rubber gloves were getting in the way, sticking to the canvas strap as my fingers fumbled inside the numb membrane. "Just a second here."

John grabbed onto the far bedrail and cranked it back and forth. "Eeeough, oow. Oohh."

By the time I removed my gloves, untied the knot on each side of the bed, and grabbed the wet towel, he was sitting up. His whole body was a rigid zigzag, from his tense neck down his back, up from his hips, to his unmoving ankles.

I was afraid Pat might hear him. "Shhh, come on. Everything's okay," I whispered as I shook open the wet towel. "You're fine."

There was a cranberry stain on the front of John's striped Izod shirt. I knew I should change it. But I had no time. He was only getting up for a couple hours, and who was there to impress? The trainer had emphasized dignity and respect, but this was just once. Just my first night because I didn't have enough time.

His shiny hairless legs slid along the mattress as he wailed. I pressed his shoulder toward the pillow to lay him down. John rocked back on his tailbone and his feet flew into the air, giving me a chance to push under his hips again. I shoved him toward the far side with all my anxious strength, and his right arm smacked the bedrail.

His voice grew louder. “Eeeoogh. Oh ooh.”

“Sorry, I’m sorry. Come on. You know how this goes right? You’re a smart man,” I said. There was the expected poop smudged on his scrotum.

I swiped the towel once, but he wasn’t completely clean. When I ran the towel over his raw skin the second time, John let go of the far bedrail and swung at me. His bony forearm caught me on the nose and pain sparked across my face. My eyes clenched and I dropped the towel on the bed. I didn’t want to touch my face with the gloves, so I jumped with my hands flicking at my sides.

When I got my eyelids to relax, I saw that John was resettled in the dirty diaper. “Look what you did. See. I’m trying to help you here, but now I gotta wash you all over again.” I snatched the cold soiled towel. Heat rushed into my arms as they lunged underneath John and heaved him onto his face. His forehead and knee smacked the bedrail.

I had him under control—an immediate satisfaction moved through me so quickly all I sensed was the confidence and immunity. I locked one elbow against his weight and kept going. I told myself I had to.

After wiping his butt and balls again, I threw the towel into the diaper, rolled them together, and yanked them from under his hip. I wasn’t thinking about any tissue tear. My rigid left arm had his whole body jammed on its side. I let him go, and John tumbled backwards and glared at me. He tried to spit, but the spray ended up all over his chin.

I smirked at him. “Good one.” The sound broke the momentum of my frustration.

John’s face was red with a small white line on his forehead where he’d hit the bedrail, and he was naked except for the dirty Izod shirt bunched at his flat bony chest. Drooping from his thin tuft of white pubic hair, his penis had the squashy appearance of something which had not been dry in weeks. His thin fingernails were clipped in uneven scraggly lines.

I dropped my hands and shoulders. John was staring at me, muttering fierce incomprehensible sounds. I saw the texture of the hospital curtain, the bumpy white vase on his roommate’s nightstand, the spoon on the floor by the dresser. As if a thick mist had evaporated, the whole room seemed full of straight hard lines. The walls, the trim, the dresser drawers.

I couldn’t believe that I had shoved an old man, pushed his face into a bedrail. I didn’t want to believe it—but you can understand now, how it was.

I pulled his shirt over his stomach and straightened the collar. Someone appeared at the door. “You need help finishing him up?” Pat asked. Her bulk and the flash of hair and makeup were magnificent after John’s ashen wispieness. She was like a giant Faberge egg.

“Yes. I don’t think I should lift him on my own yet.” My stomach squeezed when Pat stepped closer to the bed, but I waved my hands over John like everything was breezy and normal. “I mean, I’ll be able to and stuff, but he’s pretty upset right now. Probably cuz I’m new or something.”

Pat’s face didn’t change when she looked at him, she didn’t notice the line in his forehead. “John has his moods, huh John?” She smiled and sweetly jostled his shoulder. Caring in her touch. “Let’s get this diaper snapped. Forget about the pants, we’ll throw a shower blanket over his legs. The nurse won’t care cuz it’s your first night.”

After we lifted John into the gerichair, Pat headed toward the hall. “I’ll be next door. Botha those guys need a lift, so come in there when you’re done. John just needs the blanket and his slippers, and then he sits at the nurse’s station. You doin alright, Beth?”

“Okay. Yeah I’m doing . . . thanks . . . for the help.”

I tied the restraint around the back of John’s chair—making absolutely sure two of my fingers fit comfortably between the belt and his waist like the trainer had advised. I got his tray from beside the dresser and crouched to slip it over the metal arms. I felt something like a pat. Like petting. It was John’s hand. He closed his fingers around my hair and I waited for him to pull. I closed my eyes, letting my muscles settle like silt. *Pull my hair, I thought, pull it. I deserve it, I’m total scum.* The drama of it caught me for a second, and I felt repentant and inspired. Almost a saint.

His tugging jostled the scrunchy and some static built up. Opening my eyes, I saw his bulbous knees and the swath of diaper, like thick cake frosting in his crotch. He held my hair and I rested my forehead against the rubberized edge of the tray. It smelled like urine and grease and window cleaner. I prayed to whatever was out there, *Please don’t let me end up like this, please don’t.*

When I raised my head and peered through the tangle of hair, I saw that John’s lips were compressed in a tense line of exertion. It was both morose and laughable. “That’s the best you got?” I said. “You do better when you’re swinging.”

I pulled his hand away and stood up. As I fixed my ponytail, John reached his hands over the edge of the tray to jiggle it back and forth. He was humming loudly. I needed to get a blanket for his legs, and I needed to hurry because I had to walk to the linen cart in the main hallway, then back to John, then wheel him down to the nurse’s station, and then return to join Pat in the next room.

I pushed John to the door and peeked out. The north hall was empty, and the nurse’s med cart sat deserted in the south hall. I figured nobody would see if I pushed John to the nurse’s station to get the

blanket. He'd only be exposed for a few seconds. But I decided not to do it, not that first night. That night I walked to the linen cart and returned with a clean blanket.

"Here you go." I opened the aqua-green blanket and refolded it to a size that would cover his legs without dragging on the floor. "Not the fanciest, but it'll do the job," I said, reaching under the tray and wrapping the blanket around John's waist, tucking the edges under his legs.

John didn't look at me. I gently ran my hand over his forehead and rubbed his back, but he just gripped the edge of his tray and rattled it back and forth.

John

the motion to dismiss on the Prudential case will require final approval from Mr. Riley as well as myself so we will expect

stand up my dear you need to take a moment to to to pull yourself together before you leave my office what on earth are you doing these... antics are beneath both of us and they won't do anything to change the I assumed this matter was closed... closed you received my gift yes the money more than generous more than enough to help it is time for you to stop behaving this way and get yourself off the floor

you nasty girl you nasty awful girl I don't want you to touch me what are you doing what are you doing there find Genevieve Genevieve will take care of this mess Genevieve Genevieve I'm not supposed to be here in this this this so don't you touch me again not again this will be taken care of and you will

the motion to dismiss on the Prudential case will require final approval from Mr. Riley as well as myself so we will expect a draft by noon tomorrow I trust you understand the importance of this particular motion considering Judge Wilson's ruling on

where is Genevieve what have you done to me how did you get me here get me out of this thing get me out of this dreadful thing right now you are just terrible just like all the other girls just just just just just you are all terrible what purpose do you have me here for what purpose have you you you done this

I hate this chair hate it hate hate hate hate

don't threaten me not get anything from telling my wife and that is the end get yourself together get up off the floor this display... unnecessary and humiliating that's it straighten yourself out and

what are you doing to me where is Genevieve where is my wife I need to get home to her people expecting me at home she's probably planned for cocktails or some she's always planning something and I have to make sure she's alright let me out out out out out let me out damn it where are you taking me goddamn you goddamn you

I trust you understand the importance of this particular motion considering Judge Wilson's ruling on our previous effort to suppress the financial records from the regional office in Hartford

you know Judge Wilson is coming over with his wife for no no wait a minute not Judge Wilson his nephew Ronald Ronald with his wife and Genevieve planned

the supper a supper like the one we had aren't you supposed to be with her
aren't you supposed to help while Genevieve picks up flowers and and and and
Genevieve can't be out alone you know that you know what aren't you the girl
who is
goddamn you where is Genevieve just leave me alone leave me alone don't move me anywhere in
this how will she find me

Basic Training

2 · No Avoidance

When I stepped out of the rinse room and into Roberta and Kiki's conversation, I was thinking about my sore ankles and where to put my feet up. My body ached—feet, knees, armpits, neck, bunches in my lower back—but my ankles were the worst.

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 even 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. 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. I only caught a few words before Kiki saw me and shifted her eyes away, shaking her head once. 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 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. To me, she was the woman at the timeclock who'd ignored me the first night—and every subsequent time she'd seen me since then. I could tell she didn't like me. I thought she was misguided about that, but she worked upstairs on the Roosevelt Unit 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 and other people.

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. 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 conditioners in their bedrooms 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. They certainly weren’t in the nursing home.

“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 glimmered 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 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 made me think she also received 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 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. Instead, 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 when 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 would drop 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, eating it in Beatrice and Helen’s room after I gave Viola the boost.

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 before, as performers and as their own audience. “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.”

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

I stood in the doorway, where I could sense 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, and 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 could 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 intent in their 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 Beatrice. Guilt worked on me like that. It was another emotion I confused with real caring.

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. 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 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 under the imaginary water.

There wasn't any noise, but her lips were moving. She finished rinsing the sink 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 nursing home, the work, the patients, 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. 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 to 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.

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 had 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 heard this girl Valerie quit yesterday, and then her friend Sonia didn't come today," Martie said. "Somebody said 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 unit 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 unit 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 unit, 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. But her words rang majestically 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 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 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. “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. No. 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.