

# Tales from The Home

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## Misadventures in the



Douglas Wadeson MD

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# Tales from The Home

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## Misadventures in the Peaceful Shore Care Facility

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# Tales from The Home

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## Welcome to The Home

It is called the Indian River but it is actually a long saltwater lagoon that stretches for about 150 miles on the east coast of Florida. Between the lagoon and the Atlantic Ocean is a series of barrier islands, which is where one finds the Peaceful Shore Care Facility. It has a very nice location overlooking the lagoon; prime real estate really. The facility was established during the housing slump precipitated by the end of the space shuttle program and the subsequent minor exodus as the workers lost their jobs. The owner corporation, the Wellness-Therapy-Fitness Corporation (WTF, for short) would never be able to afford such land now. The staff typically referred to their owner company as ‘Grandmother,’ although when upset about something, like at annual review time, they sometimes refer to the company’s acronym and their own interpretation thereof.

You see, it was the space program that got the area growing in the early 1960s and brought it to national attention. As the area developed it became less hospitable to the mosquitoes, scorpions and rattlesnakes that once inhabited the sandy scrub habitat, and more hospitable to Yankees, seeking relief from the harsh winters of the north. They traded those winters for the sweltering eight-month summers of Florida. And seniors in particular with their aching arthritic joints saw the year-round swimming and golfing and came flocking to the area. And so the Peaceful Shore Care Facility, simply called ‘The Home’ by the residents and staff, always had a ready supply of potential occupants, called ‘The Family’ by the staff (by order of the administrator). They were Members of The Family, not ‘patients’ or ‘residents.’

The Home has a dock which is a popular sitting-and-looking site for those residents – excuse me – for those *Family* Members who had kin willing to escort them. The aides rarely have time to take them out there, except on special occasions like as a treat on one’s birthday. The home itself has a Y shape, with the lobby, offices and nurses’ station in the base of the Y and the two resident wings forming the arms. In between the arms is a large moss-draped ‘live oak’ tree, which hosts squirrels and various birds, providing some entertainment for The Family. So it is called the ‘Lookin’ Tree.’ The outside of the south wing overlooks the entry lane – called

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Yellow Hibiscus Road after the shrubs lining it – and faces a line of scrub brush which separates The Home from the neighboring condos, which can be seen peeking over the scrub.

The north wing faces what is called ‘The Pond.’ It is actually a canal connected to the lagoon but shaped round, and deep. Its deep water is a magnet for manatees when the first cold snap of winter comes (cold snap in Florida meaning under 70 degrees). The lagoon is generally shallow so the manatees will seek refuge in the relative warmth of deep-water canals. So many will congregate there that they churn the bottom sediment and turn the water to look like chocolate, but smell like...well, let’s say, fecal. Ms. Gordon the administrator has a sensitive nose and can tell as soon as she gets out of her car when the manatees have arrived. But it is not quite that time of year yet.

Ms. Alicia Gordon has been administrator of the facility for almost ten years now and has whipped it into a first-rate facility. She is easy to pick out, with her dyed burnt-orange hair always neatly fashioned into a tight bun behind her head, with matching lipstick, and her dark-toned business suits always providing contrast. It was not always so. Once she wore a beige pantsuit to The Home. One of The Family Members, Mr. Gustafson, took a look at her beige suit and her burnt orange hair, and declared in the midst of a full dining room, “Ms. Gordon, you look like a matchstick!” It has been dark suits ever since. She is officially middle-aged but looks, in medical terms, ‘younger-than-stated-age.’ She might even be considered attractive if she ever replaced her perpetual frown with a smile. She considers herself “Mother” of The Family, but that nickname never caught on with staff or residents. Excuse me, ‘Family Members.’

On this day Ms. Gordon placed the reflective sun shade inside her windshield so she wouldn’t burn her hands on the steering wheel if she had to go out during this sunny day. She locked her hybrid and headed for the front entrance, a mixture of yellow and red hibiscus shrubs lining either side of the walkway.

Josiah Grund came out, being pushed in his wheel chair by one of his nieces. “Hiya, Ms. Gordon!” In his forty years as a mailman he had learned the art of being friendly to everyone he met, but it had done a number on his knees and feet.

“Good morning, Mr. Grund...Ella.” Ms. Gordon nodded at the two. She knew every member of The Family by name and most of their kin, too. She was not known for having a sense of humor, but people did appreciate her talent for knowing names.

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Mr. Grund piped up: “You’ve met Ella, right? She was named for Ella Fitzgerald, the jazz singer. But she can’t sing like that other Ella or I’d be sittin’ in a mansion!”

Ella rolled her eyes. You will see that there is a lot of eye-rolling at The Home.

“Gonna feed the birds *and* the fish today!” He was grinning as he held up two plastic bags. “My bread crumbs, but the kitchen ladies had some old shrimp for the fish!”

Ms. Gordon could smell the shrimp and was happy to have them leave the facility. With her sensitive nose and a queasy stomach she was scrupulous, almost obsessed, with keeping The Home smelling as nice as possible, a common source of criticism for care facilities. In fact, in her left hand she carried a bag full of air fresheners from the dollar store that she would scatter around the facility once a month, in addition to the commercial deodorizers maintained by the janitorial service. She made a mental note to encourage the kitchen staff to dispose of leftover food in this way in the future. Get it out of The Home and feed the fish and birds. Win-win.

“Have fun, Mr. Grund.”

Mr. Grund and his niece continued on toward the dock.

She stepped through the front double-door, stopped in the small lobby, and took a deep breath. *Uh oh. Someone’s had an accident.*

“Good morning, Maya. Nice dress.”

Maya looked up from the sign-in desk and answered, “Thank you” as she worked her pick through her impressively large afro. As usual she wore a brightly colored dashiki dress over her svelte frame.

Ms. Gordon walked down the short hallway to the nurses’ station at the confluence of the three hallways in the building.

“Good morning, Mrs. Kellog.” The staff called her ‘Miss Sally’ but Ms. Gordon tended to be more formal.

The frail lady gave a sort of curtsy and replied, “Good morning, Miss...” She paused and looked puzzled.

“Ms. Gordon. On your way to breakfast? Enjoy.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She wobbled on her way.

Ms. Gordon leaned forward and whispered to Nurse Wingham sitting at the desk, “I think Mrs. Kellog needs to be reminded to bathe again. She forgets, you know.”

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Nurse Wingham nodded. As usual her immaculate white uniform practically glowed in contrast to her lovely smooth caramel skin.

“Anything new overnight?”

The nurse replied, “No, very quiet I was told.”

“Good.”

Ms. Gordon continued to her office. Nurse Wingham breathed a sigh of relief. It was no fun when there was a problem to report to ‘Ms. Gorgon’ as the staff sometimes called her. Or they used the codeword ‘Medusa,’ from the most famous of the mythical gorgons. Only behind her back, of course. And her icy stares did sometimes turn the staff to stone; sometimes The Family Members, too.

‘Medusa’ stopped off at the dining room. As The Family ate they were watching the weather report on the television on the far wall. She paused to listen. She felt a tug on her sleeve.

“Ms. Gordon,” said Mrs. Blinkin, wearing one of her bright flowery sun dresses. “What are we gonna do about that hurricane? Do we have to evacuate?”

“No, no, of course not. It will turn north, they almost always do.” She remembered the last time they had to evacuate The Family to a mainland facility only to have the storm pass by. Not an experiment in chaos that she wanted to repeat. “Your husband worked on the space program didn’t he? That’s one reason they put it here: we almost never get hit by a hurricane here.”

Mrs. Blinkin narrowed her eyes. “*Almost* never?”

Ms. Gordon took hold of her hand and patted it. “Now, now. We’ll keep an eye on it, and do whatever is necessary. Just enjoy the sunshine today. Tomorrow...” She stopped herself from saying ‘Tomorrow may never come.’ Not the thing to say in a nursing home, where often tomorrow did not come for some individuals. “Tomorrow we’ll have better information.”

Mrs. Blinkin gave a weak nod and returned to her breakfast and the weather report.

*One more thing to worry about,* thought Ms. Gordon.

As she left the dining room she was almost run over by a laundry cart.

“Sorry, Miss Gordon!” Big Mac the orderly stopped the cart. He flashed a smile, accentuated by the contrast of his white teeth surrounded by walnut skin. He preferred the term ‘mocha’ skin as he thought that sounded more sophisticated. And ‘Big’ was no exaggeration as Mac was the tallest and widest and largest person on staff. And strongest, having been an

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offensive lineman at the university for three years before his knee blew out. He leaned down so he could whisper to his boss.

“Got to get this to the laundry. Guppy...I mean, Mr. Gupton had a bit of an explosion last night.” He patted his rear to indicate what he meant. “Dinner last night was Mexican, ya know.”

Ms. Gordon waved her hand in front of her nose. “Yes, good work, please get that out of here quickly.” She felt a wave of nausea before Big Mac continued on his way. Her nose had been right, as usual. She made a mental note to remind Miss Boulanje to cut back on the spices next time.

Just before she turned into her office she encountered Dr. Galen Fenton. He was staring down the hallway and didn't answer when she said “Good morning.” She leaned over to look down the hallway. Miss Emily Dumly, one of the aides, the shapely blond one, was bending over helping a Family Member tie his shoes. Her shorter-than-necessary dress gave Dr. Fenton a nice view of her assets.

“Good morning,” she said a bit louder.

“Oh, good morning, Ms. Gordon.” Now the younger Dr. Blackwood would have blushed in that situation but the unyoung unabashed Dr. Fenton was unaffected. He continued to stare.

Ms. Gordon rolled her eyes and went into her office. She opened her blinds to let in some sunshine. In a moment she was engrossed with the spreadsheet on her computer, trying to figure out how to stay under budget this month, lest Grandmother complain again.

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Dr. Fenton was writing a note in a chart when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Need *anything?*” asked Miss Dumly.

The doctor looked up. Her rosy cheeks were overshadowed by her brighter-than-usual red lipstick. Her blouse buttons were under strain from her ample bust. The light overhead made her wavy blond hair shine like an angelic halo. He was middle-aged with thinning hair starting to gray and a slight paunch and she was yet to see thirty, but that did not matter to him. He suspected it did not matter to her, either.

“I'd like...I'd like more feedback about some of my patients here. Maybe you're free for lunch?”

She frowned and sat on the edge of the counter, causing the hem of her skirt to rise up a little, showing off more of her legs. “Oh, gee, I don't think I can. It's hard to know when I'll be

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free for lunch.” Then she smiled. “But I’m free for dinner! I’ve been wanting to try that new place, what’s it called? Cha-too Brand, I think?”

“Chateaubriand,” he corrected. The most expensive restaurant in town. But it might be worth it, except... He had that meeting with his lawyer to discuss what could be done about his alimony and child support payments. He really needed some relief or there would be no ‘Cha-too Brand’ dinners in the future. “Sorry, I can’t do tonight. Maybe tomorrow night?”

She frowned again, pouting her lips out. “Oh, darn! I have night shift tomorrow!” She picked up a pen and scribbled on a piece of paper. “Here’s my number. Call me before the weekend maybe?” She preferred the younger Dr. Blackwood, but he had shown no spark. Gotta take what you can get.

Dr. Fenton smiled. “Sure. Sure! I’ll give you a call.” He put the paper in his pocket.

She returned his smile and went on her way. He stared as she walked down the hall.

“Dr. Fenton.”

He continued to stare.

“Dr. Fenton!”

The smile left his face as he turned to the nurse. “What?!”

Nurse Wingham asked, “Any changes in Mrs. Plessit’s medicines? I’m getting her noon ones together.”

He shook his head. “No, the old...the nice lady is doing fine.”

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It was a typical day at the Home.

The morning activity was what Valentina the physical therapist called ‘chair exercise’ but that was a bit of a misnomer because many of the participants were able to stand, either unassisted or with their walkers. But she tailored her exercises to those in wheelchairs, figuring they needed it the most. As usual she wore her black tights, showing off her muscular legs, and her short pink tank top that jiggled in a most pleasing way during the workout. Ms. Gordon suspected that was the reason so many of the male Family Members participated.

“Okay, gang, now that we’re warmed up let’s get to it! Here’s an oldie that I’ll bet you recognize.”

She hit the play button and demonstrated the arm motions as The Family followed along.

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♪ Wake me up before you go-go... ♪ <arms raising up>

♪ Don't leave me hanging on like a yo-yo... ♪ <arms alternating up and down>

And so on...

As the song finished, “Whew! What a workout! Now, who remembers that song? What group was it?”

A few hands went up and one of the women called out, “Madonna!”

Another said, “No, not her. It was A-ha!”

Yet another said, “No, it wasn’t Abba. It was Wham!”

Valentina pointed at him, “He knows his music! How about this one?”

In a few moments the group was spelling out Y-M-C-A with their arms. That one always got the group grooving. Especially Mr. Hommel this morning.

Everyone called him ‘Hippie’ Hommel because of his penchant for wearing a tie-dyed poncho, matching bandana around his head and greeting people with a peace sign, and he liked that nickname much better than his given name of ‘Herbert.’ This morning his YMCA motions were even more animated than usual, and he began spinning in a circle as he waved his arms and sang along with the Village People.

Suddenly he spun to the side, almost knocking over Mrs. Blinkin and startling Mr. Marconi who was focused on the shapely Valentina. He continued sideways across the room, his arms and poncho flapping, gradually losing verticality until he struck the wall with his head and shoulder with a loud thump.

Valentina shrieked. She first ran to the call button then to Mr. Hommel. “Are you okay?!”

Hippie Hommel looked up at her from the floor. “I’m groovy, just groovy.”

Nurse Wingham ran in, saw the prostrate hippie, and knelt by his side. “Are you okay?!”

Hippie furrowed his brows. “Why is everybody asking me that?”

“He lost his balance and fell against the wall,” informed Valentina.

“Follow my finger with your eyes,” she commanded him.

His gaze was a bit sluggish but he followed the finger in each direction.

“What’s your name?”

Now his eyes widened. “Don’t you know?”

“Where are you?”

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“Well, same place as you, obviously.” He snorted.

Ms. Gordon had heard the alarm bell and joined them. She looked down over the nurse’s shoulder. “His eyes look a bit bloodshot.”

Nurse Wingham countered, “That’s not unusual for him. His answers are a bit vague, but that’s not unusual for him either.” Then addressing Hippie, “Do you hurt anywhere?”

“No, man, I’m cool. What’s all the fuss?”

He started to sit up. The nurse took hold of his shoulders and helped him.

Ms. Gordon leaned a little closer and sniffed. “Mr. Hommel, have you been around a skunk?” Her eyes narrowed. “Or...something else?”

Hippie looked up at Ms. Gordon. “Hey, lady, your hair’s on fire!” He snickered.

Nurse Wingham felt around his skull, then his neck and shoulders and examined his arms. “Let’s try to get you up.”

She stood up, took hold of his hands and helped him up. He wobbled a moment then stood straight.

“Hey, man, I’m fine. I was just grooving with the music. Let’s go!” He started to do the Twist.

The nurse led him to an empty chair. “Why don’t you sit for the rest of the program. Don’t want you breaking a hip or anything.”

“Alright, that’s cool.” He gave her a silly smile and started making the Y-M-C-A motions and mouthing the words even though the music had stopped.

Valentina asked, “Should we continue?”

Nurse Wingham replied, “Sure, just keep him seated. Why don’t you get me or one of the aides to help him when you’re done.”

In a moment Tom Petty was crooning "Mary Jane's Last Dance."

Ms. Gordon and Nurse Wingham stood at the door watching for a moment.

“Mary Jane? Is this a song about marijuana?” asked Ms. Gordon.

Nurse Wingham shrugged.

“Speaking of which, I’m gonna have a look around Mr. Hommel’s room. I think he’s been experimenting with, shall we say, *herbal* medication.”

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The nurse watched as Ms. Gordon headed off to his room. “Well, duh,” she whispered. The staff knew Hippie Hommel’s habits, but he was one of the more agreeable Family Members and they covered for him, lest The Gorgon find out and evict him.

She chuckled. “Hey, a gorgon turns you to stone. But that won’t hurt Hippie; he’s already stoned!”

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The rest of the day was uneventful. Well, other than the murmuring about the veal parmigiana served at lunch. Mr. Grund raised the first objection about eating young calves. That was quieted when Miss Boulanje, their Haitian cook, explained to The Family that she only used open-range grass-fed beef from mature cattle. Of course, The Home bought the breaded veal from their usual food distributor and Miss Boulanje had no idea what it contained. Horse for all she knew. But her explanation satisfied The Family. Then some complained about the sauce tasting a little funny, but she hushed that by tasting some herself.

“Yum! Delish!”

Of course, she had a cast-iron stomach trained to tolerate anything. And only a few of The Family complained of diarrhea that night, so overall Miss Boulanje considered it another culinary success.

The evening meal was a special treat: charcuterie! At least that is what Miss Boulanje labeled it when she didn’t feel like cooking on a hot afternoon and just put out sliced cold cuts, cheese and crackers. But with a nice presentation The Family thought they were enjoying haute cuisine. As long as they were happy, Ms. Gordon was happy. And when Ms. Gordon was happy, everybody was happy.

To make the evening more special Hippie Hommel had recovered enough to share his latest poem. He liked to recite his poetry in the dining room where he had a captive audience, but The Family did not complain. As long as it did not overlap Vanna and the Wheel at 7:30. He stood in front of the television mounted on the wall as that is where The Family’s attention was usually focused. He cleared his throat and announced: “Gravity Sucks. A poem by Herbert Hippie Hommel:

The sun, it rises, it rises high!  
The clouds, they float, float in the sky!

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I cannot fly though I try, I try.

Gravity is enemy mine.

The moon, it glows, it glows at night!

The stars, they wink, they wink so bright!

I cannot attain their awesome height,

Gravity, my beautiful dreams you spite!

Gravity sucks.

Hippie took a bow to a round of tepid applause. The Pulitzer committee has yet to contact him.

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Ms. Gordon straightened the papers on her desk and turned off her computer. As she headed out she said ‘Good evening’ to each staff member and Family Member she encountered. Important to maintain the illusion that they were acknowledged and appreciated. As she exited the building she saw the sun setting over the river to the west, its scattering rays creating hues of yellow, pink and orange in the drifting clouds.

“Another day in paradise,” she muttered.

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### Hurricane!

The residents were more interested in the weather report than their lukewarm oatmeal and rubbery scrambled eggs. The women, that is. The men were more interested in the top-heavy weather girl with her slender legs and high heels, who looked like she might topple over at any moment. The men watched in anticipation. The women, in disgust. “Never in my day!” muttered one, forgetting the miniskirts of her youth.

For those who were paying attention the National Hurricane Center had revised their plot based on changes in the weather patterns and it appears that Category 4 Hurricane Henri would make a landfall on the east coast of Florida. The area south of the Space Center was in the center of the prediction cone. In other words, right over The Home.

The weather girl tossed her long blond hair over her shoulder and held up crossed fingers on each hand.

“Let’s hope that cold front speeds up and pushes Henri offshore!” she exclaimed with a smile and then giggled. You know, as appropriate for an impending disaster of Biblical proportions.

The news then switched to the local beach, showing Jim Cantore and his crew setting up for a broadcast.

“We’re screwed,” muttered Mr. Gustafson.

“We’re screwed,” muttered Ms. Gordon as she looked at the plot on the NHC website. “Even if it’s not a direct hit we’ll have to evacuate just in case. What a mess.” Her first phone call was to the Florida Division of Emergency Management; she needed help arranging buses and wheelchair-accessible vans as well as an actual facility, or facilities, to house the residents. She hoped some of the families would volunteer to take their family members home during the storm, but she knew that was a slim hope. They wouldn’t be here if their families could care for them at home. She listened to the hold message for a third time...

Back in the dining room Jo Janiko groaned, “But I don’t even have a will! I don’t have funeral arrangements. What will they do with me?”

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The elderly-but-still-suave Ravel Francois reached across the table and patted her hand. “Now, don’t worry that pretty head of yours. We’ll get through this just fine. I remember Frances back in...was it 2005? Something like that. Just had to ride it out, lost some power for a few days, but life went on as usual.”

Ms. Janiko thought for a moment. “I thought you said you were sailing French Polynesia before you retired.” She had a head for details like that, being a retired librarian, and he had regaled her more than once with tales of his seafaring days.

Ravel brushed his still-full hair off his forehead and cleared his throat. “Ahem, yes, I must have been on furlough at that time. And you see some fierce storms in the South Pacific, for sure! Make these Atlantic hurricanes look like April showers. Imagine riding one out in a ship, without solid ground beneath you!” In reality Mr. Francois had never been farther than the Bahamas, but he was never one to let reality ruin a good tale.

Mr. Gupton, better known as Guppy, the ex-Navy man spoke up from an adjacent table. “And don’t worry about funeral arrangements. Our bodies will probably be swept out to sea anyway. Which suits me fine. No funeral costs! You know how much a funeral costs these days? Thousands of dollars just to get burned up! More if you want to be buried in an expensive box. Dyin’ is more expensive than livin’. For me, I’d have them just pop me in a bag and leave me by the curb on trash day. But of course that’s not legal. Know what I’d really like? To be ground up and fed to the fish. I’ve caught plenty of fish in my day. I figure it should be their turn to eat me. Yeah, being swept out to sea will suit me fine!”

Mr. Grund, who liked to feed the fish from the dock, called out from his wheelchair, “Now I like that idea!”

A look of revulsion spread over Ms. Janiko’s face.

Mr. Francois turned with a scowl. “Guppy, please! This is upsetting to the lady folk!”

“That’s ‘Chief Petty Officer Gupton’ to you. A *real* sailor.”

Mr. Francois turned back to Jo. “I’m sure they will take good care of us. Probably transport us to a nice hotel or something over on the mainland. Where we can dance the night away while Neptune’s rage avails him nought!”

“Oh, Ravel, you have such a way with words.”

“Promise you’ll have the first dance with me.”

“Why, of course!”

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“Ha, you’re foolin’ yourself, Franky,” said a hoarse voice from behind. Ravel and Jo turned to see the gangling Buddy Gustafson, slumped in his chair, still playing with his uneaten eggs.

“Last time they evacuated us it was a disaster. Barely got across the causeway before they closed it for high winds. Put us up in a high school gym. Cots to sleep on, if you could sleep with all the noise. Rug rats all over the place, ya know. Lost power which meant no AC, of course. Cold food. After a few hours the toilets all got backed up. Too much water in the system, I guess. And the smell! Sweaty people and backed up toilets! The only good thing was seeing Ms. Gordon as green as a Granny Smith apple, sitting in a chair doubled over. You know how sensitive she is to smells! Served her right!”

“Buddy! Please! Let’s show some consideration! People are worried. We don’t need to be painting such a sorry picture. Let’s show some optimism.”

“Sorry for being a realist. People should be prepared. We should raid the kitchen and grab all the snacks we can before they load us onto the cattle carts.”

“Now yer talkin’,” added Guppy.

“We must pray!” Unbeknownst to the residents Nurse Penibel had entered. She stood in the dining room doorway with her arms raised, her stocky body covered by her usual gray uniform with a white tunic over. Her long brown hair streaked with gray was topped by a traditional nurse’s cap. Nurse Penibel believed a woman should always have her head covered when in the presence of men, “as a symbol of authority” as the Apostle Paul had said. She walked to the opposite wall in front of the television, which she muted.

“Let us pray!” she said, arms again raised.

“Yes, we must pray!” agreed Sally Kellog.

“Down in front!” called out Guppy.

Nurse Penibel ignored him and began her invocation, with some bowing their heads and others trying to read the closed captioning on the TV. Jim Cantore painted a dire picture of what was going to happen in the coming days while Nurse Penibel called down the Lord’s blessings and safety upon The Home.

Ms. Gordon breathed a sigh of relief. FDEM was already arranging for school buses with wheelchair lifts to evacuate the beachside facilities. And they had designated several mainland schools as shelters. She thought back to the previous evacuation and felt a little queasy. She

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made a mental note to pack herself some surgical masks which she could spray with cologne. That might help. Next she sent their cook Miss Boulanje to the grocery store to buy some additional non-perishable food, not trusting the shelter to have enough. She was disappointed an hour later when Miss Boulanje returned to report that the shelves had already been swept clean by the panicked locals. She snagged a few cartons of crackers and some processed cheese spread which was a few days expired but might do in an emergency. And this was an emergency, right?

“Well, let’s fill up bottles and jars with water, in case there’s problems with the water supply. I’ll have Mac fill some buckets in case we need some for flushing toilets and such.” She flashed back to the last evacuation and felt queasy again.

“Oh, if we need water I think Henri will be bringing plenty,” observed Miss Boulanje as she headed back to the kitchen.

The day was deceptively calm and clear, even though the TV news continued with its reports of impending doom. By the end of the day bands of clouds started to sweep over the area. The wind picked up. Intermittent rain. No change in the projected path.

By the morning the sky was solidly overcast and the wind more consistently blustery. The residents had each packed a small bag as directed. Miss Boulanje had food boxed up and ready to go.

Dr. Samuel Blackwood came in to make his rounds early. He was around thirty, fit, cute with his sandy hair and square chin, but oblivious to Miss Dumly’s flirtation.

“Oh, Doctor, it is *so* nice of you to come in, what with the storm almost upon us. It’s got my heart thumping!” She reached for his hand and placed it on her chest over her heart, not that he could feel her heartbeat through a layer of silicone.

He pulled his hand back and continued to write in the chart. “Oh, I’m sure we’ll all be fine,” he said without looking up at her.

She continued undaunted. “Listen, my apartment complex is pretty sturdy and I’m on the second floor so I won’t get flooded. Maybe you should come over and stay there during the storm.” Then she added softly, “I have plenty of wine.”

The doctor pulled out another chart and began writing a note. “No, I’ll be fine. Can you check with Nurse Wingham and see if she needs help packing the medicines?”

Miss Dumly’s shoulders slumped. “Sure.” She shuffled off.

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When Dr. Blackwood had finished seeing his patients and reviewing preparations with the nurses he headed out, meeting Dr. Fenton on his way in. They reviewed the situation at The Home.

“What about you, Galen? Isn’t your house on the beach?”

“Yeah, I got a bag packed in my car. Hate to leave my house, but it’s well-insured. I’ll head over to the mainland, find a hotel room or something.”

“Don’t wait too long, it’s looking darker and windier with each hour.”

*Well, duh,* thought Dr. Fenton, but he said, “Roger that. Take care.”

Dr. Fenton’s concern was less for the safety of the residents and more about getting to bill for some extra visits since he had to close his clinic that day. *They’ve already got one foot in the grave anyway. Euthanasia by hurricane, I suppose.*

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Late that afternoon two buses showed up, a few hours later than Ms. Gordon had expected.

“Sorry, lady, but roads are clogged and we already made several runs. Oh, and sorry, but the lift is broke on this one.”

“Seriously?!”

“Don’t sweat it, lady. We’ll open the rear door and lift them in that way. He looks like he could do it single-handed.” Driver Mitch pointed at Big Mac, who was getting the residents lined up. “And Adam will help.” He pointed at the other driver, leaning against the second bus. He took a second look at Big Mac then walked over to him.

“Aren’t you Big Mac?! Oh man, the ‘Big Mac Attack!’ I remember that pancake block you made in the SEC championship game to score the winning touchdown! Man, they’re sticking picking up pieces of that guy out of the turf in Atlanta. Let’s take a selfie!”

Ms. Gordon sighed. Some days half her exasperations seemed to be sighs and this was one of those days. “Can we please get moving?”

“Yeah, yeah, it will only take a moment.” Mitch stood on his tiptoes so he could get in the frame with the beaming face of Big Mac. No one had asked him to pose since his playing days. In a moment Mitch’s brush with greatness was posted on Facebook and in the next moment Ms. Gordon was pushing them to get started.

## Tales from The Home

The loading was surprisingly straightforward. Even the wheelchair residents, with Big Mac lifting on one side and the two drivers on the other. The last wheelchair was Huck Shuman, recovering from a major stroke. Well, not recovering. More just surviving. Big Mac pushed him down the sidewalk, explaining along the way that they were evacuating because of a hurricane. He did not know if Huck understood. All Huck could say in response was his usual, “Pip-pip! Pip!” He had not been much of a conversationalist since his stroke.

They got to the bus and Big Mac introduced him to the drivers.

“Hiya, Huck.”

“Pip-pip!”

Mitch and Adam just glanced at each other.

Big Mac went inside the bus to receive Huck as the others lifted him. With a 1-2-3 they hoisted him up, but his right arm hit the handle of the exit door as he went up.

“Shunofabwitch!” he cried out.

Big Mac took hold of the wheelchair and pulled him into the bus. “Huck! You can talk!”

“Shunofabwitch!” he repeated.

“Speak to me, Huck!”

“Pip-pip.”

“But you just spoke!”

“Pip-pip-pip! Shunofabwitch!”

Mitch giggled. “I guess he still remembers how to swear!”

The biggest challenge was the ancient Mr. Pishman, bedridden and on oxygen, whom they left for last.

“Battery on his oxygen concentrator all charged up?”

“Yes, Ms. Gordon,” replied Big Mac.

“Oxygen bottles? I don’t know that the shelter will have any.”

“Ready to go.”

Mitch and Adam got ready to lift his stretcher into the bus; Big Mac awaited within. Ms. Gordon leaned over and wrinkled her nose.

“I think his bedsore is overdue for debridement, but so be it. Too late now. Let’s go.”

## Tales from The Home

They lifted the stretcher, Big Mac took hold of one end inside the bus, and in a moment Mr. Pishman was lying in the aisle of the bus with his oxygen concentrator humming next to him.

A gust of wind blew through and almost knocked Ms. Gordon off-balance. “Oh, my! Glad the residents are already loaded.”

The first driver was about to take his place when his radio spoke up.

“Mitch, are you there? Mitch?”

Mitch went to his seat and answered.

Ms. Gordon went to the second bus. “All set? Everyone secure?”

Adam nodded. Big Mac assured her, “Everybody in, and their bags.”

“What about the extra food?”

“Miss Boulanje is taking that in her pickup.”

“Oh, we better make sure she knows where we’re going.” Her eyebrows arched up. “I don’t know where we’re going!”

She returned to the first bus and Mitch was standing there, hands on hips.

“Got some bad news. Really bad.”

“What?!” Another gust tried to knock her over.

“Bridges closed.”

“What?!”

“Bridges closed. Wind gusts are too high. Especially in a bus. Wind gust come along, we’d have a bus full of old folks floating down the river. Well, until we sank.”

“You gotta be kidding me! Call them back! Tell them we got to get to the mainland!”

“Won’t do no good. Barriers are already up. Police guarding the causeways. They say we need to hunker down and make the best of it.”

Another wind gust came through and Ms. Gordon saw the bus rock as one thin shriek rang out from within.

Another sigh from Ms. Gordon. “We better get them inside.” She waved to Big Mac to come over. Just then Dr. Fenton, having just finished his notes passed by.

“Good luck to ya’ll. Where are you going, in case there’s an emergency or something?”

“We’re not going anywhere. Bridges are closed.”

“What?!”

## Tales from The Home

The driver was helping one of the residents out of the bus. “Sorry, Doc. Closed down, wind gusts. Police have got the causeways blocked.”

“No way!” He thought for a moment about returning home. He pictured the wind and waves battering his beachfront house. He looked at the solid brick buildings of The Home. “Ms. Gordon, looks like I’ll be staying here.”

“Well, frankly, I’m almost glad. To have a doctor on hand, that is.”

“Right. I suppose the staff will be staying, too?” He said ‘staff’ but was thinking of Miss Dumly.

“Yes, I suppose they will.”

“Then I can manage.”

The residents made it inside without much incident, although the wind did blow down Mr. Gustafson. At least he said it was the wind. Nurse Wingham was not so sure, but in these circumstances helped him up, while at other times she would not have indulged his attention-seeking behavior. Maybe it really was the wind, which was blowing quite strongly now. It drowned out Miss Sally’s constant repeating of “Omigosh, omigosh, omigosh...”

When they lowered Huck Shuman out of the bus he came down a bit hard on the pavement.

“Goddannit!”

Big Mac bent down to look in his face. “Speak, Mr. Huck!”

Huck Shuman returned a blank stare. “Shunofabwitch! Pip-pip-pip!”

That was the full extent of their conversation.

Frederick Douglass Digger the retired judge motored his scooter over to Ms. Gordon. “You know, care facilities can be held liable for not providing sufficient protection to its residents during natural disasters. Oh, yes! Don’t think you’re immune just cuz it’s an ‘act of God!’ No, no, I think it was...Simpson v Healthcare Corporation, 1978. Held liable during a flood, I believe.”

Ms. Gordon reassured him, “I promise we’ll do our best to keep everyone safe.” She wasn’t sure if he was citing an actual case. She suspected he just made up these ‘cases’ as the situation demanded.

The fronds on the palm tree in the middle of the circular driveway were being whipped horizontally. Mitch started his bus, to park it in the dirt parking area past the pavement. Dr.

## Tales from The Home

Fenton was watching as he helped the last of the residents into the home. As the bus passed his relatively-new Acura a strong gust tilted the bus, lifting it off its left wheels. Dr. Fenton held his breath. The bus hesitated a second then settled back down on all four wheels and Mitch continued on his way. The other bus followed. Dr. Fenton finally exhaled.

What could they do other than sit and watch the constant news reports about the hurricane? Some of the women did their needlework or crocheting and chatted. Some of the men started a poker game (chips only, no money per The Home rules). Even Dr. Fenton joined in to kill some time. It gave Big Mac a chance to ask the doctor about Huck's burst of profanity.

"Yeah, the brain's a funny thing. Different areas control different things. I guess his stroke missed his swearing center."

"Sonofabitch," muttered Big Mac.

Miss Boulanje cooked a special meal that evening: fried chicken, sweet potato casserole, french fries and string beans. That raised their spirits some. Spirits went even higher when the weather girl announced that the descending cold front appeared to be having some effect on Henri, creating a chance that it might stay offshore. The residents crossed their arthritic fingers.

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Dinner was over. The rain pounding on the roof and the howling wind threatened to drown out the television. There was nothing on television but hurricane news. Not that it mattered, because...

SNAP! POW!

Suddenly The Home was in darkness. A collective gasp went out from the residents. Then the only sound was the wind and rain. In a moment the emergency lights kicked on providing a soft glow. There arose a soft whimper.

"Now, now, Molly, it's just a power outage. Happens in these storms, you know," comforted Mrs. Plessit, the retired professor.

A bright light pierced the dark from the doorway and flashed around the room, pausing at each table. Ms. Gordon was satisfied everyone was okay.

"Looks like we're out of power. Let's see if I can notify someone."

She pulled out her smartphone and punched 911. There was no signal and nothing happened. She sighed, setting a new personal record for sighs in one day. "Well, the power company usually knows when the power goes out and we're a priority facility, so don't worry,

## Tales from The Home

folks. Mac, can you go to the outbuilding and check on our generator. It should have kicked in automatically.”

“Then why don’t we have power?” demanded Eddie Marconi, the retired electrician.

“Sorry, it only powers our emergency circuit, like for Mr. Pishman’s oxygen. Mac?” She scanned the room with her flashlight until she found him. “Can you go now?”

“You want me to go out there? In the middle of a hurricane?!”

“We’re hardly in the middle.”

“Middle enough for me!”

“Mac, please. The residents are depending on us.”

Mr. Marconi spoke up. “I can go with you, Big Mac. I’m an electrician, you know.”

That pricked Big Mac’s conscience. He couldn’t put a resident at risk. “No, no, you stay here. I’ll do it.” He stood up, Ms. Gordon handed him a flashlight, and he was on his reluctant way.

“We might as well get to our rooms and try to get some sleep. I’ve got some spare flashlights. Maybe some of you able-bodied men...” – she used the term loosely – “...can help the women back to their rooms. I suggest you sleep in your regular clothes, in case they come to get us – somehow – and that way you won’t have to change.”

A few men volunteered, she handed them the flashlights.

Big Mac was back. And he was still dry. “No problem, Ms. Gordon.”

“Mac, you didn’t go out there, did you?”

“Didn’t have to. Went to Mr. Pishman’s room. His oxygen machine is running fine.” He was proud of himself for using his brain for once instead of his brawn.

A moment later there were lights flickering down the hallways of The Home as the men got the women situated and then settled into their own rooms. Guppy was heard to tell Mrs. Kellog, “Don’t you worry none. I’ve been through worse storms in a ship at sea and here we are on solid ground. Get a good night’s sleep, Miss Sally.” With that reassurance she did indeed get to sleep, while Chief Petty Officer Gupton lay awake in his bed all night listening to the wind and rain and jumping every time he heard a rattle or a bang.

The staff spread themselves out, some taking the recliners in the community room and day room and a few lucky ones taking the empty rooms that were awaiting new residents. Nurses Wingham and Penibel decided to share shifts of sleeping and patrolling. Without the call buttons

## Tales from The Home

in operation they thought it best to periodically walk the halls to listen for any trouble. Nurse Penibel volunteered to take the first turn on patrol.

Ms. Gordon had her office of course, with a small couch. She had to fold her legs up, but she could fit. She managed to fall asleep but woke up rather soon. *Gosh it's getting hot in here.* With no AC and near 100% humidity it was indeed getting rather warm in The Home, especially in her small office. She sat up and took off her blouse. *I should have thought of that earlier.* She tried again to sleep, but was still too warm. Off came her skirt. She dozed off but woke again to feel her head resting on a soggy pillow. *Gee, I'm sweating like a pig!* Then she remembered what her English teacher had taught her in high school: Horses sweat, men perspire, but women *glow!* She had the foresight to have a towel in her office, and she mopped her face and neck. *Sheesh! I'm not 'glowing,' I'm sweating like a race horse!* Off came the bra.

Some of the other residents were feeling the heat, but a few felt like they were truly comfortable for the first time in years. Ah, what soothing warmth! It's like being in a sauna!

Nurse Penibel was fanning herself with a sheet of paper. She glanced at her watch; time seemed to have slowed down. *Might as well do my rounds.* She picked up her flashlight and headed to the north wing. She paused at each door and listened, thinking that if she couldn't hear anything over the sound of the wind and rain they were probably okay. At Mrs. Blinkin's room she heard some mumbling. She eased the door open.

Mrs. Blinkin was lying in bed muttering something. The nurse stepped closer and pointed the flashlight at her face, causing her to raise a hand to shield her eyes.

"You okay, Mrs. Blinkin?"

"I'm fine. Well, considering. I was just running through the residents in order. Sometimes it helps me get to sleep."

The nurse recalled she was a retired teacher. "Okay, then. Need anything?"

"No, I guess not."

That was it for the north wing. She started on the south wing. Mostly quiet. Then she heard a crunching sound in one of the rooms. She eased the door open.

Guppy was sitting up in his bed, his hands in his lap. "Yeah?"

"I just heard a strange sound. Thought I better check it out."

"Just my nuts."

She hesitated, and started to back out, not sure what she had interrupted.

## Tales from The Home

He took a peanut out of the bag between his legs. “Want one?”

*Oh!* “No. Thank you, though.”

She continued without further incident until she reached the end of the wing. Outside the last room she heard something she could not quite place. Snoring? Groaning? Some squeaking, too? *What in the world? Is someone in distress?*

Nurse Penibel slowly pushed the door open, leaned in and the sounds grew louder. She pointed her flashlight toward the noise. She saw the white soles of four feet. She lifted the light a little higher and saw a pale hairy quivering buttocks shining in the dark. The image of an octopus with two bulbous eyes and four tentacles reaching toward her came to mind. Instinctively she let out a scrawm as she jumped back and shut the door.

Ms. Gordon’s hearing was almost as sensitive as her sense of smell. Sleepy but still awake she heard the scream, feared the worst, jumped up, grabbed her flashlight and ran down the north wing. At the end of the hall she found Nurse Penibel leaning against the wall and several of the men on that wing who had also heard the scream and joined her. At Ms. Gordon’s arrival several flashlights turned in her direction. She heard a wolf whistle. A voice started to sing, “Mine eyes have seen the glory...” She looked down.

Ms. Gordon glistening sweaty skin looked quite bright in the spotlight as she realized that in her sleep-deprived rush she had not taken the time to put on her clothes. She threw her arms around her full and currently unencumbered breasts. “Gentlemen! Please!”

Two of the circles of light dropped to the floor but the third remained on her chest.

One of the men scolded, “Ravel!” and the third light also dropped to the floor.

“I’m sorry,” said Nurse Penibel. “I shouldn’t have screamed, but I was caught by surprise.”

“Is there a problem?” asked Ms. Gordon, whose red face was now hidden in the dark.

“Well, no, not really...I don’t think. It’s just...no...we should go on...”

Ms. Gordon was not one to let things pass. She went to the door and slowly pushed it open. Her flashlight lit up the moist face of Emily Dumly, sitting in bed holding her sheet up over her chest.

“Can’t a girl get some sleep around here?”

*You weren’t sleeping!* thought Nurse Penibel, but she held her tongue.

“Everything okay?” asked Ms. Gordon.

## Tales from The Home

Miss Dumly waved her hand toward the rain-splattered window. “Oh, just peachy keen, Ms. Gorgo...Ms. Gordon.”

“Just checking.” Ms. Gordon pulled the door shut. She motioned for everyone to head back to their rooms. She let the men go first then walked down the hall with the nurse.

“She wasn’t alone in there!” whispered Nurse Penibel.

“I know. I could smell Dr. Fenton’s cologne behind the door.”

“Disgusting!” uttered the nurse.

*Men!* thought Ms. Gordon. *Well, and some women, too.*

The rest of the night passed without further incident. Rain and wind would come heavy and then ease off as successive bands from the storm passed over them. And most importantly, at least to Ms. Gordon, is that the toilets continued to function.

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Those that slept were surprised to wake up to sunshine and a gentle breeze. Unfortunately they could not watch the television to see that the storm had taken a more northerly course at the last moment, sparing them the worst of it. Breakfast was just cereal and fruit, but it tasted quite wonderful to the residents who were in high spirits, thinking of themselves as lucky survivors of the terrible storm. Ms. Gordon, now fully dressed though still ‘glowing’ and unwashed went around to thank each resident for their cooperation during the crisis.

Guppy, who had not slept a wink as he kept vigil during the night, crowed, “I told ya it was nothing to worry about!”

As she left the dining room Judge Digger spoke up. “This is the first time since I been here that The Gorgon smells worse than I do!”

That elicited quite a round of laughter.

Ms. Gordon walked out front. The ground was quite saturated, with puddles in every little depression. Leaves, flowers, palm fronds and other debris were scattered about. What caught her attention though was a tall pine tree that had fallen across the power line, hence the power outage, but also over the two buses parked there. It put a deep crease in the top of each. “Mitch is not gonna be happy.” She returned inside to tell him the news.

Mitch and Adam would have run out to their buses but Mr. Marconi the retired electrician got in their way. “Hold on, fellas. You don’t want to go near those buses on wet ground with a power line down.”

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They decided it was better to be temporary residents of The Home than permanent residents of Atlantic Memorial Gardens.

Dr. Fenton, who made the most of his forced overnight stay, returned to his beachside home to find that the hurricane beach erosion had reached his swimming pool, which was now a pile of broken cement and tiles, trailing from the remnants of his patio toward the water's edge. Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy.

And so that day would long be remembered at the home, or at least as long as possible given the Family Members' failing memory. Some would call it 'Henri the Horrible' with Mr. Francois giving it the full French accent: 'on-ree 'or-ee-bluh. Some would simply call it 'The Day of the Hurricane.' But most remembered it as 'The Day Ms. Gordon Stunk.'

Ms. Gordon, the glowing one, looked out at the clearing blue skies as the power company worked on the downed line.

"Another day in paradise."

## Tales from The Home

3

### Tea Party

Hippie Hommel actually enjoyed his brief stay in the hospital for his hernia repair. He had that bulge in his groin for years, but then his bowel finally decided to crawl into it and get entrapped, giving him a new and rather unpleasant version of pain. Ah, but the pain meds! He wasn't sure if it was morphine or whatever, but it kept him flying comfortably above the pain threshold. Too bad he couldn't continue that at The Home. The pain pills helped a little, but without the soaring. *Eh, I'll just stick with my 'herbal' remedy when I get back!*

Big Mac pushed him along in a wheelchair. Hippie had resumed walking while still in the hospital but he did not mind a little extra TLC.

Maya at the front desk asked, "How ya doin', Mr. Hommel?"

Hippie raised his right foot as Big Mac pushed him past. "No toe tag yet!"

It took a moment for Maya to get it.

They approached the nurses' station, he waved, they all welcomed him back, and then Mac turned toward the north wing.

It took Hippie a moment. "Mac, wrong way. I'm on the south wing."

"Not any more."

"Whatta ya talkin' about? I'm in 6S."

"Not any more. Now you're in 5N."

"What?...Wha...How...Wha's goin' on?!" He put his hand on the wheel in a failed attempt to stop the wheelchair, giving himself a mild burn on his palm, which did not hurt thanks to the morphine lingering in his system.

Mac delivered him to 5N.

Hippie put his hands on the doorway to stop the wheelchair. "This isn't my room!"

"Hippie, it is now!" Big Mac pushed harder, like he was doing his old blocking sled drill and Hippie pulled in his arms, lest the former lineman break them off.

Hippie looked around his room and sure enough his stuff was all there. Except it looked like a mirror image of his previous room. "Am I in the Twilight Zone or something?" He jumped

## Tales from The Home

out of the wheelchair, bringing a twinge of pain, and he held onto the foot of the bed to catch his breath. “What’s going on, Mac?”

“Beats me. I just do what I’m told.” He rolled the wheelchair out of the room.

“I’ll get to the bottom of this.” Hippie turned to seek out Ms. Gordon but she was already at the door.

“Sorry to surprise you Mr. Hommel but we needed to make a room change. Your room on the south wing was set up for oxygen, which we needed for a new resident. And this room is identical. And with a better view: The Pond.”

“It’s not identical! It’s backwards!” *But I like the view of The Pond*, he thought. “And what if I need oxygen?! Did ya think about that?”

“Now, now, Mr. Hommel, let’s be optimistic. The Family Members on either side of you are nice. They’re quiet. And they’re more...uh...lively than your previous neighbors.”

Hippie Hommel had his reasons for liking the fact that his previous ‘neighbors.’ One was virtually inert and the other was demented enough that she never complained about unusual odors or smoke coming from his room.

“Plus, I knew you were a good team player and would want to do what’s best for The Home. And you really do have a nicer view in this room. I could have stuck you at the end of the south wing, but I thought this would be so much nicer for you.” Once again Ms. Gordon applied her psych minor to turn a situation to her advantage.

“Well, thank you for that.” Hippie looked around. “I suppose it will be okay.”

“You’re welcome,” replied Ms. Gordon when it should have been her thanking him for his cooperation. She returned to her duties.

Hippie walked around the room, keeping his hand over his right groin, as if his guts might fall out if he did not. Everything seemed to be in place. But what about... He walked to the door and glanced up and down the hall. Empty at the moment. He went to the side of the bed. *Is this my bed, or a new one?* He knelt down, eliciting another slight twinge of discomfort. He reached his hand under the mattress and felt around. Nothing. He began probing more frantically, up and down the length of the mattress, now oblivious to the twinges of pain from his groin.

“They must not have brought my bed in here!” he muttered. “Unless they...No. If they found it The Gorgon would have said so. Oh, I’d be hearing about it.”

## Tales from The Home

He stood up with a wince. He wanted to lie down a bit but also did not want to wait and so he headed off to the south wing, hand over his right groin, still in his hospital scrubs. At least they hadn't sent him home in one of those skimpy hospital robes.

Passing the nurses' station he nodded at the nurse and aide there. "Good morning! Just getting in my walk. Doc said I should walk a little each day."

"That's right," responded Nurse Wingham. "A little walking is good but don't overdo it. Don't want to find you lying on the floor somewhere"

"I'll be careful."

He toddled his way into the south wing, doing his best to look cool and detached. He began to softly whistle *Puff the Magic Dragon*. He approached his old room. The door was ajar. He peeked in.

There was a woman lying in the bed, propped up on pillows, reading. She had an oxygen tube under her nose. She looked up at him.

Hippie stopped whistling. He hesitated a moment and said, "Hi. Just meeting the new member of The Family. I'm Herbert Hommel, but everyone calls me 'Hippie.'" He realized he wasn't wearing his characteristic tie-dyed poncho and headband. "You'll see."

She said in a weak and hoarse voice, "Hello. I'm Theresa but...<cough>...please call me Tess."

"Nice to meet you Tess." He wondered if he should ask if he could check under her mattress and look for his stash but knew that would seem too strange. Especially for a newcomer. He would have to formulate another plan. Perhaps she would be out of the room for meals? Maybe not. Perhaps be gone for a doctor's appointment?

"Need...<clears throat>...anything else?" She held up her book, indicating her desire to continue reading.

"Oh, no. Say, who's your doctor? I suppose they'll take you to see him now and then."

"No, they said...<cough>...that a Dr. Blackwood could take care of me here."

"Oh, right. He's a good doctor." He leaned forward and whispered, "Better than that Dr. Fenton who's got the bedside manner of Dr. Jekyll."

She stared at him and did not laugh.

"Uh, well, I'll let you be. Gotta keep walking."

## Tales from The Home

He turned back toward his room and she turned back to her book. *Yes, I'll need another approach.*

As he passed the nurses' station he asked for his pain pills, and in another minute he was relaxing on his new bed. *Yes, a covert operation will be necessary. Just like in 'Nam.* Not that he had ever been in 'Nam or any other war.

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Hippie's alarm went off at 2 AM. It took him a bit to get fully awake, thanks to his earlier pain medication. He got up with a slight wince of pain and put on his robe and slippers. Easing the door open he looked out into the hallway. Vacant, as expected. He began his slow walk to the south wing, but had to pass the nurses' station.

"What are you doing up?" asked Nurse Penibel, lifting her head from the counter. His shuffling was just loud enough to wake her up.

"Doc said I should walk, help me heal faster."

She knitted her brows. "But you need your sleep, too. Okay, but take it easy."

"I will." He continued to shuffle on and she put her head back on the counter.

He stood outside his old room and looked up and down the hall for a few moments. All quiet. The door was ajar and he listened closely. Just a whisper from her oxygen. He gently pushed it open enough for him to slip in. He stopped and listened again as his eyes adjusted to the dark.

A beam of light from the street lamps lining the entrance road outside that wing was shining in through a gap in her curtain. There was just enough light for Hippie to make out Tess's form, lying on the bed, face up, sleeping peacefully as far as he could tell. He waited another minute to be sure.

Hippie knelt down next to her bed, almost letting out a little yelp of pain but he contained it. No reaction from her. He carefully pulled up the edge of her blanket so that he could put his hand under the mattress. Slowly he pushed his arm in, groping with his fingers. He paused. Still no reaction from the dormant Tess. A bit farther. Still quiet. Farther yet. Finally his fingers felt something. He lifted his head up. She was still asleep. He put his head back down and reached for the plastic bag at his fingertips. He got a grip on it and eased it out. *Oh my Precious, I thought I'd lost you!* He stood up, with another wince.

## Tales from The Home

He looked down at Tess and saw the whites of her eyes in the dim light. She had felt a tickling sensation in her back that woke her up. As she looked up she saw a dark figure standing over her, the whites of his eyes glowing as the outside light fell across Hippie's face.

It started softly then grew: "Rrrrrraaaape! Rape!"

Hippie was frozen in place, caught totally off guard. Before he could react a surprisingly spry octogenarian with an oxygen tube across her face whipped off her blanket, swung her feet out of bed and onto the floor and used all of her modest strength to deliver a kick to her assailant's groin.

He let out a loud groan, doubled over, then fell to his knees. She resumed, "Rape! Rape!" and wrapped her blanket around herself.

In a moment Nurse Penibel was in the doorway, followed momentarily by Doris the aide, and then several of the residents on that wing. They saw Miss Tess standing before Hippie who was on his knees holding his groin and moaning.

Tess pointed a finger. "Arrest...<cough, cough>...him!"

The nurse flipped on the light and they all blinked as they adjusted to its brightness.

"Hippie?! What are you doing in here?!" demanded the nurse.

He let out a soft moan. "I was just getting' this." He held up a plastic bag with what looked like some dried and diced herbs.

"What's that? In the middle of the night?!" asked the nurse.

"Arrest him!" demanded Tess.

"Dearie, get back in bed. This is Hip...Mr. Hommel. He's harmless. He's just an idiot." The nurse and Doris tucked her into bed.

Nurse Penibel turned back to Hippie, still on the floor. "Well? What's so important you have to scare this poor woman half to death in the middle of the night?"

Hippie thought fast. "Well, when they moved my stuff they didn't know I had a stash...I mean, a bag of...herbal tea under my mattress. For safe keeping, ya know. It helps me sleep. Yeah, that's it! It helps me sleep, and I couldn't sleep, so that's why I came to get it in the middle of the night." He let out another groan. "That lady can really kick."

Nurse Penibel rolled her eyes. "Let's get you back to bed, you silly old hippie." She took hold of his arm to help him up.

## Tales from The Home

“Wowouch!” Hippie clutched his groin and remained bent over. He shook his head.  
“What a kick.”

Doris took his other arm and they pointed him towards the door. They took a few steps and Hippie almost collapsed, with another groan.

“Doris, maybe you better get a wheelchair. Hippie, let me check something.” She gently pushed his hand aside and felt his groin. “Yep. She has quite a kick.”

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Big Mac took hold of the wheelchair from the ambulance crew. He rolled it through the entrance and headed toward the dining room. “Maybe next time don’t be going into other people’s rooms in the middle of the night.”

“Way ahead of you there,” replied Hippie. “Doc was pretty upset with me. Said he never had to redo a hernia repair before. Said I really messed up his beautiful stitching. But it wasn’t me – it was her! I’m telling ya, Mac, that old lady can kick!”

Big Mac chuckled. He turned the wheelchair toward the dining room.

“My room’s that way...”

“The ladies are having a welcome back party for you. They figured after two operations you deserve it. Although a few of them said you got what you deserved. I won’t tell ya who.”

“I can guess.”

“I think they just wanted an excuse to have extra snacks.”

“Glad to serve as their excuse.”

They entered the dining room to find some of the residents sitting there with teacups, and an assortment of cheese and crackers distributed amongst the tables.

“Welcome home, Hippie!” called out Miss Boulanje as she rolled out the tea urn on a cart. She paused at each table to fill up the residents’ cups.

Big Mac rolled Hippie up to an empty spot at a table with Betty Blinkin and Eddie Marconi.

“How ya doin’, Hippie?” asked Eddie.

“Sore, but I’ll manage.”

Betty couldn’t resist saying, “Maybe next time you try to romance Tess you should do it in the daylight.”

“I wasn’t...! No...I was just...”

## Tales from The Home

Miss Boulanje arrived at the table and filled their cups. “Thanks for the tea, Hippie.”

“Oh, no problem.” *I guess she means I gave them reason for a tea party.* He picked up a cracker and paired it with a slice of cheese. He did not care for the hospital food and was feeling a bit peckish.

Eddie asked Hippie about the operation and his hospital stay. “Same as before. Loved the IV pain meds.” Betty asked about going under anesthesia. She had never been “put under.”

“Oh, it’s like the best sleep you’ll ever have. You should try it sometime! Well, for most people. Didn’t work out too well for Michael Jackson.”

They heard an outbreak of laughter at another table.

“Oh, Buddy, you are the funniest guy!” called out Luna Maggio, in a voice unusually loud for her. “What’s brown and sticky? A stick! That’s hilarious? Where do you come up with such jokes?”

The three people at her table continued to giggle.

A male voice broke out in song: “I’m...too sexy for my shirt...Too sexy for my shirt... So sexy it hurts!” The tall gentleman at another table stood up and started to unbutton his shirt as he sang.

Jo Janiko shrieked: “Oh, Ravel, you’re too much!”

People at the other tables took notice and joined in the laughter and started clapping in time with Ravel:

“And I’m...too sexy for Milan...Too sexy for Milan...New York, and Japan...”

Jo stood up and started to gyrate to the rhythm. Sally Kellog stood up and started to dance in place. Josiah Grund backed his wheelchair away from the table, stood up on his wobbly legs and took Luna’s hand, letting her dance in circles around him.

Hippie, Eddie and Betty chuckled as the mirth escalated. Hippie finally took a deep sip of his tea. His eyebrows came down. He took another sip.

“Does this tea taste right to you?”

Eddie, not taking his eyes from the dancing women, replied, “Ah, just some herbal tea, I guess. I don’t particularly like it...” He took another sip. “...but it has its charm, I suppose.” He giggled.

Betty added, “It has an unusual taste, but the more I sip it the more I like it!”

## Tales from The Home

Ravel had completely unbuttoned his shirt and took Jo by the hand and raised her up so they could dance as the others kept time:

“I’m...” <clap> “...too sexy for my shirt...” <clap> “...too sexy for my shirt...” <clap>

They didn’t know the words so they just kept repeating “too sexy” <clap> “too sexy” <clap>...

“Excuse me.” Hippie got up and wound his way past the dancers to the kitchen. He found Miss Boulanje leaning against the counter and sipping some tea. She was bobbing her head and muttering, “too sexy” with the others.

“Miss B, where did you get this tea?”

She looked at him, still bobbing her head. “Good, ain’t it? A little strange, but I likes it.”

“But where did you get it?”

“Oh, one o’ da women give it to me. Doris it was. I tink. Said it your special blend. Said you left it behind when youse went to the ho’pital or sumpin’ like that. Too sexy for my shirt...” She tugged at her top button.

Hippie held his breath, hoping Miss B would not go any further. “Uh, that was, yes, a special blend. Not really for general consumption. To be used for...uh...medicinal purposes.”

Miss Boulanje turned to look into the dining room. She laughed, a high-pitched laugh, almost a shriek. “Well, it work! Look at ‘em!”

Hippie shrugged. Too late now. Might as well let them have their fun. He returned to his table. The group started a new song with Ravel leading and the rest clapping in time:

♪ If there's something strange...In your neighborhood...Who you gonna call? ♪

The whole group shouted: “Ghostbusters!”

Ms. Gordon, returning from an errand stopped in and listened for a moment. She went on to her office. “Glad they’re so happy today. Unusual. Wonder what’s got into them.”

It took a while and several more songs but the group gradually calmed down. However, they stayed in the dining room, finishing off the snacks and impatiently waiting for dinner time. They felt unusually hungry that afternoon from some reason.

Hippie thought, *Guess I’ll have to give Cousin Jimmy a call and see if he can restock me. Hope he’s not in jail again. He really should be more careful who he sells to.*

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### Meet The Astronaut!

Ms. Gordon does not often get excited about events at The Home but this was an exception. Meet The Astronaut Day! This was a first for The Home. It promised to be more exciting than when Minnie Mouse had visited from Disneyworld. Of course, the sheen was taken off that event a bit when the Family saw a bald man sitting outside smoking with Minnie's head under his arm. But at least they all got a Mickey Rice Crispy Treat out of it, or at least those who managed to eat theirs before the dietitian confiscated them.

Former astronaut Sparky Flint had contacted The Home to offer this visit. Ms. Gordon was thrilled and assumed this was a charitable outreach on behalf of NASA. Sparky did not disillusion her by telling her that this was part of the required community service for his last DUI. Neither did he tell her that NASA had distanced itself from him, ever since that rumor had hit social media about a three-way aboard the International Space Station. But he still had his ISS mission 69 ball cap. That was not actually his mission, but he liked the number and swiped the cap the last time he was in Houston.

Miss Cherry the social director was beside herself in anticipation. This promised to be more exciting than the annual Halloween dress-up party. (She thought most of the residents actually looked less frightful than usual in their dollar store Halloween makeup.) She gathered all the spare chairs she could find into the community room, which she had decorated with hanging moons, stars, comets and rockets. And she decorated herself as well: a visit to the stylist to put more curl into her shoulder-length brunette hair, it, darkened eyebrows, eye liner, brighter-than-usual lipstick – all of which was unusual for her. It's not like she needed to impress the old guys in The Home. Although she did try to catch the eye of young Dr. Young the psychiatrist when they crossed paths.

And on this particular day she had some competition. Glenda the music volunteer had not heard about the event so she showed up on her usual day to lead her popular sing-along session. She lugged her keyboard and stand in through the door, a bag full of song books slung over her shoulder. She noted all the decorations.

“What's this?”

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Miss Cherry was hanging up a banner with the letters N-A-S-A on the wall. “Oh, *you’re* here,” she said with a hint of scorn in her voice.

Glenda and Miss Dumly the aide were Miss Cherry’s main competition for male attention in The Home. Glenda’s dishwater blond hair straddled between Miss Dumly’s golden blond hue and Miss Cherry’s brunette. Glenda did not need makeup for her creamy skin, naturally rosy cheeks and pouty lips. Not as curvaceous as Miss Dumly, but attractively slim. A natural beauty – as she herself would point out. And her bubbly personality might give her an edge over the more restrained Miss Cherry. Or so Miss Cherry feared.

“Oh, I guess you didn’t hear. We’re having a special event, so you won’t be needed today. See you next time!”

Glenda did not leave. “Some sort of space event?”

“Yes, nothing much, really. Sorry you wasted your time coming in. Next time we’ll make a point of informing you.” She tried to usher Glenda out.

Just then Ms. Gordon popped in. “Looks nice. Mr. Flint should feel welcome.”

“Who’s Mr. Flint?” asked Glenda.

“You haven’t heard? Sparky Flint the astronaut. He’s coming to speak to us today. Quite exciting!”

Miss Cherry rolled her eyes.

“Ooh, that is exciting! I know! I’ve got some space music I can play to get everyone ready! The theme from *Star Wars*. Oh, and *Star Trek*. And *Take Me To The Moon*! I’ve got lots of good stuff I can play!”

Glenda set up her keyboard next to the lectern Miss Cherry had placed at the front of the room, while Miss Cherry sighed and returned to her decorations. Glenda sorted through her music, picking out the relevant pieces. She got to thinking about meeting an astronaut. It made her a bit nervous. The residents had not come in yet, and Miss Cherry was busy with her decorations. So she pulled a flask out of her bag and took a sizeable swig. Just in time, as the first of the residents began to file in. She started up the *Star Wars* theme.

A red - ‘torch red’ to be precise - Chevy Corvette screeched to a halt in the handicapped parking spot closest to the entrance. “Peaceful Shore Care Facility. Yeah, this is the place.” Sparky Flint glanced at his watch. “Got five minutes.” He picked up his ‘water bottle’ and took a

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deep swallow of the 100-proof vodka. “Aah! That should help get me through this.” He kept the car and its AC running. He turned up the radio as Travis Scott’s *Dance On The Moon* came on.

It just so happened that the Honorable (retired) Judge Frederick Douglass Digger was rolling by on the sidewalk in his electric wheelchair, getting a breath of fresh air before the event. He heard the loud music and the lyrics caught his attention. He listened for a moment, then turned toward the Corvette.

“Shut that crap off! Disgraceful! What’s wrong with you! What’s wrong with these singers today!”

The music remained loud. The judge could not see the occupant through the tinted windows. He gave a raised finger salute and continued on to the entrance.

“What’s his problem?” muttered Mr. Flint. He had no way of knowing that Judge Digger had grown up in the Deep South and too often had heard his name paired with that rhyming N-word which Travis Scott was fond of using. ‘Digger the N-----’ they called him. Half the residents thought Judge Digger was too sensitive about racial issues, but the other half thought he had good reason to be.

Another glance at his watch and another quick swig from his bottle and Flint turned off the car and got out. He popped a mint into his mouth. He looked over his mail-order navy blue flight suit— NASA had not returned his original after the hearing - to make sure it was in order. He straightened his blue-tinted pilot sunglasses. “Let’s get this over with.”

He caught his foot on the curb and almost stumbled but made it to the entrance just as one of the doors opened.

“Greetings, Mr. Flint! We are *sooo* happy to see you!” Ms. Gordon held the door open for him. “I’m the administrator, Ms. Gordon. We talked on the phone.”

“Good morning, ma’am.” He faked a smile. “Glad to be here with you fine folks.”

Ms. Gordon led him to the community room and as they entered they were met with a round of applause. Mr. Flint nodded and saluted.

“Let me introduce you to our social director, Miss Cherry, who organized this.”

Miss Cherry blushed and gave a sort of half curtsy. “So honored to meet you, sir.”

“Likewise,” he replied with a smile.

*That’s promising,* Miss Cherry thought.

Glenda was still playing her space-related music although she had turned it down.

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“And this is our music volunteer, Glenda.”

Glenda improvised a little flourish to finish the music then stood up. She reached out and took the astronaut’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I’m so *very* pleased to meet you, Mr. Flint. Your, uh, exploits are the stuff of legend. I am *sooo* looking forward to learning more about you.” She smiled and gazed into his eyes.

“Likewise,” he replied with a smile.

She continued to hold his hand. Miss Cherry’s smile turned to a frown.

After a moment he said, “I better get started. Maybe after...”

“Oh, yes!” she immediately replied.

He pulled his hand out of hers and turned to the lectern, only to find himself face-to-face with a long-gray-haired hippie, sporting a tie-dyed headband with a peace symbol and his usual similarly-colored poncho.

Hippie held up a piece of paper. “I wrote a poem for the occasion!”

Ms. Gordon rolled her eyes and started to speak but he did not wait. He turned to the audience, cleared his throat, and announced: “Vacuum Sucks. A poem by Herbert Hippie Hommel. Ahem...”

I fly through the exosphere,  
But there is no wind in my face.  
I am encased in a metal tube;  
You can’t breathe in space!  
Vacuum sucks.

I put on my heavy suit to walk outside,  
I make sure to turn on my oxygen supply.  
Because there is no air out there.  
I examine my suit with care,  
The smallest hole will be my demise, because...”  
Several residents anticipated his last line and said with him:  
“Vacuum sucks!”

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Those same residents started to applaud to make sure that really was his last line. Astronaut Flint politely joined in. Hippie bowed to the audience and then to Mr. Flint and, thankfully, took a seat. The astronaut went to the lectern.

“Good morning, fine folks of...” He paused and looked at Ms. Gordon.

“Just call it ‘The Home.’”

“Yes. Pleased to be here with the public that supports our space program. We astronauts feel like we are humanity’s ambassadors to the stars!” He waved his hand up toward the sky and almost knocked down a comet, hung a bit too low.

“Yes, but it is not an eashy...uh, easy road to become an astronaut. Years of schooling, even beyond college, and then the shpecialized astronaut training...”

Sparky Flint went into quite a bit of detail, most of it well above the heads of his audience. A few nodded off, but then, some of them were prone to nod off even when they were the ones talking. He described his own time on the ISS but avoided any mention of his romantic entanglements. He finally wound up his canned speech and gave a loud clap with his hands, which aroused a few of the napping residents.

“Okay! Let’s get to the fun part. Question and answer. I’ll start with the first question that we always get about space travel. How the heh...” He paused. A hiccup slipped out. “How does one use the bathroom in space? Doesn’t that get a bit messy?” He laughed. “Well, yes it can, if you’re not careful! But the answer is: suction! It’s like sitting on a giant Hoover!” A bit of an exaggeration but then Sparky Flint was not shy about exaggeration.

“Now, you ladies might think that sounds quite nice...” He grinned while Ms. Gordon winced. “And maybe you men, too, but it’s very gentle. Like a gentle lover...”

Ms. Gordon just found that comment puzzling and inappropriate.

Mr. Flint paused for a moment, as if trying to remember where he was going with that. “Anyway, what questions might you have for me?”

There was silence and some blank stares. Glenda rescued them from the awkwardness.

“Oh, Mr. Flint, you astronauts seem to be in such *gooood* shape.” She gave her sweetest smile and batted her eyes. “How do you exercise in space?”

“Exershish. Ah, they actually have a treadmill but you have to shtrap yourshelf onto it, so you don’t float away. That would be funny, if you start running and you just run up into the air!” He giggled.

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A few residents giggled but most just stared at him. Glenda gave a good laugh. “Oh thank you, Mr. Flint. I should tell you later about *my* exercise regimen!”

He winked at her. “I look forward to that!”

Miss Cherry did not want to be outdone. “I have a question! You astronauts are so brave! Which is scarier, the takeoff, or the re-entry?”

“Oh, good question, but we astronauts, we never use the word ‘scary.’ It’s not in our vocabulary.” He conveniently ignored the tears he shed on liftoff of his first and only mission. “No, we might ask, which is the most tense time? I suppose it is the liftoff. You’ve got a million pounds of explosive sitting under you...” – another bit of exaggeration – “...and you just hope it burns as designed instead of all at once.” He spread out his hands like an explosion and shouted, “Kabooshhhh!” That woke up a few more residents.

“This reminds me of a joke. ‘How many times do rockets blow up?’”

He waited for a moment as the crowd stared at him.

“Just once!” He laughed. The audience did not.

Then Miss Cherry forced a laugh. “Good one, Mr. Flint!”

“Now, re-entry is pretty...tense, too, but then you’re just falling to earth. All you need is for the heat shield to hold together. Now, on my last mission...” – meaning his only mission – “...we were concerned that the heat shield might be loose. So I had to don a spacesuit and go for a spacewalk.” Of course all this was fabrication, but it held the audience’s attention. “Now, when you’re out in space there may be space debris coming at you, at 17,000 miles an hour! That’s like 5 miles a second!” That was the only accurate part of his talk. He swished his hand in front of him as fast as he could and it collided with the lectern.

“Son of a...!” He caught himself in time. He rubbed that hand with his other. “Anyway, I dodged a few pieces of passing space debris...” – as if it was possible to do so at 17,000 miles an hour – “... and I secured the heat shield in place and saved the mission!”

There was a smattering of applause. Glenda stood up and clapped, catching his attention. He smiled at her. Miss Cherry frowned again.

“Any other questions? We’re about out of time, I think.”

A thin hand rose out of the audience.

“Yes, ma’am?”

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Sally Kellog, her early dementia diminishing her usual inhibitions, in her thin and trembling voice asked, “Didn’t you have sex in space?”

Ms. Gordon’s eyes rolled toward the ceiling. Miss Cherry and Glenda simultaneously giggled.

Astronaut Flint did not flinch. This was nothing compared to the grilling he got from NASA. “Now, don’t believe everything you hear on social media. Or the tabloids. Or the national news.” He turned to Glenda and Miss Cherry and in a softer voice, “I save my lovin’ for earth!” He gave them a wink.

Ms. Gordon stepped forward. “I’m afraid time is up. But we all want to thank Astronaut Flint for this informative and entertaining talk.” She led the residents in a round of applause.

Mr. Flint stood by the door and said goodbye to the residents as they filed out, shaking hands with those who offered theirs, accepting their praise and congratulations. Glenda resumed playing her space music. *Man, I could use a drink*, he thought. *Gosh, I could use a drink*, she thought.

Ms. Gordon, Miss Cherry and Glenda remained. Miss Cherry turned to Ms. Gordon, “I’ll see Mr. Flint out.”

Before Ms. Gordon could answer Astronaut Flint spoke up. “Oh, I wanted to go over this music with...”

“Glenda!”

“With Glenda.” He turned his back to the other two women. “Sho...so, where did you get your musical training? You play sho...so well.”

Ms. Gordon and Miss Cherry looked at each other. Miss Cherry had a sour look on her face but Ms. Gordon was her usual stoic self.

“Guess we’re not needed here.”

They left.

Mr. Flint feigned interest as Glenda described her musical training and showed him the pieces she had selected, “Especially for you!”

“Shay...say, Glenda, I know a little riverfront bar and grill not far, where we can get something to eat and wet our whistles.”

“Sure. I wouldn’t mind...getting wet!” She giggled.

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He carried her keyboard out for her, bumping Mr. Grund's head as they passed him in his wheelchair and then bumping it on the door, but without serious damage to either. He managed to get it into her car without further incident. He gave her the directions then headed to his Corvette in the handicapped spot, but which had not been ticketed.

Astronaut Flint pressed his car fob but the door wouldn't open. He repeated this at least three times. He eventually realized he was pressing the lock button instead of the open button. Correcting this, he fell into the car seat and immediately took a swallow from his 'water' bottle, not caring that it was warm, almost hot from the intense sunlight. "Ah, good shtuff." It was the cheapest swill he could find, but in his mind alcohol is alcohol no matter how you dress it up. He started the car, its radio resumed playing at the previous loud volume, and he revved the engine several times. He almost backed over Janet Grund, coming to visit her uncle. She gave a shriek and jumped, but Astronaut Flint was oblivious. He hit the gas and swung the car around the parking circle in a too-wide arc, clipping one of the hibiscus bushes and unknowingly carrying away a yellow flower on his red fender while leaving the scent of burnt rubber.

Miss Glenda tried to keep up in her silver-gray Civic. She watched and heard as his tires screeched as he spun his car left onto A1A, causing a car headed south to slam on his brakes, adding another screech. She made the turn and saw the red Corvette speeding down the road toward the pedestrian crossing at the beach pier.

The pedestrian light turned yellow, which encouraged Astronaut Flint to accelerate. It turned red before he reached it but that did not stop him. He just missed two surfers who had started to cross the road, the roof of his Corvette going just under the tips of their surfboards. Glenda, several cars back, came to a stop. She saw a police car pass her in the left lane, lights on and then the siren started up. When the traffic light turned green she proceeded along with the other cars. As she approached the pier parking lot she saw the red Corvette in the parking lot with the police care behind it, lights still flashing. She pulled in and parked.

Sparky Flint was trying unsuccessfully to walk a straight line. He was talking to the officer in a loud voice. She could not make out most of what he was saying, but several times caught the word "astronaut." Another police car pulled into the lot and that officer joined the first. A minute later the astronaut was blowing into a breathalyzer. Glenda began to think that their lunch was not going to happen.

## Tales from The Home

A few minutes later Sparky Flint the Astronaut was ushered into the back seat of a police car, on his way to be processed for his latest DUI.

Glenda sighed. *Well, maybe this is for the best. Dodging a bullet. But still... An astronaut! Well, as long as I'm here...*

She grabbed her backpack from the passenger seat, took out her own 'water bottle' and took a swig of light rum. Locking the car she headed to the pier, paid the minimal entry fee, and walked out over the relatively calm ocean. There was a gentle sea breeze. White puffy clouds occasionally interrupted the bright sunlight. A man in a floppy white sun hat pulled up a small fish near the end of the pier. She watched the surfers trying to catch the few small waves. A dark shadow passed between two of them but there was no shark bite today. A trio of pelicans glided over the water, searching for schools of fish.

Another swig of rum. She smiled.

“Another day in paradise.”

## Tales from The Home

5

### Before His Time

Dr. Fenton leaned over, cleared his throat and in a stentorian voice: “Good morning, Mr. Pishman!”

Mr. Pishman stared at him through his everted reddened eyelids but no sound came from his mouth besides his usual wheezy breathing.

“Well, let me take a look at you.” He took a peek into the dry mouth and at a glance could count the few remaining teeth. His stethoscope revealed the usual faint heartbeat, erratic and skipping. The lungs had the same wheezing audible from the outside. The emaciated limbs were limp.

“Let’s get to it,” the doctor mumbled. The nurse had set out the standard kit on the table behind Mr. Pishman. He put on the gloves then pulled down the sheet and rolled up the gown.

“My, my, no improvement.” *As if there ever will be.* He used the cotton gauze to wipe away some of the loose tissue and pus from the gaping sacral bedsore. Then he used the tweezers and scissors to trim away some of the dead tissue, holding his breath the best he could, turning away when needed to take a deep inhalation. Dr. Fenton could handle the look of anything – blood, guts, even maggots – but smell, odor – that was his Achilles’ heel.

He finished quickly, knowing his efforts would never be rewarded with a healing wound. At least he could bill for this. A scribbled note in the chart finished the unpleasant task.

“Mr. Pishman, looking good!” he lied. “Need anything?” knowing there would be no answer. As a final gesture he took the cup of water from the table and put the straw in Mr. Pishman’s lips. To his surprise the patient closed his lips around the straw and took a feeble sip. “Good effort, Mr. Pishman!”

Dr. Fenton returned the chart to its rack. “Where’s Nurse Wingham?”

As directed he found Nurse Wingham in the cafeteria having her morning coffee break. He took a seat opposite her, mentally noting how her skin matched her coffee. Skin color made a difference to Dr. Fenton; everybody knew it. “Just saw Mr. Pishman. Such a sad case.”

The nurse nodded in agreement as she sipped her coffee.

## Tales from The Home

“Does he ever say anything? Do anything?”

She shook her head with another sip.

“What kind of life is that, to lie there like that, day after day?”

She finally spoke up. “Not for me to say.”

“Would you want to lie there like that?”

She shook her head again. “But I ain’t him.”

“Seems almost cruel to keep him going like this.” The nurse continued to nurse her coffee. The doctor pondered for a moment. “I haven’t seen his son in a while.”

She slurped the last of her coffee. “Oh, he comes every week. Might be coming in today. Sits in there quite a while. Talking and talking...”

“Mr. Pishman talks?!”

“No, no, just the son. Tells his dad everythin’ from the prev’ous week. Family. Sports. Just the good stuff. Not politics or nothin’ like that. It’s prob’ly the highlight of his dad’s week. But I expect it’s more therapeutic for the son. Always leaves with a smile on his face.”

Dr. Fenton drummed his fingers on the table. “Still...seems cruel to keep him alive like that.”

“What’s the alternative?” the nurse asked through narrow eyelids.

Dr. Fenton’s eyes opened wide in response. “Oh, nothing! Just hate to see people suffer, that’s all.” He nodded to her and left.

“He hates to see *hisself* suffer, I think,” Nurse Wingham muttered.

As Dr. Fenton was leaving he happened to meet Cyril Pishman coming in.

“Doc! How’s my dad today!”

Cyril was short, pudgy, wrinkled and bald with a fringe of white hair remaining. It always felt strange to Dr. Fenton to be talking to a senior citizen about a parent. Even though that was fairly common these days. And he didn’t like being called “Doc” – he had worked too hard to become a ‘doctor’ – but he tried to maintain a civil tone.

“Well, Mr. Pishman, about the same.”

He took the son by the elbow and led him to the side of the hallway.

“Let me ask you...What do you see as the future for your father?”

Cyril looked puzzled. “Future? Well, I’d like to see him get stronger. Start talking again. I...don’t suppose that’s likely?”

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Dr. Fenton gave him a frown and shook his head. “I don’t think that’s realistic. On top of all his usual medical problems he’s got that awful bedsore. I’m surprised infection hasn’t set in and killed him, to be frank.”

“That’s cuz you’re taking good care of him, Doc!”

The doctor shook his head again. “Just your father’s tenacity, I guess. Say...did your father ever give you instructions about what to do with him, if he was ever... well... you know... in this sort of state? Just lingering, not much hope for the future?”

“You mean, like a living will?”

“Yes. Or just some verbal suggestions about what he wanted done.”

“Well, no. Just take good care of him, I guess.”

“Do you think your father is happy to be living like this?”

“Well, I don’t know.” And for the second time Dr. Fenton was asked through narrowed eyelids, “What’s the alternative?”

“Well, it’s just... it’s just that we can be more aggressive, although I’m not sure what that would be in your father’s case, or we can be more conservative, and let nature take its... natural course. You know, let people go to their heavenly reward, you might say.”

Cyril’s eyes tightened further. “Euthanasia?” he asked with an edge to his voice.

“No, no, not like that,” as Dr. Fenton sensed the son’s resistance. “I just don’t want to go overboard, be too aggressive. If that’s not what your father wanted.”

“Just do what you can, Doc. It’s in God’s hands, isn’t it?”

“Right, right.” But the doctor thought, *It was my hands in that bedsore, not God’s! That stench was in my nostrils, not God’s!*

“Well, have a good visit with your father.”

On the drive back to his office the doctor ruminated further. *I wouldn’t want to be kept alive like that! It’s cruel! Why can’t families let their loved ones go? He probably hates them for it. Probably wonders why they kept him alive after that last stroke. I mean, what does a guy have to do to get dead in today’s medical system?! Why can’t people be ushered on to their heavenly reward? Or maybe the family doesn’t expect a heavenly reward. Maybe they’re afraid he’s going the other direction. Maybe they are keeping him alive to prevent that! But even so, what would a few months or even a few years delay matter? Compared to an eternity? What am I talking about?! I don’t even believe in all that! But the family might. Still, they don’t understand the*

## Tales from The Home

*medical aspects. He's not going to get better, only worse. It's cruel to keep him alive in that state. And selfish. What a waste of medical resources. That bed could be used for someone with a chance of enjoying life. My skills – are for promoting health, not for prolonging death!* And so the doctor convinced himself of the necessary action.

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The next week Dr. Fenton leaned over, cleared his throat and in a stentorian voice, “Good morning, Mr. Pishman!”

And he received the usual response, which was an unblinking stare. Still, he went through the motions for what he knew would be the last time. That gave him a sense of relief. He could even put up with the stink one more time.

After the quick exam and quicker-than-usual debridement of the bedsore and an illegible scribble of a note in the chart the doctor announced, softly, “I’ve got a treat for you, Mr. Pishman.”

He pulled out a vial from his lab coat pocket and set it on the table. There was a bit of water in Mr. Pishman’s cup so he emptied it into the dying plant on the windowsill. *At least you’ve got a chance of recovering.* Then he poured the contents of the vial into the cup.

“Here, Mr. Pishman! Some medicine to help you...” He halted before adding ‘on your way.’

He put the straw between the parched lips. The lips closed and Mr. Pishman took a good sip, to the doctor’s delight. The backup plan involved a syringe, which might cause choking, spitting – unpleasant. This was much better. He paused for a moment, and offered it to Mr. Pishman again. *Another good sip. Excellent!*

Back at the office was a message to call the Peaceful Shore Care Facility.

“What? Really? I was just there. But his heart was so fragile. I’m surprised he lasted this long... Yes, I’ll sign the death certificate. Cardiac arrest, for sure. No surprise with that, really. Will you be notifying the son? Good. I’ll call him later, in case he has any questions for me. Thanks for all your excellent care. He was such a challenging case.”

Dr. Fenton breathed a sigh of relief.

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Two weeks later the receptionist told Dr. Fenton that Cyril Pishman wanted a word with him. She ushered him back to the doctor’s office.

## Tales from The Home

Cyril gave the doctor a hearty handshake. “I just wanted to thank you for your excellent care of my father. At least his last few months were peaceful. And even that day, when I went in to see him...for the last time...he looked peaceful. Thanks, Doc.”

“Oh, I really didn’t do much. I think it was your father’s spirit that kept him going. And you, talking with him every week.”

“Yeah, I’m already missing those weekly talks with him. I’ve got his urn at home, and I still talk with him...but it’s not quite the same.”

“No, I guess not.” *Actually, I’m guessing it’s exactly the same.* “Well, gone before his time, I suppose.”

“Funny you say that. I almost hate to mention it to you, but I think you’ll get a kick out of it. You know, my father’s hundredth birthday is next week. Or would have been. One hundred years old! Imagine that! He told me no one in his family ever made it to a hundred. He was so excited about reaching a hundred that he set aside one hundred hundred-dollar bills. That’s like \$10,000! He told me if he made it to a hundred to reward his doctor with it, to congratulate the doc with getting him to be the first Pishman to that milestone! If he didn’t make it, just give the money to charity. So, earlier today I took it over to Peaceful Shore and donated it to them. I hesitated to tell you, but I figure \$10,000 wouldn’t mean that much to a doctor like you, and you’d get a kick out of hearing about it. At least the home will put it to good use. Thanks again, Doc!”

Doctor Fenton closed the door and sat quietly at his desk. He pulled out the letter from his wife’s lawyer noting that he was \$7500 behind on his alimony payments. *And I would have had some to spare. He did indeed die before his time.*

## Tales from The Home

6

Oh, Rats!

Nurse Penibel awoke with a start, having nodded off at the nurses' station. She held her head up and listened. *What was that?*

She only had to wait a moment as another scream pierced the still night air. In the dim lighting at 2 AM it made her hair stand on end. Doris the nurse's aide popped out of a hallway.

"Who was that?!"

The nurse got up and started down the other hallway with Doris following. As they walked along they heard a muffled sob from one of the rooms. The nurse slowly pushed the door open. There on the bed lay Sally Kellog, her hands clenching the bedsheet under her chin.

"What's wrong, Miss Sally?" Nurse Penibel went to her side and stroked her hair for reassurance. Doris went to the other side of the bed.

"It's him! It's him. It's him..." She was trembling.

"It's who, Miss Sally?"

"Him." She looked up at the nurse. "Mr. Kellog."

The nurse looked around. "Nobody here, Miss Sally. You were having a bad dream, that's all."

"No! No. I heard him. Scratching, scratching..." – she raised one of her hands and made a clawing motion – "...trying to get out."

"It's just me and Doris here. No one else. It was just a bad dream, that's all."

"Ohhh, no! It was him. He told me he'd come back. He's trying. He's trying!"

Doris took hold of her raised hand. "Miss Sally, do you need something to relax you? Help you sleep? Maybe a warm glass of milk?"

Miss Sally thought for a moment. "I guess so. But I heard him. I know I heard him. Don't you believe me?"

Doris and the nurse exchanged glances. Nurse Penibel spoke up. "Of course you did. But you still need to get to sleep. Then we'll figure this out in the morning."

A warm glass of milk and a quiet chat with Doris finally got Miss Sally back to sleep.

## Tales from The Home

Back at the nurses' station Doris shook her head. Nurse Penibel muttered, "Just a bad dream."

The next night it was about 1:30 AM when the scream rang out. Miss Sally, Nurse Penibel and this time Miss Dumly replayed the previous night's scenario. It took longer to get the agitated Miss Sally back to sleep on this second occurrence.

The nurse commented, "Dr. Young should be in tomorrow. We'll tell him about this."

Nurse Penibel stayed a little past her shift to catch the psychiatrist whose name matched his appearance. She described the previous two nights with Miss Sally. She also informed the administrator Ms. Gordon as she liked to be informed of anything new going on with the residents, that is, the Family Members.

The doctor nodded at the nurse's report. "Her dementia may be getting a little worse. It usually does."

He chatted with Miss Sally a bit, and then asked about the previous nights.

"It's him! The nurses say they believe me, but I know they don't. But Mr. Kellog..." Her eyes drifted to the ceiling.

"How long has he been gone now?"

Her mouth dropped open. "Why, exactly one year!"

The doctor knew it was closer to two years. "Then it can't be him, can it?"

"Oh, yes. You see, he told me that if he died before his time he'd find a way to come back. To haunt his..." She looked at the psychiatrist. "Oh, sorry..."

"No, go ahead."

"He said if he died too soon he'd come back to haunt the doctor that let him pass."

Dr. Young could not repress a smile. "Well, I wasn't his doctor, so that's okay!"

She smiled a little. "I thought he was just joking." Her gaze drifted again to the ceiling. "But now...I heard him. Scratching to get out. Scratching, scratching. Just a matter of time until he gets out. Then Dr. Fenton..." She looked at the doctor with her eyes wide open. "We better warn him!" She started to tremble.

"Now, now." He reached out his hand and put it on hers. "I'll advise Dr. Fenton. But you must not let it disturb *you*." As if hearing her dead husband scratching inside his coffin would not disturb her. "I'm sure Mr. Kellog would not want you fretting and getting yourself sick about it."

"No, no," she agreed.

## Tales from The Home

“Tell you what, I’ll have the nurse put a white noise machine in here for you. That should help.” He really did not want to prescribe a sedative, their results being too unpredictable in mild dementia.

“Thank you, Doctor.”

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“Ms. Gordon, Guppy...I mean, Mr. Gupton, would like to speak with you. He says it’s urgent.” Miss Pilchard was wearing a light blue skirt and a silver blouse, and with her narrow figure and platinum blond hair she was a fair imitation of her namesake today.

Ms. Gordon looked away from her spreadsheet. *What a way to start my morning. Account not balancing and now Mr. Sour-and-dour.* “Oh, alright. Send him in.”

In a moment Guppy was bumping up against the edge of her desk, one eye half closed as he stared down Ms. Gordon. “You gotta do something! This ain’t right! You gotta do something!” His normally ruddy face was even brighter than usual. He hammered a meaty fist down on the desk for emphasis, rattling the picture sitting there.

Unfazed, Ms. Gordon in her sweetest voice suggested, “Sit down, Mr. Gupton, and relax and tell me about it.”

He gave a final glare and then sat down. He wrung his sailor’s cap in both hands as if trying to squeeze water out of it. The other residents liked to call it his ‘Gilligan’s hat,’ which he did not appreciate, having served in the Navy for thirty years until forced to take a medical retirement. Guppy was not known at The Home for his sense of humor. Maybe that chronic back pain had something to do with it. Or maybe he was just naturally grumpy. Grumpy Guppy.

“We can’t lock our doors, but you won’t do anything to keep people out of our rooms! It’s an outrage! An outrage!”

“Mr. Gupton, we discourage our residents from going into another resident’s room without permission and take steps if someone violates that rule. Tell me what happened.”

“They’re stealing from me! Right from off my dresser at night! Ooh, if I catch them...” He made an uppercut motion with his right hand.

“What’s been stolen?”

“My peanuts! My Virginia peanuts that my family brings me! I got hooked on them when I was stationed in Norfolk.”

Ms. Gordon cocked her head to the side. “Peanuts? Nothing more valuable?”

## Tales from The Home

“Valuable enough! I love those peanuts! It’s one of my few pleasures in this hell... Excuse me, in this home. But no, I keep my wallet and stuff hidden under...well, I don’t need to say. But so far it’s just my peanuts. Who knows what’s next in this God-forsaken place.”

Ms. Gordon, being a staunch Methodist, resented that last remark. Well, as staunch as one can be as a Methodist. But she let his remark slide. She held her head up and leaned forward. “Mr. Gupton, we enforce the rules here, but with kindness and compassion. So, they come in and take your can of peanuts? We can put a stop to that.”

“Not a can. It comes in plastic bags. And whoever’s doing this, they don’t even take the whole bag! It’s screwy, I tells ya!”

Ms. Gordon’s eyes narrowed. “Can you show me?” She already had a suspicion as to the culprit.

Guppy led her to his room, to his dresser. He pointed at a plastic bag of peanuts sitting there.

Ms. Gordon inspected the bag. One corner appeared to have been gnawed off and fragments of peanut shells were scattered on top of the dresser. She picked up a shell and looked at it.

“I don’t think someone is ‘stealing’ your peanuts, Mr. Gupton. Well, not another human.” She lowered her voice. “I think this was a mouse. Or a rat.”

“A rat! In the home! Well, that doesn’t say much for this place, does it?!” He glared at her.

“Well, it would help if people didn’t store food in their rooms.” She glared back. “I suppose your Navy ships never had wharf rats?”

“Well...well...that was different! On a ship you’re in trouble when the rats *leave*.”

“Then, see! Take this as a sign that this rat thinks this is a safe ship to live in!”

Mr. Gupton’s face relaxed a little and he dropped his eyes. Then he looked back at Ms. Gordon. “Hey, don’t try to twist this! The Home ain’t supposed to have rats!”

“Yes, you’re right. But like your ships, we’re right next to the water...” – she pointed out the window – “...and when there’s food available...” – she pointed at the peanuts – “...rats are hard to avoid. But I promise we will take care of it. In the meantime, ask your family to bring you a tin or something you can store your peanuts in.”

“Roger. And I’ll check with the kitchen staff. They might have something I can use.”

## Tales from The Home

“There you go.”

As Ms. Gordon left Guppy’s room she noticed it was right next to Sally Kellog’s room. A light bulb went on over her head. She found Miss Sally in the day room, but she was in the middle of a rousing game of Uno. *I’ll talk to her later, but definitely before tonight.* Instead she sought out Big Mac the orderly, easy to spot with his large frame and spotless white scrubs contrasted against his walnut skin, and found him wheeling Mrs. Plessit down the corridor toward the community room for the morning’s chair exercises. She let him get her situated then pulled him aside.

“Mac, do we have any mouse traps? Or rat traps?”

“Why, Ms. Gordon?”

She gave him a stare. “Why do you think?”

He visibly shuddered. “Oh! You not saying we got rats! I hate those things!”

“Please keep your voice down. Well, it seems that way. Do we have any traps?”

“Ain’t sure. Let’s go check the janitor’s closet.”

In a few moments they were searching the closet which smelled like a sour washcloth.

“Here’s some rat poison, Ms. Gordon.”

“Oh, no. I thought we disposed of that.”

“I can put some out...”

“No!” she interrupted. “We used that a few years ago. Someone brought in the family dog to visit one of the residents. Next thing we know we’ve got an angry family with a dead dog. Oh, no! Not going through that again! Throw that away. Well, I’ll run out and get some traps. But please don’t mention this to anybody.”

“No, ma’am. You ever see that movie *Willard*? I seen it on the Saturday night horror show recently.”

She shook her head.

“Ugh. Creepy little monsters, those rats. Gnaw you to death, they will.” He shuddered again.

That afternoon she showed Mac the rat traps. “Careful, I don’t want any broken fingers.”

“They’s getting into Guppy’s peanuts, huh? Maybe I’ll put peanut butter on the one in his room. For Miss Sally, I’ll try a piece of cheese. Mice like cheese, right?”

## Tales from The Home

“That sounds good. Try to put them out of sight. I don’t want them worrying about it. And make sure you check the traps first thing in the morning.”

Unfortunately she got busy with other matters that day and never did get around to talking with Sally Kellog.

Big Mac waited until the residents were in the dining room for dinner. He got some peanut butter from the kitchen and smeared it onto the trigger of one and hid it under Guppy’s dresser. For the other he pressed a piece of cheddar onto the trigger and slid it under Miss Sally’s bed.

That night it was again about 2 AM when Nurse Penibel heard the scream. She and Miss Dumly rushed to Miss Sally’s room. Once again she was lying there, gripping the sheet under her chin.

“He’s out! He’s out! He got out this time!”

The nurse put a hand on hers and stroked her hair. “Now, now, tell me about it. Emily, why don’t you get a glass of warm milk for her.”

Miss Sally’s eyes were darting around the room. “He was scratching to get out again, But this time. Bam! He must have got the lid open! He’s out I tell you!”

Now the nurse looked around the room. “Do you see him?”

“No. Maybe we can’t see him. He’d be a ghost, you know. But...” She called out, “Jack! Jack! Are you here?”

For a moment there was silence, then there was a scraping noise.

“He’s here! Jack’s here!” Miss Sally shouted.

Nurse Penibel felt the hair on the back of her neck tingle. “Now, now, I’m sure that’s nothing,” she said, trying to convince herself as well as Miss Sally.

They gripped hands a little more tightly and listened.

Suddenly the silence was broken: “Here we are!”

They both gave a jump as Miss Dumly returned with the milk.

“Oh, my, you gave us a start,” said Miss Sally.

Nurse Penibel heaved a sigh of relief. She took the milk and encouraged Miss Sally to take a sip.

That sat in silence for a bit as Miss Sally drank her milk.

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Finally Miss Sally suggested, “Maybe that was Mr. Kellog leaving. He has business with Dr. Fenton, you know.”

“I’m sure Dr. Fenton will be glad to see him again.”

“I don’t think so,” countered Miss Sally.

“Well, you need to get to sleep. Just hit the call button if Mr. Kellog returns, okay?”

Miss Sally finished the milk and handed the empty glass to the nurse. “You know, I hope he does come back. I want to know how he’s doing on the other side.”

The nurse gave her a smile. “I’m sure he’s been doing fine. Probably keeping an eye on you.”

Miss Sally smiled and closed her eyes to try and sleep.

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Guppy was up early as usual. His old Navy habits were hard to break. He opened the tin where he now kept his peanuts. They looked undisturbed. He took a few out for a pre-breakfast snack, but one slipped from his fingers and fell under the dresser.

“Dern it...”

He popped the rest of the peanuts in his mouth and knelt down on the floor. He reached under the dresser and felt around for the peanut.

SNAP!

Guppy let out a screech, about an octave higher than his usual gruff voice. Peanut mush spewed out of his mouth. He pulled back his hand and saw a rat trap clamped onto his fingers. “What the...!” He gripped the side of the dresser with his left hand to help himself get up, shaking his right hand as if that would get the trap off. He ran to the nurses’ station.

Big Mac was standing there shooting the breeze with Nurse Wingham. He saw the trap on Guppy’s hand.

“Oh, shoot! Let me help you, Guppy!” He grabbed hold of the entrapped hand which was still waving around. He set the trap down on the counter so he could grab the hammer-bar and pull it up.

Guppy yanked his fingers out and resumed waving his hand around, repeating, “Ow, ow, ow, ow...”

The nurse came from behind the counter and advised, “Better let me take a look. Mac, get some ice, please.”

## Tales from The Home

As Big Mac headed for the ice machine he noted that the trigger on the trap had been licked clean of its peanut butter. He dropped it into the spacious rear pocket of his XXL scrubs pants.

Nurse Wingham examined Guppy's fingers. He winced as she palpated each finger, but was glad when she announced that none appeared to be broken. Mac returned with some ice wrapped in a paper towel.

"Here," the nurse advised, "this should help with pain and swelling. On for a few minutes, then off for a few minutes. Don't want frostbite, you know. If it aches too much we can give you something for pain."

"Who put that gul-durned thing under my dresser?!" He glared first at the nurse, then turned to the orderly.

Big Mac looked away from Guppy, then suddenly twitched. "Omigosh!" He dashed off to Miss Sally's room.

He gently pushed the door open. To his relief Miss Sally appeared to be sleeping. He crept in and knelt down by her bed. Putting his head down almost to the floor he spied the trap and carefully pulled it out, being careful to keep his thick fingers from the trigger. He saw that the trap had been triggered and the cheese was gone. He slowly lifted his head up.

As his eyes cleared the edge of the bed they met Miss Sally's, now wide open. He expected a scream.

"Oh Jack, oh Jack," Miss Sally muttered with a hint of despair in her voice. She shook her head. "Oh my, Jack. Your skin, your hair... It's all burnt! You've been in the wrong place! And I thought you were such a good man!"

Big Mac hesitated, not sure what she was talking about. Finally he stood up and said, "It's me, Miss Sally! Mac the orderly! You know me!"

She stared at him for a moment. "Oh! Mac! Of course. How silly of me. I was expecting someone else."

Mac hid the trap behind him. "Yes'm." He smiled, gave her a bow and extricated himself from the room. He headed toward Ms. Gordon's office.

Guppy calmed down enough to make his way to the dining room for breakfast. Nurse Wingham and Miss Dumly resumed their duties.

## Tales from The Home

“You know, Emily,” commented the nurse, “the amazing part was that between the sailor and Big Mac we didn’t hear any top-notch cussing.”

Big Mac showed Miss Gordon the cleaned-out traps. “We’s dealing with one smart rat, Miss Gordon.”

“Not smarter than me,” she replied, unwittingly comparing her intelligence to that of a rodent. That afternoon she went to the hardware store and bought a pair of cage-style rat traps. So that night they put one in Guppy’s room – with his consent. There was a room awaiting a new resident and Ms. Gordon suggested Miss Sally spend the night in that one, to get a good’s night sleep in case Mr. Kellog came by again.

“But if I’m not there when he comes...”

“I’m sure he can find you if he really wants to. Ghosts are good at that sort of thing.”

And so a cage awaited ‘Mr. Kellog’ that night under her bed. Loaded with a nice chunk of cheese smeared with peanut butter.

And so the nurse and aide had a quiet night without any screams.

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The next morning Big Mac did not forget to head straight to those rooms. The one under Miss Sally’s bed was empty – including the cheese. He quietly knocked and Guppy let him in to retrieve that trap. Likewise empty of rat and bait.

Big Mac showed them to Ms. Gordon when she came in. “I tol’ ya, we’s dealin’ with a smaaart rat, here!”

Ms. Gordon sighed. “Well, the clerk at the store suggested a chunk of bacon for bait. Maybe we can fix it down good so the rat has to trigger the trap when he tries to take it. See if the kitchen has something like that. Not a thin slice – a good chunk of bacon.”

“Yes’m,” and off he went, the cages rattling in his hand.

Ms. Gordon began to go through the paperwork on her desk, but thought: *Maybe the poison’s not a bad idea. We’ll just make sure no dogs come in. But then I’d hate to have a dead rat lying somewhere stinking up the place. More than usual, that is...*

This time they did not have to wait until the middle of the night: the scream occurred at about 10 AM. From the direction of the sun room.

The sun room is smaller than the community room and so named because it faces south, catching the sun’s rays most of the day. Ms. Gordon, Nurse Penibel and Big Mac got there

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simultaneously. Doris the aide was standing there in the doorway, pointing with a visibly shaking finger.

At first glance the only occupant was the retired judge, the Honorable Frederick Douglass Digger. He still looks distinguished, with square shoulders and his close-cropped white hair and close-trimmed white moustache and beard that contrasts so well with his dark brown skin. He was in his wheelchair as usual, with his sleeping head slumped to the side in the warm sunlight. Then the three dropped their gaze a bit.

Stretched out on the floor also enjoying the warm sunlight was a large rattlesnake, with a distinct rat-shaped bulge in its belly.

“Omigod!” muttered Big Mac.

“Holy Jesus!” spouted Nurse Penibel, who never took the Lord’s name in vain.

“Fu...udge!” said Ms. Gordon with her usual self-control.

“Get it, Mac,” ordered Ms. Gordon.

He shook his head without taking his gaze from the rattler. “No, ma’am! I hates snakes worse than rats!”

“Did it get the Judge?” whispered Nurse Penibel.

Ms. Gordon called out: “Judge! Judge Digger! Your Honor!”

He did not move.

“Oh my.”

Big Mac really liked the Judge, and he was moved to action. He ran off.

Ms. Gordon looked at the nurse. “What?! Well. What do you suggest?”

“I suppose we should call someone. The police?”

The always-calculating Ms. Gordon shook her head. “And the press? I know. Let’s call the snake wrangler. You know, the one that advertises on late-night TV.”

“Good idea!”

Big Mac returned with a rake and a broom in his hands. “I’ll get him. The judge, I mean.” He looked at each implement and chose the rake. He tiptoed to the right side of the room toward which the snake’s tail was pointing. Then he advanced toward the snake with the rake scraping the ground in front of him.

The snake darted ahead a few feet with speed that startled Mac and caused him to step back. It stopped and turned to look at Big Mac and the ominous rattling began.

## Tales from The Home

“Oh Jesus!” gasped the nurse as she backed up a step.

Mac sidled a bit to get closer to the judge. “Judge Digger!”

This time he woke up, to everyone’s relief. “What?” He sat up straight. “What’s that noise? AC acting up?”

“You okay, Judge?” asked Mac in a hushed voice.

“Sure, Mac. You wake me up just to ask me that?!” There was a tinge of anger in his voice.

Mac slowly reached out and grasped the nearest handle of the judge’s wheelchair. “I’ll explain in a moment. Bit of an emergency.” He tugged at the wheelchair and got it moving. Slowly at first, but as it turned away from the snake more quickly. It only took the brawny former football player a moment to have the judge’s chair going out the door.

As the judge was being backed out of the room he spied the snake which now had its mouth open and continued to rattle. “Son of a biii...” His voice was lost in the murmur that had developed in the hallway as other residents had been drawn to the commotion.

Ms. Gordon now noticed the crowd. She quickly grabbed the door handle and closed it. She said to the nurse, “Let’s put a sign up, make sure no one opens this door. Get Mac to put something in front of it. I’ve got a phone call to make.”

It just so happened that Bulldog Benson the Rattler Wrangler was between jobs and could be at the home in fifteen minutes, and so he was, pulling up in his pickup with his full epithet in large letters on the side. Ms. Gordon was at the door to greet him. He looked exactly as in his commercials, with his weathered brown felt Stetson hat over his coarse sandy hair and a deeply tanned face that sported a handlebar moustache. He wore a plaid western shirt, faded jeans and boots so pointed that he could nail a cockroach in the corner. In his left hand he carried a large canvas bag.

“Howdy! You Miss Gordon?” He extended his right hand.

She shook his rough hand.

A van pulled up next to his pickup and a man hopped out carrying a camcorder. He put it on his shoulder as he approached.

Ms. Gordon’s brows furrowed. “What’s this? I wasn’t wanting any publicity.”

“That’s Bud the cameraman. You know, for the show. We hope to be on the air in a few weeks!”

## Tales from The Home

“But I didn’t really want...” She raised her hand in front of the lens as Bud adjusted his focus. “Didn’t want any publicity, so maybe just you...”

“Now, ma’am, that’s the way it works. We get *your snake* but we also get *our video*. Cain’t have one ‘thout the other. You said it was a *big rattler*. If you’d rather handle it yourself...” He started to turn back to his truck.

Ms. Gordon rolled her eyes. “Oh, alright.” She motioned them in. Bud got a nice shot of the ‘Peaceful Shore Care Facility’ sign above the door. Ms. Gordon sighed.

She led them to the sun room. “It’s right in here.” They moved the small table Mac had put in front of the door. A crowd of staff and residents were looking on. She spoke softly: “I wouldn’t have called you except...” Then leaning even closer hoping the residents wouldn’t hear, “It’s a poisonous snake.”

Bulldog looked back at the camera, and in a loud voice corrected, “*Venomous*, not poisonous, folks!” He gave the camera a wink and a smile.

Bulldog slowly opened the door, peeked in, then stepped in. “Oh yeah, a real monster.” He pushed the door all the way open. Ms. Gordon could see the room was empty. She stepped in and Bud the cameraman followed.

She pointed at the middle of the floor. “It was right there, sunning itself. It had eaten our...” She looked at the camera. “Well, it was right there.”

Bulldog walked over to the corner of the room. “Here’s your problem right here.” He kicked the grate over the AC vent near the floor. The grate was indented in the middle, leaving a snake-sized gap at the edge.

“Oh, yes. One of our residents ran into that a while back with his electric cart. Been meaning to fix it.” She blushed a little as Bud the cameraman focused on her.

“No problemo.” Bulldog knelt down and pulled the entire grate out. He reached into his bag and extracted what looked like a camera with a long black tube attached. “Borescope. Plumbers use ‘em to look into pipes. Very handy for our line of work.”

Ms. Gordon realized he was talking to Bud’s camcorder, not her.

He turned the borescope on and started to feed the camera into the vent. Bud positioned his camera over Bulldog’s shoulder to get a look at the video.

After only a few seconds he stopped and turned to the camera. “Yep, there she is.” He pointed to a vague whitish shape on the small screen. Then he turned to look into the camcorder.

## Tales from The Home

“Now this is an eastern diamondback rattlesnake, so-called because of its diamond pattern on its back. And it’s found in...well...the east. It is the largest and most dangerous *venomous* snake in America. It is called a *pit viper* because it has two pits by its eyes that sense heat. I’ll show ‘em to you when I get her out.”

Ms. Gordon made a twirling motion with her hand. “Maybe we could speed this up...”

Bulldog gave her a frown then whispered to Bud, “We’ll edit that out.” He sat down cross-legged and again looked into Bud’s camera.

“Now, the challenge is getting her out. She’s facing away from me. I think the direct approach is the simplest and best.” He put his borescope aside, set his hat on the floor and dug two leather gloves out of his canvas bag along with a cloth bag that looked suspiciously like an old pillowcase. He motioned for Ms. Gordon to back up. “Get to the doorway. When she comes out she’s gonna be mad.” Then looking into the camera, “A rattlesnake’s venom can kill you like that!” He snapped his fingers to make his rather exaggerated point, as deaths from rattlesnake bites are rare, but that doesn’t make for good TV. He put on his gloves and pointed out to the camera two small holes in the left glove.

“That’s where the last one tried to get me.”

“*Tried!*”, snickered Bid under his breath.

Bulldog took the pillowcase in his left hand and stretched out on the floor with his right shoulder positioned by the vent. He looked back at the camera. “Here goes, folks!”

He reached his arm all the way into the vent. “Got her!” He reared back and pulled his arm out, a large rattlesnake following. He jumped to his feet with the snake dangling from his hand. And he was right: she was mad. He tried to lift it up over the opening of the pillowcase but it was longer than he expected. And stronger. It twisted around and arched its body up so that it could reach out and sink its fangs into his left forearm.

Bulldog let out a blood-curdling scream that made Ms. Gordon wince and evoked an “Ooh!” from the crowd in the hallway. He let go of the snake’s tail and for a moment it hung suspended from his left arm by its fangs. Then it let go, dropped to the floor, curled up and rattled. Bud the cameraman moved his focus back and forth between Bulldog and the snake. Bulldog stopped his scream, stared forward for a moment, then his eyes rolled back in his head and he fell backward in a limp heap. Bud moved in for a close-up of Bulldog’s pale face and the eerie whites of his eyes.

## Tales from The Home

Suddenly a large blur of white and brown burst in through the door. Big Mac held his rake up. “Not in my house!” he shouted. He swung the rake forward but hit the overhead lamp, sending a shower of glass shards down on the snake and Bulldog, adding injury to insult. Or more accurately, adding injury to insult to injury? Mac raised it again and with the space now clear he brought it down with all his weight and strength on the rattler. There was an audible ‘squish.’

Bud the cameraman was beaming. “Got it all!”

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The ambulance crew wheeled Bulldog out to their vehicle past the gawking residents. The brave fellow raised a quivering thumb to show them he was okay.

Ms. Gordon turned to Bud, who was looking at his viewscreen as he replayed the scene. He muttered, “This is gonna be a great show!”

“I hope he’s going to be okay.”

“Oh, he’ll be fine,” Bud shrugged.

Ms. Gordon cocked her head. “You seem rather nonchalant about it.”

“Well, this is the third episode we’ve done, and this is the third time he’s been bitten. Did okay the previous two times. I’m sure he’ll be fine this time, too. Comes with the territory, you know.” He chuckled. “Man, I got a great shot of his eyes this time!”

Ms. Gordon watched as the ambulance and then Bud the cameraman left. She stood there shaking her head until they were out of sight.

Thus ended the rat and rattlesnake problem at the Peaceful Shore Care Facility.

## Tales from The Home

7

### Babs and Huck

“Good morning, Huck! It’s me, Babs! Oh, of course, you know it’s me. You’d recognize my voice after forty-nine years, wouldn’t you?”

She pushed the small lounge chair closer to the bed of her husband. He was lying on his side, facing away from her toward the window. She set her bulky floral brocade purse down on his nightstand and let herself fall into the chair.

“My, this is comfy! My knees have been bothering me the past few days. I hope you can’t smell that ointment I’ve been using. I didn’t put it on this morning, cuz I was comin’ here.” She took a deep sniff. “This place smells clean. For a nursing home, I mean. Some of them...phew!” She leaned closer to her husband. “Not that you couldn’t use a bath, yourself.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t come to talk about personal hygiene, did I? Well, I’ll tell you, Huck. I did want to talk with you. You see, I know you and I – we’re not getting any younger. I read somethin’ the other day. It said, ‘Today is the closest you’ve ever been to your death.’ Somethin’ like that. Got me to thinkin’. You know how the Good Book says, ‘Don’t let the sun go down on your anger.’ Well, I think that’s true of life, too. Don’t let it go while there’s still stew on the burner. Ha! I just made that up. But ya know what I mean? Problems should be resolved, don’t let ‘em linger. ‘Specially when life ends and there’s no more time for talkin’. Sunday the pastor had a good sermon. ‘The Three R’s’ he called it. Ruminatation, Regret and Repenting. Or somethin’ like that. Got me to thinkin’. Over a lifetime stuff builds up. And we ought to talk it out instead of lettin’ it fester. Shouldn’t take stuff to our graves, don’t ya think?”

She paused. “You’re quiet today. I know it’s a little hard since your stroke. Well, I’ve got stuff to talk about. Hey, Steve called yesterday. First time he’s called in a while. They’re so busy, ya know. Steve junior is on the soccer team, ya know. I know you like football – I guess they call soccer football in Europe – but I mean American football. Well, at the soccer game on Saturday he did – what did he call it? – a corner kick, I think. Anyway, the wind was blowing, and he said the ball sailed across the field and curved right into the goal! Imagine that! They won the game by a single score – a goal they call it? – so I guess Stevie won the game for them. I know you prefer football – American football – but they think Stevie is less likely to get his head banged up

## Tales from The Home

playing soccer. But ya know, them soccer players use their heads sometimes! Seems like that would hurt their brains, too. Anyway. Are you listening to me?”

She did not hear a response, but then, with her failing hearing she did not hear half of what he said, so she continued.

“And Suze, she’s still doin’ dance. Her group got one of the awards at their last competition. Competition! We use to dance for fun, not awards. But I guess she likes it. Good exercise, I suppose. Wish they lived closer so we could see ‘em more. But then they’re so busy.”

She let out a sigh and looked out the window. “Look at them ibis. What’re they lookin’ for? Worms, I suppose. Beetles. Whatever. Pretty white, though. Pretty day. Maybe I should ask them if they could get a wheelchair and take you outside? But I know they’re awfully busy. Everybody’s busy these days. Not like the old days around here. When you had to look for stuff to keep you busy.”

“Anyway, I was talkin’ to Pastor Paul after his sermon. We all got regrets, ya know, but no need to take them to our gra...our heavenly rewards. So, I thought maybe we should talk a little, clear the air, so to speak. I think overall we’ve had a good life, don’t ya think? A good marriage. Sure we’ve had our ups and downs – who hasn’t? But mostly ups, right? But a few downs. Just a few. Like when...when...” She paused, reached for her purse, and dug a tissue out of it to dab her eyes. “Like when we lost the baby. William. He was such a small little thing, but beautiful in his own way.” She sniffled.

“And then there was the time you caught pneumonia. I told you it was working those night shifts out at the Cape, in the rain and all. Thought I might lose you, too, but you pulled through. And then shortly thereafter the shuttle program ended and they laid you off. You had to scramble to find a job just to pay the bills.”

She sniffed and wiped her nose. “But I was right by your side through all that.” She thought for a moment then let out a guffaw. “I’ll bet you think I’m bad luck! Ha!”

Not hearing anything from her husband she said, “Oh, you’ve no sense of humor. I heard a joke like that some time. It’s funny, you old fuss bucket!”

She fell silent for a moment. “Seriously. We’ve had some rough patches, but not many, right? And I know I haven’t always been the perfect wife. Nobody’s perfect. But I want to clear one thing up. I know you used to worry about this. Maybe you got over it. I don’t know. But I want to clear it up before we...you know. Back in the early days, when we were first married,

## Tales from The Home

and I was working at the surf shop. Gee, who'd have thought that would become such a big deal? I mean, they've got shops all over the country now. Maybe all over the world. Anyway, yes, the surfers did flirt with me. I was pretty cute back in the day, wasn't I? That's why you married me. And yes, I'd flirt back, but just in fun. I didn't do anything with them. Honest! It was all in fun. And good for sales, the boss said. And the boss's son... Yes, he did pay me some serious attention. And I guess I was flattered by it. Okay, so maybe I did let him sneak a kiss now and then. But that's why I quit that job. I didn't want it to come between us. I believe in our marriage vows. You believe me, don't ya?"

She paused but heard no response. "Oh, I know you're probably a little mad. It's okay. It was long ago. But I wanted to clear the air. Before we...you know. Oh, and there was that neighbor Chuck who was hangin' around too much. You said so yourself at the time. He was good lookin' but too full of himself. Maybe I was flattered, but I didn't take him seriously. Really I didn't. That time you caught him with his arms around me he really was helping me with that stuck faucet. Honest! I'm not sure you ever believed me but that's the truth. Funny, really... Well, not funny. Tragic, I suppose, that he ended up being shot by a jealous husband. Just glad it wasn't you!" She laughed.

Babs took a deep breath. "And there was that time – after you lost your job – that you were hitting the bottle a little hard. I know, I know you were really stressed. But I was worried what the kids would think. Or what you might do with them. Oh, not intentionally, I know you would never intentionally hurt them. But driving drunk, who knows what might have happened. I never told you, but I was thinking of moving out and taking the kids. Take us to my mom's. I know you're probably mad to hear that now. But like I said, I want to clear the air. Before..."

"Anyway, I didn't. We worked through it, life got better, your drinking eased off. We made it, didn't we? Now Steve and his family and Willa and her family – I hope they come this summer like usual – they're doing fine. Even if we don't get to see them so often. I don't know why they don't look for work around here, the place has grown up so much. Surely they could find something here now. I can't believe Willa likes the big city after growing up here. Maybe she'll come to her senses yet."

"Well, I've been doin' all the talkin'. But like I said, I wanted to clear the air before... I guess bottom line is, I'm not perfect, you're not perfect, but our life has been good together, hasn't it? We raised two kids that have their own families now. Isn't that the point? Now we can

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get out of the way. I remember when you told me it's the duty of each generation to get out of the way of the next. Or somethin' like that. Well, we've had our turn, and now it's time to step aside for the next generation, right? And we can look back on a good life, right?"

She sat for a few minutes gazing out at the Lookin' Tree and waiting for her husband to respond. She knew he could not talk as such, but even his usual "Pip-pip" would acknowledge her.

"You thinkin' about it? I know you can't really talk, but I know. Just say 'Pip' if you agree we've had some good years together. And if not, just say, 'Pip-pip.' I can take it. It's your chance to get it off your chest. I just want us to be honest with each other before...you know."

Babs waited some more. She was starting to get a bit riled by his silence. "Huck, you must have something to say! You know I don't like cussin', but I know you can still do it. I've heard you! Just cuss at me if that's how you feel. I just need to know."

Finally she stood up and walked to the other side of the bed so he would have to look her in the eyes and respond. She leaned over. His eyes were wide open. They looked a bit strange to her, but she did not comprehend the dilated fixed pupils. He did not blink.

"Huck, aren't you gonna talk to your Babs?"

She reached out and put her hand on his cheek. It was cold. She jerked it back.

"Oh my God," she said softly.

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Ms. Gordon had a box of tissues positioned on her desk in front of the now Widow Shuman. "He looked quite peaceful. I'm sure he was comfortable, no pain." Ms. Gordon was not an experienced counselor, but she hoped that helped.

Mrs. Shuman let out a sob and patted her eyes with her tissue. "But...But I was pouring my heart out to him. I wanted to make sure we were at peace before...before...before...this."

Ms. Gordon shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "Do you have someone you can talk to? A priest? A minister? Close family member?"

"Pastor Paul will talk with me. He has a way of making things seem better than they are. But...But did Huck even hear me? All that...for nothing? I mean, I was reminding him...reminding him of his own words. How we old folks need to move aside for our kids, and it was our time to...to..." She sobbed again.

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Ms. Gordon leaned forward. “Don’t you see, Mrs. Shuman? You gave him permission to go on. To let life go and move on. You poured out your heart, and gave him permission to go. I know he’s been struggling since that stroke. You told him it was finally okay to move on, and he heard you, and left in peace. It was a beautiful thing that you did for him.” Ms. Gordon suspected Mr. Shuman had died during the night, but it was the only thing she could think of to comfort the widow. *Who knows? Maybe in some way he did hear her words and leave in peace.*

Ms. Gordon escorted Mrs. Shuman to the front entrance. “We’ll contact your funeral home to pick up the...Mr. Shuman. They’ll be in touch with you.” Ms. Gordon handed her one last tissue and asked if she needed a ride home or anything else.

“No, I’m okay. I think...” She looked over at the dock. “I think I’d like to sit for a moment before I go.”

The widow Shuman took a seat on the weathered bench on the dock. The sun was shining on this warm-but-not-hot Spring day. A small fishing boat passed by with its rods sticking up, waiting for action. The fisherman gave her a friendly wave and she waved back. She heard a snort, stood up, looked over the edge of the dock and saw a mother manatee with her young calf. “Well, hello there!” She could see a propeller scar on the mother’s back. “Take good care of that baby!” She sat back down. “Prob’ly got that scar protecting yer baby. That’s what mothers do.”

She sat back down and across the river saw a small explosion of fish as a dolphin attacked a school of mullet. “Huck really liked smoked mullet dip with his crackers.”

A pelican landed on a piling at the end of the dock and looked at her.

“Sorry, I don’t have any fish for you.”

She sat for a few minutes enjoying the sights.

“Life. So much life. Almost like the Garden of Eden. Paradise. Huck, I know yer enjoyin’ Paradise now. Hope the fishin’ is good there. Ya know, in the ‘River of the Water of Life’ as it says in the Good Book. I mean, I can just see Jesus askin’, ‘Who’s that fella fishing in the River of Life?!’ And Saint Peter answers, ‘It’s that new fella, Huck.’ ‘Well, jes make sure he keeps to the limits!’ Gee, I wonder if there are limits in Heaven. I suppose not.”

She chuckled and then dabbed another tear from her cheek.

“Don’t worry, Huck. I expect I won’t be long. It’s the kids – it’s their time now. Our time is up, ya know.”

## Tales from The Home

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### The Revenant

Ms. Gordon turned to go find Big Mac. As she passed the front desk Maya looked up at her and said, “Huck Shuman, huh? Another one bites the dust...”

“Maya! Please! That doesn’t sound very nice.”

“Sorry.” Maya was wearing a boubou dress with a front panel of black and orange stripes and the rest a pattern of circular swirls which created the illusion of curves on her otherwise straight figure. Her large metal earrings had similar swirls.

“I know Family Members pass now and then, but we need to remain...sensitive, and respectful.”

“I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I know you didn’t. You should hear some of the things I say in my head. But I keep it in my head. Nice dress by the way.”

Maya stood up to show it off. “And very comfortable. Almost like wearing nuthin’ at all.”

“Just don’t say that to any of the men. Don’t need any more heart attacks today.”

Maya snickered.

As Ms. Gordon walked away she thought, *Her ear lobes are going to be all stretched out by the time she’s thirty*. She found Big Mac in the supply room. “Mac, Mr. Shuman passed away this morning.”

“Old Huck?! Not old Huck! I liked him. He was kind of funny, the way he could only make those sounds of his. ‘Pip-pip!’ But he could sure swear when he needed to.” He chuckled.

“Yes, but I’m not sure he found it funny. He’d get awful frustrated trying to make himself understood. I don’t blame him for swearing.”

Big Mac forced his smile into a frown. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Anyway, can you get some boxes and box his stuff up. For his widow. I need to call the funeral home.”

“You want me to go in there? With...him?”

“Well, yes. Like you’ve done before.”

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Big Mac shook his head. “Yes’m. But I don’t like it. Gives me the creeps.”

Ms. Gordon put a hand on her hip. “How long have you worked here?”

“I know, I know. But it still gives me the creeps.”

“But you’ll do it?”

“Yes’m.”

He headed off to the room. Mr. Gupton, better known as Guppy the ex-sailor, was going the other way, pushing a cart with a sheet over it.

“What ya up to, Guppy?”

“Oh, uh, just...just movin’ some stuff for Eddie. Him and his hobbies, ya know.”

Big Mac nodded and continued in his way.

Ms. Gordon returned to her office to make the phone call. They would be there within the hour. She turned to her computer.

A moment later she heard Miss Pilchard call out, “Wait!”

Big Mac burst through her door. “He gone!”

Ms. Gordon looked up with furrowed brows. “Who?”

“Huck! Mr. Shuman! He gone!”

Ms. Gordon stood up. “What do you mean, ‘gone?’”

“He...ain’t...there! He’s not in his room! His bed is empty.”

“But I just got off the phone with the funeral home.”

“Well, he gone!”

She stepped out from behind her desk and Big Mac led her to the room. She double-checked the room number and stepped in.

The bed was empty. A blanket was crumpled at the foot of the bed. There was no sheet. And no Mr. Shuman.

“Well I’ll be darned,” mumbled Ms. Gordon.

“Omigod,” muttered Big Mac. “Wait. Maybe he wasn’t dead!”

“The nurse checked him. I was here. And even so, he couldn’t walk since his stroke. So where is he?”

They stood in silence for a moment.

“Undead! Or is it living dead? He’s wandering The Home somewhere!”

“No such thing. There must be a logical explanation.”

## Tales from The Home

“Miss Boulanje! She’s from voodoo land! She’ll know! Wait. Maybe this is her work! Maybe she brought him back! To do her bidding. Or to get revenge!”

He turned to Ms. Gordon and grasped her shoulders. He had never touched her before.

“Me! He might be coming for me, cuz I made fun of him! I didn’t really – I liked him – but I did talk about how he couldn’t talk but he could cuss. He thinks I was makin’ fun of him and now he’s out for me!”

Ms. Gordon took hold of his wrists and pulled his arms away from her. “Nonsense. Like I said, there must a rational explanation.” In her mind she reviewed whether she had ever unintentionally made fun of his speech problem.

“Well, let’s look around The Home – quietly – and see if we can find him.”

“I know where I’m startin’!” Big Mac took off.

Ms. Gordon sighed. She looked under the bed, although it seemed silly to her. Then the bathroom. *Where could he be? His body, that is?*

Next she returned to her office and called the funeral home. No, they hadn’t left yet, and had no one in the area that might have picked him up early. When they asked ‘Why do you ask?’ she simply replied, “See you when you get here” and hung up.

Ms. Gordon began a room-by-room search, made easier since most of the Family Members were doing a craft activity with Miss Cherry that morning. *Oh my, he couldn’t be in there, could he?!*

She went to the community room and as unobtrusively as possible surveyed all the people. No Mr. Shuman. No other dead people. That she could tell. *What was I thinking? Of course he’s not in here.* She resumed her search in the north wing.

Big Mac had made a beeline for the kitchen, to find Miss Boulanje. He found her preparing lunch.

“Miss B, Miss B, did you...Hey, is that your famous crawfish eh-too-fay? That’s my favorite.”

Miss Boulanje looked up from the big bowl she was working in. “Everybody’s favorite.” She resumed her work cutting up the fake crab that she used in place of real crawfish. Real craefish was too expensive for their budget. Even real crab was too expensive.

“Miss B, I know you know about voodoo. And the living dead.”

He looked for a reaction from her but she just continued her food preparation.

## Tales from The Home

“You know about raisin’ people back to life, don’t you?”

Still no reaction.

“Huck Shuman. Did you...did you...bring him back?”

Finally she stopped her work and looked at Big Mac through squinted eyes.

“Back from where? You lose him or sumtin’?”

“Well, yes, he’s gone. I mean, he was gone...dead, that is. And now he’s gone.”

Miss B cocked her head to one side. “I’m sorry he gone, but what’s the problem?”

Big Mac looked up at the ceiling then down at the floor and then back to Miss B.

“His dead body – it’s gone! He must be walking the halls again! And you’re the only one that I know can do that!”

She stared at him for a moment, then laughed. “Ooh, old Huck is a revenant, is he? Walkin’ the halls, is he? Ha ha! I like to see that! Ooh, may he comin’ to get you, Mac! Hey! What that behind you?!”

Big Mac spun around, his fists ready to fight off Zombie Huck. There was nothing there.

Miss Boulanje let out a loud cackle laugh. “Heh heh heh! Big boy is scared of Old Huck! Hoo boy! You scared!”

Big Mac lowered his fists and turned back to Miss B. “You know something about this or not?!” He did not see any humor in it, at all.

“I jes know it time for lunch. I hear them comin’ in. You either help or get out of the way.”

She put the big bowl of étouffée on a cart and then a similar big bowl of rice and dropped in a ladle. “You get the salad bowls.” She nodded toward a large platter with small bowls of salad. “Zombie Huck. Ha!”

Miss B began dishing out the rice and étouffée into the bowls already set out on the tables. There were various oohs and aahs as this dish was a favorite with The Family. Even the ones who said they didn’t care for crawfish. Miss B did not reveal her secret, of course. Big Mac followed behind, dropping off the salad bowls. At last they got to the table in the far corner.

“Thanks, Miss B,” said Guppy. “Love this dish! Don’t skimp. For him, neither!”

Miss B looked at Guppy’s companion, who was sitting there with his chin resting on his chest. She hesitated, ladle poised over the bowl.

“Oh, he’s just...just noddin’ off. I’ll wake him in a moment. Let him rest a little.”

## Tales from The Home

Miss B went ahead and loaded the rice and étouffée into the waiting bowl.

Big Mac set a bowl of salad in front of Guppy and then turned to his companion. He dropped the platter with a loud clatter. Fortunately there were only two salad bowls left on it, as they bounced and added additional noise. Everyone turned and looked in their direction.

“Missss Bou...lan...jay! You done it! You did do it, didn’t you!” Big Mac was frozen, his outstretched arms now minus the platter.

Miss Boulanje, who was headed back to the kitchen with her cart, came back to the table. She looked at the slumped figure next to Guppy for a moment. Then she reached over and put her hand on his chin to lift up his face.

“Well, there’s your Mister Huck. He no revenant, though. He dead.”

There was a collective gasp from the rest of The Family.

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Ms. Gordon held up a sheet to hide Big Mac lifting the late Mr. Shuman from his chair and onto a gurney. Then she draped it over the body and motioned for Big Mac to take him back to his room. It arrived there just in time for the funeral home to take it away. Away from Miss Boulanje’s voodoo. Big Mac was relieved.

Ms. Gordon looked around the dining room. “Sorry, everybody. You may not have heard yet, that Mr. Shuman – Huck – went to meet his Maker this morning. Um, I’m not sure how he ended up in here. But I’ll get to the bottom of it. I hope it didn’t, uh, upset your lunch. Miss Boulanje’s dish looks really good, doesn’t it?” She forced a rare smile. She noticed that no one was eating. Except Guppy, who was finishing a second bowl of étouffée, the one set before the late Huck.

“Mr. Gupton, do you know how Mr. Shuman ended up in here?”

Guppy, still chewing, nodded at a cart sitting against the wall. The one from which Ms. Gordon had picked up the sheet.

She glared at him. “I’m pretty sure he didn’t wheel himself in here.”

Guppy swallowed and took a sip of his caffeine-free sugar-free tea. “Well, no, I brung him in. On that.” He took a piece of bread to sop up the juice left in his bowl.

Ms. Gordon put her hands down on the table and stared at Mr. Gupton. “Now why would you do that?”

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“Well,” he said, smacking his lips, “I knew we was havin’ étouffée today. I like that word – sounds fancy, don’t it? Well, Miss B, she’s pretty stingy with it. When I ask for more she acts like I’m...like I’m Oliver Twist, askin’ for another bowl of porridge.”

Ms. Gordon was a bit surprised he knew that allusion.

“All I want’s to have some more. It’s a compliment to her, really, that I wants more! But she treats me like that Oliver!”

“But you figured she’d serve a dead guy?”

“Well, like I thought, she didn’t even notice. I mean, half of us in here look as dead as he did, to be honest. So I got my second bowl, with no hassle.”

*No hassle?!* thought Ms. Gordon. She held her tongue for a moment. “Listen, if in the future you would like a second helping, I will tell Miss Boulanje to accommodate you. Understood? And no more playing hide-and-seek with our departed Family Members. Understood?”

“Sure. No problem.” He finished his bread. “I wonder if she’d consider thirds?”

Ms. Gordon rolled her eyes and sighed.

This remains the only time Miss Boulanje’s étouffée did not receive rave reviews from The Family. Something must have spoiled their appetites.

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### Failing at Falling

“Ms. Gordon will see you now.” Ms. Pilchard was wearing light green and with her tall slender physique she looked more like a needlefish than a pilchard this morning.

“It’s about time! I’ve been waiting...” The swarthy black-suited gentleman glanced at his Rollex watch. With two L’s. “Cinco minutos! Five minutes! Time is money, you know!”

Ms. Pilchard rolled her eyes and went back to her crossword.

Ernesto Consuelo, Esq., straightened his red tie, swept his jet black hair off his forehead, ran a finger down both sides of his thin moustache and picked up his Guchi (not Gucci) briefcase. He marched through Ms. Gordon’s open door. She sat with her elbows resting on her desk and her fingers tented against her chin as if pointing to her burnt orange lips that, as usual, matched her burnt orange hair, curled into a neat bun.

“Buenos dias, Ernesto. What’s the problem *this* morning? We haven’t seen you, gosh, in almost three weeks, I think.”

Without asking he pushed his briefcase onto a corner of her desk, displacing a picture and a book to make room. He popped it open and pulled out his yPad (not iPad) and started tapping on it. “Buenos dias, indeed! Not so for Mr. Gustafson! The poor gentleman! Never have I seen such blatant neglect! For shame, for shame! Dios mío! Here it is. Watch this!”

He pressed an icon and turned the tablet toward Ms. Gordon, who lowered her hands and leaned forward.

The grainy video showed their resident Buddy Gustafson, wearing his distinctive baggy checkerboard shorts and black polo shirt lying on the floor in the dining room. A nurse walked by carrying a tray. He reached his arms up toward her. The scratchy audio seemed to say, “Help me! Help me, nurse!” The nurse paid no heed and walked out of view. Mr. Gustafson looked around and called out, “Won’t somebody help me?!”

Counselor Consuelo turned off the video. “And that’s not all, *mi amiga*.” He tapped again and showed Ms. Gordon a picture of Mr. Gustafson’s face showing a bruise running across his forehead and another over a cheekbone.

“Uh huh,” she replied and stared at him. “And...?”

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Senor Consuelo's eyebrows arched up. "And?! And such neglect cannot be tolerated! Fortunately these injuries are minor, but they are a warning that worse may come!"

"And?"

"Well, the only way you corporations react is under threat. So I am here to advise you that I am ready to initiate a lawsuit on behalf of Mr. Gustafson and his family. They are *very* concerned!"

"Uh huh."

The lawyer's eye contracted. "Senora Gordon, I do not believe you understand the *gravitas* of this situation!"

Senora Gordon leaned back in her chair and tented her fingers again. "Oh, I think I understand the situation quite well. You know, Mr. Gustafson has been our guest for quite some time. I know his family. They are the ones who brought him here."

Senor Consuelo shook his head. "And how disappointed they must be to see their loved one, *su ser querido*, being treated this way. Tsk, tsk."

Ms. Gordon responded in a mock tone of fear, "Oh dear, whatever shall we doooo?"

"Now, now. I know running a facility like this is quite a challenge, and I, that is, the family doesn't want to cause undue trouble. I...they...just want a reasonable settlement, for injuries and distress. Standard practice. Nothing excessive, just enough to send the owners a message and give the family some compensation. And I'm sure that we can reach an agreement that can keep this out of court."

Ms. Gordon nodded. "Uh huh. Yes, I think we can keep this out of court."

Esquire Consuelo smiled. She smiled. Then she opened the folder on her desk and turned her computer monitor so he could see it.

"When I heard you were coming in I got a few things together. Now, I know the Gustafson family *well* – he's been with us a long time. And you know, they told me that is was *you* that contacted *them*, not the other way around. I imagine on one of your visits you witnessed Mr. Gustafson's act..."

"Act!" Senor Consuelo said indignantly. "Act?!"

"Allow me." She pressed the play icon on the screen.

The counselor watched a video taken in the dining room. Various residents were sitting there enjoying their meals, including Mr. Gustafson. Then a nurse entered the room and

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approached one of the tables. At that Mr. Gustafson set down his utensils and stood up. He walked past the table where the nurse stood and then suddenly fell to the floor. He raised his arms and called out, “Help!” The nurse ignored him.

“See! See!” shouted the agitated attorney.

She pressed the forward icon. It was the community room and Mr. Gustafson was among those doing their chair exercises with Valentina the physical therapist. Nurse Penibel entered to check on one of the other participants. With that Mr. Gustafson got out of his chair, walked by the nurse, then fell down, reaching out his arms and crying out, “Help me!” She and the others ignored him.

“See! That’s what I’m talking about!”

Ms. Gordon let the video play. The nurse left the room. Mr. Gustafson lay there for a moment longer, then got up, returned to his chair and resumed his exercises.

She pressed the stop button.

“So?!” asked the lawyer. “Blatant neglect!”

Ms. Gordon pulled a paper out of the folder. “This behavior was evident the first week Mr. G arrived. We had Mr. G evaluated by our psychiatrist, Dr. Young. And by Dr. Fenton, the internist. Dr. Fenton found no physical problem to account for his falling. Dr. Young says it is clearly just an attention-seeking behavior. He sees a nurse, and goes into his falling routine to get her attention. Some psychological need for medical attention, apparently. Possibly ‘somatic symptom disorder’ but more likely ‘factitious disorder’ is what he said in his evaluation. And he recommended that the staff ignore him any time it was clearly a fake fall.”

“Fake! How can you say ‘fake’!”

“Calm down. I’m not accusing Mr. G of anything. It’s a psychological problem, it’s real in that sense, but it’s not a danger to him. And I’ve instructed the staff if they didn’t witness the fall they should check him out for injury. Just don’t dote on him. Dr. Young said we don’t want to reinforce his behavior.”

“Ah! But the injuries!”

“Hold on. This isn’t my first rodeo. When the family told me you had approached him I took precautions. I’m guessing that on one of your visits you saw one of Mr. G’s falls?”

He did not reply.

“Anyway, I had a camera placed in Mr. G’s room.”

## Tales from The Home

“Spying on the residents now! That’s another legal matter I will be addressing!”

Ms. Gordon shook her head. “We always have the families, or the Family Member if he’s competent, sign a permission form allowing this for safety and security reasons.” She searched through the folder and pulled out a paper. “Need to see it?”

He snatched it from her hand and scanned it.

“So, we found this one day last week.”

She pressed the forward icon and then ‘play.’

On the screen Senor Consuelo saw Mr. Gustafson sitting on the side of his bed, the Guchi briefcase open on the bed, and the lawyer was dabbing something onto Mr. G’s face. Back and forth he went between his briefcase and Mr. G’s face. Then he took out his phone and took some pictures of the ‘bruises’ on the face.

“But...but...I...I was treating his wounds! I was cleaning him up! Or he’d have looked even worse! This proves nothing!”

“Perhaps not. But I’m willing to bet that a judge, or jury if it came to that, would take these videos and the doctors’ reports into serious consideration. I can have our lawyer contact you if you’d like to set up a hearing date. Do you know Mr. Allison? He happens to be on the state bar association. I think he’d be particularly interested in that last video.”

Ms. Gordon stared him down.

Senor Consuelo tossed the permission form back onto her desk. “Perhaps we can let this go for now, but I’ll be keeping a close eye on Mr. Gustafson, you can be sure!”

“I have no doubt. Anything else?”

He stood up and slammed his briefcase shut. “Not today.” Sweat-moistened hair had sagged onto his forehead.

Ms. Gordon stood up and smiled. “I’ll see you out, Ernesto.”

She led him to the foyer in front of the nurses’ station. A young woman was lugging in a portable keyboard and its stand, a fabric shopping bag slung across her shoulder.

“Hello, Glenda. Sing-a-long today?”

“Yes, ma’am! Got some oldies and some new songs to try out!”

Ms. Gordon looked at Senor Consuelo. “Mr. Gustafson especially enjoys the sing-a-longs. Lovely baritone voice.”

“I’m sure.”

## Tales from The Home

They stepped aside as Big Mac the orderly came along pulling Mr. Smythe, who had fallen asleep in the dining room as usual. He had hold of the bar behind the geri-chair and he pulled Mr. Smythe along at a brisk pace; the diminutive senior was not much of a load for the ex-football lineman. But he did not notice that the snoring senior had slumped to the side. As they passed the nurses' station Mac cut it a little too close and there was a resounding THWACK as the back of Mr. Smythe's head smacked the corner of the counter.

"What the...?!" Mr. Smythe sat up and looked around, feeling the back of his head with his hand.

Nurse Wingham jumped up and rushed out from the nurses' station to check him out.

"I'm fine, I'm fine!" complained Mr. Smythe as the nurse fussed over him.

The nurse gave Ms. Gordon a thumbs up and Big Mac, whose blush was not evident under his dark skin, resumed pulling Mr. Smythe back to his room.

Senor Consuelo turned to Ms. Gordon. "Have a nice day, Senora. I have some business to attend to." He gave a half-bow and took off in the direction of Mr. Smythe's room.

Ms. Gordon's shoulders slumped and she sighed as she headed back to her office.

"Oh well. Another day in paradise."

## Tales from The Home

10

### The Game

Eddie Marconi leaned over and whispered to Guppy, “9 o’clock. Day room.” Guppy nodded.

Eddie tried to look nonchalant as he ambled over to the table where both Josiah Grund and Judge Digger were sitting in their wheelchairs. Both were finishing their dessert: diced fruit with a dollop of sugar-free whipped topping. The Judge was telling Josiah, “Technically they can’t call it ‘whipped cream’ because it’s not really made out of cream, you know.” The judge was full of such information and eager to share it, whether others wanted to hear it or not and even if he had shared it many times before. “There was a court case about that, you know.”

Josiah said, “Is that so?” even though he knew it was so because the Judge said so every time the kitchen served ‘whipped topping.’ But Josiah was a polite old man.

Eddie leaned over. “9 o’clock in the day room.”

The two nodded in unison and kept eating.

Eddie wandered around, still doing his best impression of nonchalance and saying ‘Good night’ to the other residents as they finished their meals and started to disperse. He lingered at Luna Maggio’s table. “Did you enjoy your meal, Luna?” He could see that her beef and noodles were only half-eaten.

“A bit heavy for me. But it tasted okay. I suppose. The fruit was a nice finish, though.” She gave him a soft smile which well-suited her oval face, framed by her blonde gray hair. Eddie wasn’t sure if that was natural or not, but he liked it. Like all the residents she had her wrinkles, but more a tribute to her graceful aging rather than the bludgeoning of Father Time as on the faces of some of the residents.

“Luna, I believe there is a full moon tonight.” He made a point of telling her this since her name meant ‘Moon Princess,’ or so she said.

“Thank you for telling me. I should take a look at it before I go to bed.”

“Or perhaps we could take a walk to the dock and look at the water in the moonlight?” suggested Eddie. Eddie’s heart, always a bit erratic, skipped more than usual.

## Tales from The Home

Luna looked down at her plate, then up at Eddie. “No, that’s okay. I think I’ll stay in tonight. But it was nice of you to ask.” She looked down again and picked at her fruit.

“Maybe some other time,” he mumbled as he turned away. One more reason to be unhappy at The Home; he added it to his long list. But at least he had a diversion tonight. He ‘nonchalantly’ worked his way over to the kitchen.

“Big Mac around?”

Miss Boulanje, sporting her customary red head wrap, was washing a large pot. “Not mah turn to keep track of dat boy. Check da nurse station. He be chasin’ Doris, I tink.”

Eddie strolled out to the nurses’ station. Sure enough there was Mac leaning on the counter talking to nurse’s aide Doris. He hated to interrupt but Mac saw him and offered, “Hey, Eddie.”

“Hey, Mac...Doris. Mac, you, uh, ready for tonight?”

Big Mac nodded and picked up a small sports bag from the counter. “All set.”

“See you later,” and Eddie sauntered away.

“What you boys up to?” asked the suspicious Doris.

“Nuttin’.”

She knitted her brows.

Big Mac’s dark skin always hid his blushes, which is good because he blushed at the slightest provocation. “Really, nuttin’. Oh, uh, Eddie’s an electrician. He said he’d teach me some stuff. You know, that I might need for around The Home. Ya know.”

She wasn’t convinced but let it ride and went back to their previous small talk.

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At 9 o’clock Eddie entered the day room. Big Mac had set up the usual table and three chairs. He had even remembered to put a poster board over the window in the door to block the light. Judge Digger and Josiah had already positioned their wheelchairs at the table. Big Mac sat between them. They each had several stacks of quarters sitting in front of them. Eddie took one of the empty seats. He pulled out a ten-dollar bill and handed it to Big Mac. Big Mac in turn put his sports bag on the table and started to count out the equivalent amount of quarters.

“Just where do you get all these quarters, Mac?” asked the Judge. “Hold up a laundromat?” Leave it to The Judge to always suggest the criminal solution.

## Tales from The Home

“Mall near me. They have a change machine. I stop by on my way home most every night to get the quarters. First time I tried to do it all at once, but it ran out of quarters, and the kids waiting for the rides started to cry. Thought the parents were gonna lynch me!”

“Lynch you?!” burst out The Judge. “You wanna talk about lynching?! I can tell you about lynching...”

Eddie rolled his eyes as he anticipated another classic Judge Digger rant, but just then Guppy came in and shouted, “Let’s see some action!”

“Shhh!” hushed the Judge. “Don’t want The Gorgon to get wind of this. She’d probably shut us down.”

Guppy put a finger to his lips and then handed Big Mac some bills.

“Seven bucks for Popeye the Sailor Man,” muttered Mac as he counted out quarters.

“Dealers choice?” asked Josiah.

“Might as well. But no more weird games, like one-eyed Jacks, black 3’s and red aces wild. None of that crap.”

“Agree, let’s keep it simple,” added the Judge.

Big Mac handed Judge Digger a new pack of cards. “No marks or nicks, so no cheating.”

Josiah replied, “Cheating? Us? Why, sir, we are insulted. Now, where was that ace I had up my sleeve?”

The group chuckled, but they were glad Josiah was wearing short sleeves, as he seemed to be very adept with cards for a retired mailman, usually coming out on top at the end of the night.

Judge Digger dealt first, starting with draw poker. And to his delight his two pair took the modest pot.

Eddie went with seven-card stud, deuces wild. Josiah had a possible flush showing, with three hearts. Big Mac had a pocket pair of eights to go with an eight on the table, but Josiah bet strong and scared him off. As Josiah collected his quarters he flipped over his cards to show no hearts, just junk.

“Shoot! That’s the last time I let you bluff me!”

That’s exactly the reaction Josiah was hoping for.

## Tales from The Home

The game wore on until eleven, with the fellows taking turns going to the bathroom or fetching drinks from the dispenser in the kitchen. They would lift up the poster board over the window to peek out and see if the coast was clear.

Nurse Wingham and Doris were on duty that night. The nurse turned to Doris. “Those guys think they’re pretty smooth don’t they?”

Doris snickered.

“Like we don’t see them going in and out of the sun room, or hear the clink of their coins. I better make a phone call.”

Doris’ smile dropped. She hated to see The Gorgon get involved.

Eddie had a nice hand for five-card stud: a wild card in his hand and two queens on the table. Josiah was showing a possible straight, but an inside straight. He would need a seven or a wild card to complete the straight. But Josiah pushed in a tall stack of quarters.

Eddie thought for only a moment. “You’re not gonna bluff me out of this.” He pushed in an equivalent stack. “I call.”

Josiah flipped over his seven.

Eddie pounded his fist on the table, causing everyone’s quarters to bounce. “I was sure you was bluffing!”

Josiah pulled in the pot. “Don’t never be sure, Mr. Marconi. Not when you’re playing The Shark!”

“The Shark!” shouted Eddie. “So, not really a mailman, were you?!”

“Oh, that’s jes a nickname I calls myself when I’m playin’. I was a mailman, all right. Wore out my feet and legs. That’s why I use this thing.” He patted the arm of his wheelchair.

“But I seen you walk,” added Big Mac.

“Oh, I walk short distances, but my nerves are shot, I wobble, and my feet get to aching sumpin’ awful. So mostly I roll. I guess you could say I’m a high roller!” He added a chuckle.

There was a knock on the door. They all fell silent. After a moment the door eased open and a head of burnt orange leaned in. “Is this an open game?”

Nobody answered.

Ms. Gordon stepped in. “Those don’t look like our usual plastic chips.”

For a moment they remained silent, then Big Mac said softly, “No, ma’am.”

“So, what kind of stakes are you playing for?”

## Tales from The Home

Another moment of hesitation, then Judge Digger said, “You can see it’s just quarters.”

“Judge, you of all people should know that gambling isn’t allowed at The Home.”

“It’s just quarters,” he replied in a timid voice that was unusual for him.

Guppy stood up. “It’s...just...quarters! Gee! Can’t some guys get together for a little fun in this...place!” He showed some uncommon restraint in not using the first word that came to his mind.

“Yeah!” joined in Eddie and Josiah in unison.

“We have a good set of poker chips. You can play anytime you want. People play cards all the time.”

After a moment Eddie offered, “But it don’t mean nothin’ when you’re playing with plastic chips. At least with real money, even if it’s only quarters, it feels like you’re really putting somethin’ at risk. It *means* somethin’. It’s like...*real* life, not play.”

Ms. Gordon suspected it was more than that. It was the thrill of breaking the rules. Of being secretive. Of getting away with something. Of acting like real players even if it was only for quarters. She couldn’t blame them for trying.

“Listen, gentlemen, I’ve got a responsibility here. Not just enforcing some rule. I can’t stand by and let you fritter your life savings away.”

Guppy let out a grunt. “Huh?! What life savings?! Between you and our *guardians*...” – he used air quotes for that word – “...this is about all we have left!” He waved his hand over the quarters in front of him.

That last comment hurt Ms. Gordon’s feelings. Despite the rumors she did in fact *have* feelings. She didn’t control the economic realities of long-term care. She just tried to keep The Home running as well as possible given the budget set down by Grandmother. She looked at the quarters, the card, and then each man in turn.

“What’s the limit?”

They hesitated, and then Eddie said, “Can’t start with more than \$10. Quarter ante, quarter is minimum bet. Obviously.”

“We might have to up that, to get the game moving. Tell you what, here’s the deal. I’ll play. If I end up as the winner, your game is done, you stick to plastic chips in the future. If I don’t win, you guys can continue. As long as you stick to your \$10 limit. And as long as I don’t

## Tales from The Home

hear of any trouble. No whining about losing money. No getting angry with each other. Certainly no yelling that might disturb the other residents.”

“Of course,” replied the Judge. “You ain’t heard nuthin’ bad from us so far, have you?”

“Well, no.” Her eyebrows lowered. “Just how long has this been going on?”

They hesitated. “Long enough,” volunteered Eddie.

“Is it a deal?”

The men looked at each other. The Judge spoke up: “It’s a deal.”

Guppy said, “Listen, I’m about done anyway. You take my seat.” He scraped his few remaining quarters into a hand and stood up.

The Judge added, “Me, too. Eddie and The Shark, I guess it’s up to you.” He took his remaining quarters. “Can you give me a push back to my room, Guppy?”

And so the two of them left, although a bit later Guppy came back in with a folding chair so he could watch the outcome.

Eddie asked, “Hey. What about Mac? Can he keep playing?”

“Yes. Although he and I will be talking about this tomorrow.”

Big Mac’s face once again changed shades almost imperceptibly.

“But who’s he playing for? Us, or The Home?”

“He’s playing for you, of course.” Then Ms. Gordon pulled two fives out of her clutch, which prompted Big Mac to get out his stash of quarters and count them out.

Ms. Gordon arranged a few stacks of quarters in front of her. “Listen, I don’t want to be here all night. Let’s up the ante and minimum bet to fifty cents. You guys man enough for that?”

Eddie, Big Mac and Josiah the Shark exchanged glances. “You bet,” replied Eddie.

“Oh, and let’s stick with Texas hold ‘em. None of this silly dealer’s choice nonsense. Just real poker. Is that agreeable?”

Eddie spoke for them: “Yep.”

Ms. Gordon did not tell them that she always won the poker games at her sorority.

The game started calmly enough. Each of the four took turns winning some pots. Then Ms. Gordon turned up the heat. Betting bigger, getting caught in one big bluff, but winning an even bigger pot when it turned out she was not bluffing.

Soon Big Mac conceded defeat as he bet and lost his last few quarters.

## Tales from The Home

Eddie was a pretty good player, but he had a run of bad beats, as Ms. Gordon called them. Josiah the Shark noticed right off that Ms. Gordon seemed all too familiar with poker terminology.

Trying to restore his stack Eddie bet hard as he had a high pair. Ms. Gordon called. Josiah the Shark bowed out. Another card was turned up giving Eddie a possible flush depending on the last card to be dealt. He stared at Ms. Gordon, trying to read her stoic face.

“All in,” he said pushing all his remaining quarters forward.

Ms. Gordon stared back. “I call.”

They flipped their cards over. Eddie had a jack of hearts that paired with a jack on the table but also gave him a chance for a heart flush, with three hearts on the table. Ms. Gordon had a ten that paired with one on the table, and a chance at an inside straight. She needed a nine.

“Ooh, bad luck, Ms. Gordon,” muttered Josiah. “I had a nine in my hand. And a nine of hearts gives him a flush. Slim chance. But a ten would do it, too. Still a slim chance.”

Ms. Gordon was a little annoyed, as she realized all that without the commentary.

Big Mac was acting as dealer now that he was out. He put the last card on the table and held it there a moment to add to the drama. Eddie stood up. Mac turned the card over.

Nine of spades.

Eddie slammed his fist on the table and almost yelled, but saw Ms. Gordon and stopped himself.

Ms. Gordon let out a sigh of relief. “That truly was a bad beat, Eddie.”

“You a lucky one, Ms. Gordon,” observed Big Mac.

Ms. Gordon had the bigger stack now but Josiah was a shrewd player and got back to about even with her.

Ms. Gordon glanced at her watch. *Ooh, too late!* But she had to admit to herself that she was genuinely having fun.

On the next hand Josiah the Shark looked at his king and queen. *That’s pretty strong.* He made a hefty bet.

Ms. Gordon tapped her fingers on the table and looked at Josiah. She felt the need to move the game to resolution. She called his bet.

Big Mac then laid out the next three cards, the ‘flop.’ Three, queen and nine.

Josiah liked his pair of queens but his face didn’t show it. He made another strong bet.

## Tales from The Home

Ms. Gordon stared at Josiah. She called.

The next card was a seven.

Josiah stilled liked his pair and bet about a third of his remaining quarters. Again Ms. Gordon stared at Josiah, looking for some sign, some tell. Nothing. Nonetheless, she called again.

The final card was another nine, making it a queen, two nines, a seven, and a three.

*Two pair, queens and nines!* Josiah was excited but as always gave no sign of it. He sat staring at the cards for at least a minute. He didn't want Ms. Gordon to think his hand was so strong that she would fold. He pushed in about half of the quarters left in front of him.

Without hesitation Ms. Gordon pushed all her quarters forward. "All in."

For once Josiah flinched a little. It didn't matter; it was all up to him now. If he folded Ms. Gordon would have an insurmountable lead. His only real option was to call, but he wasn't worried. Looking at the cards on the table he felt quite good about his two pair.

Josiah let himself break into a smile. "I call." He flipped over his two hole cards. "Queens and nines."

Eddie, Guppy and Big Mac each let out a little whoop, knowing what was at stake.

Ms. Gordon looked at Josiah, then Big Mac, then Guppy, then Eddie. She looked down at her hole cards. A queen and a nine. With the queen and two nines on the table: a full house.

She held up her cards ready to lay them down for a terrible, total, emasculating triumph. She looked at each of the four men again. She laid her cards back down.

"You got me. I was bluffing."

The four men gave a shout and began to high five each other then saw Ms. Gordon sitting there with her usual stern expression. They dialed it back. Handshakes and quiet congratulations.

Ms. Gordon gathered all the cards together, removing all evidence of that last hand.

Josiah began putting his quarters in stacks of four so he could see how much was there. "Hey, Big Mac, why don't you trade these for dollars, so you'll have quarters for next time." He turned to Ms. Gordon. "There will be a next time, right?"

## Tales from The Home

The four men stared at her in anticipation.

“That was the deal. But remember: keep the stakes under \$10, no noise, no whining. Best behavior. And keep it secret.” She figured most of the residents and staff already knew about the game, but she knew the men would enjoy it more if it was their ‘secret.’

The men were thinking, *Got her! Beat The Gorgon!*

Ms. Gordon was thinking, *They think they’ve won, but I’m the one in control. They’ll be playing by my rules from now on.* Aside from her degree in healthcare management she often found her psychology minor quite useful.

And so the ‘mysterious’ nighttime meetings in the day room continued about once a week. And every once in a while a burnt-orange-haired woman joined in to keep those misogynistic men on their toes and in their places.

## Tales from The Home

11

### Something For My Memory

“Yeah, Mrs. Finster seems more down than usual. Wouldn’t come to art class today. I even went to her room to fetch her. Told her we were making homemade greeting cards. For the holidays, you know. Most of the residents look forward to that. Some of them are real creative, come ready with ideas. Bring pictures clipped from magazines and such. Lots of fun.”

Miss Cherry paused and took a sip of her tea.

“Well,” said Nurse Wingham, “not surprising they get down once in a while. They been through a lot. By their age they have bigger families, with grandchildren, even great-grandchildren, lots goes on in families, ya know, ain’t all of it good. Others don’t have family at all.” She brought her voice lower. “They’re dying alone, that is. That’ll get anyone down.”

It was her turn to pause and sip her coffee. She liked it dark and strong. “Like me!” she would joke. And indeed, the color of the coffee was a good match for her smooth skin that belied her age. Most folks would guess half her age.

Miss Cherry resumed. “But it seems worse than usual with her. Has her family been in lately? That usually helps.”

The nurse shook her head. “Not in forever.”

“Well, tomorrow is bingo. She used to enjoy that. And then Valentina is doing that chair jazzercise the day after. The guests really enjoy that. Dancin’ without breaking a hip. I’ll make a point of getting her to go.”

“You can try, but don’t push her too hard. Sometimes I think they’ve earned the right to be left alone if that’s what they want.”

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Dr. Blackwood searched the chart rack. “Where’s Finster?”

“Here it is, Doctor.” Miss Dumly handed it to him with a generous smile and batting eyelashes that he did not even notice. “I was just documenting her meds from this morning.” Truth was she pulled out the chart when she saw him coming down the hallway so she would have an excuse to talk with him. “Nice day outside, isn’t it, Doctor?” More batting of her artificially long eyelashes. She partially sat on the edge of the counter and crossed her right leg

## Tales from The Home

over her left, allowing her skirt to ride up a bit to show off her aerobics-sculpted legs. She ran her fingers through her long blond hair. Not that the doctor noticed.

“She taking her medications all right?” asked the doctor as he scanned the vital signs and notes in the chart.

“Sure. She’s good for me. I’m nice to her. I like being *nice* to people.” She gave him a smile again but his eyes were only on the chart.

“I can go in with you, might brighten her up. I like to *brighten* a person’s day.”

“Does she need to be brightened up? How’s her mood lately?”

Emily Dumly tried to answer professionally without revealing her frustration with the doctor’s inattention. “Well, Doctor, she has been a bit gloomy in recent weeks. Quiet. Eats some, but I noticed she doesn’t always finish. Sits at her window a lot.”

The doctor turned to go down the hall. Ms. Dumly stood up to follow. The doctor raised his hand. “I’ve got it.” He proceeded to Mrs. Finster’s room.

Ms. Dumly’s shoulders slumped. She turned back to the nurses’ station and said to Nurse Penibel, “What? Is he a eunuch or something?”

Mrs. Finster did indeed have her swivel glider chair pointed toward the window. Her TV was on but muted. Dr. Blackwood paused to review her room. Very neat, almost to the point that it did not look lived in. Her bedspread looked perfectly flat and unwrinkled. On the near wall was a long dresser with a few personal effects on it. Most curiously were some picture frames, but they were all turned face-down. He first walked to the dresser and took a peek at the nearest picture. It appeared to be a family of five. He could tell from the style of clothing and hair it must have been about thirty years old, maybe forty. None of the five were smiling. He set it back down. The wall by the bathroom held a highboy, and again, a picture turned face down. He peeked at that picture. This was a couple, with the husband sitting and the wife standing behind him. The pose and faded colors suggested an even older timeframe. *Her parents, perhaps? Wait. Is that Mrs. Finster herself? Could be. And that would be her husband?* He recalled the history she told him when they first met, how her husband had died in his sleep. Cardiac arrest was the assumed cause. He had been drinking heavily as was his habit, she had told him with moist eyes. Sent her into a depression. Her three children had to be sent into foster care. He had never met any of her children or seen them at The Home. He quietly set the picture back down.

## Tales from The Home

He intentionally cleared his throat to warn Mrs. Finster of his approach. “Good morning, Miss Molly.” At that first meeting she also instructed him to follow the Southern tradition of addressing her in that way. In fact, as he recalled, she insisted he *not* call her ‘Mrs. Finster.’ Ever. She had said that most emphatically. “How are you today?”

She swiveled her chair just enough so that she could turn and see him. “Fair to middlin’,” she replied without enthusiasm.

Dr. Blackwood sat on the edge of her bed, although he hated to disturb its perfect smoothness. She turned a bit more to face him. Her shoulder-length gray hair was a bit disheveled, unlike her room. She still wore her nightgown, but that was not all that unusual in the home. A bit unusual for her, though.

“How have you been doing since last I saw you?”

She did not respond immediately. Then, “Okay,” He though her lip trembled a bit.

“Let me take a look at you.” *Maybe she’ll warm up and start talking.*

The doctor took a glance at her face, then mouth. Checked her neck. Listened to her heart and lungs. Said, “Don’t mean to tickle you,” as he palpated her abdomen, but she sat there stoically. Legs were thin without swelling. Skin a bit dry, but not unusually so. He started his note in the chart. “How has your mood been? Getting out of your room? Participating in the activities here? Miss Cherry always has something going on.”

For a minute or so she just let him write in the chart. “I would like your help.”

Dr. Blackwood looked up over his glasses as he was finishing his note. “Yes?”

Her lower lip was definitely trembling. Her eyelids quivered a bit. She turned her chair half away from him. “My memory...”

Dr. Blackwood waited patiently for her to continue.

“My memory. I need something for my memory.”

He waited again but when there was nothing more he spoke up. “It’s common to have some memory issues as we get older. Even I find myself going into a room and forgetting what I was looking for. You mean, like that? Or something more? Something more...serious?”

She paused. “Much more serious.”

“Such as?”

There was another pause. “So much... At my age there is so much. A lifetime of memories.” Another pause.

## Tales from The Home

Dr. Blackwood sensed some sorrow in her quivering voice. He could only see her reflection in the window, but it looked like a tear trailing down her cheek.

“Mr. Finster, Mr. Finster,” she muttered. Then she seemed to change direction. “Doctor, do you believe evil is inherited?”

That caught him by surprise. He pondered for a moment. “Well, a lot of who we are is genetic, for sure, but there is so much that shapes us in life. I don’t know that I would say ‘evil’ is inherited, but certainly some traits can be passed on. And other traits can be learned. From parents, from others in our lives. Gosh, it’s awfully complex.” He waited to see if she would go further. Hearing nothing more, he asked, “Are you concerned about your children, or something?”

There was a moment of silence and then he thought he heard a little sob.

“I didn’t know much about my parents. Just that there was trouble, and I ended up in an orphanage. I got a note from my mother once. They didn’t give me the envelope, so I never knew where she lived. All I remember is her saying she was sorry, but I don’t know what for. Never heard from my father. They told me he died.” Another sob. “And then...”

Dr. Blackwood waited again. He glanced at his watch, but did not push her to hurry.

“And then...” Another muffled sob. “And then my son...” She reached for a tissue from the dispenser on her nightstand. Dr. Blackwood moved it closer for her. She wiped her nose. “Then my granddaughter...”

She sniffled and they sat in silence for another minute.

“Anyway...I would like something for my memory.”

Dr. Blackwood took a deep breath, ready to give his usual spiel when asked about this. “Well, there are medications for certain specific disorders, like Alzheimer’s, but I don’t think you have that problem, thank God. Even so, there are potential side effects. You don’t want to take something unless you really need it.”

She let out a heavy sigh.

The doctor continued. “I know you see a lot of ads on TV for help with memory. I know they claim to have clinical trials, but they never tell you about those trials and what the results were. And they never talk about side effects. Anytime you take something you have to consider risk versus reward. Do they work well enough to justify the risk...”

She sobbed again.

## Tales from The Home

It was the doctor's turn to sigh. "I suppose we could try one of these supplements, to see if it helped. They seem to be fairly benign." In his mind he was thinking the placebo effect might at least help her feel better, even if there was no objective improvement. "We'll get your memory doing better than ever," he added, to enhance the placebo effect.

The only response was a thin, wailing cry. Miss Molly bowed her head. "Nobody understands..."

The doctor paused a moment, then asked, "Understand what, Miss Molly?"

She wiped her nose and turned to look at him. Now she had a stern look on her face.

"I don't want my memory better!" Her bitterness bled into her words. She turned back to the window. "I want it gone! I want it wiped out! A lifetime of memories! They haunt me. Every day. Every...single...day!" Her voice trailed off. She held her tissue to her mouth and sobbed again.

The doctor sat in silence. He was very good about the technical aspects of medicine, but not very good at counseling. *I'll see if they can get a therapist to talk with her. Or Dr. Young. And Miss Cherry, maybe she can get her more involved, distract her, boost her spirit.*

Dr. Blackwood stood up and put his hand on her shoulder. She appreciated the gesture and put her hand on his.

"I'll start you on something that might help." He was thinking a vitamin/mineral supplement might serve as his placebo. "It might be a big pill, but the nurse can split it if it's too big."

She nodded without turning her gaze from the window.

He withdrew his hand, picked up her chart, and started out. One last time he glanced at the family picture turned down on the dresser. *They were a somber looking group*, he thought. He shook his head and continued on to the nurses' station. *Sorry, there's nothing I can give you that can erase a lifetime of memories.*

## Tales from The Home

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Glenda Giggles

With Glenda's keyboard under her right arm, its stand resting in the crook of her left elbow, and a bag of music books slung over her shoulder her petite frame was under a bit of a strain. She shook her head to move the ashy blond hair from her eyes as she struggled to grip the front door handle. She called it 'ashy' although her stylist called it 'dirty blond' and she grew up with the term 'dishwater blond.' 'Dirty' and 'dishwater' sounded most unappealing to her. Even 'ashy' was not ideal, but was preferable in her mind. As she struggled to pull open the door it flew open, almost knocking her back.

"Why, good morning, Miss Glenda!" Mr. Grund practically shouted. "Beautiful day, isn't it!" His niece pushed his wheelchair through the door. "I forgot it's song day. Off to feed the birds!" He patted the plastic bag of bread crumbs in his lap, having collected them in the dining room after yesterday's meals. "Have you met my niece, Diana? We named her after Diana Ross. But turns out she can't sing like Diana Ross, otherwise I'd be living in a mansion!" He laughed.

Diana rolled her eyes and the two women exchanged hello's, then they were off for the dock.

"Have fun," replied Glenda as she grabbed at the front door handle, the keyboard stand knocking against the glass. She tilted the keyboard up to fit through the door. As she lifted her left foot to step forward the door hit her left shoulder, almost throwing her into the door jamb. She wobbled for a moment, trying to keep her balance. Suddenly the weight of the door was gone.

"Good morning, Miss Glenda," said a deep but melodic voice from behind.

"Oh, good morning, Mac. Thanks." She stepped in.

Big Mac followed her in. "Let me get that." Without waiting for her consent he took hold of the keyboard and lifted it from under her arm.

"Well, thanks." She headed to the community room.

Big Mac stayed by her side. "Anything for you, Miss Glenda." The top of her head only came up to his shoulder, so he leaned over and spoke in a slightly-raised voice to be heard over the background hum of The Home. He wanted her to hear, as he thought she was awfully cute.

## Tales from The Home

She, however, had never shown any special interest in the hulking ex-football player. He wondered if it was his lowly status as an orderly that put her off, or the difference in their skin colors. It was probably a bit of both. But still he kept trying for her attention.

“Sorry can’t sit in on your session today. Got too much to do. This place won’t run without me, ya know.” *Maybe that impress her just a little?* “I sure like listening to your voice.” Glenda’s voice was thin and a bit warbly, not quite a match for her keyboard skills, but a little flattery never hurt.

“That’s nice of you to say, Mac. Pop in for a song if you get the chance.”

“I will!”

Glenda set the stand in the front of the community room and Mac put the keyboard down on it.

“Is this good, Miss Glenda?”

She adjusted it slightly. “Just fine. Thanks.” She set down the music bag on the floor and fetched a chair. In a moment she was warming up with some scales and chords.

“You play so good,” observed Mac.

Glenda nodded without looking up at her towering admirer.

He hesitated a moment and then went on his way, Glenda not noticing the gentle smile he was offering her. He made a mental note to return in an hour so he could carry her keyboard out for her.

Glenda warmed up a bit more and looked up at the clock. Still about five minutes to the hour. Room still empty. She picked up her bag and moved to the corner behind and to her right. It was right under the CCTV camera, and so was a blind spot at the nurses’ station. She took another glance at the empty doorway and pulled out a bottle of light rum, quickly unscrewing the lid and taking a deep quaff. Glenda liked the light rum as she didn’t think it was noticeable on her breath. She took a second draft. Just in time she put it back in her bag.

“Good morning, Miss Glenda!” said two voices in unison.

Glenda’s head spun around. “Oh! Hi. Uh, good morning.” She returned to her seat. “Uh, Eddie, is it? And...” She hesitated.

“Betty,” said Mrs. Blinkin.

“Of course...Betty.”

## Tales from The Home

“Whatta ya have in mind for us today, Miss Glenda?” asked Eddie as they took their seats.

She pulled out a book and put it on the keyboard’s rack. “I was thinking we might do some Barry Manilow today.”

“Oh, nice!” Mrs. Blinkin practically squealed.

Eddie’s response was not as enthusiastic. “Eh, okay, I guess. A bit tame, but I’m sure the girls will like it.”

“Maybe next week we can do some Led Zeppelin for you, Eddie.”

“Now yer talkin’!” He strummed his air guitar and muttered, “And a whole lotta love!”

“Ya know, one of my music students asked me which rock group I liked and I said Led Zeppelin. He said, ‘Who?’ and I replied, ‘Yeah, them, too.’”

It went right over the heads of Eddie and Betty.

Gradually others roamed in until the seats were almost full.

Ms. Gordon came to the doorway and looked around.

Glenda thought, *Medusa! Keeping her eyes on everything!*

Her heels clicked as she walked across the hard tile floor. “Good morning, Glenda. Thanks once again for doing this. The Family loves their sing-a-longs.”

“Oh, I’m glad to bring a little sunshine into their dreary lives!” She giggled.

Ms. Gordon frowned. She did not appreciate the word ‘dreary’ but let it slide. “Do you get many requests?”

“Oh, I usually have a program in mind. Today is Manilow. But if there’s time and if I have the music I’ll let them make a request. Oh, that reminds me!”

She reached into her bag and pulled out a flattened box. She unfolded it and set it on the corner of her keyboard, making sure the word ‘Tips’ was showing forward.

Ms. Gordon glanced at it and frowned again. “You ask for tips?”

“Oh, not really! Hee hee! It’s just for atmosphere. Kind of like a piano bar. Hee hee!” She crooned in her wavering voice as she played: ♪ “The piano, it sounds like a carnival, and the microphone smells like a beer!” ♪

*Or maybe rum*, she thought. She started at the bottom of the keyboard and played a flourish up the length of it, throwing her hands up into the air at the end. “Hee hee!”

## Tales from The Home

Ms. Gordon looked at her through narrowed eyelids. “Um, okay. Well, I’ll leave you to it.”

Glenda played a dramatic chord. “The show must go on! Hee hee!”

Ms. Gordon gave her one last suspicious glance and then left.

“Let’s get started!” announced Glenda as she began to play Chopin’s *Prelude Opus 28, No. 20*.

Eddie looked at Betty. “Classical? We can’t sing along with that!”

“Shh! Keep listening,” warned Miss Glenda. She continued and the song transformed into a more modern sound. Then she began to sing,

♪ Spirit move me, every time I’m near you,  
Whirling like a cyclone in my mind...♪

And a moment later they all, or at least those that remembered, joined in:

♪ Baby, I love you, come, come, come into my arms  
Let me know the wonder of all of you! ♪

Glenda followed that up with *I Write The Songs*; seemed like more people knew that one.

“Hey, folks, know what’s funny about that one, *I Write The Songs*? He didn’t write it! One of the Beach Boys did!” She giggled.

Then *Mandy*, *This One’s For You* and others. They really liked *Daybreak*. They didn’t know all the words, but they could all shout out “Daybreak!” at the right times. And most joined in for this, raising their arms and swaying in time:

♪ And let it shine, shine, shine  
All around the world! ♪

“Hey, you all!” She giggled. “What has one hundred feet and no teeth?” She paused to let them ponder. “The front row at a Barry Manilow concert!” She laughed hard. Her audience did not.

“Okay, okay, didn’t care for that one. So, what is Barry Manilow’s favorite beverage?” Again she paused.

## Tales from The Home

Someone in the back called out, “Prune juice?” That got a few chuckles.

“No!” Glenda giggled. “It’s...Coca Banana!” She pulled some yellow feathers out of her bag and handed them out to some of the women. Then she set her keyboard to play percussion and pounded out a Latin beat with conga drums and clavas. Then began the music, and finally:

♪ Her name was Lola, she was a showgirl,  
With yellow feathers in her hair  
And a dress cut down to there... ♪

With that line Jo Janiko pulled down on the front of her dress to match the song. Ravel Francois, the self-appointed ladies’ man of the group, took notice, stood up and took Jo by the hand. In a moment they were entertaining the group with a sort of tango. Everyone joined in for the chorus:

♪At the Copa, Copacabana,  
The hottest spot north of Havana! ♪

By the end they were all out of breath, especially Jo and Ravel, but no ‘punches flew’ or ‘chairs smashed in two’ as in the song. They gave Glenda a hearty round of applause. She giggled.

“See you all next week!” she declared. Her mouth was very dry. *Man, I could really use a drink!*

Glenda stood at the door, saying goodbye to the residents and doing her best to remember their names. She was smooth, and they could not tell how eager she was to get the room emptied so she could have a ‘refreshment.’ At last she was able to return to her keyboard. She was surprised to see two dollars in her tip jar, which she pocketed. She set her bag on the chair and began to put her music books back into it.

“We liked the music,” said a gruff voice.

She looked up and saw Guppy standing behind Judge Digger in his wheelchair. “Howdy, boys.”

## Tales from The Home

“It would be a fine day to go down to the dock and get some fresh air,” said the judge. “You know, toast the nice weather.” He winked at her, very obvious as his dark eyelid covered the white of his eye.

She sighed. “Okay, I’ll need to put my keyboard in the car first.” The ex-judge and ex-sailor had known from the start Glenda’s proclivity for using ‘spirits’ to raise her own spirit for these music sessions. They could each scent rum at thirty paces. They had no interest in spilling the beans, but it only seemed fair to share and share alike. Right?

Glenda put her bag on her shoulder, put the keyboard under her right arm and picked up the stand with her left. She took a step toward the door and stumbled to the right. *Ooh, this might be a challenge.*

Just then Big Mac entered and rushed forward to take the keyboard from her. “Let me help you, Miss Glenda. You should have called for me. You know I’ll help *you*.”

“Thanks, Mac.”

The four headed down the hall to the front entrance. Glenda went first and held the door for Big Mac, whose large frame easily handled the keyboard. Guppy began to push the judge out the door.

“Hold on!”

They froze.

Maya got out from behind the reception desk and walked over to them, her large afro bobbing as she walked and her colorful ankle-long dress sweeping along. “Where da ya think yer goin’?”

Guppy and the judge looked at her as she came and stood in the doorway.

The judge looked up at the tall Maya towering over him and said meekly. “We’re with her,” pointing at Glenda.

She turned and looked at Glenda. “Looks to me like she’s leavin’.”

Glenda looked at the judge and Guppy, then at Maya. “No, they’re with me. Told them I’d take them down to the dock for a bit.”

Maya cocked her head to the side. “Well, nobody signed them out.”

Glenda adjusted the bag on her shoulder and shifted the keyboard stand to her other arm. “Can you put our names down for us? My hands are full.”

## Tales from The Home

Maya let out a soft grunt. "Okay. This time." She returned to the desk and picked up her phone.

Glenda led Mac to her car as the other two headed to the dock.

"Miss Glenda, you know I'll always help, just ask."

"Thanks, I'll remember that."

"Say, Miss Glenda, I heard there's a new seafood restaurant open, up the road. We should check it out sometime."

She put the stand into the trunk next to the keyboard. "Sounds nice, but I'm so busy, what with all the music lessons and such. And playing at the Casbah on the weekends. I don't know when I'd have time."

"You play at the Casbah?! I know that place. Maybe I can come hear you play sometime."

"Sure, it's a free country."

She said that to be as non-committal as possible, but Big Mac took it as an open invitation and felt encouraged. He knew where he would be on Friday night.

Mac returned to work and Glenda headed to the dock, after removing the music books from her bag. At the dock Guppy was sitting on the crude bench and the judge was in his wheelchair with a paper bag now in his lap.

"Beautiful day, Miss Glenda!" beamed the judge as he extracted three shot glasses from his bag.

"Lucky no one else here," commented Glenda.

"Ain't nobody around this time of day," replied Guppy, taking one of the glasses and holding it out.

Glenda glanced around, sat on the bench and she pulled the bottle out of her bag. She filled the judge's glass, then Guppy's then her own, and set the bottle down. She raised the glass. "Cheers!"

Guppy reached out and gently pushed her arm back down. "No need to attract any attention," he whispered, although no one else was around.

"Who's gonna see?" she asked.

They each sipped their rum in silence. A nice yacht sailed by.

"I was skipper on a yacht for a while," muttered Guppy.

## Tales from The Home

“Lucky dog,” said the judge, holding out his shot glass for a refill.

“Must have been nice,” said Miss Glenda and she refilled the three glasses.

“Not really. The sailing was nice. The water. The sights. But the people. Yuck.” Guppy took a deep sip from his glass. “Kind of sad that people with money are often the ones least worthy of it.”

Miss Glenda was surprised to hear such philosophizing from the old sailor. “Rich or poor, people are both bad and good.”

“Yeah, but rich people can afford worse vices in my opinion. I mean, he and his friends had young women on there. I’m sure some of them were...you know...too young.” He shook his head.

“I’d have thrown the book at him,” growled the judge.

“Yeah, you would, but some of them guys *were* judges! Anyway, I had to quit. Told the owner I couldn’t turn a blind eye to all that.”

“Wonder what happened to him,” mused Glenda.

“Oh, he became a senator.”

A pair of dolphins swam by, their shiny wet dorsal fins reflecting the bright sun.

Glenda giggled and waved. “Hi, Flipper! Hey, guys. How did the octopus make the dolphin laugh?”

Neither offered an answer.

“With ten tickles!” She giggled again.

Guppy laughed, his usually surly self being lightened by the light rum. The judge just stared at her.

“C’mon, Judge! Ten tickles! Octopus! Ten-ta-cles!”

He tilted his head back and let out a kind of gushing snort. “I get it!”

Glenda could not suppress the urge to raise her glass to the dolphins, “Beautiful creatures!” The sun lit up her glass.

Ms. Gordon focused her mini-binoculars as she looked through the glass front doors.

“Whatcha see, Ms. Gordon?” asked Maya from her desk.

“Mischief,” replied Ms. Gordon. “Thanks for calling me.” The flash of reflected sunlight allowed her to hone in on Glenda’s shot glass.

Maya walked over to her. “Looks like a nice day for sittin’ on the dock.”

## Tales from The Home

“Yeah, too nice.” She handed the binoculars to Maya.

Maya looked for a bit. “Oh. What they drinkin’?”

“Not mineral water, I’m willing to bet.”

“Whatchoo gonna do?”

“Just keep an eye on them. For now.”

“Ain’t she the music teacher?”

“Yes.”

“You gonna, maybe, ban her?”

Ms. Gordon shook her head. “You kidding? You know hard it is to get volunteers like her for this place? To keep The Family entertained and out of mischief? Just so long as she doesn’t go too far. Looks like they’re heading in.” She folded up the binoculars and put them in her purse.

Maya thought, *But ain’t that mischief?*

A few minutes later the three came into the lobby, singing an old sea shanty. Miss Glenda’s voice rang out:

♪ "Way. Hey! Blow the man down!" ♪

The other two then joined in:

♪ "Give me some time to blow the man down!" ♪

They all laughed.

Ms. Gordon clapped and then stood up from one of the lobby chairs. “You three seem to be having a good time.”

The judge and Guppy suddenly looked serious, but Glenda was still her usual bubbly self.

“Oh, yes! A beautiful day out there! Boats, dolphins, fish, birds. Even one crab!” She stared at Ms. Gordon with that last line.

The judge and Guppy could not suppress a snicker.

“I’m glad you are enjoying yourselves. Just don’t want you to get carried away, what with you being in high *spirits*.”

“Now, now, Medu...” She caught herself even though her mind was not at full strength. “Ms. Gordon. We’re fine, respectable citizens, just enjoying life. Nothing wrong with that, is there?” She put her hand to her lips but could not suppress a small burp.

“Gentleman, it’s about lunch time. Why don’t you go get ready?”

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Guppy pushed the judge down the hall and another, quieter round of ‘Blow The Man Down’ began.

“Miss Glenda, The Family loves your visits. I would just hate to see something happen to stop those visits.” She reached out and tapped the now-empty bottle that was causing a bulge in Glenda’s music bag.

“Nope. Wouldn’t want anything to happen. Nothing will happen. What could happen?” She giggled.

“Miss Glenda, maybe you should take a walk around The Home for a while. You know, before you try to drive home.”

“Try? There is no *try*.” She giggled. “Actually, I think he said, ‘Do or do not, there is no try.’ Does that sound right?” She cocked her head to the side. “Anyway, yes. I’ll go for a walk. It’s such a nice day, don’t you think? Want to walk with me?”

“*I have work to do*” Ms. Gordon replied with narrowed eyes.

“I’m sure *you do!* Toodle-oo!” With that Miss Glenda turned, pushed the door open, and skipped out like a schoolgirl.

Ms. Gordon watched as she turned onto the sidewalk that encircles The Home rather than heading to the parking lot. She breathed a sigh of relief.

As she passed the reception desk Maya asked softly, “You gonna keep her on?”

Ms. Gordon shrugged. “Good help is so hard to find.”

She continued on to her office, still debating in her mind Maya’s question. Finally, she plopped down into her chair and muttered, “Ah, it’ll be okay.” She raised her bottle of mineral water to toast the sunlight streaming in through her window. For a moment she wished it was her own bottle of rum. “Just another day in paradise!”

## Tales from The Home

13

### The Reveal

Leslie Layton had been at The Home for a few years now. She was generally well-liked. Got along with everyone. Polite. Helpful to others. Just a little frail and fragile due to her cardiomyopathy. Got winded easily, sometimes had to excuse herself from activities in order to rest. Her medical chart also listed a double mastectomy because of a high risk for breast cancer. Even the other residents, at least her female friends, knew that because of her prosthetic bras and silicone bra implants that she sometimes had to adjust during the day. Who knows what the men thought when they saw her rooting around in her bra at those times.

Bingo was a popular weekly activity at The Home. Miss Cherry, the activities director, thought it rather bland but for seniors whose gray cells were not hitting on all cylinders it was just the right level of challenge and excitement. Who knows what the next number will be and whether it will take you to victory?! Sometimes there was too much excitement. Like when two residents called “Bingo!” at the same time and then argued about who was first. Or when someone called it out, only to find that they had marked the wrong spot, bringing down a chorus of ‘Boo’s.’ But so far there had been no bloodshed.

There were other challenges. “Did you say ‘B-15’ or ‘G-50?’” “B-15, turn your hearing aid up!” “I don’t have hearing aids! Someone coughed when she called it out!” “Well, everyone else heard it. Listen up!” “Hey you old...” And that is when Miss Cherry would step in.

Another problem was when someone’s marker ran dry just as they were approaching ‘Bingo.’ Oh my goodness, a category-5 hurricane would cause less distress. Seriously, Sally Kellog once needed a nurse’s attention with smelling salts when she got herself so worked up because her marker stopped working late in the game. And heaven forbid that some should bump a table casing an errant mark or knock someone’s card off or worse yet, spill their drink on it.

But Miss Cherry always had a bingo joke ready if necessary to calm the crowd. Like, which rock musician would most like to join us? Bingo Starr! What bird most likes to play? The fla-bingo! Her favorite though was, What do you call an old man who just won three games of bingo? Jerry-hat-trick! Not all of the residents would get that one, but Miss Cherry herself would always laugh at it. Some of the residents would call out the answers with her, but for others they

## Tales from The Home

seemed like new jokes every time. Also, she would try to spice things up by giving certain numbers special names. For example, she would call out “Heinz” and see if they got that it was G-57. Or, “It’s not after, it’s...” And someone would call out “B-4!” “Vitamin” and someone would call out “B-12!” And when she was feeling a little naughty she would call out, “Uh-oh-69, for those of you who can still do that!”

This morning’s session had proceeded without incident. Leslie had come close to winning the first three games, but had to sit back and watch others claim the thrill of victory. Still, the excitement was infectious and she approached the next game with great anticipation. She did not notice her heart rate increasing with each number called as her card filled in. Suddenly there were both a row and a column lacking only one mark. She had not won in recent weeks; would this be the time?

“I-27.”

She looked at her card. Not what she needed. Mrs. Plessit, the retired professor who thought the game was beneath her but played anyway, and truth be known, got as excited as anyone when she won, started to call out, “Bin...!” She stopped herself. “Sorry, not the right one.”

“False alarm” declared Miss Cherry. She picked out the next ball. “G-49.”

Leslie looked at her card. *Omigosh!* She marked G-49. She jumped up, bumping her table in the process and almost committing the cardinal sin of knocking over the residents’ cups. “Bingo!”

Now this was a very minor exertion accompanied by a very minor surge of adrenaline but for some physiologic reason Leslie’s delicate heart was on edge that morning and this was all it took to send her heart into an erratic uncontrolled rhythm. Her eyelids fluttered, then her eyes rolled back in her head and she collapsed to the floor.

Sally Kellog screamed. It took Miss Cherry a moment to recognize what had happened, then she ran to the door and hit the emergency button and then to Leslie’s side. Mrs. Plessit was already there with her fingers on the neck, checking for a pulse. She looked up at Miss Cherry and shook her head. Miss Cherry took a wrist and felt for a pulse, but she was shaking and it was hard for her to tell if there was a pulse or not.

## Tales from The Home

In a moment Nurse Penibel ran in carrying the automatic defibrillator. “Move away!” she ordered. Fortunately Leslie’s table was on the outside of the group of tables so there was room for the nurse to kneel down and lay out the defibrillator. “Did she just pass out?”

“Yes,” answered Mrs. Plessit before Miss Cherry could respond. “Stood up, called ‘Bingo’ and collapsed.”

The nurse ripped open Leslie’s blouse, sending some buttons rolling across the floor. “Everyone back to your rooms, please. Especially the men.” Even in this situation the strait-laced Nurse Penibel thought of Leslie’s modesty. Miss Dumly the aide ran in and joined her. “Take her bra off,” the nurse ordered as she reached for the defibrillator pads.

The bra had a front snap which made it easy for Miss Dumly to open it up. She pushed the silicone prosthetic breasts aside. Then she stared at the chest.

Nurse Penibel turned back to Leslie, ready to put the pads in place on her chest. She stared at the chest.

Mrs. Plessit, fingers still checking for a pulse, interrupted and said, “What’s on her medical bracelet?”

Miss Dumly’s trance was broken. She reached for the bracelet. “DNR,” she muttered.

The nurse put the pads back in the defibrillator case without taking her eyes off Leslie’s chest. Two nipples, some hair, and no sign of mastectomy surgery. “What the...” she mumbled. She hesitated, then reached down and grabbed hold of Leslie’s skirt and underwear and lifted so she could take a peek. “Uh...okay...”

“What is it?” asked Miss Dumly.

Mrs. Plessit asked, “So, DNR? No resuscitation for Miss Leslie?”

Nurse Penibel continued to stare at Leslie for a moment. “No. No resuscitation for *Mister* Leslie!”

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Dr. Blackwood arrived as the funeral home assistant was wheeling the body out the front door. He had him pause so he could lift the sheet and say a silent goodbye to his patient. Ms. Gordon was just inside the door, tapping her foot. “Can we talk?”

She led him to her office, Dr. Blackwood nodding and smiling to the residents and staff that they passed. She motioned for Nurse Penibel to join them. Ms. Gordon closed her office door and they took their seats.

## Tales from The Home

“Did you know about...Leslie?” asked Ms. Gordon. She had a stern look on her face, but then that was common for her and Dr. Blackwood did not read anything into it.

“Well, of course I knew about Leslie’s cardiomyopathy, but I had no way of knowing when she would go.”

“She?”

Dr. Blackwood then realized what this was about. He stared back at Ms. Gordon. “She.”

“He’s not a she, I checked!” replied the nurse, thumping her hands on the arms of her chair.

Dr. Blackwood took a moment. Then, “It is true that she was anatomically male, but she lived her life as a female. And I respected that.”

Nurse Penibel let out a gasp. “Nonsense,” she muttered.

The doctor ignored her and kept his focus on Ms. Gordon. “Don’t suppose you ever noticed those scars on her wrist? She was forced to live as a male when young. Two suicide attempts later she left home and became the Leslie she always knew herself to be.”

“Nonsense,” muttered the nurse again.

Ms. Gordon asked, “Then why was he still...male? Why didn’t he make the transition?”

“When he was young the technology wasn’t so good. And expensive, too. She learned to live as a woman despite the anatomy. I mean, who we are is in our minds, not our...gonads. She did have a castration, though. Sad, really. She did it herself, part of her second suicide attempt. Fortunately survived. Did you notice *that*, Nurse Penibel?”

“I didn’t look that close. But I saw enough.”

Dr. Blackwood turned back to Ms. Gordon. “You can’t really know a person just by looking in her jeans. Or even at her genes.”

Ms. Gordon was puzzled and knitted her brows, but then realized it was ‘jeans’ and ‘genes’ he was saying. Nurse Penibel didn’t get it and her scowl remained unchanged.

“Why did you keep it from us?” asked Ms. Gordon. “Don’t you realize you were putting our other residents at risk?”

“How? How was she any risk to anybody?” He turned to the nurse. “Has she caused any problem here that you can remember?”

The nurse remained silent, her scowl intact.

## Tales from The Home

The doctor continued. “It was her life. Her personal business, no one else’s. If I thought her...’status’ would be of any impact to anyone else here I would have said something. But she just wanted to live her life in peace. Is that a problem?”

“Abomination!” muttered the nurse.

Ms. Gordon thought for a moment. “But she wasn’t on her own. She was here, in our home, surrounded by others.”

“And it had absolutely no impact on the home or the other residents, did it? No one even knew anything until today. Do the other residents even know now?”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure they caught on,” said Nurse Penibel.

“Thanks to you.” It was Dr. Blackwood’s turn to mutter.

The nurse leaned forward to get closer to the doctor’s face. “It’s just not right! He was a man! Stop pretending otherwise.”

Dr. Blackwood had discussed this with Leslie’s closest relative, his nephew, and he was afraid that he would have no more success now than he had then. But he felt obligated to Leslie to make the attempt.

“Listen, I used to have the traditional view – the religious view – growing up. Male or female, very simple, right? Well, in medical school I studied genetics, and embryology, the uterine environment. The fetus is already under various influences. Did you know that there is evidence of maternal-fetal DNA exchange during gestation? What effect might that have? Who can say? And there are chimeras, where people have mixed DNA. Who can say whether that contributes to sexual variations?”

“Nobody can say, that’s who,” replied the nurse.

Dr. Blackwood continued. “Are you familiar with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome? A person is XY like a male, but because of a genetic mutation they don’t respond to the Y chromosome and develop looking like a female. I know a pretty woman who is actually XY like this. That’s the extreme example, but maybe there are other variations where the person’s brain doesn’t recognize the Y influence so they think female while looking male.”

“And maybe not,” growled Nurse Penibel.

“Yes, maybe not, but still... Then there’s infancy, childhood development, puberty. Who would argue that childhood influences, like our parents, don’t make a big contribution to who we are?” He looked at the nurse.

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“Yes, that’s why we need to make sure children are not influenced *wrongly*.”

Dr. Blackwood sighed. *Tough audience!*

Ms. Gordon then asked, “Are you saying these things cause people to be gay, or trans, or whatever?”

Dr. Blackwood shook his head. “I’m not claiming to know the details of why people are what they are. I’m just saying that human development is very complex. Very! So, I have met with and examined people of all sorts of variations. Not just sex, but skin color, body type, cultures, likes and dislikes, everything. I came to realize that there are variations in every aspect of being human. *Every* aspect. *Including* gender identity and sexual orientation. We humans are just too complex to expect that the only outcomes are ‘straight’ male and ‘straight’ female. Life just isn’t that simple. So I learned to live and let live. I don’t want anyone to control who I am and how I live so I’m not going to try and control others and dictate how they should live. Is that so hard to understand?”

Dr. Blackwood relaxed, his sermon over.

Without hesitation Nurse Penibel said, slowly and clearly, “A-bom-in-a-tion!”

Dr. Blackwood rolled his eyes and turned back to Ms. Gordon, who was sitting there with her chin resting on her tented fingers. She thought for a moment then finally spoke.

“I guess no harm done. But I still wish you had taken us into confidence.”

“For what purpose?” He looked at Nurse Penibel and raised his voice a bit. “So Leslie could be treated as an ‘abomination’ by your staff?”

The nurse glared back at him. Ms. Gordon leaned forward.

“I would never let the staff mistreat any of our residents. Nurse Penibel, you wouldn’t have treated her, or him, I mean, her, any differently, would you?”

The nurse said weakly, “Of course not.”

Dr. Blackwood knew that it was not possible to think of someone as an ‘abomination’ and yet treat them the same as everyone else, but he let it go.

Nurse Penibel stood up and addressed Ms. Gordon. “I need to see to the patients.” She turned to the doctor. “Is there anyone else we should know about?”

The doctor smiled. “I can’t say. Miss Penibel, you know your Bible?”

She stood straight. “Yes I do!”

## Tales from The Home

“May I ask, Who was the first foreign convert in the early church according to the book of Acts?”

The nurse thought for a moment. “Cornelius? The Roman.”

“Actually, a black eunuch. Acts 8. Black skin. And a man who was sexually altered to retain feminine characteristics. Two strikes against him, in a way. And yet he is portrayed as the first outsider converted in the church. I wonder why they picked a *black...eunuch* for that role.” He emphasized each of those words. He knew how she felt about sexual matters and he had also heard her let slip the ‘n’ word in the past. “It’s almost like they were trying to make a point, using him as the first convert.”

Nurse Penibel replied, “You’re just trying to twist what it says.”

“But that *is* what it says. And 300 years later at the famous council of Nicea they agreed that eunuchs, sexually-altered men, could even serve in the clergy.”

She turned and let herself out, muttering one more “Abomination” under her breath.

The doctor turned back to Ms. Gordon. “I didn’t even get to the part about Jesus saying that some men are *born* eunuchs. What did he mean by *that*?”

They sat in silence for a moment. It was the doctor who spoke next.

“How do you personally feel about this issue?”

Ms. Gordon thought for a moment. “I don’t think about it too much. But generally I leave people alone if they leave me alone. They don’t pry into my life, why should I pry into theirs? But for medical reasons I still think we should know about such situations.”

The doctor stood up. He wasn’t sure he had convinced Ms. Gordon but at least she seemed more open-minded than Nurse Penibel. *I suppose benign tolerance is better than outright hostility.* “I also have patients to attend to.” He reached for the door knob then looked back at Ms. Gordon. “You know, there are about the same number of gay people as there are left-handed people in the world. But we don’t think of left-handed people as ‘abominations’ or sinners. Any more, at least. In times past left-handers *were* associated with the devil. The word ‘sinister’ originally meant ‘left,’ you know. And it was also associated with being gay. Funny thing is there are studies finding that left-handed people are more likely to be gay than right-handers. Makes one think. But society changed its thinking about being left-handed. Maybe one day about being gay, too. Good day!”

“You know, I’m left-handed,” replied Ms. Gordon.

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Dr. Blackwood thought, *I know!* He smiled, pointed his finger at her, and whispered, “Abomination!”

She returned his smile so he did not have to add, “Just joking.”

The doctor stepped out and closed the door behind him.

The news about Leslie quickly spread through the facility. Not just her death, but also Nurse Penibel’s surprising discovery.

Luna Maggio observed, “She was such a nice lady. We’ll miss her. Or him? Her? Oh my...”

Miss Plessit responded, “Yes, we’ll miss *her*. She’ll always be *Miss* Leslie to us.”

Sally Kellog recalled, “Once I went to visit her in her room, and I heard a loud tinkling in her bathroom. I just assumed she was emptying out her water pitcher or something.”

Luna added, “Well, once I saw her taking out her breast prosthetics and saw her, I mean his, nipples. But I didn’t think anything of it! I just thought they didn’t cut them out for some reason, you know, like they usually do with that surgery.”

But the most interesting rumor was that she, or he, was actually an ex-mobster who took on the disguise to evade his old enemies. A very convincing disguise! Nobody could say how that rumor got started but it quickly became gospel truth without any real evidence.

Betty Blinkin whispered, “Ooh, I remember how shy she was when people would come to visit The Home. Sometimes she would stay in her room. I’ll bet she *was* in hiding!”

They all found this idea very stimulating. Their brush with The Mob! In a way they all helped with his disguise! Ms. Gordon overheard the residents excitedly discussing this rumor and did nothing to dispel it. Why spoil a good story?

## Tales from The Home

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### Big Mac in the Kitchen

As Dr. Blackwood wrapped Miss Boulanje's wrist she winced repeatedly.

"Sorry I don't have a red bandage to match your head wrap. Pretty tender, huh?"

"You sure it ain't broke?"

"Pretty sure. But I can write you an order to get an x-ray to be sure."

"Mebbe tomorra. I got dinner to make."

"You're gonna need help. You're right-handed, aren't you? And make sure you keep the floor dry."

"Not me! I tink one of da nurses drop an ice cube. Dey's always getting' ice out of da machine."

"Well, don't be trying to lift anything with that hand. Especially hot pots and pans. I don't want to be treating you for a burn. I'll tell Ms. Gordon you'll need help for a while."

"Sumun in *my* kitchen?"

"Sorry, can't be helped. You'll be okay in a few days. Probably."

"Prob'ly?"

A bit later Big Mac leaned into the kitchen. "Ms. Gordon says you need help, Miss B?"

Miss Boulanje was trying to dice the vegetables with her left hand. "You? You know anyting 'bout cookin'?"

"I microwave stuff all the time at home."

She slammed down her knife. "That's warmin', not cookin'!" She shook her head. "You know the difference between a bed pan and a frying pan?"

Big Mac said "No," expecting a punchline.

"Then get out of mah kitchen!" She walked over and put her pudgy hands on his chest to push him away.

"Ouch!" She rubbed her bandaged wrist then looked up at the tall orderly's face for a moment. "I guess you'll have to do. Can you cut up dhose veg'tables? About da size you see dere."

"Sure. I cut bait all the time. Can't be no harder."

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“That ain’t bait! Get cuttin’.”

As he began he asked, “I guess you been cookin’ a long time?”

She scoffed. “Ha! First meal I served, some fella named Judas got up and left in a hurry! Ha!”

As he minced the vegetables she struggled to get a large pan of frozen lasagna out of the freezer. She pulled it out with her left hand and then tried to get her right forearm under it, to lift it. She couldn’t suppress a whine as she felt the weight on her right wrist.

“Let me get that!” shouted Big Mac as he lunged toward her, knife still in hand. As he grabbed at the big pan Miss B saw the flash of the knife coming at her left hand and instinctively stepped back, letting go of the pan. Six pounds of frozen lasagna fell onto Big Mac’s right foot.

“Son of a...!” He saw the crucifix hanging from Miss B’s neck and checked himself. “Ow! Ow!” He clutched his right foot.

Miss B ignored his moaning. “Put it on da counter. And get dat udder one, too.” She went to the refrigerator to get some extra Parmesan cheese.

“Hope it ain’t broke,” said Big Mac putting his foot on the floor and testing it out.

“Dr. Blackwood can order x-ray,” Miss B said without a hint of sympathy.

He picked up the pan and put it on the counter. “It gonna be okay? It was on the floor.”

“Pan was on floor, not da food. Get udder one.”

Big Mac complied. “So, you don’t make it yourself? Here I thought...”

“You try makin’ la-sag-nah...” – that’s how she pronounced it – “...for dis many peoples. You – get back to cuttin’.”

Big Mac worked on dicing the rest of the vegetables stacked on the counter.

Miss B went to a cupboard and took out a bottle of wine. She poured a large glass. Big Mac noticed. “I likes cookin’ wit wine,” Miss B told him. “Sumtime I even put it in da food!” She swallowed the wine in one long gulp. “Aaah! Hit da spot! Wrist already better.”

Miss B turned on the big burner of the old stove. “Get dat big skillet.” She pointed to a large cast iron skillet hanging from a heavy hook on the wall. “Grease da bottom real good.” She pointed at the tub labeled ‘Lard.’

“Lard? You use lard? Is that...I mean. It’s fat, isn’t it? Is that good for The Family?”

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“O’ course it good for dem! Taste good! Dey eat! Dey need eat. Need to keep der strength up.” She raised her arm to make a muscle with her biceps. “Can’t have dem wastin’ away.”

Big Mac shrugged and did as he was told as Miss B finished prepping the lasagna.

“Now, put skillet on stove, put in veg’tables. Put dese in da oven.” She pulled open the oven door.

After Big Mac had done so she instructed, “Now help me dish out ice cream for dessert. We fix it up with fruit, dey tink it healthy dat way.”

Big Mac fetched the tub of vanilla ice cream from the freezer and they began portioning it out into small bowls. Then she had him get the tub of diced fruit from the fridge and they began to sprinkle it into the bowls.

“I smell sumting. Better stir da veg’tables,” she ordered.

Big Mac turned to the stove. “Miss B! Miss B!” he yelled.

Miss B turned around to see the skillet on the stove engulfed in flames. Fortunately the metal hood over the stove kept the flames from reaching the ceiling. The experienced Miss B grabbed a large cookie sheet sitting beside the stove and flipped it over the skillet. Flames continued to flicker around it. “Huh. Dat usually choke it out.”

She reached under the counter for the fire extinguisher but naturally used her right hand. She yelped and switched to her left hand. The release pin was on the left side so she had to reach over with her right hand. The smoke alarm went off with its piercing shriek. She tried unsuccessfully to pull out the pin. It was stuck.

“Mac! Grab da pin!” She held it out toward him.

It took him a moment to focus on the pin and then grab it. He yanked, pulling her off balance so that her face fell into his chest. He took her by the shoulders and set her back up straight. She squeezed the handle of the extinguisher but the pin was still in. She held it up for him to try again. This time he put his left hand on the body of it while he yanked the pin with his right. It came out. With Miss B already squeezing hard the extinguisher erupted a stream of foam which caught Mac in the face. He turned away and sputtered as he tried to breathe through the foam on his snowy face.

Miss B kept her grip firm and turned the extinguisher toward the flame, spraying an arc of foam around the room. In a moment the cookie sheet, skillet and stove were covered in a layer

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of foam and the fire died out. Just then Ms. Gordon and Nurse Wingham ran in. They saw Big Mac standing there with what appeared to be whiteface. Half the room looked like a winter wonderland. *What in the world are they up to?*

Miss Boulanje stood there with the dripping extinguisher in her hand. She calmly set it down and went to the stove. She flipped the cookie sheet off the skillet, reached in and pulled out a slice of carrot. It was charred on one side. She popped it into her mouth.

“Jes right!” she beamed.

“What happened?!” demanded Ms. Gordon.

Miss Boulanje shrugged. “I told *him* to grease the skillet and cook the veg’tables. *You* told him to help,” clearly putting the blame on Ms. Gordon.

Ms. Gordon turned to Big Mac, his face still dripping white foam. “Well?”

“I greased the bottom of the skillet like she told me!”

Miss B looked at him for a moment then slapped her forehead with her right hand, causing her to wince and yelp. “I meant da *inside* of da skillet, you idjit!”

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Somehow The Family got fed that night without further incident. Miss Boulanje enjoyed a bowl of ice cream and fruit as she made Big Mac clean the kitchen. She made a mental note to ask the Gorgon to have Big Mac clean the kitchen every night until her wrist had healed. After inspecting the kitchen, making sure Big Mac was better at cleaning than cooking, she said goodbye to Nurse Penibel, who was covering the night shift at the nurses’ station, and started down the hallway.

Hippie Hommel was shuffling toward her in his pajamas. His face was expressionless and his bloodshot eyes were staring ahead without blinking. She thought he looked more pale than usual.

“G’night, Mr. Hommel.”

He continued to shuffle along and made no response.

*Didn’t hear me.* “I said, Good night, Mr. Hommel,” in a louder voice.

He passed by her without saying a thing or looking at her.

“How rude!” she muttered. She watched him continue on and a thought came to her. “Oh, Lord! A zombie! He done died and now he’s a zombie!”

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She ran to the nurses' station, passing him on the way. "Nurse Penibel! Hippie! Mr. Hommel!" she said in a loud voice. Then softer, "He done died and now he's a zombie!"

The nurse laughed. "Good one, Miss B." She was used to seeing Hippie overdo it with his 'herbal' medicine some evenings.

"No, no, it's true! Oh, Lord, I used to see it in Haiti. Dark arts, evil priests. They brung 'em back to life to walk the streets like that! Voodoo!"

"Who do that voodoo that you do?" muttered Nurse Penibel. "Miss B, you know there's no such thing. He's just..."

"Oh, yeah, they is! I seen it! Sumun doin' voodoo in this place!"

Nurse Penibel stood up. "Look, I'm sure he's just ...uh, sleepwalking." That was better than saying 'stoned.' "I'll get him and put him to bed." She walked out from behind the counter to find him, but could not resist adding, "And if you find me here tomorrow with a blank expression on my face, you'll know you were right."

"Dat ain't funny, nurse! You better take it serious like!"

The nurse headed down the hall with a smile on her face. "Superstitions," she whispered. "Jesus took care of all the demons already."

Miss Boulanje paced back and forth for a minute, keeping an eye out for anyone else who might be acting strangely. "Maybe it's dat judge. He sinister, I tink. He might know da dark arts. Wonder if he from Haiti, too."

Nurse Penibel led Hippie back to the nurses' station. He still had a glazed look in his eyes but he was walking better. He said in a monotone, "Hello, Miss B. I liked dinner tonight, but the veggies were a bit burnt."

"See?" said the nurse. "Not a zombie. Just a little...cooked, himself. Literally. I'll get him back to bed."

Miss Boulanje rubbed her sore wrist and looked around one last time before heading home. "I be keepin' my eye on dis place. Strange peoples. Stra-a-ange! Voodoo, I'll bet! People *do* come back to life sumtime and walk da earth! I knows it!" She clutched the crucifix hanging on her necklace as she walked out.

## Tales from The Home

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### Win Some, Lose Some

Dr. Blackwood was finishing a note in the chart of one of the Family Members.

“Dr. Blackwood! Oh good, you’re still here.” Doris took a moment to catch her breath, having run from the lobby. “It’s Maya. She fainted.”

Dr. Blackwood closed the chart. “Up front?”

In another moment he was in the lobby where Maya was stretched out on some chairs.

“Hi, Doc.”

“How ya feeling, Maya?”

“I’m okay now. I think.”

“What happened?”

Maya hesitated. “Not sure, really.”

Doris jumped in. “I come up front to watch the desk so Maya could use the bathroom. She stood up, her eyes fluttered, and she fell back into her chair, out like a light.”

“Maya, can you tell me where we are?”

“Sure. The lobby. Of The Home.”

“Who am I?”

She twisted her mouth. “Why, Dr. Blackwood, of course.”

“How do you feel now?”

“Fine, I guess.”

“Have you ever fainted before?”

Maya thought. “A few times. Mama told me it’s common for tall girls to faint. Takes longer for the blood to get from the heart to the head. Somethin’ like that.”

“Yes, probably just a simple fainting spell, but let me take a look just to make sure.” The doctor pulled his stethoscope out of his pocket.

“Oh, no, I’m sure I’ll be fine.” She started to sit up, her eyes fluttered, and she murmured “Uh oh” before lying down again.

“Did you feel faint?”

“Just a little.”

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“Hold still.”

He felt her pulse, which was strong and steady. He pulled down one of her eyelids: color normal. He pulled her chin down so he could look in her mouth. Normal color and moisture. Her neck was without swollen glands or thyroid. He checked her fingernails.

“Whatcha lookin’ for, Doc?”

“Signs of anemia, and other things.” He whispered. “Do you have very heavy periods?”

“No, they seem normal. And I eat plenty of meat.”

“Yeah, probably not anemia. Although I’ve seen young women walking around with only half the blood they should have. It’s amazing what the body can tolerate. Let’s have a listen.”

He slipped his stethoscope in through the collar of her dress so he could get it right against her skin. “Nice and steady,” he reassured her. “Let’s have you sit up again.”

Keeping his stethoscope in place over her heart he listened carefully as she sat up.

“I don’t feel good.”

He helped her lie back down, listening the whole time. He took his stethoscope out.

“Plop, plop, fizz, fizz,” he muttered.

“What?” said Maya and Doris together. Doris thought, *Is he asking for an antacid?*

“Maya, anyone in your family have a problem with fainting caused by a heart problem?”

Maya’s eyes widened. “I got a heart problem?!”

“Don’t get excited. Anyone in the family?”

“Not that I know of. What’s goin’ on, Doc?”

“I can’t be sure, but when you sit up I hear a...*plopping* sound in your heart.”

“Omigod! Am I gonna die?!” Maya grabbed his hand.

“No, no, it’s not like that. But you might have a growth in your heart...that’s getting in the way.”

“A growth?! Like cancer?!”

“No, no! Usually totally benign, not cancer. But still serious.”

Doris suggested, “I know! A ‘maxima,’ isn’t that right, Doc?”

“Close. ‘Mix-o-ma’ he pronounced slowly. Listen, I think we better get you over to the hospital to check this out. I might be wrong, of course.”

Maya squeezed his hand harder. “Tell me straight, Doc. Am I gonna die?” A tear trickled down her cheek.

## Tales from The Home

The doctor smiled. “No, no. It’s treatable. But we can’t have you fainting when you’re driving or something like that. And I might be wrong, you know.”

Doris grunted. “You’re never wrong.”

“I wish that were true, Doris. Why don’t you call for an ambulance, that way they can monitor her on the way to the hospital. I’ll call the ER and tell them what I suspect is going on.”

Maya pulled on the doctor’s hand and asked again, “Am I gonna die?”

“No, Maya! Just relax best you can and we’ll get you checked out and fixed up.”

Phone calls were made and fifteen minutes later Maya was on her way to the hospital. Dr. Blackwood reported to Ms. Gordon.

“But you think she’ll be okay?”

“Should be. If I’m right she’ll need surgery to remove the myxoma, but she should do fine.”

“Huh. I guess Miss Pilchard can handle the front desk until we get a temp in.” Cool and efficient Ms. Gordon was not going to be thrown off by a minor medical emergency.

Back at the nurses’ station Nurse Wingham approached the doctor. “You seen Buddy yet? Mr. Gustafson, that is?”

“He’s not one of my regulars. Not sure who he sees.”

“Well, can I ask a favor then? He’s been whinin’ about his foot. Now, you know him. If he’s not falling, he’s hurting. If he’s not hurting, his stomach’s upset. It’s always somethin’ with him. Dr. Young, you know, the shrink...”

“Yes, I know Dr. Young the psychiatrist.”

“Sorry, Dr. Young, the *psy-chi-a-trist*, says it’s all attention-seeking behavior. But his foot does look a bit red and swollen.”

“Did you call his regular physician?”

“On vacation.”

Dr. Blackwood glanced at his watch and sighed. “Sure. Let’s take a look.”

They found him in his room, which was a bit unusual when ‘The Price Is Right’ was on in the dining room.

“Mr. Gustafson, I understand your foot is bothering you.”

“Not just my foot, Doc. Yeah, it’s sore, but I feel weak. Nausea. Hot flashes then chills. I feel faint. I’m a mess, Doc! Maybe I need to go to the hospital.”

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Nurse Wingham gave the doctor a knowing look and a shake of her head.

“Let’s take a look.” As per his usual routine he started at the head and worked his way down. Mr. Gustafson was a bit frail, but generally intact. Then he got down to his right foot.

“It is a little puffy here around the ankle. Pink. Maybe a bit warm to the touch. What’s his temperature?”

The nurse glanced at his chart. “Ninety-seven this morning.”

“Low, not high. By ear?”

“I can ask Doris but probably by ear.”

“Hmm. And what’s this scratch here, on top of your foot?”

Mr. Gustafson shrugged, “Don’t know.”

The nurse suggested, “Pretty common for him to get scrapes and scratches, with his falling and all.”

The doctor looked at his patient. “Well, could just be arthritis flaring up. Do you have gout? No? And the other possibility is infection, maybe related to that scratch, although it seems pretty minor.” Turning to Nurse Wingham. “He’s not on any immune-type medicines, is he? No? Good. But still at his age... I better put him on some antibiotics, just to be safe. Are you allergic to anything, Mr. Gustafson? No? Good. We’ll get you started on something and keep an eye on it. And stay off your foot. Use the call button if you need to get out and about.”

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Dr. Blackwood was about to leave his office later that day when Dr. Smithy called from the hospital. “Sam, how are ya? Fishin’ been good?”

After a little small talk Dr. Smithy got to the point. “Anyway, you know that girl you sent over this morning? Tall, cute thing? Well, you were right. Echo shows a nice plump myxoma in the left atrium. Had an opening on the schedule tomorrow so we’ll get her done. Seems very healthy, should do fine. Say, um, do you think it’s ethical for a doctor to date a patient?”

Dr. Blackwood was caught off guard. “Well, I guess so, once the official doctor-patient relationship is over...assuming...”

Dr. Smithy jumped in. “That’s what I thought! I better do a good job tomorrow. I’ll keep you updated!” And with that he was gone.

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## Tales from The Home

Dr. Blackwood laid there for a moment, groggy, then his phone rang again. *Darn!* His hand flopped around on his nightstand until he grabbed hold of his phone. He tried to focus his eyes on it. 2:15 AM. A message to call The Peaceful Shore...

“Hello. This is Dr. Blackwood. You called?”

“Doc, it’s Nurse Penibel. Yeah, Hanna said to call you if Mr. Gustafson got worse.”

The doctor rolled his sleepy eyes. *He’s not really my patient!* “Well, what’s his situation?”

“Foot is swollen and red. But main thing he’s not himself. I mean, I know he’s usually a bit goofy, but he’s really out of it. Moanin’. Mumblin’. Restless. Won’t answer my questions.”

“Vital signs?”

“Temp only 96.5, and BP a bit low. Let’s see, 100 over 60. And he’s usually on the high side.”

“Oh, dear. His infection might be significantly worse. Better call for an ambulance, get him over to the ER. They can do labs, full workup. He’s not...he doesn’t have directions to refuse hospital care or anything like that?”

“Well, he is DNR but nothing to prohibit medical care as such. I checked his chart.”

For the second time in less than a day he advised that he would call the ER to give them a heads up.

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Dr. Blackwood sat in the chair across from Ms. Gordon. “I’m glad Maya did well. Back home already I hear.”

“Yes. She’s lucky you were here that day and made the diagnosis. We’re circulating one of those oversized ‘Get Well’ cards for The Family to sign. I think she’ll like that. Wish we could do the same for Mr. Gustafson.”

The doctor shook his head. “Yes, that was a shame.”

“Well, you win some, you lose some. I’m still not clear on how he went downhill so fast. I mean, within a day of getting to the hospital he was...gone.”

“Vibrio.”

“What?”

“Vibrio is a bacteria that’s found in brackish water, like in the lagoon. Can be very nasty. Even young healthy people can succumb to it. And Mr. Gustafson...not the most robust

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individual. I think his age and health were against him.” *Or maybe if I had been more aggressive when I saw him...*

Ms. Gordon watched as his eyes dropped to the floor and he fell silent. She gave him a moment.

“I doubt anything could have saved him, even if we got it earlier. Wouldn’t you say? I mean, even with the antibiotics he went downhill so fast.”

The doctor looked up at her. “I suppose so.” *But I’ll never know for sure.* “I’m still wondering how he got that infection.”

“I think I know,” replied Ms. Gordon. “He rarely goes outside, but a few days before all this I recall running into him as his grandson was wheeling him back in. We always ask the family to use a wheelchair so there’s no chance of tripping and falling outside. They had been down to the dock, and I remember his shoes and socks were in his lap. They said they sat on the dock and put their feet in the water. But just being in the water wouldn’t cause an infection, would it?”

“Probably not, but those pilings are full of barnacles. And he had some scratches on top of his foot. I suspect that’s how the infection got in.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. Aggressive bacteria in a weak patient. I once almost lost a fisherman who cut his foot on an oyster shell. And he was young and healthy. It’s a shame.”

“Yes, a shame. But on the other hand, he didn’t have a long, lingering...passing. You know, like some do. Maybe it’s for the better in some way.”

“Maybe.”

They sat in silence for a moment.

“I better get going,” said the doctor.

Just then Ms. Pilchard stepped in. “Someone to see you, Ms. Gordon.” She whispered, “Your favorite attorney-at-law, Mr. Consuelo.”

“Should I stay?” asked the doctor.

“No, it’s probably about someone else.”

She was wrong. Esquire Consuelo replaced Dr. Blackwood in the chair. “About your recently-deceased resident Mr. Gustafson...”

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Ms. Gordon took a deep breath. Fortunately she had the foresight to contact their own attorney. Her every answer to Mr. Consuelo was, “You’ll have to discuss that with Mr. Allison.”

Still, it was always an unpleasant experience talking with Ernesto Consuelo, the prince of innuendo and insinuation. She was relieved when he finally gave up and left.

*Poor Mr. Allison, always dealing with the likes of him. Mr. Allison is such a nice guy, though. Hard to believe he’s a lawyer. Hmmm. He is a widower. Maybe I should call him before Consuelo gets to him. Doesn’t hurt to keep myself in Mr. Allison’s mind. One never knows...*

Ms. Pilchard popped in again. “Here’s Maya’s card. I think everybody’s signed it. Might be a bit expensive to mail, though.”

“Thanks. I’ll take it over myself. I need to check on her anyway.”

She glanced inside the card. Half of the signatures and inscriptions were illegible, but Maya wouldn’t care.

“And some of the Family were asking about a card for Buddy. Mr. Gustafson.”

Ms. Gordon looked up at her. “A card? Well, that’s not what he needs now. Maybe they haven’t heard. But let’s have a little memorial at dinner tonight. People liked him. Even if he was a bit squirrely. Can you ask Miss Boulanje if she can serve some special punch or something so we can have a toast to him?”

Ms. Gordon found Maya in good spirits and on the mend. She zipped back by The Home in time to lead The Family in a toast to Mr. Gustafson.

Sally Kellog commented, “He was so nice. And so funny, the way he would fall down and pretend to need help. Such a clown!” She laughed.

Guppy added, “He did have a sense of humor. The other day he told me, ‘I’m so old, even carbon won’t date me!’” He laughed, as did some others who got it.

Eddie added, “He told me to cheer up, cuz old age doesn’t last long!”

A mixture of laughter and frowns.

Ms. Gordon did not think of Mr. Gustafson as funny, but then she was not known for her sense of humor. She simply said that he would be missed.

On her way out she saw the last sliver of sun as it set in the west and muttered, “Another day in paradise. Hope you’re enjoying the real thing, Mr. Gustafson.”

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16

### Franklin Lives Again!

Miss Cherry the social director set up the boombox in the community room, ready to swing and sway as she called out the bingo numbers. The men particularly liked those days like today when the youthful Miss Cherry wore a skirt that was shorter than necessary. And especially when she dropped something and had to bend over to pick it up. Hippie Hommel always made sure to get there early enough for a seat at the front table, just in case. He told his buddies that like him Miss Cherry was also a bit ‘hippy,’ but in her physique not her vibe, and that she still had the best legs in the ‘joint.’ The other men did not argue with that, although Miss Cherry did not have a lot of competition in the ‘joint.’

She flicked on the boombox. But there was no sound. She flicked down then up again. No sound. She looked at the front panel. It was dark.

“What the...?” At home she would have completed the sentence, but she was very careful with her language around the ‘guests,’ as she called them.

She picked up the unit and immediately noticed that something was missing: the cord.

“What the...?”

She dutifully completed two games of bingo without the usual musical accompaniment, but not without a little attitude. Then straight to Ms. Gordon’s office.

“This isn’t the first time, you know. A month or so ago it was the blender we were gonna use to make mocktails for the Valentine’s Day party. That really upset the old...the guests.”

Ms. Gordon puckered her painted lips, forming a burnt orange circle that matched her burnt orange dyed hair. She leaned forward and used a burnt orange fingernail to flick a solitary piece of dust off the sleeve of her navy blue dress suit. “Yeeesss.” She pulled up a spreadsheet on her computer and began typing. “I’ll add it to the list.”

“How much stuff are we talkin’ about?”

“I’ve got seventeen items listed now. Electrical cords, phone charger cords, at least one lamp. Even that cord to the loudspeaker in the hallway. Didn’t find out about that until that ‘code blue’ and nobody came running. That was embarrassing. Thank goodness it was just another one of Mr. Gustafson’s false alarms. The kitchen had to get a new toaster because someone cut the

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cord on the previous. And I'm sure some of the old...some of our Family Members might be missing stuff but just haven't reported it, thinking they lost it. You know how they don't like admitting to their memory problems."

"But why? You think someone's taking this stuff? But why?"

Ms. Gordon shrugged. "Beats me. Just hope we catch whoever it is. It's just annoying. And a little drain on our budget. It's not like we've got a lot of excess to cover these extra expenses."

"Should we call the police?"

Miss Cherry was given a scowl. "Heaven forbid! Like we need that kind of publicity. No, we'll just keep our eyes open. We'll find this person yet. I'd just like to know why. Why are they doing this? Maybe just bored. Maybe just some demented mischief."

"Maybe," agreed Miss Cherry.

\*\*\*

Eddie Marconi the retired electrician thought he heard the vibration of his phone. He reached over to his nightstand and fumbled for it. "2:00 AM" it read. He pressed the 'Dismiss' icon. He lay there quietly for a minute to make sure all was quiet in the hallway. Easing his legs onto the floor he slid his feet into his slippers. He tiptoed over to the door and gently shut it, then laid down the towel he had waiting to shut out any light that might escape under the door. Returning to his bed he turned on his lamp, reached under the mattress and pulled out a large flat plastic bag, then a second smaller one. He began with the smaller one.

"Oh, yeah, this is perfect," he whispered as he examined the cord from the boombox. He rooted around in the bag until he found the wire cutters. He held them to his lips and gave them a pretend kiss. "Oh, this is so much easier with you! No more using toenail clippers. So glad the custodian didn't notice when I filched you from his toolbox. I think he was just back from a three-Miller-Lite lunch. Like taking candy from a baby. A besotted baby..." He chuckled.

It was not unusual for Eddie to talk to himself. Or answer himself. He often joked that he was the best conversationalist in the place, so why not?

He clipped off the plug on the end of the cord, then began to strip away the plastic covering, revealing the embedded wires. "Ooh, perfect. This should just about do it."

By three o'clock he was done. He stashed the bags back under his mattress. Before turning off the light he looked at the wall beyond the foot of his bed, where a large plastic kite

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was hanging. “They think you’re just for decoration. Little do they know... You’re a major player in my escape plan! Oh yes indeed!”

Eddie slept well the rest of the night.

\*\*\*

Mrs. Blinkin was just beginning her breakfast. Her pants suit was neat and colorful, befitting the Florida coast. Her short gray hair was simple but properly brushed. Her face had its share of wrinkles, but of the type that suggested character rather than decay. On her plate sat the standard scrambled eggs, whole-wheat toast with sugar-free jam, and one reduced-sodium turkey sausage. Her cup held the standard decaf coffee.

“May I join you?”

She looked up to see a tall man with a full head of gray hair, wearing khaki pants and a dark green polo shirt, holding a plate of food.

“Why, of course.” She motioned to the seat next to her.

He sat down with an identical plate of eggs, toast and sausage. “You’re kind of new here, aren’t you, madam? You see, you can have any breakfast you want, as long as it’s eggs, toast and faux-sausage.”

She chuckled, having been at The Home longer than he had. “Oh, the food’s okay here. I’m Betty. Betty Blinkin.” She blinked her eyes at him repeatedly. “There, that will help you remember!”

It was his turn to chuckle. “Nice to meet you. I am Edward Marconi. Or just Eddie. But my real friends call me the ‘Shock Jock.’” He began on his eggs.

Of course she already knew his name but she enjoyed this little skit. Anything to change up the routine.

“Shock Jock? Were you a DJ on one of those naughty talk radio shows? You don’t look the part, if you don’t mind me saying...”

“No, no. Nothing as interesting as that. I was an electrician. You see, my customers were ‘shocked’ to find out I was a bad electrician.”

He waited for a laugh, but she just gave him a blank look.

“Ahem. They were *shocked* to find out I was a bad electrician.” He used his fork and knife to make a sort of rimshot on his plate.

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“Oh!” She gave a little chuckle. “I see. But...but you weren’t really a bad electrician, were you?”

Not sure whether she really got the joke, he just continued on. “No, I was a good ‘un. Worked on major electrical plants. Lots of power. Only got a few people killed, Not bad for my line of work.”

“Oh my...”

“I worked at a nuclear power plant for a while. But my wife made me quit. Said my glow kept her awake at night.”

Her mouth dropped open.

“I’m joking! You don’t know me well. Half of what I say is a joke. The challenge is figuring out which half.”

Mrs. Blinkin shared that she was a widowed retired teacher. Language arts, so she did not know much about electricity. Eddie said that was alright, “I no speak good English,” and they both chuckled some more. “Ya know, somebody actually filled the birdfeeder in the Lookin’ Tree the other day! Miracles never cease! ‘Course, squirrels seem to use it more than the birds, but it’s still somethin’ to look at.” He leaned closer and spoke softer. “Any sign of life around here is a good thing.”

She gave him a little chuckle, almost a pity chuckle, but then he got quiet.

*I shouldn’t have said that. Just cuz I don’t like life here doesn’t mean she don’t. Some people here seem to enjoy themselves. They can handle being caged in. Locked up. Not me. But not for long.*

Later that day Eddie called his son, and by pure luck managed to catch him at home.

“Dad, we’ve been over this. You know the things that have happened. The mini-strokes. The memory lapses...”

“Oh, nonsense! I was doing fine at my condo! I never missed paying my bills, did I? Never got in any trouble...”

“Well, that’s not quite true, Dad. Remember the fire?”

“Oh, blast the fire! One time! I think that stove was defective. It ran too hot! Shouldn’t have caught that grease on fire. Besides, so what even if I had burned up my whole kitchen?! I wasn’t in any danger.”

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“Dad, I’m not sure the people in the condos around you felt that way about it. I mean, that could have been a bad scene. A really bad scene.”

“And for that I am sentenced to life in prison?!”

“Oh, Dad, it’s not prison! They give you a nice room, meals, activities, companionship. You complain too much.”

“Yeah, you like it so much why don’t you come and live here then?! Yeah, you would enjoy the companionship here. I had a nice chat with ‘Droolin’ Doug’ the other day. Talked politics and in response he soiled his pants. Come to think of it, maybe that was a pretty good commentary on today’s politics. But you know what I mean. Not exactly Harvard here.”

“Dad, I know it’s not ideal, but make the best of it. The doctor says as long as your heart is in that condition, well, you know... Stroke, fainting, more of those memory lapses. Bad stuff can happen. And you’re safer there. Aren’t you?”

*I’m certainly not in danger of dying from overstimulation. Or laughing myself to death.*

“Yeah, Dale, I understand.”

“Hey, you want me to bring over the fishing poles this weekend? See if we can catch something off the dock?”

“Nah, that’s okay. Nowadays I just enjoy watching nature, don’t need to torture it. I’ve already killed enough fish in my day.”

Last time he had caught a fish he had a hard time getting the hook out and it died in his hands. He could picture himself laying there on the dock like that fish, gasping his last breath. He had not been fishing since.

“I would enjoy a sit and a talk, though.”

“Sure, Dad. It’s a date.”

Unfortunately Dale had an unexpected work assignment and didn’t make it over that weekend. Like most weekends.

\*\*\*

Thursday night a storm front moved in. Peals of thunder rolled over the facility. Flashes of lightning darted across the sky. An electrical storm as was so common in central Florida, the lightning capital of the United States. The ‘Shock Jock’ was ready. Finally.

He pulled the bags out from under his bed. He extracted a large coil of wire, carefully constructed from the various cords he had harvested over the preceding months, painstakingly

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weaved into a serviceable kite string. Next he took down the kite from his wall, flipped it over and tied one end of the wire to its crossbar. There were several thin flaps of metal that he had fashioned from spare parts around the home that he now tied to the wire, for added attraction. He slapped on a ball cap to keep the rain out of his eyes, and then his rain slicker.

Looking out his window he waited for the next flash of lightning. Then, “One...two...thr.” Boom-rumble! “Wow, less than a mile away!” He stood up straight. “Time to go.” He took one last glance around his room. His eyes rested on the picture of his son’s family. With a salute, he said, “So long! I know you did your best. This is for the best, too.”

He peeked into the hallway. All was quiet. He carefully guided the large kite out the door, being sure not to snag anything. Softly he made his way to the side door that led out to the field by the Lookin’ Tree. Being an electrician he had already made a jumper to bypass the security alarm on the door so it did not ring as he opened it. He gently closed it behind him.

There was a strong breeze; perfect for his kite. The rain was just heavy enough to make everything, including his kite and wire, wet. Once in the middle of the field he held the kite up and let the breeze catch it. Slowly he payed out the wire as the kite rose into the air, darting about as the wind gusted.

“Ben Franklin lives again!” he yelled.

As the kite gained height Eddie had thoughts, though not really second thoughts. “It’s not really suicide. I wouldn’t want the kids to think I did that. No, no. Don’t want them thinking that. It’s actually God’s choice, whether He hits my kite or not. The kids, they’ll just think I was a demented old fool playing in the storm. I can live with that.” He laughed. “Or *not* live with that as the case might be!”

The wire had reached its full length. The kite wavered back and forth in the wind. Thunder rumbled and lightning flashed all around. “Perfect,” thought Eddie as he wrapped the end of the wire firmly around his hand and dug his feet into the wet earth.

Nurse Wingham happened to have night duty and happened to look out at the storm. She couldn’t see much in the darkness except for distant flashes of lightning. Then one hit closer, lighting up the field.

“What?! Wha...?! Doris, come here! Come here!”

Doris joined her at the window.

“Is that someone out there? Or am I seein’ things?”

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Doris peered into the dark. A lightning flash illuminated a figure standing in the field with one arm raised up.

“Oh, geez, it looks like a spook!” whined Doris. “I’ll bet it’s Miss B’s doing! Big Mac told me she’s a voodoo queen!”

“Spook nothing! I think that’s one of our patients!”

Nurse Wingham ran to get her raincoat. She paused at the window as she was putting it on. She and Doris watched as the field lit up and simultaneously they heard a tremendous BOOM! There was a flash in the middle of the field, and the figure was no longer standing.

“Omigod! Doris, get the AED! Quick!”

“I ain’t goin’ out there!”

Nurse Wingham grabbed Doris’s collar and brought her face close. “Yes, you are. We are in the saving-lives business, not the scaredy-cat business!”

Doris was more afraid of Nurse Wingham than either the storm or the spook so she ran to get the automatic defibrillator. The nurse ran out the door, pausing for a moment to notice that the alarm did not sound, but then ran to the figure lying in the field. Thunder continued to pop in the sky but she paid no heed. Of course, when she told the tale later the lightning was striking all around her. Just a slight exaggeration.

“Mr. Marconi! Eddie, you fool! What you thinking?”

She noticed the wire around his hand and followed it across the field but could not see the mangled smoldering kite attached to the end. “Omigod.” She knew being attached to wire could not be a good thing in a lightning storm. As quickly as possible she unwound the wire from his hand and threw it away from them. His palm was scorched although she could not see that in the dark.

“Are you still there, Eddie?” She felt for a pulse. Just then Doris arrived with the AED. She opened it up and it began to voice its usual commands.

“CHECK RESPONSIVENESS.”

“I’m doing that,” muttered the nurse.

“CALL FOR HELP.”

“I *am* the help!”

“OPEN PAD PACKET.”

Doris began to do so.

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Nurse Wingham had her fingers over Eddie's left carotid artery. "By golly, he's got a pulse! A good one! Is he breathing?"

She and Doris watched closely.

The nurse shook her head. She tilted Eddie's head back, pinched his nose and put her mouth over his, giving him a solid breath.

She pulled back and watched. She gave him another breath.

Did he twitch? Nurse Wingham and Doris now held their breaths for a moment.

She gave him another breath.

There was a moment of silence and then a cough. Or was that just air escaping? Another moment. Did his chest move?

"Hmmm. Why'd you stop?" Eddie's eyes fluttered, and then he opened them. "You know, in Arkansas we'd be engaged, I think."

"You're alive! You're alive!" A bolt of lightning across the sky lit up Nurse Wingham's silhouette.

Eddie looked at her. "Okay, so now I'm in a Frankenstein movie. What's goin' on?"

\*\*\*

Edward Marconi was transported to the emergency room in surprisingly good spirits. Dr. Blackwood later wondered if the lightning bolt had served as a sort of electroshock therapy for Eddie, who had been depressed in recent months. But the other amazing thing is that the electricity had passed right through him without significant damage. In fact, it appeared to have served as cardiac shock therapy as well; a natural cardioversion. His atrial fibrillation had resolved and he was in a normal steady rhythm again.

"What were you thinking, Dad?" asked Dale.

His father smiled. "Just recreating that experiment my mentor Ben Franklin did. Did you know lightning is made of electricity?"

Dr. Blackwood stood by the gurney and shook his head. "Eddie, you know we shocked your heart several times and couldn't get you back to normal rhythm. I don't get it."

Eddie smiled. "I guess Mother Nature did what you doctors couldn't do. I'm not surprised."

\*\*\*

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After a brief stay in the hospital Eddie felt better than ever. He was stronger, got more active. Most importantly his mind seemed sharper than it had in years. He beat Dale at Scrabble and chess, which he had not done in years, except when he knew that Dale had let him win. His recovery was so impressive that Dale agreed he should have another chance at living in the condo on his own again.

Eddie made a point of visiting Peaceful Shore on a regular basis. For one thing, to bring Nurse Wingham a flower, or a gift card, or some little thing to thank her for the breath of life. Or, his “jump start” as he called it. And the widow Betty Blinkin was kind of cute, even if she didn’t always get his jokes.

17

Mr. Smythe's Stroke

Dr. Blackwood was writing a note in a chart as Nurse Penibel was entering vital signs in some others. They did not exchange pleasantries as usual. Things had been a bit frosty between them since the incident with Ms. – or Mr. – Layton. Dr. Blackwood did not like to hold grudges, however.

“How are things going? Here at The Home, that is?”

“Fine” answered the nurse without looking up.

“Weather has been nice lately. Had a chance to enjoy it?”

“No.”

He finished his note and put the chart back in the rack.

“Exercise classes still going? With Valentina?”

“Of course.”

“Anything new on the horizon?”

“The sun I suppose.”

Dr. Blackwood was about to give up and go on his way when a woman ran up to the nurses' station. Thirtyish with her purple-highlighted hair tied in a ponytail and wearing a black baggy t-shirt over gray leggings. The front of her t-shirt declared “God, Guns and Freedom!”

“Grandpa's having a stroke!”

The doctor and nurse exchanged glances then jumped up and followed her to the room.

“Mr. Smythe!” said Nurse Penibel. “What's wrong?” She went to one side of the bed and Dr. Blackwood the other while the woman stood by the chair where sat a young boy.

Mr. Smythe just smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

“Your smile's a bit crooked, Mr. Smythe,” observed the doctor.

“Right!” said the woman. “When we came in he didn't look right.”

“Mr. Smythe, can you give me a big smile?”

Mr. Smythe continued his half-smile, then said, “What?” He followed that with a bit of a wince.

The doctor spoke louder, “Give me a big smile!”

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Mr. Smythe winced again. He smiled but mostly on the left side, not the right.

“Can you squeeze my fingers?” The doctor put a pair of fingers from each hand into Mr. Smythe’s palms.

Mr. Smythe looked puzzled. “Say again?” He winced. “Can you do something about my ear, Doc?” Then he turned to his granddaughter. “Can you get some water? I’m very dry.”

The doctor thought, *Having a stroke but worried about his ear!* But he simply responded, “What’s wrong with your ear?”

“What?” Mr. Smythe turned his left ear toward the doctor. “I’m not hearing so good. And it hurts.”

“Should I call for an ambulance?” asked the nurse. “You know, he did hit his head on a counter last week. Pretty hard.”

Dr. Blackwood was about to reply in the affirmative, but he hesitated. Facial droop, ear pain, loss of hearing, dry mouth. He took out his penlight and took hold of the right ear lobe.

“Ouch!”

The doctor looked into the ear canal. “He’s got some blisters in here.” He thought for a moment.

“Timmy’s got some blisters, too,” offered the granddaughter.

“Ambulance, Doc?” asked Nurse Penibel again.

The doctor held up his hand. He looked over at the boy, now sitting in his mother’s lap. There were several red blotches scattered on his face, at least one with a blister.

“How old is your boy?”

“Five.”

“Has he seen a doctor about those spots?”

“No. It’s just a rash. Boys get into everything, you know.”

The doctor thought for a moment. “Has he had his usual childhood shots?”

“You mean vaccines? Are you kidding?! I’m no fool!”

The doctor bit his tongue. He turned to Mr. Smythe and announced, “Congratulations, Mr. Smythe, you have the chicken pox!”

“Chicken pox!” blurted the granddaughter.

“Chicken pox?” queried the nurse.

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“Well, a variation of it. Called Ramsay Hunt syndrome actually. But it’s chicken pox of the facial nerve, basically. No doubt you picked it up from little Timmy here.”

“Chicken pox?” said the granddaughter. “Well, he’ll get over that then. They both will.”

“Sure. Of course, he might have permanent hearing loss, facial disfigurement, chronic face pain. Plus it can damage the eye since he can’t close it properly. But we can put him on medication and reduce the chances of all that.” He turned to the nurse. “I’ll write the orders and let’s get it started right away.”

“Is that really necessary?” asked the granddaughter. “Don’t people just get over chicken pox?”

The doctor turned back to her. “Why were you worried when you thought it was a stroke, but not when it’s another condition that can cause the same complications? You’d want us to treat a stroke, wouldn’t you? Then let’s treat this as well.”

“I suppose.”

“And I would get your son into his doctor today.”

“He’s healthy. It’s just a rash.”

“A rash that represents a viral infection that can affect the brain and lungs and other tissues. In rare cases can even cause...” He hesitated then spelled out, “D-E-A-T-H” hoping that Timmy had not yet learned to spell. He considered leaving it at that, but could not resist saying, “Both of these could have been spared if Timmy had been vaccinated.”

“You’re not putting that stuff in *my* child!” She wrapped her arms tighter around Timmy.

Dr. Blackwood took a deep breath. “Let me give you my little spiel about vaccines, and then you are free to do what you choose. First, vaccines are one of the oldest of the modern medical therapies, going back centuries in Asia and the Middle East even before Europe started using the process of inoculation. Second, it is the most effective public health measure ever developed, virtually eradicating a number of diseases that use to ravage humanity with disability and death. Smallpox, for example, is gone, totally gone. Immunization is one of the most scientifically sound medical therapies, based on careful study of germs and our own immune system. It is perhaps the most thoroughly studied and tested of our therapies. It has proven to be one of the safest forms of medical therapy, with only rare side effects versus excellent efficacy. In an era of concern about healthcare spending they are very cost-effective, as a penny of prevention is worth a dollar of cure. And finally, they are among the most *natural* of medical

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therapies, causing your own immune system to fight disease rather than having to rely on synthetic drugs for treatment. That pretty much sums it up.”

“Well, I’ve done my research, doctor, and I’ll make my own decision!” the granddaughter replied forcefully.

The doctor turned back toward the nurse to hide his rolling eyes. “I’ll go write the orders.” He turned to Mr. Smythe and grasped his hand and in a slow, loud voice, “We’ll get you started on medicine that should help and we’ll keep a close eye on you.” To the daughter he said, “He probably does need some water to keep that mouth moist. We’ll give him drops to lubricate his eyes, too. And I’m afraid we’ll have to ask you to keep Timmy out of the facility until he is over this. Other people here may also be susceptible. And watch yourself for any symptoms.”

She nodded but said nothing.

Back at the nurses’ station the doctor wrote up the orders for the nurses. “Let’s stick with non-narcotic pain meds, but let me know if he complains too much about his ear pain.” He handed the chart to Nurse Penibel. “You know, it’s funny about the internet. You can access information from around the world, in an instant. You’d think it would be a revolutionary advancement for education. Instead any crackpot can post his crazy unproven theories on there and people will lap it up. Oh, and cat videos. It’s also good for cat videos.”

Nurse Penibel chuckled. “Love those cat videos.”

Dr. Blackwood also chuckled. “And you know what? It was the same way with television. That should have been an education revolution, too, bringing top-flight scholars and learning right into our homes. My grampa was a cameraman in the early days of television. You know what he televised? Wrestling. Roller derby. Televangelists. Oh, and baseball. I guess baseball’s not too bad. We do need *some* diversion, I suppose. But it’s funny how people often shun learning and sink to the lowest common denominator. I guess that’s human nature. We’re not as advanced as we pretend.”

Nurse Penibel thought back to their recent confrontation over Leslie Layton. *Is he talking to me? About that situation?* She muttered, “Sometimes we *advance* ourselves right beyond common sense.”

Dr. Blackwood was not sure what she was driving at with that statement. He was tempted to reply that ‘common sense’ was not always ‘correct sense’ but he sensed that a discussion of epistemology would not be productive. Instead he replied, “It does seem that our intelligence

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often outstrips our - What would you call it? - our emotional IQ? I mean, we are better at building bombs than bridges, it seems.” *That sounds philosophical*, he thought. *And alliterative!*

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Mr. Smythe did respond well to treatment and his symptoms resolved without consequence. Whether the granddaughter, Nurse Penibel or Dr. Blackwood learned anything from the situation remains an open question.

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18

### Grandmother Pays a Visit

Ms. Gordon stood before the nurses' station. Nurse Penibel, Miss Dumly and Big Mac stood at attention behind the counter.

"She's coming today. An important visit by the Wellness-Therapy-Fitness Corporation."

"Grandmother!" offered Big Mac with his usual broad smile.

"Yes, Grandmother," muttered Ms. Gordon.

"Why today?" asked Nurse Penibel. "We just had our annual review last month." She lowered her voice. "Is there a problem?"

"Not sure. I was told they wanted a detailed look at the facility. I assume she might tell us more when she gets here."

"It's a 'she'?" asked Miss Dumly, a hint of disappointment in her voice.

"Yes, a Ms...What was it? *Ro*-bel, I think? Ms. Robel." She glanced at her watch. "Any minute now. Just relax. I'll show her around, answer her questions. Of course, if she addresses any of you, just answer politely. Defer any technical questions to me. Got it?"

The three nodded their heads.

Ms. Gordon headed to the lobby just as a tall olive-skinned dark-haired woman in a beige pantsuit was coming through the front door. The bright sunlight reflected off her large gold earrings. As she neared Ms. Gordon could see her features were sharp and straight. The name 'Nefertiti' came to her mind. She carried a brown leather notebook under her left arm.

"Ms. Gordon?" The visitor stretched out her hand.

"Oh. I'm sorry," apologized Ms. Gordon as she wrung her hands. "We've gotten away from shaking hands here since the pandemic, you know. Germs, you know. We've, uh, taught the Family Members to bow or curtsy instead." She offered an awkward half-bow, half-curtsy.

The visitor nodded in return. "Family members only?"

"Oh! I mean the residents! We call them 'Family' here. Makes it feel more...homey."

"I'm sure." She pulled a card out of her pocket and handed it to Ms. Gordon:

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“So pleased to meet you, Ms. *Ro-bel*.” Ms. Gordon smiled.

“It’s *Ro-bel*.” She did not return the smile.

“Sorry, Ms. *Ro-bel*. Do you want to talk in my office? Look around?”

“Let’s get to it. First, do you have the list we requested?”

“Oh, yes! You wanted a list of the Family Members listed as competent. Able to manage their own affairs still?” Ms. Gordon pulled a folded piece of paper out of a pocket and handed to her.

Ms. Robel glanced at it. “Hmm. I’d like to talk to these people at the end. Maybe in about an hour?”

“Of course. Uh, I’ll have one of the nurses gather them together in the community room. I think there’s bingo in there just now, but they’ll be done soon.”

“Fine.” Ms. Robel handed the paper back to Ms. Gordon.

“Well, this is the lobby, of course. Simple but clean.”

Ms. Robel opened her notebook. “Looks like eight chairs. In good shape.” She scribbled a note.

“Yes, they don’t get much use. This is our receptionist, Maya.”

Maya stood up, matching Ms. Robel in height, but her afro gave her the advantage. Her afro bobbed as she gave a bit of a bow to the visitor.

Ms. Robel ignored her and leaned over her desk. “Not much here. Desk worn. Swivel chair worn. Old telephone.” She scribbled again and then started down the hallway.

Maya and Ms. Gordon exchanged questioning glances.

Ms. Gordon caught up and showed her each room and closet, Ms. Robel scribbling along the way.

“Here’s the community room.”

Ms. Robel leaned inside to see the Family Members and their bingo cards.

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Miss Cherry pulled out a token. “Not after, but...”

“B4!” called out Eddie.

“Bingo!” yelled a female voice.

“Bingo!” yelled another.

“I said it first!”

“Well, I’ve got it, too!”

Ms. Gordon interrupted: “Hey, everybody! We’ve got a special visitor. All the way from Grandmo... from the home office. Say ‘Hello.’”

A chorus of ‘hello’ rose from the group, like a classroom of obedient children.

Ms. Robel did not respond to them. “Is that television new?”

“Well, yes, just this year. Part of a gift donation. Forty-eight inch, I think. I think it has wi-fi and all that.”

Ms. Robel moved her pen in the air as if counting. More scribbling in the notebook.

“Chairs seem in decent shape,” she mumbled.

They moved on to the south wing. Mr. Gustafson shuffled by and said “Good morning.”

Ms. Gordon got out “Good...” when Mr. Gustafson wobbled and then fell with a loud groan. He held up his arms toward them. “Hel-l-l-p...!”

Ms. Robel stepped back. Ms. Gordon rolled her eyes. *What bad timing.* Normally she would have followed the psychiatrist’s advice and walked on, letting him get up on his own, but Grandmother was here. She knelt down.

“You poor man. Balance off a bit today, huh? Let me help you up.” She pulled on his upper arm but he was dead weight. Intentionally.

Ms. Gordon called over to the nurses’ station. “Miss Dumly, can you help?”

Miss Dumly looked over and saw Mr. Gustafson on the floor and she also rolled her eyes. With a sharp audible sigh she got up from her chair and joined them.

That brightened Mr. Gustafson who said sweetly, “Good morning, Miss Dumly!”

“You take his right arm and we’ll lift,” directed Ms. Gordon.

Miss Dumly bent over, showing off her aerobics-sculpted buttocks, but Ms. Robel was staring at the ceiling and did not notice. Mr. G noticed with a smile. In a moment they had Mr. Gustafson standing, but he lurched to his right and had to put his arm around Miss Dumly’s waist. Intentionally.

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“Sorry, dear,” he said as he batted his eyes.

Miss Dumly rolled her eyes again. It was certainly not the first time one of the male residents had needed such ‘assistance.’

“Why don’t you help him to the dining room?”

Miss Dumly rolled her eyes for a third time then led Mr. Gustafson away.

Miss Robel glanced at Ms. Gordon and said, “He’s so old he remembers when the only flavor of vodka was vodka.”

Ms. Gordon was so surprised that she did not laugh or add a comment before Ms. Robel turned and continued into the wing. She showed Ms. Robel each room on that wing, detailing each Family Member’s name, their primary medical condition and other personal tidbits stored in Ms. Gordon’s capacious memory. Ms. Robel seemed to ignore all that and only asked about the equipment and furniture. In particular she asked what belonged to The Home and what belonged to the residents themselves. There was quite a mixture of both but Ms. Gordon seemed to know all the details. Ms. Robel was busy with her writing.

Ms. Gordon showed Ms. Robel into Miss Theresa’s room, with its low hum from the oxygen equipment. The appraiser made notes as Ms. Gordon detailed the apparatus. Miss Theresa set down her book and gave Ms. Gordon a bewildered look. Ms. Gordon mouthed silently, “I’ll explain later.”

When they were done going over the equipment Ms. Robel finally took a look at Miss Theresa’s thin withered face. “I’ll bet your Social Security number is a single digit.” She turned and exited the room.

Ms. Gordon was shocked and embarrassed. She whispered to Miss Theresa, “Sorry. I’ll explain later.”

They repeated the procedure for the north wing. At the nurses’ station Ms. Robel asked more questions, like, How many security cameras? Is this the only monitor? (No, there’s one in my office.) Is this the only medication refrigerator? How many defibrillators? Are they new or well-used? (Fortunately rarely used but kept well-maintained.)

“Do you want to see the grounds now, Ms. Robel?”

“No,” she replied without looking up from her scribbling in her notebook. “We did a drone aerial survey last week.”

Ms. Gordon was taken back a bit. No one had told her about any aerial survey.

## Tales from The Home

Ms. Robel closed her notebook and looked up at the clock on the wall. “Are the residents assembled yet?”

“Let’s see.” Ms. Gordon led her back to the community room, which was about half filled, compared to bingo. You don’t have to be ‘competent’ to participate in bingo.

Ms. Robel scanned the group. She told Ms. Gordon, “Too bad wrinkles and gray hair aren’t marketable commodities.”

Ms. Gordon instinctively gave her a “Shhh!” She finally spoke up. “Ms. Robel, I think your comments are inappropriate and...”

“Oh, relax. It’s not like they can hear me. Huh. There’s probably a quarter-million invested in hearing aids in this room.”

The normally quick-tongued Ms. Gordon stood there in stunned silence.

Nurse Penibel was there, paper in hand. “I think that’s everybody, except Mr. Francois. He had a doctor’s appointment this morning.”

“Thank you.” Ms. Gordon turned to Ms. Robel. “Did you want to meet them, or...”

Ms. Robel ignored her and went to the front of the room. She raised her hand and called out in a strong voice, “May I have your attention?”

The background murmur died down. A voice called out, “Are you the new director?”

Ms. Gordon rushed to Ms. Robel’s side. “No, no. I’m still the administrator here. This is Ms. Robel. She is from the corporate office. She’s been looking over the facility this morning. She asked to speak to you all. Please give her your attention.” Ms. Gordon was also wondering what this was about.

Ms. Robel cleared her throat. “We asked you to be here because you are still legally responsible for your healthcare decisions. Therefore you need to know that it will be necessary to find a new place of residence within the next month. The Peaceful Shore Care Facility will be closing down.”

There was a collective gasp from the group, including from Ms. Gordon whose mouth literally dropped open.

There was then a moment of complete silence as they digested what they had just heard. Judge Digger spoke first.

“What’re you talkin’ about?! This is our Home!”

“It *was* your home. Now you will find another” replied Ms. Robel.

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“Now, hold on, missy,” continued The Judge. “I know our rights. Reminds me of Foster v Healthright Corporation...or was it Healthtime? 2001, I think? Anyway...”

“Our corporate lawyers have already reviewed the situation and we will proceed as I have stated. And of course we will assist you in finding a new residence. We want to expedite this matter.”

“This *matter*?!” sputtered The Judge. “We’re flesh-and-blood, not some figures on a spreadsheet somewhere!”

Others in the group voiced their “Amen.”

Mr. Grund, sitting in his wheelchair with a bag of bread crumbs for the birds he hoped to be feeding soon, turned to Ms. Gordon. “Did you know about this, Ms. *Gorgon*?!”

Ms. Gordon, not even noticing his intended slur, raised her hands. “I promise you! I did *not* know about this until *just now*! I am as alarmed as you are!” She turned to Ms. Robel. “Why wasn’t I informed of this?”

“You just were,” she responded with an impassive stare. Turning back to the group: “As I said, we will be helping you with this transition. One of our representatives will be on site in the next few days to assist.” Turning to Ms. Gordon again she added, “Corporate is already in the process of communicating this to the families of those not competent to make their own decisions.”

Miss Maggio called out, “But why? We like it here!”

Ms. Gordon almost smiled when she heard that, but her face didn’t know how.

Ms. Robel replied, “This property is too expensive. Do you have any idea what the taxes are on this riverfront property? We need to sell the property.”

The Judge spoke again, “Aha! You need *the money*! Selling us out so the owners can make more *money*. We understand all right.”

“That’s just the economic reality of the situation. Accept it or not.” Turning to Ms. Gordon, “Shall we go to your office? A few details to go over before I leave. Plus I need an inventory of your office equipment.”

“Yes, yes, I suppose so.” She did not realize how flushed her forehead and cheeks were, almost matching her hair.

As they exited the community room Big Mac was escorting Mr. Francois down the hall. They heard the loud chatter from that room.

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“What’s up?” asked Big Mac. “We missing a party or sumthin’?”

“Anything but a party. Come on.” Ms. Gordon led them to the nurses’ station, where she informed them, Nurse Penibel and Miss Dumly of the shocking news. She ignored their immediate and expected questions and led Ms. Robel into her office.

A half hour later Ms. Robel was on her way. Ms. Gordon held the front door for her and resisted the urge to give her a boot on the way out. She started back down the hallway, lost in thought.

Maya asked, “Is it true?”

“Fraid so. Better started looking around. I’ll give you a good reference, of course.”

At the nurses’ station the staff and many of the Family Members stood around pelting Ms. Gordon with more questions. Unfortunately she had no answers, but promised to work on getting some.

“She cared more about the furniture than the people,” commented Ms. Gordon. “Le’terr Robel. ‘La Terrible.’ Lives up to her name.”

Nurse Penibel added, “Ms. Robel. Mis’rable. Lives up to that name, too.”

Miss Boulanje had joined the group, having heard the fuss from the kitchen. “Anybody get a strand o’ her hair or sumting? For a voodoo doll. I knows a person.”

Everybody liked that idea.

Big Mac added, “She so mean, Taylor Swift ought to write a song about her!”

The staff got that one and laughed but not the residents.

Ms. Gordon closed the discussion with, “I looked up ‘bitch’ in the dictionary and found her picture.”

There was a moment of stunned silence – Ms. Gordon said that?! – and then they all laughed.

Ms. Gordon returned to her office and closed the door. She plopped down into her chair and looked at the bright sunshine streaming in through her window. “Another day in paradise.” She picked up a stapler and threw it at the picture of The Home hanging on the opposite wall. The glass cracked.

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### The Doctor's Last Visit

It was time for rounds at the Peaceful Shore Care Home but today Dr. Fenton had a special task. Mrs. Plessit was a nice enough senior, certainly not the most troublesome on the doctor's list of patients there, but there were some issues. For her son at least. The main one being the sizeable bank account her late husband had designated for her care in her waning years. And her son needed that money. Not that he didn't have an adequate income with his position as a research lab manager, but...trips to Aspen for skiing. Diving in the Caribbean. Touring the Swiss Alps. Sushi in Tokyo. Such things cost money. Considerable money if you're going to do them right. And that money was sitting in his mother's bank account, not his own. After all, wouldn't Dad have wanted his money to go to the enjoyment of life, rather than mouldering away in some nursing home? I mean, it's not like Mom is ever going to get out and enjoy life again. Right?

Not that he put it to Dr. Fenton like that the previous day in his office.

"Doctor, I can't hardly stand to visit my mother in that decrepit old 'storage facility' for the dying. She wouldn't have wanted to spend her last few years in such a place. I can see the despair on her face every time I go there. It's heartbreaking. I feel like it's cruel to keep her there."

"Are you thinking of moving her somewhere else?"

"No, I don't mean that. Any place would be the same. Just sitting there, waiting to die. Wouldn't that drive you batty? What sane person would want to live like that? If you can call it 'living.'"

"She doesn't seem particularly uncomfortable to me. When was the last time you visited?"

"Oh, well...it's been a while, it's true...but we've had a special project at work, keeping me busy." His mind flashed back to last weekend in Miami Beach with the receptionist. "Not that it matters – I'm not sure she even knows me when I visit her. Very sad..."

"She recognizes me by name every time I see her," replied the doctor, unconsciously tapping his fingers on his desk.

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“Well, it’s probably your white coat. She associates the coat with the name, I suppose.” He thumped his hand over his heart and frowned. “But it grieves me so to see her like that!”

Dr. Fenton leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling for a moment rather than rolling his eyes. Then he looked at Mr. Plessit. “And what do you suggest we do about it?”

“Well, I was wondering...How long do you think she’ll last? I mean, given her deteriorating condition and all? I mean, two heart attacks already. I would need to make plans and all. Contact relatives. You know...”

The doctor nodded. “Yes, two heart attacks, but very mild, fortunately. With her stents she should be safe for now. Could be many years before another event like that.”

“Or stroke! My mother would hate to be gorked out, lying in bed, staring at the ceiling all day! I can already see her brain starting to fail. Soon, she’ll be like...like a zombie. That’s no life for anybody.” He dropped his eyes to the floor.

The doctor tented his fingers and rested his chin on them. “I don’t think she’s as bad as all that. True, she has some issues, but they seem under control. And her mind’s not all that bad.” He thought for a moment of some of his other patients at the home. *She’s a veritable Einstein compared to some of those poor folk there!*

“So, she’s probably gonna last a good while longer?”

“Quite possible.”

They sat in silence for a few moments.

“And...but...but when someone is lingering like this...aren’t there...ethical ways of...you know...speeding up the natural course of things? You know, for the sake of the patient?”

*For the sake of the family. Or son,* thought Dr. Fenton. He leaned forward. “You mean...mercy killing?”

Mr. Plessit waved his hands. “No, no, no! Don’t say it like that! Surely there’s a better way to say it. ‘Hastening her to her heavenly reward,’ perhaps?”

The doctor relaxed back in his chair. He had ‘helped’ patients in the past, but they were really at death’s door, and truly suffering. Like Mr. Pishman. He clenched a fist, thinking of the money that situation had cost him. Now with people really at the brink of death it was usually just a matter of prescribing enough morphine to cover the pain, and if the morphine happened to stop his breathing...well, everybody would feel relieved to see the suffering end. But Mrs.

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Plessit was not nearly in such a condition. He looked at Mr. Plessit. He glanced at his watch, a not-so-subtle clue that he had patients to see.

“Listen. I really don’t want my mom to go on like this. I *can’t* let her go on like this.” He thought of the weekend in Vegas he was planning with that cute lab technician and his dwindling bank account. “Let me be blunt.”

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out an envelope and set it on the desk. The doctor looked down at it for a moment, looked at Mr. Plessit, then picked it up and peeked inside. He thumbed through the ten crisp hundred-dollar bills. He knitted his brows and looked at Mr. Plessit.

“That’s just a...a down payment, if you will. My mother’s comfort means a lot to me. You see, I’ve been able to siphon off...I mean, set aside about fif...about twenty-five thousand dollars from my mother’s account. For ‘medical supplies.’ You could even use it for improvements at the home, for the comfort of the others who still have a chance. You see? It’d be a win-win situation.”

The doctor stared at Mr. Plessit’s trembling lips. *Improvements at the home?* He thought of his own oceanfront home and the repairs it needed after the last hurricane. And Mr. Plessit was not the only one with a dwindling back account, thanks to his ex-wife’s alimony payments and increasing child support claims. And college costs, soon. And a shrinking practice thanks to the doc-in-the-box industry. Hence his need for nursing home patients.

He leaned forward. “Fifty.”

“Fifty!” Mr. Plessit blurted. Then softer, “Fifty?”

The doctor nodded.

Mr. Plessit thought for a moment. *That’s all I have!* But he thought of how much was in his mother’s account. He nodded. He whispered, “Fifty it is. I’ve got it in cash in a shoebox at home. So no paper trail. I can drop it by as soon as...as soon as mother is in her heavenly home.”

“Hmmm...your mother has no critical medical condition at the moment. Might be suspicious if she died unexpectedly.”

“But you’re her doctor, right? So you sign her death certificate? I mean, she has known heart disease, right? Who would question a sudden death in a nursing home? I’m sure it happens all the time.”

“But what’s going to make it happen *now*?”

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Mr. Plessit hoped the doctor already had an answer for that. He let out a heavy sigh. He reached into his pocket and drew out a vial containing a clear liquid and put it on the desk. "It's a relative of benzene. We use it in our lab. Should act fairly quickly. You should read its warning label. Should look enough like a heart attack. Especially if that's what you say it was."

The doctor nodded. He wasn't an expert in toxicology, but he knew benzene was quite noxious. "I think she's fragile enough that this should work." He picked up the vial by its cap and slipped it into his lab coat pocket. He leaned forward.

"You know, if you don't come through with the money, your fingerprints are on this vial. I, on the other hand, wear gloves when I do my rounds. That death certificate could say, 'benzene poisoning,' you know." The part about the gloves was a bit of a bluff, but he figured it would help. To make sure Mr. Plessit didn't welch on the deal.

Mr. Plessit gulped. "I understand."

Dr. Fenton smiled. "I'll be making my nursing home rounds tomorrow morning, about 8 o'clock."

Mr. Plessit stood up. "I know you'll take *good care* of my mother."

The next morning was a bright autumn day, the oppressive heat and humidity of summer having finally eased off. Dr. Fenton got out of his aging Range Rover, donned his white lab coat and approached the Peaceful Shore Care Home.

The door opened and out came Mr. Grund being pushed in his wheelchair by his granddaughter.

"Hiya, Doc! To the dock to feed the birds!" He patted the bag of bread crumbs on his lap.

"Hold on," the doctor motioned to the aide. He pulled out his stethoscope and gave Mr. Grund's heart a quick listen. "You're looking well. Feeling well?"

"Oh, yeah, doc! Never better! Say, have you met my granddaughter? This is Aretha. We named her after Aretha Franklin. But she can't sing like that Aretha. Otherwise I'd be in a mansion! Oh, but we keep tryin'!"

"Grampa!" moaned Aretha in a raspy voice.

They continued toward the pond and the doctor went inside. He found Mr. Grund's chart, jotted a quick note, making it sound like a complete cardiovascular and neurological exam. He checked Mr. Grund off his visitation list and thought, "That was a quick hundred bucks. Now for a quick fifty-thou."

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He made his way to Mrs. Plessit's room, exchanging pleasantries with the staff along the way, and stopping by their cafeteria to help himself to a cup of coffee.

"Good morning, Mrs. Plessit."

"Good morning, Dr. Fenton. Nice day out there? In the 'real world?'" She smiled. She was sitting in her swivel chair facing out the window, which looked upon the large oak tree with a bird feeder. Except that it had been weeks since someone had actually put bird seed in the feeder. Still, the ibis and cattle egrets would sometimes come around, and the occasional squirrel. A couple of geese waddled by. Her room was fitted out like a small apartment rather than the more common hospital room décor. Money may not buy happiness but it can buy some measure of comfort. The television was tuned to her favorite talk show. The guest made a funny comment and she laughed. She swiveled her chair toward the doctor. "He's a funny guy. I like his movies."

"Yes." This was not some 'gorked-out' stroke victim or withering cancer patient. But still, who would want to waste away here, trapped in a small room like this? Or so he rationalized in his mind.

"Let me take a look at you." He set his coffee down on the small table next to her by the window, where she kept her bird binoculars and ever-present cup of iced tea. Decaffeinated, by doctor's orders and to her displeasure. He glanced at her face and then gave a quick listen to her heart and lungs. Trace swelling in the ankles. *Go through the motions, at least. Heart's regular but I'll say frequent ectopic beats. Faint rales in the lungs, let's say. And I'll make that '1+' ankle edema, not 'trace'.* "Any complaints?"

"Fit as a fiddle and ready for love!" Her customary response to that question.

He almost regretted proceeding, but fifty grand is, well, quite grand.

"Listen, I don't want you losing too much weight. And the diet here may not be the best..." He went to her bathroom to get a paper cup from the dispenser. He returned in a moment with a cup filled with clear liquid. "It's a new vitamin solution we're trying. Supposed to have a sweet taste. But it still might taste a little 'medical.'" He set it down on the table next to her.

She sighed. "Doc, I take so much medicine already. Is it really necessary? I eat my fruits and veggies."

"Trust me. It'll be good for you." He smiled and thought, *Or for me.* "Excuse me." He went to her bathroom to wash the vial and his hands. *Don't want any traces left.*

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Mrs. Plessit looked down at the paper cup. *Doctors. Always feel like they have to 'do' something. Can't leave well enough alone.* The water was running in the bathroom. She picked up the cup and sniffed it, then wrinkled her nose. *Wonder if he uses sweetener in his coffee?*

Dr. Fenton returned to her side as she set her empty cup down on the table. "So, not too bad, was it?"

"Like you said, a little sweet with a 'medical' taste." She smiled.

He picked up her empty cup, crumpled it and reached behind her as if to put it in her wastebasket but actually slipped it into his lab coat pocket. He looked at the moisture on his hand.

"Gotta use proper hygiene technique," was his excuse as he returned to her sink and washed his hands again – and also the paper cup.

She swiveled her chair back toward the window and picked up her binoculars. "Ooh, is that a green heron? He's usually down by the dock."

The doctor stepped out of the bathroom and retrieved his coffee. "Gotta keep moving."

She nodded and continued to gaze at the heron.

"*Goodbye*, Mrs. Plessit," he said with a bit of emphasis. And with more finality than even he appreciated.

The heron flew away but a squirrel came down out of the oak and started searching the ground beneath it. She preferred birds but a squirrel was better than nothing. It was alive, at least. After a few minutes she started to nod off.

She was aroused by a shrill alarm sound and then the shout of "Code Blue!" from the speakers in the hallway. She heard some commotion as people ran down the hall. In a moment she heard an aide running the other way, saying, "It's Dr. Fenton!"

A few minutes later she saw the ambulance crew roll their stretcher down the hallway. A moment later her son stood in her doorway.

"Mom?!"

"Hello, Roger. Long time no see."

He stood there for a moment, looked down the hallway, then back at her. He came in and sat on the side of her bed. "I thought..." He caught his breath. "When I got here I saw the ambulance out front. I thought...I thought maybe..."

"No such luck, sonny-boy. Fit as a fiddle and ready for love."

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“Oh, well...gosh. That’s good news. Yeah, good news.” His tone didn’t sound particularly convincing. “Had me worried.”

“I’m sure you’ll get over it.” She gave him a Mona Lisa smile.

The ambulance crew wheeled their stretcher past the doorway, a sheet concealing its inert passenger.

“Dr. Fenton, on the other hand...not having such a nice day. Vitamin overdose, I would guess.” The retired chemistry professor turned back to her window and looked through her binoculars. “Oh, look at that turkey vulture. Right on time.”

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### The Eunuch

Doctor Blackwood was about to reach for the door handle when the door opened. Out rolled Mr. Grund being pushed by one of his nieces.

“Morning, Doc! Beautiful day, ain’t it?!”

“Good morning. On your way to feed the fish?”

“Well, the birds more than the fish. Just stale bread crumbs today, from the kitchen. Say, Jannie, next time stop by the bait shop and see if they’ll give you some dead shrimp.”

Jannie crinkled her nose. “Yuck, Unc.”

“Say, Doc, you met my niece? Janet?”

“Nice to meet you, Janet.”

She nodded.

Mr. Grund leaned over and whispered, “She was named after Janet Jackson, but unfortunately she can’t sing like *that* Janet. Otherwise I’d be sittin’ in a mansion!” He chuckled. “Anyway, Snooky likes shrimp. Kitchen here don’t have it much.”

“Snooky?”

“There’s a big snook that hangs out under the dock. I calls her ‘Snooky.’ I know, not very original, but what do you name a fish? Right?”

“A big snook you say?”

“Oh, no! Get that thought out of your head, Doc! I know you likes fishin’. Don’t even think about it! You leave my pet alone!”

“Okay. But I would like to see her sometime.”

“Lookin’s okay. But not catching! C’mon, Jannie – to the dock!” And off they went.

The doctor went in to the nurses’ station and pulled out the charts he needed from the rack and checked the notes for any recent updates from the nurses.

“Good morning, Doctor!” said a very sweet voice.

The doctor looked up and Miss Dumly the nurses’ aide was leaning over the counter, not at all bashful about the generous amount of cleavage she was showing. “You’re looking good. Nice tan.”

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He looked back down at the chart in front of him. “I’ve been able to get out more after clinic hours. Jogging the beach is so therapeutic after a day of work.”

“Oh, and good for your physique! It shows! But I like...*other* forms of exertion.”

The doctor glanced up at her. She was twirling a lock of her golden hair with a finger and giving him a half-smile.

“Well, any form of exercise is good for you. Is Mrs. Finster in her room?”

“Probably. She hasn’t been getting out much lately. I’ll go with you!”

“No, that’s not necessary. I’m sure you’ve got other duties.” He picked up the chart and came out from behind the counter.

“Nothing more important than you, Doc.” She started to follow.

The doctor held up his hand. “No, really. I think she’ll open up more without an audience.”

Miss Dumly’s shoulders slumped. “Let me know if you...*need* me.”

The doctor walked off and she turned back to the nurses’ station where Doris was watching the monitors.

“Hard to get his attention. If my neckline was any lower I’d be falling out of it. I don’t think Medusa would approve.”

Doris snorted. “Good luck. That’s why they call him ‘The Eunuch.’”

“What? I hadn’t heard that. Umm...What’s a ‘eunuch?’”

Doris raised her eyebrows, surprised that she had to explain. “You know...” She made a cutting motion over her groin. “Snipped. Chop-chop.”

“Oh, you mean a vasectomy.”

“No, more than that.” She leaned forward and whispered. “His balls.”

Miss Dumly reared back. “What?! You mean...he...he’s like...spayed?!”

“No, not really! ‘Spayed’ is for females, anyway. It’s just a nickname. Cuz none of the girls can get him interested. Ask Miss Cherry. She’s tried and tried.”

“Huh. Then what’s his problem? Maybe he really has been...snipped or something. Such a shame. He’s so cute with that sandy hair and surfer body.”

“And he’s a doctor,” added Doris.

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## Tales from The Home

Dr. Blackwood finished with Mrs. Finster, encouraging her to join the morning's chair exercise class, which was about to begin. "Valentina makes it fun, don't you think?"

She just waved a hand dismissively.

He saw his other patients, checking his watch as he wanted to be finished by the end of the exercise class. He felt a little guilty because he rushed his last patient as the top of the hour approached. He finished his note in time to pop into the community room as Valentina the physical therapist was leading the group in some final stretches.

"Reach down and try to touch the floor!" she called out. Most of The Family members only had to lean over in their chairs but those that were standing bent over best they could.

Dr. Blackwood saw Mr. Gustafson lean over and immediately sensed a potential problem. He dashed over in time to catch him before he went forehead-first into the floor.

"Thanks, Doc."

"Not so far next time," cautioned the doctor.

"Now reach for the ceiling!" called out Valentina. Her arms stretched upward, pulling up her short tank top and revealing her sculptured abdomen. She stood on her tiptoes, showing off her well-defined calves as her black tights stopped just below her knees. Dr. Blackwood noticed such details. Valentina relaxed and the group followed her lead.

"Okay! All right! What a great group! Proud of how you all did today! We'll do it again next week!"

She stood by the door saying goodbye to each Family Member as they made their way out. Finally it was just her and the doctor.

"You're good with the residents. Which PT group do you work with? I could make referrals."

"Oh, I'm independent," she replied as she leaned over to pick up her mat, with the doctor continuing to note her athletic anatomy from that angle. "I do classes like this, plenty of retirement homes around here, and exercise classes at the gym. Personal trainer for some clients. Don't think I could handle office work. Too routine" She fetched her gym bag and stood before the doctor.

Now the doctor could focus on her face. Jet black hair tied in a ponytail. Thin dark eyebrows that matched. Almond-shaped eyes, their color made the word 'emerald' come to

## Tales from The Home

mind. Her nose very straight. *Definitely not a boxer* came to the doctor's mind for some reason. Lips modest but red and well-proportioned for her oval face. Just a hint of an exotic look.

"Did you hear me, Doc?"

"Huh? What?" The doctor returned to reality.

"I said, I can give you some flyers in case your patients are interested in classes or personal training."

"Oh! Yes! That would be nice."

"I'll have to drop them off. I don't have any with me."

"Any time. Any time at all."

They stood looking at each other for a moment.

She glanced into the hallway then stepped back into the room. She motioned for the doctor to follow. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"I've got this lump. Little lump. But I noticed it in the shower. Maybe it's nothing but I'm worried."

"Well, why don't you call my office..."

"Oh, it'll only take a moment." She reached under her tank top and grabbed the lower edge of her sports bra and pulled up, exposing her left breast to the doctor.

"I don't think..." said the doctor whose eyes automatically fixated on the modest but perfectly-shaped breast.

She grabbed his right hand and put it on her breast. "A little above the nipple."

He finally broke his stare and looked into her eyes. "I really don't think..."

"Oh, don't be silly! You're a doctor! I'll bet you see breasts every day. There. Can you feel it?"

At that moment Miguel from the janitorial service popped in, broom in hand. He took a glance, stopped, then slowly backed out.

The doctor kept his eyes on Valentina's face but gently palpated the tissue. Then he withdrew his hand. She lowered her bra.

"Well?"

"Well, there is a lump. But it's small, soft and moveable. Probably just a breast mouse."

Appropriately she let out a squeak of her own: "Eep! Breast mouse?! How can that be?!"

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“It’s just an old name for a lump that feels like...like it’s running away when you touch it. It’s a fi-bro-ad-e-no-ma.” He always liked to sound out medical terms slowly so the patient would understand. “Totally benign. Fairly common. Nothing to worry about.”

She put her hand over her breast. “Are you sure? My mother had...you know.”

“We should do an ultrasound to be absolutely sure, but I’m 99% sure. Call my office and we’ll set it up. Nothing to lose sleep over.”

She let out a heavy sigh. “Oh, thank you, Doctor! I was so worried! But I want to do the ultrasound, for sure. Now I owe you. Free aerobics classes? I know. How about some...*personal* training sessions?”

The doctor thought for a moment. He realized his heart was beating harder and faster than usual. “I’m sure we can figure something...”

A minute later she went down the hallway as the doctor returned to the nurses’ station. Miguel and Big Mac were leaning against the counter, watching the doctor approach. Big Mac gave a sort of wolf whistle. The doctor looked at them. They both gave him a thumbs up and a pair of big smiles. The doctor blushed.

\*\*\*

Doris had the weekend duty and decided to take her short lunch break on the dock, it being such a nice day. Not too hot. Gentle breeze. She took a seat on the bench and said hello to Mr. Grund. He tossed a shrimp into the river. It was met by a big swirl of water. She could smell the shrimp from where she was sitting.

“Have you met my niece Whitney?”

“I don’t think so. Hello, Whitney.”

The thin, tall young woman returned the ‘hello.’ She sniffed her hands. “Uncle Josiah, I don’t think I’ll ever get that shrimp smell off my hands.”

“Use more hand wash when we get back in.” He turned to Doris. “She was named for Whitney Houston. Can’t sing like her, though. Otherwise I’d be sitting in a mansion!” He laughed. Whitney frowned.

The usual parade of boats, birds and assorted sea life was in evidence, as usual. A couple paddled a canoe by the dock.

“Hello, Doris, Mr. Grund,” called out a male voice.

“Who dat?” replied Doris.

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The man stopped paddling and lifted the bill of his cap.

“Doc Blackwood! Whatcha doin’ out here?! And who’s that you got with you?” She could see shapely legs stretched out in the sun but not her face. The woman lifted the brim of her broad sun hat.

“Miss Valentina! Hello there!”

Miss Valentina waved back.

Mr. Grund tossed out a shrimp and there was another swirl in the water. “Snooky’s down there, Doc! But don’t you get no ideas!”

The doctor leaned over and saw a shadow under the dock. “It’s tempting, but I’ll leave your pet fish alone.”

“Where your fishin’ pole?” Mr. Grund asked.

The doctor pointed down the river. “We’re going to the spoil island for a picnic. No fishing today.”

“Too bad. Nice day for it. But maybe for other stuff, too. Have fun!”

The two waved and resumed paddling.

Once they were out of earshot Doris commented, “Maybe he’s not such a eunuch after all.”

“What?” asked Mr. Grund, throwing out his last shrimp, only to have a seagull dive down and grab it before the snook.

“Oh, just a nickname we have for Dr. Blackwood. Never seen him with a woman before.”

“Huh,” grunted Mr. Grund. “Well...Maybe she used the right bait.”

Maybe. After they were married Valentina finally did confess to her new husband that she had an ultrasound several days before she asked him about that lump. Indeed, it was just a breast mouse. A breast mouse was the right bait as it turned out.

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21

### The Date

Ravel Francois played a king of diamonds. He looked across the table at his partner, Jo Janiko. "I think we'll make the bid."

They did, and with it won the pinochle game. Ravel and Jo exchanged a weak high-five. Guppy walked away muttering, "I still think he cheats. Should have played that king earlier when the queen was played."

"Shall we celebrate with a drink?" asked Ravel.

"Oh, lets!"

Ms. Dumly had set out some iced drinks, all sugar- and caffeine-free, of course.

"Red or white?" asked Ravel.

"White," answered Jo.

He handed her a lemonade. Or what passed for lemonade here in the home, made from powder. He picked up a 'red,' a fruit punch.

"Mustn't have too many. I have to drive home," he joked.

She tittered.

They took a sip and he led her to a couple of empty chairs by the picture window. This room had the best view in the house, looking out toward the river. A nice yacht was passing by in the distance.

"Oh, to be sitting on my yacht, sipping my Château Lafite Rothschild," muttered Ravel.

Jo tittered again. "This 'chardonnay' is good enough for me. And no 'mal de mer.'"

"Oh, no fear, my dear! I would command Neptune to smooth the waters before us!"

They both giggled. They sipped and watched the yacht sail away while a dolphin broke the surface closer to shore.

"I swam with a dolphin once," Jo volunteered.

"Oh, really? Tell me."

"Years ago. There was a place in the Keys where they would let you jump into the water, and the dolphin would come up and let you grab its dorsal fin. It would pull you a little ways, then you let go and got out. I wonder if that place is still there?"

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“That must have been fun.”

“Yes, but scary, too.”

“Scary?”

“Yes, those dolphin are big. And they have teeth, you know.”

“But surely they wouldn’t bite you!”

“Oh, no, they’re gentle, but still kind of intimidating.”

Ravel raised his cup. “To the brave Miss Josephine!”

She met his cup with hers.

They sipped in silence for a bit.

“You know,” said Ravel, “I got my new bed last week. Not one of these little singles they have here. It’s a full size.”

“Oh. I didn’t know we could bring in our own beds here. That does sound comfortable. I should look into it.”

“You can bring in anything you like. As long as you pay for it.”

They were silent for a bit as they sipped from their cups and looked out at the river.

“You know, Jo. I get lonely here.”

Jo glanced around. “Well, there’s plenty of people around. Sometimes too many people around! Sometimes I wish I was more lonely. If you know what I mean.”

Ravel shook his head. “That’s not what I mean. I mean, well, a man...and a woman, too, I’m sure...sometimes needs...more intimate companionship. You know...heart to heart. Not casual conversation or a game of cards. Something more. Something to remind him...or her...that the fire is still burning. That life is still to be lived! Do you know what I mean?”

“Well, close friendships are important.”

He turned to look her squarely in the eyes. “Not just friendships. Closeness. Physical closeness. Intimate closeness. You know. ‘liaison amoureuse.’ You see?”

She blushed a little. “I don’t know French.”

“But you know my meaning? Amour. Not just the talk. The *act* of love.”

Her blush deepened. “Oh, Ravel...”

“We’ve known each other for months. We get along so well. I am not...offensive, am I?”  
He had always been a handsome man, and despite his gray hair and wrinkles his tall stately figure was still attractive. At least to those of similar age.

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She, likewise, was considered a handsome woman. ‘Younger than stated age’ is how Dr. Fenton phrased it in her chart. Her upbeat attitude, not all that common in senior homes, was an added attraction.

“No, not offensive at all. ‘Dashing’ is better the word, I think.”

Ravel smiled. “Ah! Thank you for that. Shall we make it a date, then? Tonight, even? Like I said, my new bed is *most* comfortable.”

Jo’s expression changed to one of concern. “Oh, I don’t know.”

“I don’t mean to be pushy. But time...it’s not on our side any more. We must act while we can!”

Jo took hold of his free hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “It’s just that...I feel funny...well...Can I be honest? Your room...right there with the other men on that hall...I would feel like they’re watching. And listening.”

“Oh, now, I don’t think...”

Before he could finish Jo added, “But my room...on one side she’s almost comatose, and the other side is still empty after...after Mr. Gustafson...you know.”

Ravel’s smile broadened even wider. “Your place would be fine! Is it a date, then? Shall we say 9 o’clock? Give us time to clean up after dinner? At your place?”

She hesitated a moment. “It’s a date!”

“I’ll bring the champagne!”

\*\*\*

Ravel looked in the mirror and combed his gray but full hair. Next he combed his closely-trimmed moustache. He noticed one hair sticking out and removed it with a snip of his scissors. No cuts on his face from shaving. He had to watch for that because of his blood thinner. More than once he had returned to his room to see that he had spent the day with a blotch of blood on his cheek or chin. He reached for his *Dior Homme* stick deodorant and opened it. The lid caught the sliver of remaining deodorant and popped it out. The thin slice hit the edge of the sink and did a beautiful two-and-a-half gainer into the toilet. He stared down at it and considered fishing it out, but could not bring himself to do so.

He opened the medicine cabinet, but as he feared he had no other deodorant. *What am I to do?* He looked around the bathroom, and then went into the bedroom. *Ah!* He picked up the room deodorizer. ‘Wildflower Field.’ He took a good sniff. “It’ll do,” he told himself. He lifted

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up the plastic cone and reached in his fingers to gather a good dollop. He took another sniff, nodded, and rubbed it into his left armpit. He switched hands and then applied some to his right armpit. Then a bit on the neck. He took a deep breath. “Yes, that’ll do.”

Ravel put on his neatly-creased white pants and then his long-sleeved white silk shirt. Well, actually rayon, but he liked to pretend. He tied a red cravat loosely around his neck and tucked it into his shirt. It was actually just a red scarf that he had ‘found’ in the community room the other day. He paused. *Gee, I hope it’s not Jo’s scarf! Nah...*

Meanwhile Jo was putting on her light pink pants suit. *Or should I wear a skirt and show off my legs? No, this is good. Let’s not be too much of a hussy!* She used her brush to touch up her hair. *Hmm, some lipstick would help these pale lips of mine...But...* She rummaged through her cosmetics bag and as she feared, no lipstick. The clock showed almost 9 o’clock. Her shoulders slumped. Her eyes happen to fall on her art supplies. *I wonder...* In a moment she was back in front of the mirror with a red felt marker in her hand. *Let’s see if this works.* And it did. Not as good as lipstick, but it did darken her lips.

There was a knock on the door: *Shave-and-a-haircut...two bits!*

She slowly opened the door. “And who is this gallant gentleman at my doorstep?”

He took a bow. “Ravel Francois at your service. Bon soir, mademoiselle.” He stood up and handed her two bottles of sparkling water. “Champagne, as promised!”

“Ooh, I’ll put this on ice,” and she took them to her mini-fridge.

They settled into the two easy chairs she had on either side of her small bistro table. They shared some small talk. He spoke of his time in the maritime service and how he had traveled the world. Truth is, he never left the shores of North America but improvised some other travel adventures. She enjoyed watching travel shows and caught some of his geographic mistakes, but politely said nothing about those. She just oohed and aahed when appropriate.

For her turn she shared her experience as a hotel concierge in Miami Beach.

“We once had Sean Connery stay with us. *The 007!* Ooh, he was handsome. I was tempted to ask him for a kiss, but I kept my poise.”

“His loss, my dear.”

“Not that he was as handsome as you, of course.”

“You are too kind, Madam!”

“That ‘champagne’ should be cold by now.”

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She fetched one of the bottles and two glasses.

Ravel stood up. "Allow me." He twisted off the cap and filled each glass. He lifted his up and said, "To a beautiful night."

They 'clinked' their glasses – more of a small thud since they were plastic. They took a sip, staring into each other's eyes. They smiled. They took another sip. Simultaneously they set their glasses down. In next moment Ravel wrapped his arms around Jo.

"You look so lovely tonight, Jo. As always."

"And you are so dashing. More than that actor fellow."

They paused for just a moment and then he bent his head down and they were kissing as passionately as two teenagers after the prom. It had been so long, for both of them.

As they took a breath Ravel reached up to pull off her jacket. At first she stiffened and held her breath, but then relaxed and helped the jacket come off. He reached for the top button of her blouse.

She let out a gasp.

He paused. "Wait, are you afraid...afraid you might get...pregnant?"

Her eyes opened wide. They both laughed. In a moment her blouse was coming off as was his shirt as each helped the other.

She said, "Ravel, I'm going to...unravel you!" She had prepared that pun beforehand.

"Jo, I'm going to board you...amidships!" He improvised that one.

\*\*\*

Nurse Penibel was pushing her medicine cart down the hall. Miss Janiko was next. Yes, her little paper cup with its three pills was ready. She didn't understand why someone like Miss Janiko couldn't keep up with her own medications. She was sharp enough. Probably a liability thing, in case one of the residents didn't take her meds, or took too much, or something. She picked up the cup. Normally she would knock before entering – for that matter Miss Janiko's door usually was open until she went to sleep. But it had been a long day for Nurse Penibel and she didn't think anything of opening the door and letting herself in.

What met Nurse Penibel's eyes did not conform to her conservative religious upbringing. No, she was not in one of those 'liberal' sects. No, sirree. She would be quick to point that out in any discussion of religion.

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There on Miss Janiko's bed was a mass of writhing wrinkled flesh, with four squirming arms and four flapping legs. There were smacking sounds and squeaking bedsprings, with an intermittent groan thrown in.

Nurse Penibel dropped the cup, which hit flat on the floor causing one of the capsules to pop out like a Mexican jumping bean. She backed out of the room, her gaze transfixed on the frolicking couple. Quietly she closed the door.

"Now, how am I gonna document the reason she missed her medicine tonight?" She thought of the phrase, 'Doing the devil's dance' but settled on simply, 'Indisposed.'

\*\*\*

After finishing the medication rounds Nurse Penibel was about to nod off at her station when an alarm went off. She looked at the panel. "Doris! It's Miss Janiko's room!" They both took off at a jog.

Doris got there first, opened the door and stepped in. Nurse Penibel was right behind. On the bed was a man lying there mostly covered by a sheet, with one leg sticking out. Next to the bed was Miss Janiko, clutching her robe that was loosely wrapped around her, the emergency call button still in her hand. She looked at the two others and tried to speak, but nothing came out.

Nurse Penibel ran to the bedside. "Mr. Francois," she muttered. He looked pale. More pale than usual, that is. She put her fingers to his neck. "I don't see breathing. I don't feel a pulse. Doris, get the..."

She looked at Mr. Francois's wrist. "Hold on." She read the bracelet. "DNR. Don't bother."

"DNR?" Miss Jeniko asked in a shaky voice.

"Means he did not want to be resuscitated if his heart stopped. And it appears to have stopped."

Miss Jeniko's knees started to buckle but Doris rushed to her side and helped her to one of the chairs.

"So...he's...gone?"

"Fraid so," replied the nurse. She pulled the sheet up over his face, but before she let the sheet down: "I swear he has a smile on his face. Guess he died happy."

A few minutes later the nurse and Doris had Mr. Francois on a gurney.

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“Take him back to his room. The ambulance can pick him up there,” the nurse told Doris with a wink of her eye. She did not approve of shenanigans in The Home, but she wanted to preserve Ms. Janiko’s honor. Not that anyone else in The Home would think anything of the situation.

Doris wheeled the late Mr. Francois back to his room.

“You gonna be all right, honey?”

Miss Janiko sat for a moment staring at her now-empty bed. She looked up with a tear running down her cheek. “Yes, I think so. Just a bit of a shock. But I think I’ll be okay.”

“You call if you need anything.” Nurse Penibel gave her a reassuring smile and closed the door behind her.

Jo looked at the closed door, then at the bed. She sat in silence for a moment. Then she wiped the tear from her face and smiled.

“I still got it!”

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22

### Fairy Tale

Once upon a time there lived a young princess in a faraway land. It was not a prosperous land, but it was a lovely place populated by good people, and the princess ruled wisely and gently. The wide blue ocean lay to the east, while a quiet green river ran along the west. Trees provided shade from the bright and warm sunshine and flowers dotted the landscape with vivid colors. The people there were common folk and they looked out for one another, always ready to lend a helping hand. Life in that land was not exciting, but it was steady and safe. The people were happy.

One day an emissary from the king arrived. The king lived far away and did not know the land or its people. He sent this envoy to survey the land. She was a woman with an evil glint in her eyes, and a tongue as sharp as an adder's fang. She inspected the land, scrutinized the castle, and calculated in her mind the value of their humble possessions. The one thing that she did not see was the worth of the people who lived in the land. That could not be recorded in dollars and cents and thus was ignored in the emissary's ledger. The princess and the people could sense the foreboding pall that now hung over their quiet land after the wicked woman returned to the king.

Some days later the people looked to the north and on the crest of the hill saw the silhouettes of the king's soldiers on their steeds of war. The villagers gathered together and went to the princess. "What is the king going to do? What shall *we* do?"

The princess looked out upon her people with a tear in her eye. "We are a peaceful and humble people. We can naught but wait and see what the king intends."

Without further warning the king's men swept down the hill and over the land. Every possession was taken as plunder. Every person was driven from their home to the castle court. There they gathered, arm in arm, quaking as they awaited word from the princess.

At last the princess appeared on the parapet but her wrists were tied. Towering over her the field marshal of the king pushed her aside and unfurled a scroll. His voice rang out over the crowd:

"By order of the King, ruler of all, this province is his possession, and all that is in it. Henceforth the Princess and her people are banished from the land. By his grace he allows you

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three days to gather together your personal possessions and make your arrangements. You will be escorted to the border of the land and from there you must go to find a new home. Thus the king has decreed.”

The people were silent. Finally a voice called out, “Princess?”

The princess bowed her head for a moment, then raised it up and stood tall. “The King has spoken and none can resist. He can take our land, but he cannot take our spirit. That is the true wealth of this land. And you shall take it forth with you to new lands and new homes.”

In the few days left they worried little about their meager possessions and instead spent the time in fellowship and good cheer as they reminisced of their time together. The King could not take their memories. Only the relentless onslaught of time could do that.

The princess wished them each well as they wandered off into this wide and wonderful world. At last there was only she and a village elder, standing at the border of the land.

He asked, “And what of you? They took your castle.”

The princess shook her head. “It was never *my* castle. It was *our* castle.” She let out a sigh. “But ultimately it was the *King’s* castle. And he has taken it back. But as I said, no one can take our spirit from us.” She placed her hand over her heart. “Who we are does not depend on the place where we live or the circumstances that surround us. Life goes on.”

The old man nodded then went on his way.

The princess looked back at the castle, gleaming in the sunlight. A tear trickled down her cheek. She took a step across the border.

\*\*\*

Ms. Gordon closed her notebook and looked out at The Family as they sat there quietly for a minute or so.

“I don’t like that story,” said Sally Kellog.

“I was expecting a Knight in Shining Armor to come and save the land, or something,” said Jo Janiko.

“No knights in shining armor. Not in the real world,” commented Mrs. Plessit.

“I’m afraid that’s often true,” replied Ms. Gordon.

“I suppose the message is... that life is not about where you live or what you possess?” offered Luna Maggio.

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Burnsy snorted. “Huh! That’s easy for people to say who live in nice places surrounded by plenty of nice things!”

“Yeah,” joined in The Judge. “Money may not buy happiness but it sure makes misery a lot more comfortable!”

Several people laughed and others gave an ‘Amen.’

After another moment of quiet Mrs. Plessit added, “Adapt and overcome. That’s the history of life on this planet. And life does go on.”

The group fell silent once more.

Finally a voice called out, “It’s Wheel time.”

Ms. Gordon glanced at the clock. She stood up, clicked the remote control to turn the sound back on, and punched in the needed channel. As she headed out of the dining room a hand caught her arm. She bent down to hear Mrs. Plessit over the TV.

“Do you see yourself as a princess, then?”

“No. Not really. I don’t think there are princesses in the world anymore. Or Prince Charmings. But there are kings, I’m afraid.”

“Ah, the Golden Rule.”

Ms. Gordon narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips.

Mrs. Plessit continued: “The one with the gold makes the rules.”

“Ah. I’m afraid so.”

Mrs. Plessit gave Ms. Gordon’s arm a squeeze. “Adapt and overcome.”

Ms. Gordon patted her hand. “Indeed.”

The Shrink Gets Shrunk

Dr. Young sat at the nurses' station, set down his notebook on the desk area and opened up the patient chart to a blank page. He noticed there was a seam in the desktop but his notebook was at an angle with it. He carefully moved the notebook so that it lined up perfectly with the seam. He shook his head and turned to Doris. "I'm afraid Mrs. Finster..."

Doris interrupted: "Miss Molly, you mean."

"Right, she doesn't like to be called by her married name. I'm sure there's some connection to her stubborn depression, but she won't open up about it. And it's kind of...creepy how she keeps her family pictures face down. Something's there but she won't talk to me about it. How about you, does she ever share things with you?"

"Not a word. I try to talk with her. She never talks about herself. Talks about the news and true crime shows. I tell her not to watch that stuff – too depressing! I tell her to watch fun stuff. She don't listen."

"Well, I'm hesitant to put her on more medication. Too many side effects. I don't think she's a suicide risk in her present situation. Maybe we can just encourage her to participate more. You've got plenty of activities here. Perhaps you can..." When he turned toward Doris he realized he was talking to himself as she had gone over to the end of the counter to talk with Betty Blinkin. He turned back to the chart to finish his note.

"Oh, Doctor! I'm so glad you're here!"

He looked up to see Luna Maggio. He had treated her anxiety when she first arrived at the home but she had settled down nicely. "Yes?"

"I've got a question for you."

She waited as he finished the note in Miss Molly's chart. Then he made sure the bottom edge of the chart was perfectly aligned with the edge of the counter.

"Well, I had this dream last night. I've had it before. It's so strange! I don't know what it means. I'm in a grocery store and pushing my cart along. In the vegetable section I pick up some carrots, and they're huge! And then some long cucumbers. Then some...I think they're butternut squash or something, but long and skinny. Of course I have to check them to make sure they're

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firm and ripe. Next I'm in the meat department and I buy some hot dogs – foot long – and some sausages. In the bakery I buy some eclairs. When I go to check out there's a man there – he looks like Denzel Washington, I'd say – and he says to me, in a deep voice, 'Can I be of service, Luna?' And that's when I wake up, I think. I don't remember more. What does it mean? It's not the first time I've had this dream."

Dr. Young suppressed a snicker as he thought of the Freudian implications. He pondered for a moment, and recalled one of Freud's sayings. He adapted it and said to Luna, "Sometimes a carrot is just a carrot. It's just a grocery store. It's just a dream. It probably doesn't mean anything. Just your mind killing time during sleep. That's all."

"Oh," she responded, obviously disappointed. "That's all?" She thought for a moment. "And here I thought it meant I was starved for sex."

Dr. Young snorted and he felt a bubble of snot come out his left nostril. He grabbed a tissue from the dispenser on the counter and wiped his nose. *I don't think she needed me to interpret that dream!*

Doris had returned to his side in time to hear Luna's comment. She suppressed a smile. "Now Miss Luna, listen to the doctor. It's just a silly dream. Don't worry about it none."

Luna nodded. "I'm not worried. Just curious. I have another question, Doc."

He braced himself.

"Why do they call you a 'shrink'?"

Dr. Young stiffened his back and lowered his eyebrows. "Well," he said trying to hide the displeasure in his voice, "it's an old term. Now considered *impolite*. It probably goes back to primitive tribes that would cut off and shrink the heads of their enemies."

"But why would that apply to a psychiatrist?"

Dr. Young raised his hands. "Not sure. It's not like we think of our patients as trophies or anything like that. We don't hang their heads on the wall! I suppose it's just that we 'shrink' our patients' head problems down to manageable size? I don't like the term myself."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to offend."

The doctor forced a smile. "No offense taken."

"Thank you." She turned and headed to the kitchen. "I wonder what kind of vegetables Miss B has on hand. Denzel, I'll be seeing you tonight!"

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Dr. Young looked at Doris and shrugged his shoulders. He took Mrs. Finster's chart and returned it to the rack, making sure that each chart was lined up perfectly with the others.

"You know, Doris, I had a patient the other day. I asked him if he was bothered by dirty dreams. And he said, 'No, in fact, I rather enjoy them.'"

He waited for a laugh but none came. Doris had a concerned look on her face.

"It's a joke."

Her face did not change.

"Well, never mind."

"Whoa! That was quite a session!" declared Miss Cherry. "Halloween cards and pictures! This place is going to look mighty spooky! The folks had some pretty twisted ideas today. But I don't need to tell you that, Dr. Young. You know how they think."

Miss Cherry pulled her heavy bag of art supplies off her shoulder and plopped it down on the upper ledge of the counter. A jar of orange glitter popped out and when it hit the counter its loose lid came off. It proceeded to tumble down onto the desk, spewing the glitter onto the desk and onto the floor. And all over Dr. Young's notebook.

Dr. Young looked at his bespeckled notebook and the desktop. He jumped out of his chair. "Oh no, no, no, no, no, no!" He grabbed two tissues from the dispenser, one with each hand and set to wiping off his notebook. "Omigod, omigod, omigod, omigod!"

He saw that the glitter coming off his notebook was falling onto the desk. "No, no, no, no, no, no!" He tried to wipe the glitter on the desk into a pile. Then he saw there was still glitter on his notebook. He went back to wiping that off. "No, no, no, no, no, no!" His hands were visibly shaking.

Doris and Miss Cherry exchanged glances. Miss Cherry let go of her bag and dashed around the counter.

"Dr. Young! It's okay! Just a little mess." She grabbed a tissue and started to sweep up the desk.

Dr. Young was finally satisfied that his notebook was clean, then looked down at the floor. "No, no, no, no, no, no!" He knelt down and tried to sweep up the glitter there.

Doris put her hand on his trembling shoulder. "Dr. Young, leave that! I'll get Big Mac to mop it up. Just leave it."

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“Oh, no! Can’t leave it. Mother says...” He caught himself and stopped. He resumed futilely trying to gather up the glitter from the floor. A moment later he fell backwards.

Doris caught his shoulders before he hit the floor. “He’s hyperventilating,” she observed. She turned to look for a paper bag.

Miss Cherry knelt down next to him. She grabbed his face in her hands. “You need to stop panting like that!” She leaned over and put her lips to his.

Doris returned with a paper bag. She began counting.

Finally Doris took her lips from his.

“Twenty seconds,” commented Doris.

It was the longest, most passionate kiss Dr. Young had ever experienced in his relatively short life. His eyes were closed. But his breathing was back to normal. A bit of a smile crept onto his scrunched face, as Miss Cherry still held his face in her hands.

“You okay, Doc?” asked Doris.

“Jusht fine,” the doctor said through puckered lips.

He opened his eyes and saw Miss Cherry looking into them.

“Sorry, but you were hyperventilating. It was all I could think of.”

“Don’t be sorry. It was...nice.”

Miss Cherry smiled. She took her hands from his face, grasped his hand and stood up. He followed.

He looked down at the glitter on the desk.

Miss Cherry waved her hand over it. “Don’t worry! We’ll clean it up.” She said to Doris, “Let’s get a wet cloth. Hurry.”

The doctor looked from the desk back to Miss Cherry. “It’s okay. It’s just glitter, right?”

“Right!”

He dropped his eyes to the floor. “I’m sorry...I’m sorry to make such a fuss. Did I say something about Mother? How embarrassing. It’s just that I was taught...”

“You don’t have to explain. We all have our baggage to carry.”

He turned his gaze up to her face. She was smiling. He broke into a smile.

Doris returned with a wet cloth and looked at them, their gazes still locked on each other. She gently pushed the doctor. “Why don’t you two...” She almost said ‘lovebirds.’ “Why don’t you two go on and I’ll clean up.”

## Tales from The Home

They walked around the counter and Miss Cherry picked up her bag.

He cocked his head to one side. “Miss Cherry. I don’t even know your first name.”

She gave him another smile. “What would you like it to be?”

He thought for a moment. “Juliet. Is it Juliet Cherry?”

Her face brightened. “Yes! That’s it!”

“Really! Oh my! I can’t believe it! Is it really?”

She gave his cheek a gentle pinch. “No. It’s Clara. Clara Cherry.”

“Oh!” he said with a perplexed look on his face.

“You don’t like it?”

His head cocked up. “No! It’s great! I love it! Clara. That’s the name of the girl in The Nutcracker ballet. I love that ballet.”

“That’s who I was named for!” She didn’t really know why her parents chose that name, but hey...it might have been from The Nutcracker.

“And I don’t know your first name, Doctor.” That was a white lie.

“What would you like it to be?”

She paused for a moment. “Alan.”

His jaw dropped open. “That *is* my name!”

She snickered.

“Wait a minute...You knew my name, didn’t you?”

“I’m not telling.” She turned and took him by the arm. “Why don’t we head over to the Marker 17 Bar ‘n Grill? You can tell me more about your mother.”

He stiffened. “Oh, I don’t think you want to hear about Mother.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Say. You don’t still live with her, do you?”

“Gosh, no! I moved out after high school and never looked back.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Well, you can tell me about it over drinks. Or dinner.”

“Or both,” he added. “Let me take that.” He took the bulky bag from her shoulder and examined it. “Hmmm. It looks a bit...mixed.” He avoided the word ‘disorganized.’ “Maybe I can sort it out for you.” He opened the bag.

She clapped her two hands over the top of the bag. “No! It’s the way I like it.”

He looked at the bulging bag. He looked at her determined face. He looked back at the bag. She could see the tension in his jaw as it moved from side to side. His face relaxed.

## Tales from The Home

“Of course. It’s your bag. Not mine.”

“Great! And I’ll be the one doing the psychoanalysis tonight, not you, alright? And all I charge is one nice dinner.”

“I agree to your fee structure,” he replied with a smile.

They walked down the hall with Doris watching. She looked at Miss Cherry’s pink blouse and baggy green slacks and orange sneakers. She noticed that her socks did not match. The doctor’s dark suit looked tailored and expensive and fit him perfectly. As they passed a trash can she tossed a tissue toward it but it bounced off the lip and dropped to the ground. She walked on. He stopped. He went back and picked up the tissue and put it in the bin, then rejoined Miss Cherry and they walked on.

Doris murmured, “I hope it’s true that opposites attract. Cuz that’s the new Odd Couple right there.”

As she resumed wiping up the floor she laughed. “I think the headhunter has a new head to hang on her trophy wall! The shrink has been shrunk!”

## Tales from The Home

24

### The Not-So-Great Escape

Josiah Grund and Judge Digger sat in the lobby, looking at the glimpse of the Indian River one could see through the windows on either side of the glass entry door.

“Well, at least The Home was a nice location. Right on the river. Can’t beat that. We’ll probably get stuck in some hellhole on the mainland, Judge. No river. No sea breeze. Heat, humidity and traffic noise. Just lovely.”

“Josiah, I fear you are correct. And I know how much you love sitting by the water. I’ve asked my family to look for another place on the river but they – well, my one nephew – says there ain’t none. All condos now. So, mainland it will be, no doubt.”

They sat in silence for a bit. The tall mast of a yacht in full sail was visible as it followed the wind downriver.

“Prob’ly headin’ down to the inlet, then out to the ocean. Sail the deep blue sea.” The Judge sighed.

“You know, Judge, I ain’t seen the ocean since I got here.”

“Still there. Looks the same.” The Judge chuckled.

“Yeah, but you know...It’s right there and we never get to see it. I mean, the river is nice and all. But I’d like to see the ocean one last time before we have to leave. Something about it... You look out and it seems to stretch out to infinity. Like, endless possibilities. It’s like...looking at life, or sumthin’. And out beyond that horizon is...is...”

“Death?” observed The Judge.

Josiah snorted. “No! Well...beyond life. Afterlife? Whatever that is.”

“You not a believer?” asked The Judge.

“Oh, raised Assembly of God. But over the years...I just don’t think any religion can understand God. Not really.” Josiah thought for a moment. “I think that’s why I like the water so much. Always moving, changing, full of life, all sorts of mysteries hidden under the surface. Like life. Like the universe. Like God.”

“I didn’t realize you were such a philosopher, Josiah.”

## Tales from The Home

“Well, walking all those mail routes does give one time to think. And livin’ here – what do we have other than time to think?”

The Judge thought for a moment. “Bingo! That’s what we have here! Time. At least, what’s left of it.”

They both laughed, then fell silent. They could see the resident great blue heron fly in and land on the dock.

“He’s prob’ly wondering where I am today. Sorry, Bluey, no feeding today.” Josiah sighed. “Seriously, one last time, to see the ocean.”

The Judge thought for a moment. “Well, why don’t we?”

Josiah looked at him. “Don’t we what?”

“Let’s go to the ocean. You know, the pier is right across A1A. We really should take one last look.”

Josiah glanced back at Maya at the reception desk. “How we gonna do it? We can’t just go out. Maya would see us. And all the other doors have alarms.”

“We’ll need a distraction.”

They thought for a moment.

“Bomb threat?” suggested Josiah.

“No! We don’t need the police down on us!”

Another moment passed.

This time Josiah said, “Fire alarm?”

“No! Well...” The judge thought for a moment. “That would open the door at the end of the south wing, out to the driveway, then out to A1A. That might work. Staff would be busy with everyone else.”

“Enjoying the view?” said a soft but strident voice.

Josiah and The Judge gave a jump. Ms. Gordon had an eerie way of suddenly appearing out of the blue.

“Uh, yes, Ms. Gordon. Nice day,” mumbled The Judge.

“No bird feeding today, Mr. Grund?”

“No, ma’am, family couldn’t make it today.”

“Well, your blue heron is going to miss you.” She pointed toward the dock and then went on her way.

## Tales from The Home

“She don’t miss much, do she?” whispered Josiah.

“She’s downright spooky. Think she heard us?”

“Well, she dint say nothin’. Don’t you think she would have said sumthin’ if she heard us?”

“No matter. Let’s do it. When?”

They thought for a moment. The Judge suggested, “How ‘bout tomorrow morning during the Bingo game? Most everybody will be in there. And the staff will be busy with them when the alarm goes off.”

“Perfect. We can use the alarm in the north hallway, then go out the south.”

“Well, why not just use the south alarm?”

“Cuz first thing they’ll do is check the alarm that was pulled.”

“Right.”

“Fine. Who’s pulling the alarm?”

The Judge thought for a moment then said, “As a judge I don’t think I should. Dignity of the bench, and all that. Plus, the state has my fingerprints.”

Josiah grunted. “Nonsense! You...Oh, never mind. I had plenty of practice back in school. I’ll do it around 9:30. Be over in the south wing to meet me there.”

“Roger that. Maybe we should avoid each other the rest of the day. Don’t want The Gorgon to get any more suspicious. Oh, and be sure to charge up your chair tonight.”

“Righto.” Unfortunately Josiah’s memory was not what it once was.

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At 9:30 on the dot the fire alarm went off. Nurse Wingham jumped up from her seat at the nurses’ station and scanned the screen above the desk. None of the cameras showed any obvious smoke or flame. On the alarm board the north wing light was flashing. She looked back at the screen but Josiah had already wheeled out of view. Doris, Miss Dumly and Big Mac came running. Ms. Gordon came at a brisk walk.

“Mac, check the north wing for smoke and fire, get any patients moving out the north door. Hanna, go to the south wing. Doris, help Miss Cherry get everyone out of the community room – bingo, you know. Emily, get Miss Theresa on portable oxygen so we can roll her out on her bed.” Then she called 911, even though she knew the fire department would already know the alarm was tripped.

## Tales from The Home

Josiah rounded the nurses' station heading to the south wing.

"No, Mr. Grund! Go out the front!" yelled Nurse Wingham.

He ignored her and kept going but she was too busy to notice. The Judge was waiting at the south wing emergency exit.

"C'mon!" He waved impatiently at the approaching Josiah then pushed the door open with his three-wheeled mobility scooter, which was the envy of the rest of The Family. Josiah followed in his older motorized wheelchair.

They rolled down the sidewalk toward Yellow Hibiscus Road that led out to A1A. The Judge went full-speed over the curb into the driveway, the bottom of his scooter scraping the edge of the curb. Josiah followed his lead. His wheelchair had a bit more clearance than The Judge's scooter, but he took the curb at a bit of an angle and almost toppled over as his right front wheel dipped down. Josiah instinctively threw his weight to the left to compensate and he and the wheelchair stayed upright. They rolled on down the driveway, voices outside the facility now coming to their ears. The Judge's scooter moved easily but Josiah had to push his throttle to the max to keep close.

The Judge stopped when they reached busy A1A and Josiah pulled up next to him. Josiah pointed to the left. "The pier is over there." He could see the sign above its entrance.

"C'mon," urged The Judge. He turned his scooter to the left. "There must be a crosswalk over here."

Josiah pushed his throttle to keep up. There was indeed a crosswalk, with stoplights to accommodate the pedestrians crossing the busy road. The Judge pressed the crossing button.

In a minute or so the light changed, the traffic came to a stop and the 'Walk' signal lit up.

The Judge led the way with Josiah behind him. He crossed the four lanes and breathed a sigh of relief. "Made it!" He heard nothing from Josiah. The Judge looked back. Josiah and his wheelchair were sitting in the middle of A1A, Josiah furiously wiggling his throttle stick.

"What the...?" The Judge turned his scooter around – it had a surprisingly tight turning radius as promised in the ads – and rolled out to Josiah.

"I guess it's the battery!" yelled Josiah as he rocked back and forth, as if that would get it to go.

The Judge rolled his eyes. The 'walk' signal turned yellow. "Oh boy..." He rolled his scooter behind Josiah's wheelchair and gently gave it a push. Nothing but a scraping sound as his

## Tales from The Home

bumper hit the rear of the wheelchair, which did not budge. The Judge pushed his throttle again, but they only moved an inch or so.

“Put it in neutral!” The Judge shouted.

Josiah twisted around and pointed down at the bottom of the wheelchair. “The neutral switch is back there!”

“What...?! Who designed that gol-durn...”

“Hold on!”

Josiah could walk a little, though not very steady on his feet. By now the light had turned green, and the cars that had lined up in both directions started to honk their horns. Josiah carefully stood up, holding onto the wheelchair for balance. He eased his way to the back of the wheelchair and bent down. He grasped the lever and with a wince as he felt a twinge in his back he pulled it up.

Now, that section of A1A is built so that the center is a little higher and the road slopes to the edges so that the often-heavy rain would run off more effectively. The result was that as soon as Josiah flipped his chair into neutral it began to roll forward. His left hand was holding onto it and as his left arm was stretched out by the fleeing wheelchair he was looking at a face-plant into the asphalt. He felt a firm hand grasp his right upper arm and hold him up. Fortunately The Judge still had a strong grip.

“Hold on, buddy.” The Judge eased his scooter up next to Josiah and helped him toddle across the road amidst the honking horns.

Meanwhile the impatience of the drivers had built up and one who was several cars back and could not see the wheelchair fiasco had enough. He gunned his Mustang and swerved across the center line into the left lane to bypass the cars sitting in front of him. However, the lanes on that side of the road were now clear of the wheelchairs and those cars started forward. The Mustang was now heading straight into that oncoming traffic. He swerved back to the middle of the road but there was not enough room for his car, the car sitting to his right, and the car heading toward him. His right front fender dug into the car on the right and his rear swung out to the left so that the oncoming car hit his left rear panel, creating a three-car jam in the middle of busy A1A. It was at that time that the siren of a fire truck responding to the alarm at The Home could be heard approaching. It would not get through the jammed traffic any time soon. Thank goodness it was a false alarm.

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The Judge and Josiah had reached the edge of the road and heard the screeching of brakes and the crunching of metal followed by a chorus of honking horns. Josiah got in his wheelchair and The Judge's scooter was barely able to push it forward down the sidewalk. Neither looked back.

A surfer with his salt-encrusted shoulder-length hair, pink tank top and floral boardshorts was looking on as Josiah and The Judge approached the parking lot in front of the pier. The sound of shouting voices joined the honking horns and fire truck siren behind them..

“Whoa, dudes, what happened? You okay? I heard some gnarly crunching sounds!”

The Judge answered. “Oh, you know. Crazy drivers. Not safe to cross the road these days. And then my friend's wheelchair ran out of juice.”

“Bummer, man. You headed to your car or something?”

“No, to the pier actually. We're...uh, we're here as handicapped representatives of the day. It's that...uh...program they've got. You know, for the disabled...”

“Oh, right, dude! Sure!” the surfer said supportively but ignorantly. “You need help or something?”

“I don't think I can push my friend up the ramp to the pier. Maybe you could...give him a push?”

“Oh, sure, man!” He saw Josiah's cap with a boat on the front. “Glad to help our disabled veterans! Go Navy!”

Josiah and The Judge did not correct him.

They got to the entrance with the surfer's help, who went on his way with a cheerful “Pomaika'i!” The two had no idea what that meant but it sounded friendly.

The Judge once again positioned his scooter behind Josiah's wheelchair, hoping he could push him along the flat pier. They began to move.

“Hold on” said a stern voice.

They looked to their right and a man with straggly hair and a thin beard was sitting behind a counter. “Two bucks each.”

Josiah looked back at The Judge and shrugged. Neither had brought their wallets.

The Judge spoke up. “We're seniors.”

“That's why it's only two bucks.” The man pointed at the sign above him showing the various fees.

## Tales from The Home

The Judge tried again. “*Disabled* seniors.”

“Two bucks.”

And once more: “Disabled *veteran* seniors.” The Judge internally cringed at that little lie, but he would get over it.

The man rolled his eyes. “Okay. One buck each. Just for today.”

They still didn’t have the money.

A man dressed touristy with a loud Hawaiian shirt and powder blue cargo shorts overheard. “Hey, let me get this for you.” He pulled out his wallet. “What branch were you in?” He handed the clerk two dollars.

“Uh, why, the Navy, of course,” responded Josiah, continuing the lie.

“Yeah? My dad was Navy! Where’d you serve?”

Josiah hesitated. The Judge jumped in. “We were Naval Intelligence, so we can’t say anything more than that.”

“Gotcha. Well, always appreciate our servicemen.” He gave them a salute. “I couldn’t serve myself. Bone spurs, you know.” He pointed at his feet.

“Yeah, I hear that a lot,” said The Judge with a smirk as he pushed Josiah forward.

Their progress was slow and the scraping of the two machines produced an annoying high-pitched squeaking sound. They had not yet reached the edge of the water when a voice offered, “Need help?”

There were two Hispanic teenagers, each carrying a fishing pole, one with a tackle box and the other a bait bucket. Their t-shirts and cut-off shorts bore the fish blood stains of previous conquests.

“Well, my chair ran out of juice.”

“And my battery meter is getting low, having to push him.”

One of the boys handed his bucket and pole to the other. “Here.” He got behind Josiah’s wheelchair and started to push.

“Thanks, *hombres!*” Josiah wasn’t sure that was the right word to use, but the boys didn’t seem to mind.

The boys found Josiah a nice spot overlooking the water and beach. The Judge pulled up next to him.

“Thanks, guys. Good luck with your fishing.”

## Tales from The Home

One replied. "Gracias, but we don't need *luck!*"

He proved to be right as Josiah and The Judge watched them pull in a number of fish. Some of them they called 'la pesky-dee-ah' or at least that's how it sounded to their gringo ears. A larger one they called 'el pargo.' They even caught a sting ray, easily recognizable without help.

It was a beautiful day. The ocean did indeed seem to stretch to infinity. A trawler slowly crossed their view. Farther out near the horizon they could see a tanker headed north. Pelicans dive-bombed schools of fish, with sea gulls swooping down and scooping up their leftovers, although some of them preferred the easy pickings of human leftovers around the pier. A small group of dolphins headed south. A large sea turtle passed near the pier. White fluffy clouds would intermittently bring relief from the hot sun. Not that they would complain about the sun. It felt good. The scent of the sea air was invigorating, despite the fish and bait remnants on the pier. It was all good for Josiah and the Judge.

"Do we have to go back?" asked Josiah.

"That's a good question. But not yet."

"I am a bit hungry."

"Yeah, and I think Miss Boulanje is making her jambalaya tonight." The judge glanced at his watch. "But we've got plenty of time."

"Not that we can get back anyway," said Josiah with a laugh.

"Yeah, we might be permanent residents of the pier!"

They both chuckled.

A deeper voice said, "Fraid not."

The turned and looked up to see the towering figure of Big Mac standing behind them.

In unison they said, "Oh boy..."

"How'd you find us?" asked The Judge.

Big Mac walked to the railing and looked over. "Ms. Gordon spotted you toodling down the driveway. But we were tied up with the fire alarm and couldn't stop you. *Somebody* pulled a fire alarm it seems." He looked down at the two.

"I wonder who would do such a thing?" asked Josiah, trying to suppress a smile.

"Yeah, I wonder. And then it took a while for the fire truck to come and give the all clear. Some sort of accident held them up, they said."

## Tales from The Home

“Really?” said The Judge in his most innocent voice. “I wonder what happened.”

“Wouldn’t be surprised if two crazy seniors had somethin’ to do with it.”

“Don’t see how,” replied Josiah. “Of course, we were just minding our own business in our wheelchairs, enjoying a nice day. A *very* nice day. I guess you mean, two *other* crazy seniors.”

“Well, anyway, time to get home, guys.”

“Did you see all the fish those guys caught?” The Judge pointed at their two teenage friends.

That worked as Big Mac could not resist checking out their catch and exchanging some fishing tips. It bought them a little more time.

“Alright, time to go, guys.”

“I’ll need a push. Battery’s out,” said Josiah.

“And mine might go out,” added The Judge pointing to his batter meter in the yellow.

Mac rolled his eyes. He got behind Josiah’s wheelchair and started to push. The Judge, resigned to their fate, pointed his scooter down the pier. He did not make it off the pier before his battery also ran out.

“Oh, well, guess we’re stuck,” said The Judge a bit smugly.

“Not quite.” Big Mac positioned Josiah in front of The Judge’s scooter. “Put it in neutral, Judge.”

The judge complied.

Big Mac lined up the two and began to push. “Just like the blocking sleds back at school.” He moved them along at a steady pace.

Unfortunately, neither The Judge nor Josiah thought about their experience on A1A. Josiah’s wheelchair got to the edge of the ramp leading down to the parking lot and it began to roll down. With surprising acceleration.

“Whoooooaaaaa...” screamed Josiah as his voice faded into the distance. It was hard to tell if it was thrill or fear.

It took Big Mac a moment to realize what had happened. He took off running, faster than he had since his last football game at the university.

Josiah reached the parking lot going an admirable pace and just missed the back of a car that was driving by. Fortunately the ramp was lined up with one of the lanes in the parking lot so

## Tales from The Home

Josiah continued on without smacking into a parked car. As he neared the end of the lot a car turned up that lane, saw the wheelchair speeding toward him and managed to turn in time to avoid Josiah but could not avoid running into the back of one of the cars parked there with a sharp crunch and the tinkling of headlights and brake lights followed immediately by some loud cussing.

Josiah looked ahead. There was a row of shrubs at the far end of the parking lot, forming a border along A1A, which was busy with traffic as usual. He closed his eyes and clenched the arms of his wheelchair.

The wheelchair had lost a little speed in the flat parking lot so Josiah's entry into the shrubs was not too painful and fortunately they were dense enough that he did not proceed onto the certain-death of A1A. Big Mac caught up, out of breath. He pulled Josiah's wheelchair back out of the shrubs.

Josiah looked up at him, a scratch running across his forehead and another on his left cheek. His hat was still tangled in the bush. "Let's do it again!"

Big Mac managed to get them into The Home's van and back in time for Miss Boulanje's jambalaya. The rest of The Family plied them with questions about their adventure and the two enjoyed embellishing the details. Of course the fire alarm itself was not mentioned. The staff was surprisingly quiet about the affair. The Judge thought, *The calm before the storm?*

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It was the next morning that Ms. Gordon had Josiah and The Judge brought to the sun room. She paced back and forth in front of the window and finally stopped and stared at them.

"Three cars in an accident on A1A. Two cars in the parking lot at the pier. Thank goodness no injuries. Fire crew tied up with a false alarm. What have you got to say for yourselves?"

The two were silent for a moment, and then the Judge said, "I can answer this. Pedestrians, or in this case, wheelchairs, always have the right of way." He smiled.

Ms. Gordon glared at him and tapped her foot. *He may be technically right.* "You don't take responsibility? I'm concerned that The Home will be held liable for this." She was hoping to make them sweat a little.

"I don't see how," replied The Judge calmly. "I am a judge, you know. Take the case of *Binton v Causwell, 1995* I think it was..."

## Tales from The Home

“Oh, please, enough of your cases! There may be an even more serious matter. The false fire alarm. It appears that someone pulled the alarm in the north wing.”

“Appears?” queried The Judge.

“Well, no one was looking at the monitor at the time, but the fire crew thinks that’s what tripped the alarm.”

“But no one saw anybody actually trip the alarm?” asked The Judge.

“Well, no.”

The judge continued: “I suppose it’s possible one of the less lucid members of The Family might have accidentally tripped the alarm. Hard to hold someone accountable if they’re ‘non compos mentis.’ But you know, this place is getting old. Maybe Mother hasn’t been keeping it up to code. Especially now that they’re closing the place. Probably *their* fault, not anybody here, really.” The Judge had a half-smile on his face as he looked back at Ms. Gordon.

Ms. Gordon’s foot stopped tapping but she kept her eyes locked on The Judge. Then she shifted her stare to Josiah. He had a red line running across his forehead and another on his cheek as souvenirs of his adventure. “What have you got to say about all this, Mr. Grund?”

Mr. Grund thought for a moment. “I think The Judge summed it up pretty well.”

Ms. Gordon stared at him for a moment then resumed her pacing for a minute. She stopped and turned to look at them.

“I suppose at this time in The Home’s history there’s no point in telling you that a repeat of your little escapade will not be tolerated.”

“No point at all,” noted The Judge with a smile.

She stared at them for a moment, then her shoulders slumped and her face relaxed.

“How was it?”

Josiah and The Judge exchanged glances.

“Glorious!” spouted Josiah with a big grin.

“Another day in paradise!” beamed The Judge.

## Tales from The Home

25

### Goodbye Yellow Hibiscus Road

Chief Petty Officer John Paul Gupton handed his suitcase to Big Mac, who put it in the back of the van. He looked back at The Home one last time. Then he looked at Ms. Gordon.

“I’m gonna miss those poker games,” he said in his gravelly voice.

“Perhaps you can start one at your new home, Mr. Gupton.”

“We’ll see. Won’t get to take your money anymore, though.”

“I think you’ve got that backwards. I won’t get to take *your* money.”

“Eh, we’ll call it even.” He looked up at the sky. “Not sure it’ll be as warm out there.”

“I hear the climate in San Diego is very nice.”

“Yeah, I guess. I’ve been there, back in the day. But I’ll bet it’s changed. Everything changes. But my grandson, he says he’ll take me out to the naval base when he can. Watch the ships.”

“I’m sure you’ll enjoy that.”

“Yeah.”

Big Mac started the van. Guppy wrung his hands and looked down at the ground.

“Well, better get going. I guess this is goodbye.”

“Goodbye and good luck, Guppy.”

He looked up and saw something he had never seen before. Ms. Gordon was smiling. He returned the smile.

“Finally you call me ‘Guppy.’ Finally.”

“Finally.”

He took a seat in the van, turned and gave The Gorgon a salute.

She returned the salute and closed the van door.

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As Ms. Gordon approached the entrance the door opened and out stepped Eddie Marconi, who held the door, followed by Betty Blinkin and then Nurse Penibel carrying a suitcase.

“Oh, you’re on your way, then?”

## Tales from The Home

“Yes!” said Eddie. “Got the place all ready for her! Oh, Betty, you’ll like Sunrise. Not right on the river like this place, but you can see it from the deck. Meals are good, too!” He glanced at Ms. Gordon. “Not that the meals here aren’t good. I gave Miss B my compliments last night.”

A middle-aged man approached and reached for the suitcase.

“This is my son, Glen. This is Ms. Gordon, and Nurse Penibel.”

The group exchanged hellos and smiles.

As Nurse Penibel handed him the suitcase she said to Mrs. Blinkin, “So, you’ll have a place of your own, I suppose?”

“Oh, I’ll be with Eddie.”

The nurse smiled. “You’re getting married, then?”

Eddie jumped in. “Doesn’t really seem to be a point to that. We’ll be together, that’s the main thing.”

“Together...in sin?”

Eddie and Betty were taken back a bit. Then Eddie spoke. “No. Together...in love.”

“Unmarried,” replied the nurse.

Eddie answered without hesitation, “As married as Adam and Eve, I suppose.”

“Adam and Eve were brought together by *God!*”

Then Betty spoke up, staring down Nurse Penibel. “Just as we were brought together *by God!* I mean, have you forgotten that lightning bolt from the sky! If that wasn’t God, then what was it?!”

The nurse gave a ‘hmmph’ and went back inside.

Ms. Gordon shook her head – *Will Nurse Penibel ever lighten up?* – and said, “I hope you’re both very happy there.”

“I’m sure we will be,” replied Betty. “Not that we weren’t happy here. I know you did your best to take care of us.” She leaned over and gave Ms. Gordon a peck on the cheek.

*I think that’s the first time one of The Family ever gave me a kiss!* “Thank you. Good bye.”

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## Tales from The Home

The group for dinner was the smallest Ms. Gordon had seen since The Home first opened, some having already moved on and the rest scheduled to go the next day. The Judge, Mr. Grund and Big Mac sat at a table playing cards. She walked over.

“Not poker?”

“Nah,” replied The Judge. “Just some gin rummy to kill the time. Mac already took all the quarters anyway.”

“What are you going to do with all those quarters, Mac?” asked Josiah as he played a card.

“Laundry. And there’s a video arcade near me. They won’t last long. And it turns out Miss Glenda likes video games, too.”

“Miss Glenda? You seein’ her?” asked The Judge.

“Well...sort of. I went to hear her play at The Casbah. She plays with a small combo on the weekends. Turns out we both like classic jazz. We went to the jazz festival in Orlando last weekend.”

“Wellll...Big Mac got himself a girl! How ‘bout that!”

Big Mac blushed, not that they could tell. “It’s not like that! We’re just friends.”

“Friends now, but later...” added Josiah.

Ms. Gordon visualized the petite Miss Glenda next to the sizeable Big Mac. “Just be careful you don’t break her,” she cautioned.

Big Mac’s flush deepened and was just barely visible now. “C’mon, guys!”

“Gin,” called The Judge.

“If I could have your attention!”

They turned to see Hippie Hommel standing under the television. He was wearing his usual colorful poncho, but in place of his usual peace-sign headband he had substituted a black one.

“I wrote a poem to commemorate the occasion.”

“Of course you did,” groaned The Judge.

“I want to hear it,” said Jo Janiko.

“Me, too,” added Luna Maggio.

“Thank you.” He cleared his throat. “I call this one, ‘Reality Sucks.’ By Herbert Hippie Hommel...”

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“I gaze upon the crescent moon,  
Stars twinkle, morning comes too soon.  
During the night my mind flies free,  
Adventures which I will never see, because  
Reality sucks.

I eat my gruel, life is so cruel,  
My joints all ache, My legs they quake.  
Why did I come into this room?  
I forgot something I assume.  
Just another step closer to my tomb, because  
Reality sucks.

Another day, another death.  
Felled by the Grim Reaper’s shibboleth.  
We each are but Fate’s handpuppet,  
Taking our turn to kick the bucket.  
My friends I now count on one hand  
As we depart to Nowhereland.  
Now Our Home is being ditched  
So the owners can get rich.  
Because you see...”

The Family anticipated the final line and they all said in unison, loudly:

“Reality sucks!”

They all laughed. Big Mac laughed hardest of all as he had noticed that even Ms. Gordon had joined in for that last line. “Good one, Hippie!” he called out.

Ms. Gordon thought, *He called it ‘Our Home.’ So, maybe they did think of it as home.*

Miss Boulanje had prepared a special meal. It started with her special gumbo, toned down for the senior palate; on her own she would have made it much spicier. She had a selection of fresh vegetables that she picked up at the market, not out of a can. And they were steamed, not

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charred on this occasion. Lasagna was a popular favorite with The Family, even if it did come from the food service. And for dessert she had prepared a big cake and on its white cream cheese frosting she had written with blue icing:

GOOD BUY

AND

GOOD LUK!

English was not her first language, obviously.

As Miss Boulanje was cutting and handing out the pieces of cake Luna asked her, “What are you going to do?”

“Oh, they’s a new Carib’yan rest’runt openin’ and they wants me to be da cook. Better pay, too! And I can really spice things up! I made a dish for da boss and he broke out in a sweat! Loved it!”

They watched Wheel of Fortune one last time, and Mrs. Plessit impressed everyone by getting the Bonus Round Puzzle, even though there were only three letters to work with.

“You’d a won a car!” observed Josiah.

“What would I do with a car?” she replied.

The Judge spoke up. “You take the cash. They make you pay the tax up front, so most people just take a cash prize instead of the car or the vacation or whatever.”

“Really?” said Jo. “I always picture them riding around in their new car or cruising the Riviera. I guess nothing’s real on TV.”

“Not much. I think there was a court case about that back in 1987. I think it was called...”

“Judge!” interrupted Josiah. “Enough of the court cases! We ain’t lawyers! Don’t need to know the president.”

“Pre-ce-dent,” corrected the Judge.

The Family, what remained of it, stayed up later than usual. The hurricane was discussed. The dolphins and manatees and birds. Mrs. Plessit read a list of all the birds she had spotted through her binoculars. Josiah and The Judge once again regaled the group with the story of their adventure to the pier. And they reminisced about some of the Family Members who had passed on, raising a toast of watered-down sugar-free lemonade to each.

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“And to the late Dr. Fenton,” added Mrs. Plessit with a smile as she raised her cup. That was not greeted with much enthusiasm.

“I’ll miss Dr. Blackwood,” said Luna. “Nice doctor. I know he and Valentina will be very happy together.”

They raised their cups to the new couple.

Finally Nurse Wingham on her last night of duty at The Home chased them off to bed.

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The next morning Big Mac began early shuttling Family Members in the van to their new facilities. A few had family members pick them up, but not as many as one might hope.

Sally Kellog took Ms. Gordon by the hand and squeezed it. “Thank you.” She leaned forward and whispered. “I never did like it when they called you ‘Medusa’ or ‘The Gorgon.’ You were always nice to me.” She got into the van with Big Mac’s help.

*They called me ‘Medusa’? ‘The Gorgon’? What?*

Ms. Gordon turned to go back in but Miss Cherry was coming out, pulling a cart full of art supplies behind her. “Need help with that? I can get Big Mac...”

“No, that’s okay. Alan is picking me up.”

“Alan?”

“Oh. Dr. Young. The psychiatrist.”

“Yes, I know him. I just didn’t expect him to be with you.”

Miss Cherry flashed a big smile. “You didn’t know? We’ve been seeing each other lately. It took soooo long to get his attention. Took a panic attack, really. You know these doctors – so consumed with their work.”

Ms. Gordon thought back to Dr. Fenton. *Not all of them.*

“Anyway...” Miss Cherry leaned forward. “I think he’s going to pop the question! Any day now!”

Just then they heard “Hello there!”

Dr. Young joined them and took hold of Miss Cherry’s cart. “Ready?”

“Sure.” She leaned forward and gave Ms. Gordon a quick squeeze. “Goodbye, Alicia. Hope we run into each other sometime.”

*Nobody ever calls me Alicia!* “I’m sure we will. Good luck.”

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As the pair headed for his car the doctor said, "I've got a special place in mind for dinner. On the water. Moon is supposed to be full tonight."

Miss Cherry put her hand behind her back and crossed her fingers and glanced back at Ms. Gordon with a smile.

*Good for her. And him.*

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Theresa Thomas had the 'honor' of being the last Family Member to leave. They arranged for an ambulance because she was so frail and dependent on oxygen. *She'll be better off in a better-equipped facility anyway*, rationalized Ms. Gordon.

She walked back into the lobby.

Maya was on her way out. "Thanks for that letter of reference. The new job should be good. A bit more upscale. Oh! I'm sorry, Ms. Gordon."

"No offense taken. I hope it works out well for you. And Dr. Smithy."

"Oh, you heard about him? Yeah. He's nice. And...a heart surgeon! That 'maxima' might be the best thing that ever happened to me!"

They stood there awkwardly for a moment, then Maya leaned over and gave Ms. Gordon an obligatory quick hug and then was out the door.

Ms. Gordon stood there for a moment. It was so quiet! It was eerie. She walked down the hallway, her footsteps echoing in the silence.

Nurse Wingham and Doris were at the nurses' station throwing away some papers and making sure everything was turned off.

"Thank you both for your good work here," said Ms. Gordon, leaning on the counter ledge.

"Thank you," they replied in unison.

"Doris, tell me again where you're going?"

"That urgent care center across the river. At least there won't be overnight shifts. Less frequent weekends. And should be interesting. Not quite as good as Emily's situation, though."

"Yes," agreed Ms. Gordon. "Miss Dumly. Private caretaker for some rich guy. Gee, I wonder how she landed that job."

Doris and Nurse Wingham laughed.

"Hanna, think you'll like the hospital?"

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“Gonna start in pediatrics, they said,” replied Nurse Wingham. “Should keep me hoppin’. But it’ll be good to get back to some real nursin’ work. Not that this wasn’t real work, sorry.”

“I understand. Well, I guess now you’ll be working on people starting out in life rather than helping them on the way out. Wait. That didn’t sound right.”

“I know what you mean. Yes, it’ll be nice to be with people looking forward to life rather than looking back on life.”

“Mrs. Blinkin didn’t get her chart,” said Doris.

“I’ll drop it off at her new place. I’m going that way. Anything else left? No? Listen. Just make sure everything is turned off. Grandmother will be taking care of the rest. It’s her responsibility now.”

Doris came out from behind the counter and Nurse Wingham followed. They took turns giving Ms. Gordon a hug. They both had tears in their eyes. Not that it was truly a sad occasion, but just because. Ms. Gordon remained dry-eyed. She went to her office as the other two gathered their things and headed out.

She had already taken home her personal effects, like pictures and knick-knacks. She spent some time on her computer, making sure any personal files were erased. She was about to turn it off when it suddenly went dark as did the overhead light. *What the...?* She picked up her briefcase and stepped into the hallway. Big Mac was walking from the south wing.

“Turned off the power, like they told me.”

“Oh, right. Forgot you were still here.”

They stood there by the nurses’ station for a moment in the silence and the dim light.

“Kind of spooky, ain’t it?” observed Big Mac. “Listen close, I’ll bet we can hear The Family walking the halls one last time. They’re saying their goodbyes.”

Ms. Gordon thought that was a bit odd, but she stood there for a moment and could indeed hear them in her mind. And see them. There was Mr. Gustafson lying on the floor, calling for help. There was Hippie delivering another one of his poems. Mrs. Plessit and her binoculars. Judge Digger citing another court case. Josiah Grund trying to stare her down to bluff her out of a poker pot. Jo and Ravel dancing during the sing-a-long session. And finally, Ms. Robel. She pictured her as the Wicked Witch from Oz, sending her flying monkeys to attack The Home. *She has the ruby slippers now, I suppose. Well, you can have them!*

Then she headed down the hallway and Big Mac followed her out.

## Tales from The Home

After one last look she locked the front door then turned to the parking lot, empty but for two cars. Big Mac looked down on her for a moment and then stepped forward and wrapped his long arms around his boss. Now ex-boss. She braced for the impact.

She felt a gentle squeeze that lasted a few moments and then he let go and stepped back.

“I guess you know your own strength.”

Big Mac laughed. “Yeah, I learned the hard way. When I gave my grandma a big hug and heard her ribs crack. Oh, was she mad! I was her errand boy for a month until she healed up!” He laughed again.

“Well, goodbye, Ms. Gordon.”

“Goodbye, Mac.”

He turned to go to his car.

“Wait!”

He turned back.

“I’m sorry. I’ve been so busy. That’s no excuse. Tell me, what have you got lined up for yourself?”

“Oh, you didn’t hear? The college here is starting up a football program. They hired me on as an assistant coach. And I’ll be teaching some PE, too.”

“Well, congratulations! I’m sure you’ll enjoy that.”

“Sure will!” He gave a wave and walked to his car.

Ms. Gordon went to her car and put her briefcase inside. She walked back toward The Home and looked up at the sign: ‘Peaceful Shore Care Facility.’ “The ‘S’ is sagging a bit. Not my problem now.” She pulled a small yellow hibiscus flower from one of the shrubs and put its stem through the buttonhole in her left lapel. “I hope it doesn’t stain.” She took out her phone and turned to take one last picture of The Home.

Ms. Gordon walked down to the dock. She brushed off the bench. “Mr. Grund and his breadcrumbs. And his birds.” She looked for a spot clear of bird droppings and sat down.

A boat motored past, an array of fishing poles pointing up to the sky. She waved, but the fisherman did not notice.

A pair of dolphins swam past, periodically breaking the surface with their dorsal fins as they took their breaths. A quartet of pelicans flew by. A mullet jumped. Just a leisurely jump, not a frantic one like being chased. *I wonder why they jump.*

## Tales from The Home

The heat had eased off some as the sun was headed toward the horizon and a gentle sea breeze made it more comfortable than usual. She took a deep breath and her sensitive nose could discern both the fresher scent of the ocean and the more musky scent of the lagoon, with a hint of the hibiscus flowers. She found it preferable to the mix of camphoraceous humans and sickly-sweet floral air fresheners inside The Home.

“Well, I did my best,” she said out loud.

A seagull landed on a piling near her, probably hoping for a handout.

“*We* did our best,” she told the bird. The bird cocked its head as if trying to understand.

“Sorry, you’ll have to find another source for breadcrumbs and shrimp and such. Come back in a year or so. Maybe the people in the new condos will feed you.”

The bird flitted one piling closer.

“What are my plans you ask? Well, I’m glad somebody asked. It just so happens that I will be the new manager of the outpatient surgery center. Yes, a bit different, but a good challenge. Of course, first I’m taking a week to go to Bermuda. Who knows? Maybe I’ll meet some rich yachtsman there. Handsome, dashing. Single, of course. Actually, a widower would be nice, somebody already broken in. Ah, one can dream...”

The sun was touching the mainland to the west now, its light scattering through the dense, humid air. There was a line of high clouds following the edge of the lagoon and their underbellies were lit up with shades of yellow, pink and orange. A group of white ibis flew by, silhouetted against the sun as they headed to their nighttime roost in the mangroves of a spoil island. She heard what sounded like a heavy exhalation. She walked to the edge of the dock and looked down upon a mother manatee and her hundred-pound calf. She noticed the prop scar on the mother’s back. “I’ve seen you before. Come to say goodbye? Yes, I’ll miss you, too.” She sighed. “For some reason I’ll miss all of this. But...adapt and overcome, right? That’s life.”

Alicia Gordon pulled a tissue out of her pocket and dabbed the tears running down her cheeks. She took in a deep breath through her nose and then exhaled slowly through her mouth. She forced a smile and felt a little better.

“Another day in paradise.”

The End of The Home