

The Spiral

Jessie H. Cochran

THE OLD man was back, on the bed again, lying flat, but he couldn't remember getting up there. It was a climb, too, because it was a hospital bed and higher than the one in his hotel room. His hands were folded on his stomach and he studied the backs of them. Mottled and livered, the nails turned inward like claws. I'm falling away, he thought. Falling away. What is happening? And then the spiral began again. That was the way the psychiatrist had put it: a spiral of thought we'll break with the shock treatment.

But all the treatments had done was to make it impossible for him to remember how he had gotten back in bed. It didn't matter. I'm dying, he thought. It's happening to me. It's the beginning. Then the walls of the room seemed to be reaching down and not up, and the spiral ceased and was all at once a straight drop, a deep shaft that was dark and pitted with cruel little lights that hurt his eyes and terrified him. He fought the whole way, trying to swim up; but how can you swim in the air? I'd climb back up, he thought, if someone would tell me how. There must be a way. I can't fight this thing. I don't even know what it is.

He reached bottom at last, or was suspended, because there wasn't any bottom to the shaft. But he stopped and for a wonderful, God-like moment his mind was empty and quiet before the thoughts came pouring in, like a flood tide over the arid, barren sand.

Everything that comes out of me is black. I should have gone to the doctor sooner; I thought I had diabetes. It's my own fault; there's no one to blame but myself. Old Jess Wright had diabetes and they cut off both his feet, but he died anyway. I'm going to die, it's the beginning of it. Nothing is going to do any good.

He opened his eyes and stared at his hands again, which were the same, except that just over the index finger was the psychiatrist who appeared for a moment to be standing on his bed. He wasn't, of course, only leaning against the footboard, but it gave him a bad moment. His hands jerked and trembled, which the psychiatrist did not miss.

"How are you today, Mr. Williams?"

The old man squinted to get his eyes adjusted, because they seemed to be playing funny tricks on him these days. I should have gone to see the doctor sooner. I thought I had it.

"Well, all right I guess." Of course this man, who was too young, couldn't help him. He was a pale little man, almost non-existent, except that his glasses caught and reflected the light, but this only meant you couldn't see his eyes. It was all futile, useless; what could possibly be done?

"You're going to be all right, you know. We'll break that spiral."

"Well."

With great effort he pulled himself up in bed and swung his feet over the side. His body reminded him of a beached whale he had seen once, the tremendous bulk fallen in on itself, dying on the beach. He felt his ribs caving into his stomach, which constantly dropped and dropped, sickening him.

"Does the diet here seem to be all right? Are you hungry between meals?"

And where will I go afterward, if I don't die here? Where will I go to die? The doctor was looking at him and he knew he had to say something, so he said that.

"Of course there's always the question of where I'll go when you folks here are through with me."

"Well we'll see about that. There are plenty of good rest homes until you feel like your old self again."

The old man laughed, because he couldn't remember his old self. There must have been one, somewhere, but it was lost now. The old self hadn't been dying, and he was. He had diabetes now, and he should have gone to see the doctor sooner. I have no one to blame, he thought, no one to blame but myself.

The doctor clutched his hands around the footboard and shoved himself into a straight, hopeful posture and almost smiled. He wore a gray suit and a dark blue tie with small designs in it and probably had a wife and children waiting for him at home. A long house, because these men made a lot of money. The old man paid him a lot of money, and he paid the hospital a lot of money, but neither this doctor nor any doctor nor any nurse in the whole hospital could tell him how to swim up out of the shaft. And he was willing to try it, because he'd always taken care of himself, but he just didn't know how.

"You seem in better spirits today, at any rate. Maybe our treatments are taking effect and you just don't know it yet."

He nodded and pulled back his lips hard over his gums, because he thought for a horrible minute he might cry, but he controlled it.

"Let's hope so," he said. "Let's hope so."

The Broken Record

Lucia Walton

AS THE front door swung open, a voice called down the stairs, "That you, Jenny?"

"Come on down, Mother, we've got company. Jack's in town and brought me home."

"Fine! I'll be down as soon as I finish dusting."

"Take off your coat, Jack, and come in the living room." Jenny shook snow from her dark page-boy and began stripping off her white gloves. The overhead light of the hall deepened the shadows that ridged her sharp cheekbones. Her thin face looked older than the square one of the young man with her, though they were of the