The Visit

George Curran

When we walked in, the nurse glanced over her shoulder and gestured for us to wait a moment. We stood by the door at the base of one of the beds. A woman was sleeping there—hands clutching a purse, mouth wide open, smelling of talcum and face powder. Smelling, I thought, like dust on rose-leaves:

But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know.*

Finally, the nurse took the syringe from my grandmother's mouth and wiped her face and chest with a paper napkin.

"Margaret, you have visitors," she said as she gathered her things. My mother and I sat in the two chairs by the bed. My father stood:

"We're just finishing up dinner," the nurse smiled at my father. "Is she eating?"

*T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton."
“Well, she was good at lunchtime. She ate some soup and drank some juice, but she doesn’t seem hungry now. Maybe she’ll eat some more for you.”

“Margaret, will you take a little more soup?” My grandmother made a gurgling sound when the soup was forced into her mouth.

“Come now, Margaret. It isn’t that bad. You need to eat to keep your strength.” A stream of soup blotched my grandmother’s gown.

“Well, Margaret. You don’t want an I.V. do you?” We all stared at her. “I guess that’s all she’ll eat. Have a nice visit.” The nurse picked up her tray and whisked out of the room.

“She ain’t much of an eater,” said a woman in a wheelchair. “The food around here stinks. Ya’ know, ya’ get used to home cooking, and when ya’ come here . . . I don’t know, dey ought to do somthin’.”

The wheelchair lady wore a pink gown with blue flowers on it. An arthritic arm hung like a bear claw from the end of the armrest.

“Ya’ got to eat, though. To keep your strength.”

“We brought her some bananas,” my mother said. “Maybe she’ll eat some bananas.”

“Do you want a banana? Here, I’ll peel you one.” My mother drew a banana from a paper bag, peeled it, and put half of it in my grandmother’s hand.

My grandmother lifted the hand with the banana to her mouth and bit a piece off with her lips. She took a large bite next—awkwardly, with both hands.

“What’s wrong with your arm now?” my father asked. “A couple of weeks ago, you decided you couldn’t walk. What kind of game are you playing?”

“Now, don’t choke. You’re getting banana all over yourself.”

“Do you want another half?” my mother asked. “Here.”

She ate the second half more quickly than the first. My father laughed.

“She likes ’dos bananas, don’t she?” said the wheelchair lady. “Dey don’t give us much fruit.”

Another woman entered the room carrying a pillow. She was well dressed and moved easily. “Look at this pillow they gave me! It’s like a concrete block!”

“Yeah, I knows dem,” said the wheelchair lady. “I had my son bring a feather pillow from home. It’s real soft. I can’t sleep on dem dey give us.”
The pillow lady noticed us. “How are you folks doing? It’s so nice to have visitors, isn’t it Margaret? Oh my, and they brought you a treat!”

“It’s awfully cold outside. I wish they’d turn on the heat.”

“You’re likely to freeze to death,” said the wheelchair lady. “I got three quilts, but jeez, dey ought to do somthin’.”

The pillow lady walked over to her bed and arranged her pillow under the blankets.

The woman in the bed by the door stirred. She still clung to the purse on her chest. Tufts of fine white hair went everywhere. Awake now, she meticulously opened her purse and slipped out a piece of yellowed newsprint. She brought it to her lips and kissed it repeatedly, then put it away.

“Would you like me to raise your bed a little, dear?” asked the pillow lady.

The purse lady looked up blankly. “God bless you, dear. You’re my little angel.”

“I’m not your little angel,” she said smiling. “We just take care of each other, don’t we?”

“Thank you, little angel. God bless you.”

The pillow lady cranked the bed up a couple feet and stood up holding her back. “I’m going for a little walk. It’s good to get a bit of exercise everyday. Now you all have a nice visit.”

“Are you goin’ to be back to take me to dinner?” asked the wheelchair lady.

“I’ll be back. Don’t worry.”

“That’s nice. I’ll wait for ya’.”

The pillow lady disappeared around the corner, and the wheelchair lady picked up a newspaper from her nightstand. The purse lady slipped the bit of newsprint from her purse, kissed it several times, put it back, and arranged and rearranged the things in her purse.

My grandmother tilted oddly in her bed and looked at us with watery eyes. She opened her mouth—nothing came out—and gestured to my mother.

“Do you want another banana?”

She nodded tiredly.

“Well, I’ll give you half, but I don’t want to give you anymore. You might get sick. O.K.?”

As she ate the banana, I noticed her wrist. It was thin, fragile, and encircled with a name band embossed “Margaret Dolan.” The name
so 

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seemed so alien to me. She was called “Grandma” by us and “Mom” by everyone else. I don’t recall her being called Margaret ever before. “Now you’re getting banana all over yourself,” my father scolded. He looked around for a paper napkin. Finding nothing, he pulled out his handkerchief and awkwardly picked the bits of banana from my grandmother’s gown and bed. “I’m going to find the nurse.” My father walked briskly from the room, folding his handkerchief. I looked at my grandmother. She looked at me. I spoke. “How are you doing, Grandma?” She said nothing, but held her eyes on me. I couldn’t understand what they were saying. “We’d like to have you for Thanksgiving,” my mother said. “But the doctors said you can’t leave unless you feel better. You need to get up and move around a little.” “My son lives in Arizona,” said the wheelchair lady. “He said I could come down, but I don’t think I could take the plane ride and all that. Maybe Christmas . . . .” “Is there anything you want?” my mother asked. “Do you have enough dresses and everything? I bought you a size ten like you said a couple weeks ago, but it seems much too big. You’ve lost a lot of weight since then.” A tear streamed from my grandmother’s eye. The purse lady was asleep now. Her head was tilted back and her mouth gaped open. Old people asleep always look dead to me. My father reentered the room and sat down. “We ought to get going.” “O.K.” my mother said. She looked at my grandmother. “Here, I left you some bananas. If you want another, just ask the nurse. They’re right here, and I’m sure they’ll get you one if you ask.” “Bob will be over next week,” my father said. “Now you start taking care of yourself.” “Goodbye, Grandma.” As we walked out, the wheelchair lady waved at us. “Bye-bye, now!” The commotion awakened the purse lady. She spoke with both hands raised. “God bless you. God bless you, my little angels. God bless you.” As I left the room, I saw her pull out her ragged piece of paper. She kissed it, kissed it again, and put it back in her purse. Then she pulled out a small box and opened it. With a small pad, she spotted her nose, cheeks and eyes with face powder. Rose dust, I thought. Rose dust.
Photo contributed by Elizabeth Vandegrift