

The Road to Hell Is Paved with Good Intentions

by Paul Pinckley

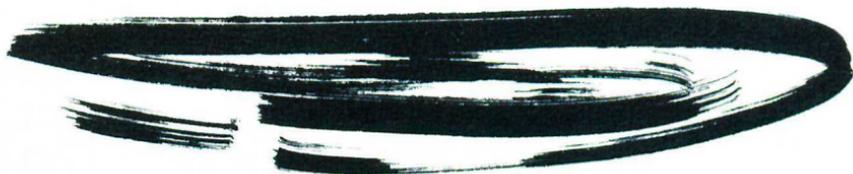
La Nora Kuntz lived in the Garwood Apartments on south Denny Street with her husband "old" Roy. She was a sixty-three-year-old dialysis patient whom I transported in an ambulance (non-emergency) every other morning at 6:00. My partner Barb and I picked her up at her home and took her to Methodist Hospital's 5R ward to be dialysed.

La Nora's kidneys had long since abandoned her. Her skin was as gray as silly putty from the salts and poisons that had failed to wash away. The dialysis machine would clean her tired old blood and pump it back to her tired old body. The treatment took several hours; around 1:00 we would return to take La Nora home. Sometimes we would arrive early, and she would still be on the machine, her blood on spin dry.

After her blood was folded up and tucked away into the linen closet of her veins, we would lift her onto the ambulance cot, wrap her up, and take her home to old Roy. We always had to carry La Nora because she was non-ambulatory. She had fallen outside Methodist Hospital one day and broken her knee. She attempted to sue the hospital for damages, but the attorneys just continued the case; they could stall it forever. They knew that she was a dialysis patient and would probably die in a couple of years.

After she had surgery to repair the broken knee, La Nora was provided with a brace and a physical therapist. The brace was too complicated and uncomfortable for her to bother with, and the physical therapist insisted upon laborious exercises to which La Nora would apply no effort. She dismissed both altogether in a short period of time. She simply lay in bed and watched television. With no support or exercise, her knee fused together as straight as a 2 x 4, one which soon withered to a 1 x 1. La Nora couldn't have cared less. Old Roy was there to care for her, and her outings of every other day were all the excitement she craved.

The ambulance cot didn't fit down the hallway to her bedroom, so Barb and I had to pick La Nora up and carry her into the living room to the cot. She was always eating and smoking in bed. Lifting her up out of the bed, we were usually rewarded for our efforts by putting our hands into spilt food, ashes, — or her excrement. Old Roy was not very good at patient care. He had lost his right arm in some mining accident, and he was an alcoholic. They fought most of the time. She would throw things at him, and he would return fire; he was a



poor shot however—nature didn't intend for him to be a southpaw.

La Nora would be particularly nasty to us if we were late in picking her up. This meant that she would be late in returning home in the afternoon and would miss her favorite soap operas. She had a nasty-little-old lady personality at all times, but missing her soaps made La Nora unbearable. She would pick at Barb, telling her that her hair was disgusting and that she was ugly and up to no good. She would tell me that I was shifty looking and that I acted as if I were on drugs.

Barb and I took abuse from La Nora with smiles, good nature, and oh-you-don't-really-think-so's. But it was not La Nora's miserable attitude that made her so obnoxious; La Nora had been obnoxious in her youth, or so old Roy told us. The renal unit at Methodist Hospital could not stand her, nor her doctors, nor old Roy, nor my partner Barb, nor I. Nobody could stand to be around La Nora Kuntz.

Many of us who had to deal with her caustic, condescending temperament had petty little mechanisms of retaliation, myself included. On Capitol Avenue at 18th Street, in front of Methodist Hospital, there was a particularly bad pothole. When La Nora was being unusually abusive and the act seemed justified, I would drive purposely and maliciously into the pothole. Little old La Nora would give a shriek as I bounced her little old arthritic ass into the air and she was caught by the safety belt across the waist and slammed back down. She would then throw at me epithets found only in the vocabulary of longshoremen. I would apologize with saccharine hypocrisy and then note that we were at the hospital and it was time to go inside.

Being dialised reduces the blood pressure to almost shock level and holds it there for several hours. One day, while she was on the machine, La Nora's blood pressure dropped even lower. She went into a grand mal seizure and lost consciousness. Soon afterwards her heart failed, and she was in full arrest. The technicians started CPR and administered drugs. They used the cardioverter and after thirty minutes of intense and aggressive treatment, when she was out of danger, we were called to take her home.

When we arrived, no one told us of her episode. (La Nora alone told us of her adventure, when we inquired about her unusually poor appearance.) Normally, when a patient suffers a full cardiac arrest, he or she is admitted to an intensive care ward for a period of recovery, yet La Nora was being sent back to her miserable apartment. I telephoned my manager to ask what to do. He in turn called La Nora's doctor to confirm the order and to make sure that he was aware of her condition.

"Take her home," the doctor said.

We took her home to old Roy and put her to bed.

That night, at 2:35 a.m., La Nora Kuntz died of heart failure.

* * *

A couple of days later, Barb and I, not having to make the early morning run anymore, had a chance to get some breakfast. I had waffles, eggs, and coffee; Barb who was dieting just had half a grapefruit. I had a chance to read the sports section; Barb did the crossword.

Later that day we had to go to Methodist Hospital to pick up some supplies. While we were stopped at the light at Capitol and 18th Streets, Barb and I silently watched as a road crew filled the pothole.