

Home Rounds

by Rebecca Saalfrank

"Morning, Hilda!"

The nurse's crisp polyester pants rustled and cracked as she twisted around and pulled the aluminum serving cart into the room backwards. One of the wheels on the cart stuck halfway through the turn, skidding stubbornly over the polished floor and across the threshold. The nurse turned away from the brightening corridor she had just left and looked over to her immediate right. Meaty Mrs. Lessing lay dully in her bed there, her hip sunk deep into the soiled sheets and her thick hand placed heavily on the pillow beside her iron-grey hair. Because of her incontinence, the nurses no longer even put any clothes on her below the waist; now, with her sheets kicked down to her ankles, she looked like a huge bleached whale beached on the bed. The nurse walked over and gently pulled the sheets back up over her.

"I said, GOOD MORNING, HILDA!"

"What?"

The nurse turned around, grasped the white fabric that hid the rear of the room and pulled the curtain back along its track toward the wall. The metal curtain hooks whizzed and then clattered and jumped crazily up and down as they reached the end of the oiled track. In the mustard light filtering through the curtained window, an old woman lay with her quizzical face turned toward the nurse. She blinked from behind thick glasses that magnified and distorted her eyes, making them look like run-together watercolors or melted brown poached eggs. Thin brown hair frizzed up from her head like cotton, and blue-veined turkey flesh jiggled beneath her arm bones.

"Do you want to get up today?" The nurse tore the window curtains open, and cold sunlight spilled into the stuffy room. "I said, DO YOU WANT TO GET UP TODAY?"

"Are you my new nurse?"

The nurse crossed over to Hilda's bed and smiled down at the brown hair. "No, I've been working here a good while now. Don't you remember?" The watercolor eyes turned toward the other bed.

"Do you know my roommate? She kept me awake half the night, moaning. She talks to herself, too, but no one understands her." The nurse looked over to the bleached whale, exposed once again.

"Here, Hilda, I have to get you up. It's the rules. I have to make your bed."

The nurse rolled the vinyl-seated wheelchair over from its corner and set it next to the bed. With a chonk-chonk, she tugged the levers that locked the wheels, one on each side of the chair. She unfolded the crocheted lap quilt in the seat, spread it across the foot of the bed, and pulled the wheelchair's right footrest straight out, the way Hilda liked it. Then the nurse positioned herself next to Hilda's brown

head. She eased her arm under the old woman's neck and gently grasped her opposite shoulder; supporting her backbone thus, the nurse slowly bent Hilda up to a sitting position. With some small amount of tugging and aimless leg-kicking, the two together got Hilda to sit on the edge of her bed. Now, the nurse slid her hand from the woman's shoulder to under the armpit and gently eased the frail body up to a stand. The two stood together swaying a moment, the young woman holding the older one up. Hilda's white slip lay pulled up around her blue hips, where the mattress had caught and lifted it. Then Hilda slid one foot a few inches forward toward the chair. Step by step, Hilda advanced, stooped back into a weak crouching stance, her feet splayed out in front of her and all her weight pushed back onto the nurse's strong arm. With practiced ease, the nurse maneuvered Hilda to the front of the chair, turned her around, and with her arm still firmly behind Hilda's shoulders, lowered her little by little onto the green vinyl seat. The nurse knelt, helped Hilda place her feet on the padded footrests, spread the crocheted lap quilt across Hilda's lap, and with a chonk-chonk unlocked the wheels.

"Mary visited me last night," Hilda commented as the nurse rolled her to the white window. The nurse had no way of knowing whether this was true or not; although Hilda's sister lived in Intensive Care on the far end of the facility, she was still ambulatory and visited her sister occasionally.

"Your plant here is getting dry — I say YOUR PLANT IS DRY. DO YOU WANT ME TO WATER IT FOR YOU?"

"Yes, the nurse gave me that plant. The colored one." Now that was wrong, thought the nurse. A succinct gold card still remained taped to the parched pot: "To Mom — we love you. Charlotte."

The nurse strode back to the aluminum serving cart — covering up the bleached whale once again — and returned with a fresh set of antiseptic white sheets. As she began to strip Hilda's warm, limp sheets off her bed, the nurse noticed the old woman had conjured up a crushed stuffed doll in a fading chalk blue sailor's suit.

"I see you found your Snoopy doll again."

"Yes, he's my little baby. His name is William."

The nurse grinned. "Named him after your son, eh? NAMED HIM AFTER YOUR SON?"

"I don't have a son." The melted eyes looked out guilelessly from behind the thick glass lenses.

"Of course you do. Don't you remember? There's Charlotte, and William, and Suzanne, and Donald. Look, here are pictures of them — I said PICTURES... HERE ON YOUR NIGHTSTAND. There's William. . . WILLIAM. . ."

"Charlotte's supposed to take me home today. Is she here yet?"

"Charlotte was just here Saturday, visiting. You know that. I gave her some coffee."

Hilda gazed blankly at the photo collage for a long time as the nurse shook open the new sheets. "Why, look — you gave me a picture, too. Is that your husband?"

The nurse tried to laugh, but the guffaw died hollowly. "No, he's a

little old for me. TOO OLD FOR ME! That's my dad. Donald, your youngest — I said THAT'S DONALD. REMEMBER?" The sheets rustled like sails in the waste-and-floor-wax-scented air.

It wasn't until the nurse was tucking in the final trim hospital corner on Hilda's bed that Hilda spoke again. "Is it very cold out?"

"No, but it's icy. I lost control of my car and almost slid into a dump truck on the way over here. I SAID I . . . NEVER MIND."

Hilda gazed through the frost etchings in the corners of the window. "You know, a nice girl like you ought to have a husband — settle down, and raise a family. . ."

"No, I love my work. I HAVE TO GO NOW. DO YOU NEED ANYTHING?"

"Yes, here—" Hilda conjured up a quarter and held it out. "Would you take me home?"

"Let's wait till tomorrow. I said MAYBE TOMORROW." The nurse lifted the dirty sheets from Hilda's bed, carried them over to the aluminum serving cart, and stuffed them onto the bottom shelf. As she pushed the cart out the door, the twisted wheel straightened itself out, but now it caught on the trailing edge of a soiled sheet and skidded stubbornly across the polished floor.

"You know, you're much nicer than the nurse I had last week." Hilda carefully began unbuttoning Snoopy's thin sailor's suit.

"I was your nurse last week."

"Mmuurrrrrhhhh," moaned Mrs. Lessing, kicking her sheets off.

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"Did she recognize you today?"

The nurse had decided to stop back in during her afternoon break and met the thickly muffled couple on their way out. Their murmurs together bounced flatly off the mustard wall outside Hilda's room. The woman balanced a bundled-up baby on her protruding hip.

"Well, she was doing okay at first," replied the husband behind his moustache, "but toward the end there, she started wandering a little. We thought we'd better leave."

"Yes, and she got so upset when we called her 'Grandma,'" piped in the wife, her eyes glittering. "Does she always do that?"

"Pretty much so, yeah," The nurse flattened out her palm hard, pressed it firmly on the worn, glass-smooth wooden handrail riveted into the wall and slowly began to rub it. She stared at the hand moving heavily back and forth on the wood. The baby yawned. "I think she's getting worse."

"She is in her eighties now." The man twiddled his moustache a moment and then sighed. "Well, tell your dad we said hi."

"Yes, we'll have to get another game of bridge going," added his wife. The bundled-up baby yawned again.

The nurse found Hilda sitting bewildered, wheeled back in the corner of the room. The old woman hurriedly stuffed her crushed doll under her lap quilt.

"I SEE YOU HAD SOME VISITORS. LINDA AND MARTY — DO YOU REMEMBER THEM?"

"They had a baby. Cute baby." Hilda's eyes boggled behind the

thick glass lenses. "I have a little baby, too. His name is William."

The nurse smiled at the thin brown hair, frizzed as though by a light socket. "I know. They're serving popcorn down the hall. POPCORN. Do you want some popcorn? I'LL GET YOU SOME POPCORN."

"Oh, no, you don't have to. I still have some left over from last week. See?" Hilda held out a half-full white paper bag stained with butter. "I'll just eat this. I won't eat very much." Pointing her eyes down, she quickly popped a single soft, stale kernel in her mouth and rolled it around between her front teeth.

"Nonsense. I'll get you some hot. I'LL BE BACK IN A MINUTE."

Back outside, long strips of cold winter sunlight striped the corridor floor across from open doorways all along the floor-wax scented hall. Up and down the wide corridor the nurse looked at a silent procession of vinyl-seated wheelchairs, nestled up unmoving against the obligatory wooden handrail on both walls. The bundled white wrinkle-heaps in the chairs never looked at each other, never spoke. The nurse could hear the dull squelching of her own soft soles as she trod the center path the wheelchairs left. 'They're all waiting,' she thought. 'They're just . . . waiting. . .' Behind one open door, a bony old man sat on the edge of his bed, blankly fingering a raspy accordion. A second man, with thick trifocals and orange polyester pants up to his chest, gazed into a mirror and scraped an electric razor across his trembling chin. A sunken hulk farther down the hall crouched in front of his MTV. In the nearly deserted lounge at the corridor's end, the girl behind the popcorn machine grinned like a lunatic through bright red lipstick and thrust two steaming, white bags at the nurse. "Don't they want any popcorn today?" she asked, pointing at the chairs lined up in the hall. Somewhere in the lounge, an isolated voice groaned.

On her way back to Hilda's room, the nurse stopped in the doorway of one open room and gazed inside. On the opposite wall, the mustard curtains were drawn shut, and mustard light filtered in over a thick sheeted lump on the far bed. A two-man transport ambulance team had wheeled a white-sheeted gurney into the room, and the men in white coats struggled now to work around the gurney. One of the two, the rosy-faced blond, leaning over the head of the sheeted lump's bed, was apparently new to the team. The nurse already knew the ambulance's driver, though a gangling young man with limp brown hair below his shoulders, who would discourse endlessly about Ovid for a cup of the nurses' coffee. When he saw the observer in the doorway, he smiled a little before turning back to the bulk lying on the bed.

The nurse watched as the ambulance driver grasped the feet of the draped mass, tucking the sheets under his fingers so as not to slide off. His partner eased his hand under the figure's neck and clutched the opposite shoulder, as though to support its back. At a subdued "Okay," the two men lifted together; the body bowed between them like a sardonic sheeted smile as, with uneven, mincing steps, they maneuvered their load over to the waiting

gurney. As they laid the covered figure down, the gurney shifted forward a few inches, metal wheels rattling on the hard floor, and one blue hand rolled out from under the sheet. The blond gingerly tucked the rebellious claw back where it belonged. It wasn't until the gurney was nearly out of the darkened room that the nurse first saw the deceased's roommate huddled in a corner alone, looking on with lost, bewildered grey eyes.

"You know, we haven't made a live run down here in a little while now," observed the ambulance driver in the corridor. He paused while the blond pushed a wandering wheelchair over to the wooden handrail on the side. Behind the nurses' station, a blue-clad nurse carefully wiped "Cheever" off the blackboard directory on the wall. The driver glanced down at the popcorn bags the nurse still clutched. "No offense, but I really hate this place."

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"EVENING, HILDA."

Mrs. Lessing's bare hip rolled deep in her stained sheets, and the nurse saw Hilda's frizzled brown head shaking slowly back and forth in the dim shadows beyond. Hilda's chair was stuffed back into its usual corner, and Hilda methodically folded and re-folded the crocheted lap quilt over the vinyl seat. The nurse shifted her heavy overcoat from one arm to the other.

"I'VE GOT TO GO NOW, HILDA. ANOTHER NURSE WILL PUT YOU TO BED A LITTLE LATER."

The old woman turned her questioning face toward the nurse and blinked melted watercolor eyes behind her thick glasses. "Have we been introduced?"

"Sure we have." The stifling heat inside the room made the nurse's head throb. "I brought you your popcorn today — remember? POPCORN—"

"Popcorn?" Hilda looked baffled.

"Sure." The nurse paused. "Are you all right, Grandma?"

"Grandma? But I don't have any children."

"Sure you do. Look, there are PICTURES —" The photo collage was missing from its usual nightstand perch. "Do you want some oxygen?"