

Night after Night

Night after night, day after day, I lie here, weary eyes fixed, frozen, focused, staring at the same abstract images dangling from the ceiling tiles like a baby's mobile. I lie here, brain still chained to the cold brick wall of a useless body, and I try to imagine the ultimate irony. Perhaps it is the inept chef who gets food poisoning from his own cooking. Perhaps it is the scheming warden who is incarcerated in his own prison. But it just could be the arrogant nurse who ends up as a patient on his own unit.

Against the endless drone of a television, I have time to think, time to stare into this empty space, time to contemplate the same unanswerable question until the lights that continuously burn all around me go out forever and I am finally allowed the darkness I so desperately sought on that other night so long ago.

But until that darkness comes, I will endure it all – the pain, the humiliation, the futility, the careless bantering of nursing assistants as they joke and tell my story over and over to each other during bed changes, embellishing it each time it recycles. And as I hear the story, I find my own memories sharpen and fade, sharpen and fade until there is no longer the truth, only the reality.

And that reality is that I was young once, a nurse so dedicated to his patients that he traded his marriage for his profession and ended up losing both. I came to this place and this unit at Pittsdale Manor right after graduating from nursing school. PM is a large and well-established post-acute facility that has both skilled nursing and nursing home wings. Since I had a BSN, I was made night shift charge nurse on one of the skilled nursing units. This may have sounded (and certainly seemed to me at the time) impressive, but the title was really rather hollow since I was one of only three regular

RNs on the night shift and the only one who worked full time. Still, I took the job and the responsibility seriously – too seriously to suit my wife, Julie.

Julie and I had grown up together. We went to college together. We were both going to become high school teachers. She would teach English and I, history. It was all arranged and proceeding according to plan until our junior year. It was then I had a sort of awakening, a vision, a desperate yearning to do something of more immediate importance than force apathetic high school students to memorize dates and names. The catalyst for this epiphany was watching my grandmother spend three months in a rehab facility following a broken hip. I watched the nurses, studied them, admired their dedication. And suddenly I knew that was what I wanted to do with my life. The next semester I changed my major to nursing and spent six years in undergraduate school, instead of the usual four.

I must admit that Julie stuck by me, even though she thought I was a little crazy and more than a little selfish. We were married during my last year in school mainly because it was expected. But I should have known it wouldn't last. She was already teaching, making money, with evenings, weekends, and summers off. She needed a husband who would be home when she was home, who shared some of the same interests. Instead, she had a husband who worked odd hours, picked up overtime, and talked about his patients incessantly. Within a year, she was gone, and six months after that, she was living with Jarrod Anderson, the science teacher and football coach.

When she left, I experienced a logical progression of emotions – shock, confusion, anger, relief, and finally apathy. I loved my job and let it become my life. In time, I deluded myself into thinking it gave me everything I needed to make me happy and fulfilled. When I discovered that I was wrong, my well-ordered world came crashing down on me like a demolished building.

The explosive charges were set one night in the early spring. It was 10:45 when I arrived at work, a 20 bed unit that specializes in the long term care of patients who have suffered cerebral trauma – strokes, aneurysms, blunt head injury, and the like. I was greeted as usual by Betty Foster, a grizzled veteran of PM who, although only in her early fifties, looked as though she was always just one cigarette short of being a patient herself. She continuously whined about something, anything, nothing. And I would listen patiently and nod, telling myself that I would never ever let myself get this way, no matter how long I remained a nurse. She was just tired, I rationalized – too many late nights, too many long hours, too many cigarettes, too many failed marriages.

As we sat down for report, Betty ran quickly through the patients we both knew so well – not much changes here in sixteen hours. But then she stopped and almost smiled, something decidedly rare for her. “You have a new one in 121,” she said.

Good, I thought, we needed to fill that bed. But why was she so excited about it?

“Something of a celebrity,” she continued, “Marissa Stupanski.” The name didn’t mean anything to me, and this must have shown in my face because Betty didn’t wait for me to say anything before she added, “You know, the young woman who was found in the garage with the door closed and the car running. My god, don’t you remember? It was on the news for days and it only happened two months ago.”

I didn’t remember, and it was then I began to realize just how out of touch with external reality I had been during all those months following my separation and divorce. The petty problems of real life seemed insignificant somehow, especially since I had buried myself in the soft mud of the job like a box turtle. “I guess I must have missed the news, Betty,” I said. “Suppose you fill me in.”

Betty shifted in her seat and looked all around her as if searching for spies. “It seems she had been quite popular, especially with the men,” she began, “Then she

married some guy everyone knew was dealing drugs. Supposedly, he was pretty abusive. I heard she went to the ER a few times following an ‘accident.’ They all knew he was beating her up, but no one could prove it and she would never admit it or file charges. He must have hit her one too many times, I guess. Anyway, they found her in the garage barely breathing. She was on the ventilator for a couple of weeks with no response to any stimuli at all. Her parents wanted her taken off life support before she was trached. And she was, but you know what?” Betty smiled again. “The poor thing didn’t die, didn’t need the trach, just a feeding tube. Not much care really – just weed and feed.”

I always admired Betty’s way with words. She was nothing if not consistent. “Thank you, Betty,” I said, not even trying to match her wit – not that I ever could anyway. As soon as report was over and Betty was gone, leaving the trace odor of sweat and stale cigarette smoke behind, I gathered up my equipment - stethoscope, penlight, sphygmomanometer – and started down the long corridor while my three nursing assistants gossiped and steeled themselves for another long night of shifting dead weight and changing dirty beds.

The feeding pump alarm in 121 caught my attention, and I figured that room was as good a place as any to start. I entered the room and glanced at the patient. Betty had been right: it was a young woman, probably around my age. I turned on the light to get a better look. She didn’t respond – her eyes were closed and stayed closed. I studied her a little more closely. She was a bit thin and her body was covered with fading bruises, most likely caused by the intensive care she had been receiving for the past several weeks. She was reasonably clean, considering what she had recently been through, although her dark blonde hair obviously hadn’t been washed for a while.

But, in spite of all that had happened to her, her face was still very pretty, taut unblemished skin covering high cheekbones. Her small, firm breasts moved rhythmically

and effortlessly up and down on her chest – no sign of respiratory distress, I thought.

Again, Betty was right – a relatively simple case.

Then I turned my attention toward the beeping pump – the battery was low, just needed to be plugged in. I placed the plug in the wall outlet and regarded the patient once again. That’s when the realization hit me in the gut like a load of dirty wash. “I know her,” I exclaimed out loud.

It was true. She had been Marissa Pinkney in high school. How could I have forgotten her? How could any boy have forgotten her? She had been every pubescent schoolboy’s fantasy – cheerleader, prom queen, debate team captain, and the most beautiful girl most of us had ever laid eyes on outside of a magazine. I could not begin to count the nights I had fallen asleep with her image burned into my brain, how many wet dreams I had had with her as the central character, the catalyst for a healthy and seemingly insatiable adolescent lust.

Of course, in real life, I kept my distance. Girls like Marissa were completely unattainable for ordinary guys like me. In the well-defined caste system of the high school social structure, she was a Brahman and I was an untouchable. Besides, she was involved with older guys, more sophisticated guys, guys who knew about the world outside of school – college students and outlaws; the ‘bad boys’ girls like Marissa always seemed to be attracted to. We all knew it but didn’t think it was especially remarkable, just the natural order of things.

After high school, we heard she had gotten serious with the son of a local gangster – or something like that – and she passed quickly into a world that most of us knew only from movies. And she was eventually forgotten.

Now, it seemed, this high school beauty queen had suffered the ultimate reversal of fortune. I mean, here she was, comatose and tucked neatly into a bed on a medical unit

almost no one ever visited – the true cul-de-sac of life. Her beauty was still virtually intact but her brain was gone, reduced to warm butter. Still, I couldn't help staring at her, admiring her, in spite of her condition. Then, frightened by feelings I didn't quite understand, I finished with her and quickly moved on to the next patient. I only saw her two more times that night. But I thought about her...a lot more than I should have.

I thought about her all the next day as well, thought about her in my fragmented sleep, thought about her in ways that crude and insensitive men often think about beautiful women, ways that I had suppressed since my separation and apparent determination to live like a monk.

The next night I found myself anxious to see her again, eager to see her again. Her sudden appearance on my unit had completely changed my view of the world, reawakened feelings that I had tried so hard to suppress. For the first time in a long time, when I looked outside, I saw the emerging spring instead a drab and lifeless landscape.

Each time I gazed at her, I became exhilarated but also confused. She had been cleaned up since the day before and was now nearly as beautiful as she had been the last time I saw her. It had been two summers after high school in Fowlers Park. She was strolling casually with her older boyfriend. She looked happy even though she probably wasn't. Her face was radiant in the sunlight; her long blonde hair bounced just right as she walked among the boulders. She was wearing a loose-fitting summer dress that became deliciously translucent when the sun hit it just right. I was transfixed. However, since I was at the park with Julie, I had to constrain my excitement. We veered off into the woods and made love more than once. When I closed my eyes, it was Marissa's face I saw.

Over the years, the image of that afternoon faded, sank to the deepest recesses of my memory. Now it was back, stronger than ever, beaming through my brain like a lighthouse beacon on a stormy night.

Like the night before, I tended to her expeditiously and escaped quickly, trying hard not to look back. The next night, I did the same thing...and then the next and the next and the next until a pattern was established. I did my job and ran home in a cold sweat, praying to any god who would listen that my feelings would pass, that, in time, I would regard Marissa as just another patient, a limp pulsing body buried under a white sheet.

But it was not meant to be. Although my only contact with her had been professional, I had dreamed about more. I had seen the two of us together, flesh to flesh, rolling and sweating and exchanging fluids on a blanket in Fowlers Park. The dream was beautiful and terrifying at the same time. Still, it remained a dream, a fantasy until the night I had to enter the 'forbidden zone,' touch the dream and make it real.

The night it happened began rather typically except that when Betty reported, she added almost as an afterthought, "121's foley seems to be blocked or something. I tried irrigating it but had trouble. It probably needs to be changed. Sorry, I didn't have time."

This is not good, I thought, as I realized immediately the implications. Slowly, like a man condemned, I gathered up the necessary equipment, told the nursing assistants where I would be, and shuffled into 121. I assessed the foley without touching anything and concluded that, unfortunately, Betty was right – it needed to be replaced and couldn't wait until morning. I shuddered and squirmed as I beheld what was only a few centimeters away – the promise land that so many boys had lusted over, myself included.

Eight years of repressed feelings intruded themselves on me all at once. I had to touch *it* when I pulled the old catheter out and put the new one in, but I tried as hard as I

could not to. It was like touching something electric, an ungrounded wire branching off from a main power line. I dragged my fingers back, but they seemed to want to linger, ignoring the constant pulsating jolt of current.

The little slit was warm and dry, but, I swear, it seemed to moisten slightly as my fingers strayed into the folds. It may have been my lust-fueled imagination, but I became suddenly aware that her breathing pattern was changing, perhaps quickening as my fingers probed for the urethral opening. Then, repulsed by what I was feeling, I yanked my hand back and turned toward the door. But I stopped myself. I was a professional and I had a job to do. I simply had to get a hold of myself and do it. I tried to imagine the patient was sixty years older and considerably more overweight. It didn't work.

The next ten minutes were the worst in my life. I felt like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, trying to fight off this insistent lust with professional indifference. The Dr. Jekyll was slowly losing ground, and I knew it. I especially knew it when a strange voice inside my head began to rationalize an abomination. "Go ahead – touch it, massage it. Who's going to find out? Besides, she seems to enjoy it," the voice was saying. I was horrified, but I started to listen anyway. I hadn't really touched a woman since Julie left, and I missed it. I missed it more than I realized. I missed it as much as a man misses food or sleep – Maslow's needs hierarchy leaping out of the psychology textbook.

That night, I gave in, surrendered myself to the dark side, indulged my urges, my eager and curious fingers stroking, massaging every square centimeter of her female anatomy. And although I wasn't sure Marissa actually enjoyed it, I was very sure she wasn't objecting. Eventually, I did replace the foley and moved on to the next patient, but it was too late; I was already feeling like a single lost sheep wandering through the valley of darkness and despair.

If I had stopped at that point, been content with that one terrible misstep, I might have found my way back to the flock relatively unscathed. But I didn't stop, couldn't stop. At one time in my life, she had been everything I had ever wanted. And now, since no one else seemed to want her, since she had been cast aside like an old dog, I figured she was mine to claim.

At first, I was content just to touch her from time to time. But as the weeks passed and my love grew, I got bolder. I would sometimes spend long solitary moments stroking her face, her breasts, her inner thighs. Everything was within my reach. No one ever knew what I was doing, and Marissa never complained.

But inevitably I wanted more. And, as if my doom had been pre-ordained like some Greek tragedy, I finally got the opportunity. It was about six weeks after she had been admitted. I entered her room and saw that the foley had been removed. The last barrier to the ultimate contact had come down. On this particular night, one of the nursing assistants had called off and the other two had to rush just to keep up with the endless work. Thus, when I offered to clean Marissa and change her bed, they didn't think twice about it. The stage was set.

Quickly, I checked on all the other patients and gathered up everything I needed – so far, so good. The nursing assistants were all the way down at the other end of the long corridor. I closed the door and approached the bed. Marissa was wet but not dirty. I bathed her and changed the bed expeditiously. Then I stood back and gazed at her naked body wonderingly. I had never seen her before exactly like this – laid out and entirely vulnerable - and wasn't entirely prepared for the shock of it. As I continued to indulge myself and felt my emotional turmoil bubble up inside, I knew I was doomed – no turning back, no redemption, no salvation. In my heart and in my dreams, I had already committed the sin; there was nothing left but to go all the way.

And I did – not like a lion, but with as much patience and tenderness as time would permit. She felt surprisingly soft and sweet, well beyond my dreams. All too soon, I exploded inside her and it was over. Except for the aftermath – I had just raped a patient. They send you to prison for that – and rightfully so. My license gone; my freedom, my life gone...just like that, in the blink of an eye.

I pulled myself together as well as I could and cleaned her up, wiping away all trace of my contact with her. I glanced at the clock. The whole terrible episode had taken less than twenty minutes. Yet I felt as though I had aged twenty years.

When I emerged from the room, sweating and flushed, the nursing assistants were still down at the other end of the unit, complaining about their workload. I checked on the other patients and sat down to chart. Everything was okay; I was going to get away with what I had just done. The rest of the night passed without incident. But my mind was in chaos. What had I done? Why had I done it? I was falling helplessly in love with Marissa, but how could I possibly rationalize that? She was now only a warm body, a mirror that perhaps reflected the memory of the beautiful young woman she once was. What was it that I thought I loved – the body in the bed or the memory?

I didn't know the answers to these questions. All I knew was that I had to keep seeing her, that perhaps, in some strange unfettered universe, she somehow understood that my love for her was pure, that I loved her more than any other man had ever loved her (or could ever love her) – and that made everything all right.

But I also knew that my soul – what was left of it – was now condemned to eternal damnation, all because of a lust I couldn't control for a woman who would have never even looked at me in life and now could no more feel love than a plastic mannequin.

Over the next few nights, I found myself spending more and more time with Marissa, touching her, caressing her, combing her hair. I began to neglect my other patients. My work suffered enough that my co-workers became concerned. “Are you all right, Glenn?” Sandra, the unit manager, asked one morning.

“Yes,” I quickly replied. “I’ve been working a lot and not sleeping well. It’s probably catching up with me.”

She scanned me carefully. “You need to take some time off,” she declared. “You may be getting too attached to the patients. It happens sometimes.”

Did she know? How could she have known? On the outside, I remained calm and expressed gratitude for her unnecessary concern. But I went home in a panic. For the first time, I truly realized that Marissa and I lived in totally different worlds, occupied different planes of reality. Perhaps, if I could not bring her into my world, I could join her in hers. These were very dangerous thoughts, but clearly I was well beyond that kind of danger. Quite simply, I couldn’t live with Marissa and I couldn’t live without her. My fragmented mind reflected on the possibilities. If I freed her soul from the prison of her useless body, would she love me for it? If we died together, would we be united in heaven?

The vision of us gliding, hand in hand, through a glorious eternity guided my thoughts and gave me strength. The only question left was how to bring it about. It had to be painless and simultaneous, but also a bit romantic, body touching body, like Romeo and Juliet at the end of the tragedy.

The next night I went to work with two plastic dry cleaning bags and some twine. Near the end of the night, as the sun was just beginning to emerge, gently burning away the darkness, I entered Marissa’s room. I gazed at her wistfully and questioningly, seeking some kind of affirmation, I suppose. And as I looked at her, she seemed to open

her eyes a little as if to say, “I love you, Glenn. Do it. Set me free and let’s take this journey together.”

I stripped off my clothes and sank into the bed beside her. I placed a bag over her head and tied it around her neck. Then I did the same thing to me. At first, I felt dizzy as I entered her. A few seconds later, the room and everything in it began to slowly fade out of existence. It was a magnificent sensation – one door closing while another opened in the distance, revealing all the light in the universe and all the free spirits that ever were reveling in the radiance.

But suddenly the door slammed shut before I could reach it. Someone must have found us and ripped off the plastic bags just before the final release that comes with cerebral anoxia. Of course, I hadn’t really thought about what it would look like, the two of us found together, side by side or one on top of the other. I hadn’t cared.

Now I have to live with that image, hear it described over and over and over again until it is all I can see. Now I must live in emptiness, a soul trapped between two closed doors, in a pathetic eternal limbo born of a hopeless love. And yet, I still can’t help but wonder if Marissa, slumbering blissfully just two rooms down the hall, could have ever really loved me back – she who had wanted so much to die because of what selfish men had done to her, how badly they had used her. In the end, I was just another of those men, simply exploiting an opportunity, preying upon her vulnerability. Where is the love in that?

I will be haunted by it all until the darkness that is supposed to bring peace washes over me at last.