

## The Blanket Warmer

I am trapped in a corner by a guy who smells like curry—but without the gentle coconut undertones. It is my fault, really. Shortly after walking into the room of fellow orienteers, I felt naked. I realized my skirt was way too short for this, or any other activity commencing in a daylight hour. In fact, I was the only one wearing a skirt. It was just me and five guys. Most wore a straight-out-of-the-Sears-bag white shirt and a look that said "I never had a date last summer, and I was really, really hoping..."

We are listening to the charge nurse, whose oversized badge reads "Nurse Jane Snaute," extoll the virtues of our summer internship. Apparently, we are going to witness "the heights of the human spirit, as well as the deepest seas of human depravity." Curry-guy turns to me and laughs, obviously thinking we could share this emotion together—one too many Bieber songs for him. All I want to witness is a return of my personal space.

Nurse Snaute rambles on, leaving out the part where we will earn less than the busboys in the hospital cafeteria. Touché for her 'cause I had left out the part, during my interview, where my parents had sat me down near the end of the school year, to tell me that I was going to make more of myself this year, as a high school senior, than I did last summer when I laid around tanning and smoking on my friend Becky's trampoline. My dad had added the informational bonus, for about the eighth time, that my plans to go to college and major in literature would ensure a future position as a waitress wearing a polyester vest, serving hot fudge sundaes to screaming kids. I counter-punched with the factoid that J.K. Rowling's father had once told her the same thing—a little literary license on my part, but it could have been true.

I knew I was in for the repetitive you-should-be-a-healthcare-worker jag. My dad went a little overboard with the part about how "no Dupree has ever not made something of themselves!" I had him on this one. I first explained the grammatical insufficiencies concentrating on the improper use of negation within his diatribe. Secondly, I pulled from the attic of my memory banks; the case of one Aunt Opal Dupree—impregnated in 1959 and shipped off to a farm in Iowa. That branch of the family tree gets abruptly pruned at that point and I've never been able to acquire the denouement of that story.

My counterpoint, as one could easily surmise, was defeated, landing me here amongst the five nerd/delinquent amalgams marching in lockstep to the directives of the Y chromosome.

We hike to the emergency department, where we will all be spending a few nights each week. I managed to position myself more carefully this time but Curry-guy still finds me. I catch a glimpse of his name tag—"Khalid."

"Don't talk to doctors, they can be real ass wimps. That's what brother advice to me when he do his internship last year." Khalid—I'm going to stick with Curry-guy—then hits me head-on with a full curry torpedo. "What is to be your name?"

I may need the services of a toxicologist. "Mindy," I reply, then clear my throat, before having one of those episodes where my parents say I open my mouth before putting my brain in gear.

"Don't even think about it." I turn to Khalid and up the volume just enough for the pack to hear. "My family will never pay a dowry!" That closes the torpedo hatch as we are surrounded by laughter.

I'm hoping I got the message across; "fear my brain instead of staring at my skirt." I'm just about to hit Curry-guy with a couple of reinforcing Desdemona quotes from Othello when

Nurse Snaute locks onto me. She stops us outside of room seven. Inside, several nurses are attacking the buttocks of an Alzheimer's patient with towels and wipes. An overpowering odor of excrement hits me in the nose and gut. I am repulsed and amazed to an extent rivaling the page when Jay Gatsby realizes Daisy Buchanan might be even more narcissistic and shallow than himself. Or when Stephen King realized he was nearly put into the planet's discard pile by a light blue Dodge van.

Snaute stares at my name tag, the hem of my skirt, then back at the name tag. "Young lady, why don't you and Ron start your summer by helping the medical professionals in this very room." Ron seems equally repulsed by the smell and aroused by our pairing.

I am inexperienced in the aging parameters of senior citizens based on viewing their buttocks, genitalia, and scat. But this patient looks to be about a hundred.

Ron starts into the room ahead of me, falls behind, and now appears pale while searching for the closest chair. Admittedly, I am frozen as I take in the spectacle of Ron and his impending loss of consciousness. Snaute and coworkers are much quicker, thankfully, and Ron is collared by the grasping hands of experience after he passes out, but before he hits the ground.

From this point onward, I give him the moniker "Ron the fainter" (RTF for short) and am able to convince my colleagues to follow suit.

Near the end of our first day, we are given our politically-correct-sounding assignments and our paperwork packets. Mine has the hospital dress code on the front *and* the back page. A couple of the guys are assigned "admissions and family comfort." One is assigned to deliver food to the E.R. patients. My illustrious assignment is "blanket warmer," of all things. Curry-guy's is "room stocker." We will be working the same nighttime hours. Not sure if Snaute has a sense of humor or not, but gotta give her credit for that one.

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Curry-guy has apparently researched his packet enough to find the phone numbers of all his fellow teens. He calls me the next afternoon, prior to our first official shift.

“Hi Minpy, this is Khalid. I was hoping that we to be going in together.”

“Khalid,” big sigh, “my name is Min-Dy with a D, as in denied. That is nice of you to offer. But if we go in together, someone will see us. And do you know what they will assume?”

“No. What is to be their thinking please tell us?”

Now I’m actually starting to feel a little mean, like I have swatted a puppy twice on the nose for the same accident. “Curry-guy, if we go in together, people are going to look at us and say ‘Hey, doesn’t it look like Minpy and Curry-guy are coming into work together?’ So you understand why that would be impossible, right?”

He doesn’t.

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In time for my first night shift, I walk through the hordes in the waiting room. I press the button to signal that I need to be let into the E.R. A security guard, whom I met yesterday, opens the door and introduces himself as Kevin. We had met yesterday.

After I tell him my name, he looks confused. I think it is my new garb. I have the frumpiest and dullest green scrubs ever issued in this building. I refresh his memory banks by mentioning yesterday’s attire. Now he remembers me, smiles, and lets me in so I can begin shift number one.

I am ready to impress people with the fact that I actually read my packet and can do my job without further instruction. I proceed to the cabinet that holds the heated blankets and load them onto my cart.

Walking promptly into the first patient room, I see a young mom holding her infant. He is looking around and waving his arms like only a one-year-old can. He looks at me and smiles, causing the fish hook impaled in his lower lip to move. This starts the next round of crying. I freeze, not knowing what to do, and run out of the room.

Unfortunately, just before I can compose myself, one of the doctors sees me and asks what is wrong. I try to tell him in a brave voice, but he ends up leading me by the hand into the room. He explains that the medicine to numb the child's lip is on the way. In the meantime, it will only hurt when he smiles—a catch Joseph Heller could be proud of no doubt—and he already has a blanket.

Luckily for me, no one but the doc seems to have noticed my first trepidation and I make it all the way to room five before running into Curry-guy. He has recruited RTF and they are holding a patient down by pressing both sides of his pelvis while another E.R. doctor is standing on the bed to relocate his hip. I decide the sedated patient is another person not in need of a blanket and am about to leave when I hear the sickening “Ka-Thunk” of a hip and socket reunion.

The doc wipes sweat from her brow and hops down from the bed. Curry-guy and I immediately share the same thought. We look to RTF for the first sign of fainting, but he seems to have good color and is able to take a few steps.

Curry-guy looks him over from head to toe. “You no to visit floor, RTF?”

That cracks us all up.

The next couple of hours pass quickly until the charge nurse tells us we have a break, and to remember to cross the blue line to smoke. I wonder how she knew that we smoked.

I have never heard of the blue line—apparently some Orwellian statute enforced by the hospital suits. They feel that the hospital employees project a bad image by smoking on campus, so everyone is forced to march to the edge of the hospital parking lot—denoted by a painted blue line—and smoke. This creates a steady parade of employees, clad in Easter-egg colored scrubs and smoking at every entrance to the hospital grounds.

We cross the line, choose a bus bench, and RTF passes out Marlboros.

“So you to be desire of nurses or doctors?” asks Curry-guy after his first puff.

RTF is shaking his head and laughing once again.

“You are one big mess of words,” I tell him. “See, when you say ‘desire’ that means that someone wants someone else sexually.” Blank look to the left of me, stark interest on my right. “Go to the library on the way home and check out *Body Heat* or any tome by D.H. Lawrence.

RTF chimes in. “I think he means what kind of healthcare whatever do you want to be—a nurse or a doctor?”

“For your role in the cosmos, RTF, I see you as a sort of illiterate Holden Caulfield.” Silence. “Why don’t you take him to a bookstore or something? We will have a lot better over-the-blue-line conversations the rest of the summer.”

“So what *do* you want to be, a nurse or a doctor?” RTF persists.

“Neither; I am hoping to be a writer. My dad made me take this job hoping I would change my mind and *want* to become a nurse or a doctor.”

Brief interruption as we explain to Curry-guy the difference between a writer and a rider. Also, a bus stops before us and we realize the driver thinks we are waiting for him. We wave him off after a quick apology.

“So a writer, huh? I thought anybody could be a writer,” RTF pauses to wipe his nose on the back of his jock-muscled forearm, “if they just learn about colons and half-colons and stuff.”

“Yeah RTF,” rolling my eyes. “Half-colons are extremely important to us writers. Punctuation is actually just a vehicle that carries the reader on the road through your story. There are great writers that use almost no punctuation, like Cormac McCarthy. There are also great writers that use heaps of punctuation, like Elizabeth Kostova.

I see by his face that I have lost him once again. I change the subject. “So what are you in for, part of an experiment to see if they can cure macho guys from fainting?”

“Very funny.” An actual bus patron walks up to our bench. RTF uses the chance to slide over and smash himself next to me. “Actually, I have four hundred hours of community service.

“Yes!” I shout with glee. “I knew it. What did you do, drill a peephole between boys and girls locker rooms?” This was going to make shift number one much better than imagined.

“No, stole a Pepsi machine and pushed it off the back of a pick-up truck going fifty miles an hour...just to see what would happen.” He looks up at me, I think more proud than ashamed. “It was spec-tac-u-lar.”

“So you will get no money come from hospital?” I am surprised that Curry-guy is able to follow the whole juvenile delinquency story line.

“Yes, but” holding up a finger to show that he was one up on us, “that means that I will be done a couple of weeks before you losers because a summer is longer than four hundred hours.”

“Wow, we will be in awe of your greatness and your poverty for just two and a half months then.” I turn Curry-guy’s wrist over to look at his watch. “We have to get back.”

We stand up to return to the vast emptiness of the nighttime parking lot. I briefly compare and contrast our trek to a Tolkien-esque adventure, but this falls on unappreciative ears.

The rest of the night is made up of multiple adrenalin rushes, but as dawn approaches, I am fighting to stay awake while envying the patients that I cover with blankets and warmth.

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A couple of weeks later and we are fully in the groove of our summer jobs. One of the others was fired for violating some patient privacy law. The rest of us are still trudging along like faithful teenage minions. I pointed out to my remaining coworkers that blanket warmer is a job description only. Despite this, Curry-guy is convinced that I am the nexus of information he will use to solve the female riddle—sort of his personal version of *Stranger in a Strange Land*. I'm hoping we both realize this is not feasible. I do convince him in the interim to consume less curry and carry some mints.

RTF has had to sit down a couple of times. One was excused because a patient birthed a baby on a cart in the hallway, but he hasn't fully fainted again. Curry-guy is reading a book now, after much prodding on my part. I started him on *Where the Red Fern Grows*—thought this would be at his reading level, while at the same time open up his sensitive male soul.

Curry-guy's comments have definitely made this all worthwhile—"I think Dan and Ann show true dog love for their owner person." I told him I could not agree more.

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Though I've been on the job for many weeks, I think I still learn something every day. For example, you do not give blankets to psychiatric patients. Tonight I learned that any time a patient says "I think I'm gonna," it means they are going to throw up and we should move fast.



It is a rare quiet night in the E.R. RTF calls me over his trays of patient food, and says we should hit the bus bench as soon as he puts the trays down. I track down Curry-guy and we head out to our break.

The bench is deserted and I take up my customary spot in the middle. Curry-guy hands out cigarettes. RTF convinced him that he should supply smokes Monday through Friday. The two of us are in charge of weekend supplies. I don't know how Curry-guy thinks this is fair, but I haven't exactly brought it up.

We observe the unwritten rule that no one talks until everyone's smoke is duly started.

Curry-guy breaks the silence. "I think if I know good kissing, then girls will want to be me."

I choke. We are dying with this one. RTF slaps me on the shoulder, sending my cigarette spiraling into the street.

"My foreign friend, what you mean to say is 'if I am a good kisser, girls will want to be with me.' Besides, you got all the female information you could ever want, all wound up in one bundle and sitting right here between us. You just have to ignore her big words and get down to what she really means. Why don't you help him out Minpy?"

I try to direct a serious leer despite the laughing. I discuss our situation, the fact that I can most definitely be of no help to Curry-guy, and how RTF should take charge; buy him a self-help book or something.

We remain alone on the bench as the bus approaches. It is Juan, the bus driver. After a few episodes of stopping in front of us for no reason, he now recognizes us and stops whenever he can, just to say hi.

"Hola, mi tres amigos que fuman," he yells as he opens the doors.

“Hola Juan, Buenas noches,” I wave to him.

He smiles and drives away. My foreign language skills are still quite rudimentary, like when Ayla, a Cro-Magnon, tried to talk to the Neanderthals in *Clan of the Cave Bear*. I explain to the guys that Juan is either saying hi to his smoking friends, or...telling us we are on fire, I am not sure which.

“You would think Curry-guy could help us out a little bit more with the foreign language stuff. Isn’t your country right near Mexico?” I think RTF might actually be serious.

“No India is not near Mexico, you beeg dope!” Curry states, carefully enunciating each syllable.

“CG, that was awesome. You said that sentence almost perfectly. Way to go!” Now I’m slapping him on the back. “And RTF is a beeg dope, a beeg fainting dope!”

As we walk back to the E.R., RTF tries to rehash the whole kissing thing again. I steer our conversation back to the subject of proper English verbiage and pronunciation.

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A few weeks later and midsummer has passed. RTF is off tonight and Curry-guy is acting morose for no reason. The night is so out of control that I barely get a chance to talk to him. Three patients are in leather restraints (I don’t have to offer them blankets, thank God) and expletives now outnumber all other pronouns. I am in danger of missing my break when Curry-guy announces he is going out. I tell him to go ahead and I am able to sneak out about ten minutes later.

It has just rained after an interminably hot day. Fog is rising from the asphalt on an overcast night. I approach the back of the bus bench. Curry-guy is hunched over, staring at the ground. When I call to him, he stands up and I can see remnants of tears on his cheeks.

“What is wrong?” I ask him.

“You did not tell me on Dan and Ann.” He starts to sniffle but is able to compose himself and continue in an accusatory tone. “They come to end right here in book. You give to me no warning!”

I am stunned. I don’t know if I should defend myself and/or Wilson Rawls.

“Oh Curry-guy,” I touch the cheek where the last evidence of moisture remains. “If you knew everything that was going to happen, you would have no life. It would be just like reading a script. As bad as the bad surprises are, the good ones, both in books and in your life are going to be so much better.”

“I am not believing of you.” Still accusatory and looking me right in the eyes.

I have no words for him. Maybe if I were him, I would be “not believing” as well.

I step toward him, rise on my toes, and place and grab the front of his shirt to bring us together.

I kiss him on the lips and stand my ground. After a couple of seconds, my lips part and he kisses me back. Some minutes pass and the rain begins anew. We let each other go and walk in silence back to the hospital.

I doubt the rest of his summer was ever the same. After all, I was his first kiss. I am never able to confess to Khalid that he was also mine.