

BEING GOOD ABOUT IT

by

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Rejoice, o young man, in thy youth . . . and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.

Ecclesiastes 11:9

Part I · Aspirations

1 · Orientation

Like most of the women who worked in the nursing home, I needed the money and I considered it important work. It was taking care of people. But I probably felt so uneasy on my first night because somewhere deep down I knew I was deluding myself—people didn't really care about nursing homes or the elderly. People didn't want to know what happened there. We just pretended they did, because it was the decent thing to do. It made everybody feel better.

Unlike the other nurse's aides at Liberty Home, I needed the money for college rather than for milk and peanut butter and baby wipes. Brown University was expensive and my financial aid only covered part of it. So in the summer of 1991, I went back to my parents' little maroon house in Massachusetts, where I could live rent-free, and asked my uncle if he'd let me borrow an old car from his back lot. And I applied for the job as an aide. I didn't know that summer would be the last time I lived at home. I wanted to save money for school while helping people. It seemed simple.

At the beginning of the summer I was probably too young and unsure to have the compassion really needed to care for the patients—but I could get them cleaned and out of bed or washed and back into bed. I could see their frail bodies without flinching. If Liberty Home's five days of certification training didn't prepare me for much else, it did show me that.

The first two days of training videos weren't a complete waste of time—we saw how to use a kidney pan and rinse dirty diapers—but the plain images and scripted voices didn't give us any real sense of what it was like to work in a nursing home. Then on Wednesday, the trainer announced that she'd made arrangements for us to get a resident up from his morning nap. The reaction in class was mixed. Most of the trainees said they hoped they weren't picked to do it, they wanted to see somebody else go first. We all wanted to see—there was that sideshow quality to the training, knowing strange sights were being held just out of our reach.

I assumed I wouldn't be chosen because there were other girls who took the training very seriously. Sonia, Valerie, and Sheila were my age, but they didn't go to college. They were thinking about maybe becoming nurses, so they wore uniforms everyday, bought binders for their training manuals, and asked questions about everything from recording bowel movements to cleaning fingernails. I listened attentively, as I did in every class, but it sounded like common

sense. I thought the nursing home couldn't possibly be a challenge—not after a year at an Ivy League college.

So I was composed as we returned to class from the short morning break. Other people expressed various degrees of anticipation, with one lady looking a lot like Mr. Furley when he thought Jack was up to something on *Three's Company*. The trainer told us to leave our things on the conference tables and gather by the door. My nerves remained bound and buried. “Ready everyone?” she asked, and paraded us out of the Conference Room-Chapel and down the main hallway of Liberty Home. She stopped abruptly in front of a patient's room. “As you will see, John is an 83-year-old man with incontinence and dementia,” she said. “However, he is physically mobile and requires a belt restraint. We need to wake him, get him clean and dry, and lift him into his gerichair, just like we practiced this morning with the training mannequin. Beth and Valerie, why don't you set up by his bed.”

I was standing at the back of the group with my arms folded, waiting for the demonstration. The trainer said my name. *Beth*. My lips parted. I looked up from the plastic number plate by the door. *Not me*, I thought in her direction, *what the hell are you doing?*

“You'll need to get linens first,” she said in a jovial voice, like she was offering me the chance to fly to Paris if I could just get my hands on a passport. “But I have rubber gloves and a lift belt here for you.” *Oh goody*, I thought.

When Valerie and I returned with the two diapers, a few washcloths, and three hand towels, the other trainees parted to allow us into the room. A man lay asleep on his back in the second bed. Only his face was visible, his mouth hanging open like a ghost's.

Valerie immediately moved between the two beds and pulled the hospital curtain with a flourish. “Very good, Valerie,” the trainer said. “We have to be mindful of the residents’

privacy.” I rolled my eyes and got into position on the opposite side of the bed. I felt it necessary to direct any self-consciousness into contempt for Valerie’s toady behavior.

“Oh,” Valerie said and waved the washcloths in her hand. “These need to be wet.” She smiled and bounced toward the bathroom.

I stood watching John and hoped that we wouldn’t find poop in his diaper. He was gaunt. His skin was like a shroud that had melted onto his skull. I hoped his penis wouldn’t get hard or something when we washed him. I really didn’t want to look at it in front of the other trainees. I tried not to imagine the men I’d seen naked—like my father once by accident, my friends Rob and Tommy during a game of truth-or-dare, a sick pervert who’d exposed himself outside the town library, and my boyfriends Dave and Jeremy.

“Now we can untie the restraint,” Valerie announced upon her return.

A sticky yellow mucus was caught in the deep ridge along the side of John’s mouth, but I knew from the videos that we couldn’t work on a patient, not even to wipe his cheek, until he was fully awake. Seeing the glob dragged a retch to the back of my mouth and I wondered if I could do the job, if I could endure such close contact with everything that came out of people. The space around me seemed to ripple, like time had missed a second and was trying to catch up. Then I leaned over John and rubbed his shoulder, and I felt the rush of facing the hideous and being good about it.

“Hello. We’re here to get you up, okay?” I said it and held my smile.

“Aahh oohh oh.” John snapped up, his arms flailing. He almost slapped Valerie’s arm and she recoiled. The mucus on his face vibrated.

“Oh, yes. Okay,” the trainer said in quick snippets. “So John is *very* active, but remember what we worked on for soothing and lifting.”

I could tell from her tone that she didn't know this patient. That she probably didn't even work at Liberty Home—she was most likely an RN who did training at lots of different places. And her authority immediately diminished. My stake in Liberty Home felt more legitimate than hers, even though she was the nurse and I was only there for the summer.

At the same time, I kept seeing the goo and felt amazed at my ability to calm John despite my revulsion. I thought I was incredible, like Mother Theresa or Audrey Hepburn. I hugged his shoulders and pressed him flat on the bed, my breasts inadvertently pushing against his arm.

Valerie fussed with the sheet, tucking it until it only covered John's left leg, the one in front of her. Then she paused with the washcloth in her hand, a signal that it was my turn. I was to open his diaper. And expose his penis. She gave me a tight-lip smile like she was just doing her job, wasn't trying to set me up at all.

I folded the bottom of John's worn oxford over his stomach. The middle of his diaper felt dense and warm, even through the gloves. I pressed it down between his thighs with one fast jerk. The uncircumcised penis sat in his crotch like a bloated larva, white, damp, stretchy. I had never seen an uncircumcised penis. I almost pointed and said *he's not circumcised*.

It was a plain soft penis, lacking mystery or promise, no threat. I could have bobbed it in my hand. But the testicles were a bit worrisome. Long and purple-red, the scrotum seemed about to disintegrate and abandon the testes to the raw cooled air.

My eyes met Valerie's as I set both hands on the bedrail. Now it was her turn, she had to use that washcloth. The other trainees stayed completely silent. We all knew what Valerie was supposed to do. She set her face with a pleasant look, eyelids slightly raised, and ran her splayed hand around John's crotch.

When she was done, I rolled John away from me, onto his left side. He grabbed the far bedrail and clanged it back and forth. “I’ll hold him over for you,” Valerie said and handed me a washcloth. I wanted to tell her *fuck off, you finish washing him*, but the trainer didn’t comment.

There was a watercolor stroke of brown on the diaper, and a soft smear of poop in the folds of his scrotum. My throat convulsed, and I had to stop thinking about what I was doing. I shook the washcloth open and lifted John’s right butt cheek. It was an ordinary ingrained action from years of watching women and girls—mothers, babysitters, aunts, grandmothers, friends—wiping kids’ butts. Somewhere under the baggy flesh, tiny strips of his muscles clenched.

“You’re doing great, John,” Valerie said. Her voice hung over us like a fuzzy pink ribbon as we lowered him onto the new diaper and slipped pants over his ankles. “That’s it, we’re just here to help you,” she said. “Don’t worry, you’re clean and dry now, right?”

Her sweet voice continued as she walked to my side of the bed, where she dragged his legs off the mattress and I lifted him into a seated position. “There we go. Look at that, all ready to get in your chair. We’re almost—” She stopped as soon as John whacked her in the cheek.

Pressing her hand against the side of her face, Valerie stood with her back to the other trainees, who didn’t see the furious reaction flash over her. The whole thing was such an unexpected comeuppance, I almost laughed.

“It’s okay Valerie, stay with it,” the trainer encouraged.

But John grabbed in the air with his free hand and got a hold of Valerie’s wrist. His face grew red as he jammed his teeth together. “Eeghhh errhh.”

Valerie tried to pull her arm away but John lurched. I caught him against my chest and shoulder, and then we were all stuck, like three uncomfortable players in a demented game of Twister.

“Let me get my arm in there,” the trainer said. “I got him.”

I stepped out of her way, and she held John with two hands as I peeled his fingers from Valerie's wrist. Each one of his fingers looked delicate, as if the flesh had evaporated, leaving only dry bone and gray veins, but they were strong and clamped onto her arm. Valerie didn't say anything.

When she was free, she stumbled back. The trainer moved to where Valerie had been. "You get him on that side Beth, I'll get him on this one. We don't have time for the lift belt." I followed her lead and wedged my arm into John's armpit. "One, two three," the trainer counted.

John screeched when we lifted him, but I concentrated on keeping my arm firm. I felt strong. We were carrying his weight.

The trainer pulled up his pants and we sat him in the gerichair. I didn't look at Valerie. I didn't smile although I'd been better, I'd been able to do it all the way from start to finish. I wrapped the belt restraint around John's waist and tied it behind his maroon chair.

"Valerie, why don't you slide the tray on," the trainer said.

When Valerie slid the tray over the arms of the chair, she leaned away from John. I plucked a tissue from the box on his nightstand and wiped the mucus from his jowl. Although my stomach contracted as the tissue smeared through his stubble, I folded it and wiped again.

"Good work ladies. Good first effort, right everyone?" The other trainees nodded, but a few looked queasy. Three of them wouldn't show up the next day. "Beth, why don't you get John into his slippers so we can bring him to the nurse's station." The trainer signaled for the group to head out, and I slid John's brown corduroy slippers over his narrow feet.

Valerie walked ahead of me as I pushed John's chair down the hall. She was running a hand along her forearm like it was sore. The trainer patted her shoulder and said something close to her ear. I smirked, straightening my arms against the handle of the gerichair. John's head bobbed with the vibrations from the wheels. *I took care of this patient, I thought. I did it.*

Although John later shook that confidence like a cup of Yahtzee dice—when Pat sent me to his room alone during my first shift—at that moment in the hall, I was victorious.

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As I arrived for my first shift a little before three o'clock in the afternoon, I thought I was ready for the summer. I'd completed the five whole days of training and shown up for work, which in my mind meant I was both prepared and committed. I found a parking spot and walked into the breakroom like a judge stepping into court. But nobody said hello. None of the women at the three cafeteria tables spoke a word to me. They continued to chat with each other, eruptions of cigarette smoke bursting from their mouths. The small room, which had two sealed windows on one side and two snack machines on the other, was filled with the gray haze.

I hurried to the beige refrigerator at the back of the room, pushed my paper bag onto a shelf, and turned to leave. I glanced around but didn't recognize anybody—training had taken place during the day shift, but I was working 3-to-11 to avoid getting up early. The women's faces and hair blurred above their white outfits. I could've joined them for a quick cigarette, but I didn't know where to sit and couldn't stop worrying about whether my underwear showed through my white pants. I didn't want them to notice I was nervous, so I just walked out of the room.

The service hall was a short bright area with a dingy staff bulletin board and the official timeclock. I scanned the timecards and quickly found mine—someone had used a thick blue marker to write my name and ID number on the top. It looked temporary and unusual next to all the ones with computer-printed labels.

Kiki came out of the breakroom as the digital clock pulled my timecard behind the dull silver screen. She had shiny curls and a round pretty face with thick eyebrows and cupid lips. She walked past me to get her card from the metal rack. I loosened my shoulders, slumped a

little weight on my hip like I was relaxed, just punching-in as usual, not new or overwrought in the least. I noticed she was black but pretended that I didn't. I thought that was the best approach at the time, really tolerant. And I didn't want to react like my father, or even my mother, although she hid it better.

The clock emitted sounds like a dozen tiny metal feet tapping. When it stopped, the hum from the fluorescent bulbs reverberated off the painted concrete walls, making our silence even more palpable. I smiled as I stepped out of the way, but Kiki remained blank. Her lips, shaded with a glossy plum lipstick, didn't move. Two other women got in line behind her, but I didn't say anything. I knew from years of listening to my dad and the guys he worked with at the warehouse not to act like a regular on my first night. But I was sure the aides were happy to have me on staff. Marilyn, the nursing director, had said I would be a big help. I'd gone home to western Massachusetts, though most of my friends from Brown were traveling or doing internships, and signed up for the nurse's aide training so that I could help. And to make money for school.

None of the summer jobs around Granfield paid as much as the nursing home. \$6 an hour was a lot of money to me—over two dollars above the minimum wage. That's what my cousin was making at the mall, just \$3.75 an hour. Although working as a nurse's aide wasn't related to my career plans, it was the best pay I could find. So I was willing to do it, even if part of me wanted to be on the Cape or renting a sublet in Manhattan. Since I couldn't afford a summer like that, I let myself believe I was doing valued work, I was taking care of people. And I was still under the impression that my ability to get John out of bed demonstrated some special aptitude for the job. I was gifted.

I stuffed my timecard into the rack and walked out of the service hall. As I cut across the rear corner of the decorative lobby, I noticed the receptionist in the booth by the front entrance.

She shook her long blonde hair while listening to a middle-aged couple wearing business clothes. An elderly man in a red windbreaker sat alone on one of the faux French couches, his hands wringing and wringing around each other.

I continued toward Lincoln, the wing Marilyn had assigned me to. It was the second wing on the first floor, and the one where John lived—I liked knowing that already. I walked past the Conference Room-Chapel where we had watched videos and taken notes, and stepped through the double doors. Heavy beige doors held open with industrial magnets. They marked the threshold onto the wings, where the colorful lobby carpet ended and beige linoleum spread down the hallway, into every room, like Ovaltine dumped from an enormous vat.

I immediately noticed Pat standing at Lincoln's nurse's station, but I didn't want her to see me yet, to catch me walking like I'd been dropped through a vent into the wrong place. It was my first night at Liberty Home, and the place felt different than it had during the previous week of day shifts. Fewer patients sat along the main hallway. The afternoon sun that drifted through the windows seemed worn—too weak to really intrude on the fluorescent glow. Visitors were heading out rather than coming in, like the building was being unloaded and those of us left behind were in for lockdown.

The further I moved past the threshold, the more I sensed the smell. It wasn't like a hospital. Hospitals smelled like the hydrogen peroxide and antibacterial ointment in my parents' medicine cabinet. Not the nursing home. It was stale despite the vapor of cleaning agents and bleach. The ammonia scent was bitter and heavy, and I felt like I was inhaling minuscule bits of dead skin.

I moved to the right side of the hallway, and my fingers grazed the wooden railing as I studied the cream wallpaper. I'd hoped to slip into Liberty Home, to fit like a raw egg poured in

a cup, but the main hallway didn't offer any cover. Blank open doors staggered along both sides. Sounds came just within earshot and fell, dropping to the floor behind me as I passed.

“ . . . said that we were having a barbecue next week but I'm not going out . . . ”

“ . . . come here, come here, come here, hey come here, come here, come here . . . ”

“ . . . try it and you'll see that no detergent powers out stains . . . ”

“ . . . daughter called on my birthday from Chicago. Chicago. Where she . . . ”

Liberty Home clearly wasn't going to be a place I could just blend into. But sticking to the right side of the hallway allowed me to walk up behind Pat without being watched. I skimmed the wall like a cat, alert but impassive, and when I reached the intersection with Lincoln's north-south hall, I stopped next to the linen cart. The bright lights gave the recessed nurse's station the look of a church sanctuary, a place of authority and deference.

Pat was leaning on the counter, her wide oil-drum body propped on tip-toes. She was a white woman with ruddy arms and a few swollen veins wriggling down the back of her left knee. Her polished white nurse's shoes had thick marshmallow soles.

A woman who I couldn't see was sitting at the desk and calling out patient names like a military roll, so I turned my attention to the linen cart. Its plastic cover was swept over the top, revealing the four metal racks filled with linens I'd learned about in training. Shower and bed blankets. Pads, each one stiff from a plastic lining and stained with yellow shadows. Cloth diapers, large and thick and also discolored—the spots making the work seem shoddy at first, until I grew used to them. White sheets, pillowcases, towels, and washcloths sat next to several tight stacks of the blue hospital gowns we called johnnies.

Random items were strewn on the bottom. Belt restraints for around the waist, vest restraints for over the chest, and pelvic restraints for under the crotch. There was a large canvas

seat with reinforced trim and metal bars for the Hoyer lift crane. In the far corner, three ankle braces lay with puffy heel pillows, synthetic lamb's wool, and a few elastic straps with velcro.

“. . . Edna and Louise, Frank and Carl, Beatrice and Helen. That's all of em.”

Pat nodded, plopping onto her heels. “Yup, that's the whole mess. Now we gotta keep these assignment lists in a drawer here or we'll lose em again. If this girl actually shows up, she's gonna need these for a while.”

Gail chuckled and stood up, placing four slips of paper on the counter. She was a young black woman with a narrow face and distinctive almond eyes. Her hair was combed into a short spiky ponytail. I hadn't expected many black women to work at the nursing home. Liberty Home was in Granfield, where I'd grown up. A small town with all white people. But it was a pleasant surprise, another opportunity for me to shine. “I don't even know why we bother,” Gail said. “But I guess some of us are crazy enough to stick around.”

Their doubt startled me, like the sudden sound of screeching tires with splintering glass. It wasn't the welcome I'd anticipated. The expectation of failure didn't fit with the view I had of myself, not when I was on-time and trained and gifted. So I took the doubt as a challenge. In that instant, I resolved to finish the summer and stay at Liberty Home no matter what happened. There was no way I was going to switch to some lame job at the mall with my cousin. Plus I wanted that \$6 an hour. The rest of the summer—the desolation and peculiar beauty, the friendship and humor, the accidents and investigation—all flowed from that decision, which had seemed so clearheaded and simple.

I stopped bouncing my heel and hooked a thumb under the strap of my bag as Gail noticed me by the linen cart. Jerking my face into a smile, I took three steps forward.

“Well I think this is her. You Beth?” she asked.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “The trainer told me I was working this wing.”

Pat turned around. Everything about her was an exaggeration. Her thick black eyeliner and mascara were applied so heavily, they left speckles on Pat's powdered white cheeks. The fabric of her uniform plunged into crevices of flesh under her chest and around her waist. I didn't see any sign of her skeleton, of her bones.

"Hey, how ya doin. Come on over, we don't bite. I'm Pat and this's Gail. Roberta should be here any minute, she's the fourth aide tonight. We've all worked here a long time, so if you got any questions just ask."

I nodded during her pause and pushed the strap of my bag further onto my right shoulder. I wasn't able to speak. My brain was silent, like it had reached that blank groove at the end of a record album. They stared.

"Well. This is your first night, right?" Pat continued. "So you'll do first rounds with me, then you'll get list 3 for bedtime—that's the easiest one. But we'll do last rounds together so ya don't feel like you're in over your head. I gotta send you to do some-a the patients by yourself though, or we won't finish on time. Promise to give ya the easy ones."

Her words took a second to process. "But . . . the trainer said there'd be five aides on each wing during our first week," I said. "That way we'd have like, an orientation period with shorter assignments or something."

Gail and Pat both laughed. The trainer obviously hadn't known what she was talking about—but I'd believed her. I looked down at my feet and tried to smile as if I didn't mind their cackling. Their open mouths and squinty looks. My white leather sneakers, an old pair I'd worn in high school, looked flaky and dry compared to Pat's polished shoes. I should've listened to my mom and bought new ones, but I'd wanted to save all my money for school. I ran my hand up and down the strap of my bag.

“That’s a good one,” Gail said. “Marilyn gettin five aides on a wing. Now Marilyn’s the nursing director you know, and she makes all them decisions. She don’t put five aides on a wing for 3-to-11.” Gail shrugged. “But the woman has no shame. I wouldn’t be surprised if she did tell your trainer she was gonna do that.” Gail wasn’t wearing makeup. Her dark skin was smooth and even, with a glow of orange under the surface.

“Liberty Home doesn’t spend money that way, you just gotta get used to it,” Pat said. “They’re always cryin broke while we’re down here making 6.25 an hour.”

“Shit. Those fuckers make us work short all the time just so they don’t have to break out the cash. Most they do is pay overtime for the extra shifts and doubles,” Gail said.

They didn’t talk like the trainer, who’d been upbeat and professional in class. They didn’t speak like Marilyn, who’d been congratulatory and formal when giving out the certificates. I figured Pat and Gail were testing me a little. They wanted to see if I could take their dose of reality, but I wasn’t letting them rattle me. The only thing that sounded like a real pain was the possibility of double shifts. I wanted the job, but I didn’t want to be at the nursing home for sixteen hours—I didn’t need the money that bad.

“Well, we should put our bags in the kitchenette. Here let me show ya.” Pat stepped around the counter and I followed her to a door behind the desk. “This’s where we keep all the stuff for the patients’ snacks, but I put my pocketbook in here too since the door is locked. There’s too many busy hands around the coat closet. That’s an interesting bag you got. Looks like it’s from the army.”

“Oh, yeah.” I almost said thanks. “It’s from an army-navy store.” I grabbed the gray canvas bag with one hand and slipped the strap off my shoulder.

“My husband Bud was in the army,” Pat said.

“Really?” I didn’t have anything else to say. In my mind, the army was Vietnam and Agent Orange and screaming and families who moved a lot. I didn’t understand why anybody would join.

The kitchenette was a narrow room squeezed behind the desk, next to the coat closet and med room. It was rather dismal—an ancient microwave and a toaster surrounded by crumbs. A battered mini-refrigerator on the floor. Near the metal sink sat a tray heaped with brown plastic coffee cups, two plastic bowls of mush, and a sectional plate of half-eaten food.

“What the hell is this. Gail, Gail check this out,” Pat spun and shouted into my face. “They left a full tray in here again.” I stepped back as Gail appeared in the doorway. “We’re gonna have to get room-to-room checks if they keep pullin this shit. There better not be any crap anywhere else. Sorry Beth. Here put your bag in this cabinet. That one in front has bread, tea, Sweet’n Low, some animal crackers, saltines, and jelly packets. There’s usually butter packets in the refrigerator with the milk’n juice. The nurses keep apple sauce in there too, but that’s for meds. And none of the patients are ever supposed to be in here.” Pat ended the tour there. “Just look at this shit from lunch. I am sick of pickin up after them, like we don’t have anything better to do.” So much for the deference.

I tried to muster some exasperation about the tray, but it didn’t upset me at the time. It seemed easy enough to take the tray to the kitchen or add it to the dinner carts later. I hadn’t felt the weight of those simple tasks, I didn’t understand their cumulative power.

“I even asked em if they got everything.” Gail pointed at the main hallway with her hand high above her head. “That bitch Diane walked outta here with her nose in the air like she’s all that. The kitchen staff needs to hear about this right now too, cuz they get heated if the breakfast stuff ain’t put away before dinner, and I don’t feel like hearin it.”

Pat herded us from the kitchenette as she stomped toward the desk.

I heard voices coming from the med room. “28, 29, 30 31, 32 digoxin. And there are the three packs that came in the delivery. Ready for . . .” The day and evening nurse had wheeled the med cart to the doorway, blocking themselves in with the pills and liquids, capsules and ointments. The cart was beige plastic. A small lamp rose from the top on a bendable coil.

“I’m leavin a note for 7-to-3 right now. And we should say something to the day nurse since she’s still here.” Pat snatched a piece of scratch paper and leaned over the desk. She pressed her weight onto her left hand and I saw a wedding band embedded in her ring finger. “What’s the date? Yeah and we should both sign it. Oh, you too Beth, if you wanna.”

“That’s okay.” I walked toward the front of the nurse’s station. “They wouldn’t know who I am anyway.”

Pat didn’t say anything else. I told myself I didn’t care—the whole thing seemed rather petty. Who cared about a tray of dishes. There were bigger concerns in the world, I had bigger concerns. About graduation requirements and study abroad and glasnost and apartheid in South Africa. I didn’t want it to matter so much that they weren’t asking me to sign a stupid note about dirty dishes.

“Alright,” Pat continued, “so Gail, I’m gonna say that we found a lunch tray . . .”

I grabbed the scrunchy from my pocket and pulled my wavy brown hair into a ponytail. Neither Pat nor Gail said anything to me, so I focused on the main hallway and struggled not to itch at the elastic band of my pants, an old pair with a wide waistband and front pockets stitched to the outside. I didn’t want to admit that they made me look like a hobo because I refused to spend any money on a uniform.

Running my hand along the counter, I stole a few glimpses of Pat and Gail to compare what they were wearing. Pat had on a uniform, a one-piece dress with luminescent buttons, a rounded collar, and empty belt loops. Faint coasters of stain showed at the armpits.

Although Gail wasn't wearing a uniform, her white pants were thick and ironed flat. Her shirt was a nurse's top with front snaps, little metal donuts around white centers, and her bulky white socks were puckered above spotless leather sneakers. She was also wearing a lot of jewelry. Rings with heavy edges, glittering bits of diamonds.

I moved one of my simple silver hoops in my ear like it wasn't hanging right and eyed the bracelet on Gail's wrist. It flashed her name in a swirl of gold. Another broad stream wriggled across her collarbone. Gail's necklace was three times as wide as the big gold chain I'd bought in tenth grade with money from babysitting and cleaning offices. I didn't wear my gold chains anymore though, or my sapphire ring. People at Brown didn't wear gold like that. They mostly wore silver and big earthy stones and etched toe rings with expensive brown sandals. Although I felt a vague longing when I saw Gail's jewelry, I reminded myself that it was really too brash and flashy.

I paced to the linen cart and glanced down the main hallway for the fourth time. A patient with purple scabs all over her nose was scooting her wheelchair toward the dining room, one hand on the railing and both feet inching along the floor.

"You're here for the summer right, now til the enda August," Pat said from behind me.

"That's what we heard."

I returned to the counter and rested my forearm on top. "Yeah, for the summer. Plus I'm gonna work at Thanksgiving and Christmas."

"You a college girl then," Pat noted.

"Yeah."

"You go for nursing?" Gail asked.

“No.” I assumed they’d respect me more for doing something else as my real job—I didn’t see the insult in thinking I was doing good work at Liberty Home for the summer, but other work was better as a career. “I’m probably gonna major in political science.”

“What the hell ya do with that?” Pat said. It was the same question my father asked every time we talked about my major.

“I’ll probably go to law school. I wanna be a lawyer and work with people who’re having problems.” My father told me I was full of pie-in-the-sky baloney and warned me that some people couldn’t be helped. They were just bad, like the people my brother hung around with. But not my brother, although he was the one buying the drugs. “I wanna defend people and their civil rights, make sure they get fair treatment and stuff,” I said. I expected Pat and Gail to really admire that.

“Bud thinks you can’t change a criminal. He says we should just lock em up and throw away the key,” Pat said. “I don’t always agree with him, but that’s what a lotta people think.”

“Lawyer is good money though. Real good,” Gail nodded. “Why you workin here then?”

Their lack of enthusiasm was disappointing. “This seemed like a good job for the summer. You know, helping older people. It’s a good thing to do, more than other jobs.” I thought for sure Gail and Pat would respect me for that.

Gail laughed. “That’s the shit right there. Ooh my, tell me who’d wanna be up in here if they didn’t have to?” She held Pat’s arm for a second. Her body swayed with a cynical amusement I didn’t understand. But it strengthened my resolve. I wanted to know what was so hard about Liberty Home.

“If you wanna know the truth,” Pat said, “I don’t think I could do another job after this one. I’d probably get too bored. Plus I do love the patients. They can drive me crazy, but God

bless em, I love them. And they need us, we're family to them. I just don't know about it bein a good thing. It is important though, it has to get done."

Nobody said anything for a couple seconds. "How old're you?" Gail asked.

"Nineteen."

"You got a boyfriend at college?" she asked.

"No, no. I'm not seeing—" The answer had come fast, but I stopped. It was a lie. I had a boyfriend. His name was Jeremy, and his father worked for an investment bank in Manhattan and his mother was an art dealer and they drove up to visit him in a convertible Mercedes. But I didn't want to take it back, I didn't want to explain. They didn't need to know. I couldn't have explained my denial anyway. I hadn't moved past the contradiction of being both proud and ashamed of Jeremy at the same time. Proud and ashamed of a lot of things.

"Here comes Roberta," Pat announced. "Now we can get started."

"Hello ladies," Roberta called. "We got four tonight?"

"Sure do." Gail pointed at me. "This is Beth, one-a the new ones."

Roberta glanced to the ceiling and smiled. "Praise God," she said in a soft voice. She was a tall black woman with round cheeks and heavy arms. Dark circles held her eyes deep in her light brown face, and her wide feet sloped to the sides of her nursing shoes, which looked like they were going to split from the pressure. A hard bulky textbook rested in the crook of her arm and a plastic-wrapped plate of cookies sat on top. "So, Marilyn gave us one of the new certified girls. Good to meet you Beth, I'm Roberta. Here ladies. I brought some cookies from the party we had at school today."

"Ah jeez Roberta. Just what I need." Pat peeled open the plastic wrap and picked out two cookies. I thought she was going to hand one to me. "Help yourself Beth, then come over to the linen cart and I'll help you load up."

I didn't want a cookie. I didn't like oatmeal raisin, which was all that was left since Pat had taken the two chocolate chip. But Roberta was watching and Gail had already taken a bite of hers.

"Don't forget to grab some rubber gloves, Beth." Roberta took a box from the desk and set it on the counter. "Fill your pockets now and you'll be happy later."

"Mmhm," I nodded, my lips closed over a mouthful of the dry cookie.

"Roberta's goin to school too, gettin her LPN," Pat said. I smiled and widened my eyes, but I thought Pat was a little confused. An LPN program wasn't really college, it wasn't a four-year degree. "How does it feel, Roberta?" Pat asked as we gathered around the line cart.

"You're almost done now."

"I am too tired to know. All these years have come down to this, God willing. I am in His hands. But Jamal can't stop talking about it. The poor man. He thinks I'm going to go back to cooking and cleaning like I used to. I'm happy though, real happy. And I couldn't have done it without him. I am truly blessed."

"You're lucky that he—" Pat snatched my hand away from the washcloths. "Don't bother takin any-a those. I'm gonna show you a better way."

"Okay. Then I just need a lift belt." It was an impulsive attempt to sound like a regular.

"Sure," Pat sighed.

Roberta laughed. "Give her a break. It's her first night, and a lift belt isn't going to hurt anybody."

"Not gonna finish eleven or twelve patients at bedtime with a lift belt. But there might be some on the bottom there."

I didn't want to take a belt, not if they thought it was stupid, but I couldn't get out of it without looking pathetic. They all watched as I rummaged through the bottom shelf and found a

single belt sitting under a piece of foam eggcrate. I decided against wearing it around my waist like the trainer and the women on 7-to-3 had done.

“You lift without the belts?” I asked.

“Yeah, we just hug the patients under their armpits. Here, gimme those.” Pat laid her diapers and pads on the large plastic hamper and yanked mine out of my hands. Without a word, she reached under my armpits, hooked her elbows in, and clasped her forearms across my shoulder blades. Her bosom enveloped my narrow chest and buoyed me up as she squeezed and lifted. “Then pivot and put em where they gotta go. Jeez, you’re light as a feather.”

She dropped me back on my feet. I felt small and floppy.

“Take the lift belt, Beth. You might have the time to use it,” Roberta said before turning to follow Gail down the south hall.

Pat handed me my stack of linens. “Sure, if ya want to. Go ahead.” I reeled in the belt’s metal clasp as Pat tromped into the north hall. “I like to start at the far end and work my way back. It makes me feel like I’m getting somewhere. So we’ll go down here and do Beatrice and Helen first.”

I pushed the wheeled hamper and followed Pat to the last room. I did my best to ignore the pulse that was throbbing out of my ribcage and into my neck and fingertips. I told myself I was ready to do the job, I was ready—but I just wanted to watch Pat do everything.

Pat walked to the far bed without stopping in the bathroom to wash her hands like the trainer had told us to do. So I walked with her. There were no lights on. No television, no radio. Just the standard issue: two hospital beds, two hospital tables, two nightstands, two dressers. Stepping past the bathroom, I was surprised by a woman sitting in a chair with her knees together and her feet flat on the floor.

“Oh. Hello, hi there.” I brought my face down in front of hers. Only her pupils moved.

“Come over here first,” Pat called. “Beatrice won’t say anything to you anyway. Nothin personal, she’s just out-of-it. And this is Helen.” The bed in front of Pat was almost flat, just a mound of blanket. “Hi Helen. How are ya? Helen’s out-of-it too. Totally out-of-it. Let’s get these off and see what you got.” Pat swept the sheet and blanket into the air and flung them to the foot of the bed.

It was not a person. It was a pile of weathered branches bent into the fetal position, with a dried apple head stuck on top. I stared. I felt oddly thrilled and didn’t know what to do about it. We hadn’t worked on anybody like that in training. One patient might’ve been that contorted, but Sonia had merely cranked the bed up and held a straw so the woman could sip a strawberry protein shake.

“Should I pull the curtain?” I asked.

“Nah. Nobody comes down here.” With one flick Pat had Helen’s johnny up by her neck.

I bit my lip. The trainer had instructed us to never expose a patient, to always keep a sheet covering part of the body. I glanced at Pat’s face, but she was focused on Helen.

“Makes you wanna drink your milk huh,” Pat said. “The ones like this are in a lotta pain too, on a lotta meds. Hah honey?” She ran her hand over the strings of Helen’s milkweed hair, which were pulled into a red elastic. “Helen’s good to start with cuz I can show you a few things.”

“Okay,” I said, but seeing Helen so exposed, I felt a twinge of pity. A feeling that I still confused with actual caring. I brushed the johnny away from her chin and pulled it over her chest.

“Oops, yeah. Don’t wanna cover your face, right Helen?” Pat said.

Helen was lying on her right side with her rounded back close to the bedrail in front of me. Each of her hands was clamped on a nubby washcloth and there was a pillow beneath her clenched knees. Her body curved toward her stomach as if her bones were being pulled into her belly button with fishing line. Although her muscles and tissue were almost gone, I noticed a scar that looked like it came from a c-section.

Pat pulled the unsnapped diaper away from Helen's belly. Sparse white hair didn't hide the stretched mauve edges of her vagina. "Well, Helen's only wet but I'll show ya how to wash with a towel anyway." Leaving the sheets down, Pat walked to the bathroom. "Get the water warm, not too hot. They have sensitive skin and you'll burn em with water you think is just fine." Pat wet one end of the towel and pumped out two squirts of pink soap from the wall dispenser.

Trying not to let any thoughts show on my face, I followed Pat to the bed. She rolled Helen toward my side and pulled out the damp diaper. "She's light enough so I can do this by myself, but watch. You wash the patient with the wet end of the towel." Pat spread the towel over the palm of her hand and rubbed it along Helen's crotch. "Then you dry em with the other end. No washcloths, less to carry."

My hips tilted away from the bed, away from the rough work of Pat's diligent hands. Helen's face didn't change. No flinch, no acknowledgment. "Throw it or roll it up in the wet pads," Pat said. "You know the rest, right?"

"I thought we weren't supposed to put stuff on the floor?" I pushed my voice high and soft, into a question. "The trainer said we're supposed to set it on the bed." I should have kept my suggestion to myself, where it was pleasantly entwined with the idea that I was going to do everything the right way.

“Nobody does that. It’s gross, and as long as we don’t throw the dirty diapers open on the floor, there’s nothin unsanitary,” Pat said. “There we go Helen. She needs to be turned too, but she’s light.” Pat reached one arm under Helen’s shoulders, the other under her knees.

“I can help. I can lift on this side.”

“Nah. Look how light she is.” With a short sigh, Pat lifted Helen a couple inches, drew her closer, and put her down. “Pull the diaper up and we’re done. She doesn’t move so you don’t have to snap it—it’d just dig into her skin. Try pickin her up, see how light she is.”

My hand ran along Helen’s back. I grimaced as her skin slid over her sharp spine and a crunchy age spot rubbed my forearm. I tried to put my weight into my legs before tensing my arms. But all the pull went into my back. My neck locked and the air huffed out of my lungs as I picked her off the bed. There was a crinkling sound from Helen’s body, like a smashing of potato chips. I let her down.

“Her back cracked, that’s all,” Pat said. “Now we lean her on her side. There ya go, and use this pillow to prop her knees. They told you this is all for bed sores, right?”

“Yeah, we had a whole thing on that.” Deep wrinkled indentations from the wet diaper covered the skin on Helen’s right side. The red spot on her hip was the size of a tea saucer.

“You check Beatrice while I throw this stuff in the laundry. She stands so just lift her skirt to see if the diaper’s wet,” Pat said and walked into the hall.

Beatrice stood when I touched her elbow, but she didn’t look at me or say a word. I reached under her skirt and unsnapped the diaper. She was dry. She sat down as soon as I touched her shoulder.

“We’re supposed to take her to the toilet but we don’t have time tonight,” Pat said. “So you can go do John now, get him into his gerichair. He’s in the room next door and he’s also really light. Just sit him up and lift under the armpits like I showed you. Or with that lift belt.

He's mostly out-of-it but he might fight a little, so be quick. I'll be across the hall with Viola if you need anything."

"Okay. So I'll go . . . there." My experience with John and Valerie made me question whether I'd be able to get him up by myself, and the adrenaline from starting my first shift had already dissolved, leaving my legs feeling slightly elastic. I didn't want to get him out of bed alone.

But I wanted Pat to think I was a good aide and to prove I could get through the summer.

"You'll probably need a wet towel," Pat said, walking across the hall. Her permed hair bunched against her neck as she shouted, "Viola dear, how ya doin today?"

No light or sound came from John's room. He was lying in the same position as the first time I saw him, with his mouth open. I was not ready to wake him up. He was going to yell. He was going to need me to touch him with nobody watching.

I clutched the stack of linens to my chest. The room seemed bigger without the huddle of trainees, and in the quiet open space I noticed frames hanging on John's side. They were simple, yet they seemed extravagant. All the other items in the room were functional: sleep or storage or sitting or serving. But not the picture frames. I liked that someone had hung them. They seemed charming even if John didn't know they were there. I liked the chance to look at the pictures, to see into his past. Into his real life.

I walked to the three frames hanging above the dresser. One showed a young man with a large oval face, full lips, and narrow shoulders. He was wearing a cap and gown, but the black and white had faded. The diploma had yellowed in his long smooth fingers. I easily recognized John in the second one, a wedding photograph with the name DeCaro's stamped in gold in the lower right corner. John was sitting in a chair and his wife stood beside him with a hand on his

shoulder. They were next to a large fern, in front of a curtain. His suit was dark and linear, her dress was plain. But the bouquet brimmed with many different flowers, curving and delicate.

In the third frame, I saw John. He was holding a rudder at the back of a sailboat. He had a jaunty smile and a baseball cap, but the lines alongside his mouth were deep and the skin drooped under his chin. A wedge of muscle still cut along his right arm. The image was a little ridiculous, a little too much like the Kennedys or something, but he was happy.

The two frames near John's bed displayed diplomas, an Amherst College BA and a Harvard JD—a Harvard fucking JD. Heavy calligraphy with swoops and sharp edges sliced over the paper. *John William Leggett*. It was impressive. It was fucking huge. I nodded in appreciation of the hard work, the prestige. But I looked to the bed and saw John. *This was it?* I thought. The hours, the studying, the late nights and six-figure paychecks, the long meetings with hushed secretaries, the belts and suspenders and wing tips.

I didn't get it. He should've had someone to take care of him, or the money for someone to take care of him. What was he doing at Liberty Home? He didn't even have his own furniture. I forced my mind back to the boy in the cap and gown, the man in the wedding suit, and the baseball cap. I tried to hold onto those pieces of his existence—John was a Harvard lawyer, the top of the legal field. Ever since my junior-high counselor had met with my parents, my dad had talked about Harvard. His tone had been full of hope and suspicion and revenge and pride. I'd have to tell him that the first patient . . . the first patient whose balls I washed went to Harvard. I smiled. Wrinkled old Harvard balls, my initial brush with greatness.

There was no more avoiding it, I had to get John into his gerichair. Pat expected me to do it. But the thought of pinching his nose, like my brother used to do to me when I was sleeping, flashed through my head. Only once—for less than a second.

No one had shaved John's face that morning or washed the large crumbs of sleep from his eyelashes. I remembered the poop smear and pulled on a pair of gloves. Waiting in the bathroom for the water to grow warm, I gazed in the mirror. I turned my head to the side. My bangs had grown a little too long, the freckles on my nose had already come out for the summer. My collarbone showed at the base of my neck like a slender tree root.

On the way to John's bed, I thought about how I'd be able get him up. I realized that I couldn't use the method from training, because doing it myself meant I had to start without waking him. I would have to rush through as much as possible before he was alert.

I squeezed the small lever and released the bedrail. With my hand as a guide, the brown metal gate quietly swung to the right. John was still asleep. His breathing made no noise, but his chest moved slightly. Sneaking my fingers under the sheet by John's neck, I kept my eyes on his face. Still asleep. Still breathing. He didn't give me any reason to get Pat.

The sheet and blanket flew off his body in one ripple, and before John opened his eyes I had the wet diaper unsnapped. Just as he started to moan, I pushed to roll him. He tilted a little but stopped hard.

I'd forgotten the belt restraint. It was holding him and cinching his waist, which caved under the pressure like a tube of clay.

"Oh shit," I said. "Shit, shit, shit." I squatted and pecked at the knot, but my push had yanked it tight. And the rubber gloves were getting in the way, sticking to the canvas strap as my fingers fumbled inside the numb membrane. "Just a second here."

John grabbed onto the far bedrail and cranked it back and forth. "Eeeough, oow. Oohh."

By the time I removed my gloves, untied the knot on each side of the bed, and grabbed the wet towel, he was sitting up. His whole body was a rigid zigzag, from his tense neck down his back, up from his hips, to his unmoving ankles.

I was afraid Pat might hear him. “Shhh, come on. Everything’s okay,” I whispered as I shook open the wet towel. “You’re fine.”

There was a cranberry stain on the front of John’s striped Izod shirt. I knew I should change it. But I had no time. He was only getting up for a couple hours, and who was there to impress? The trainer had emphasized dignity and respect, but this was just once. Just my first night because I didn’t have enough time.

His shiny hairless legs slid along the mattress as he wailed. I pressed his shoulder toward the pillow to lay him down. John rocked back on his tailbone and his feet flew into the air, giving me a chance to push under his hips again. I shoved him toward the far side with all my anxious strength, and his right arm smacked the bedrail.

His voice grew louder. “Eeeeogh. Oh ooh.”

“Sorry, I’m sorry. Come on. You know how this goes right? You’re a smart man,” I said. There was the expected poop smudged on his scrotum.

I swiped the towel once, but he wasn’t completely clean. When I ran the towel over his raw skin the second time, John let go of the far bedrail and swung at me. His bony forearm caught me on the nose and pain sparked across my face. My eyes clenched and I dropped the towel on the bed. I didn’t want to touch my face with the gloves, so I hopped from foot to foot with my hands flicking at my sides.

When I got my eyelids to relax, I saw that John was resettled in the dirty diaper. “Now look what you did. See. I’m trying to help you here. Now I gotta wash you all over again.” I snatched the cold soiled towel. Heat rushed into my arms and hands as they lunged underneath John and heaved him onto his face. His forehead and knee hit the bedrail. I had him under control—an immediate satisfaction moved through me so quickly all I sensed was the residue and immunity. I locked one elbow against his weight and kept going. I told myself I had to.

After wiping his butt again, I threw the towel into the diaper, rolled them together, and yanked them from under his hip. I wasn't thinking about any tissue tear. My rigid left arm had his whole body jammed on its side. I let him go, and John tumbled backwards and glared at me. He tried to spit, but the spray ended up all over his chin.

I smirked at him. "Good one." The sound broke the momentum of my frustration. I could suddenly see all the details of the room.

John's face was red with a small white line on his forehead where he'd hit the bedrail, and he was naked except for the dirty Izod shirt bunched at his flat bony chest. Drooping from his thin tuft of white pubic hair, his penis had the squashy appearance of something which had not been dry in weeks. His thin fingernails were clipped in uneven scraggly lines.

I dropped my hands and shoulders. John was staring at me and muttering fierce incomprehensible sounds. I saw the texture of the hospital curtain, the bumpy white vase on his roommate's nightstand, the spoon on the floor by the dresser. As if a thick mist had evaporated, the whole room seemed full of straight hard lines—the walls, the doors, the trim, the dresser drawers.

I couldn't believe I had shoved an old man, pushed his face into a bedrail. I didn't want to believe it. I pulled his shirt over his stomach and straightened the collar.

Someone appeared at the door. "You need help finishing him up?" Pat asked.