

Transport

by Ginnah Howard

Ruth carries

always a small bottle of
nitroglycerin; and tissues, wads of
tissues; two Tums (for calcium, she tells me),
Tic-Tacs in a little plastic box that snaps; often several
Smith Brothers Lemon Licorice Throat Drops. Pocket portage:
pajamas to robe to sweater. Mornings, beneath her pillows, I find
these nested, plus, a butterscotch ball; her bedside flashlight; for
under

her breast where it itches, baby powder—Giant-sized with
Cornstarch—though the list for her daughter said *small*, so Ruth
could manage it better prone, in the dark. *Maybe I can just dump
some on the sheet and roll in it*, she says.

Ruth resists

bathing and changes of
her *Cuddl* thermal bottoms.
Her daughters have abandoned all
hope of showers. Ruth hasn't said No (No
is not how she does it), but any bath-manipulations
hunker down her jaw, dead-weight her round-bellied body,
and, given her bathroom, it would take me *and* her night lady
both
to step her up over the tub and lower her down onto the rubber
seat of
the stool, and one of us to get in there to hoist her back to
standing. The
main in-charge daughter tells me they're backing off on personal
hygiene, but
could I perhaps dampen her hair with a washcloth, then give it a
touch with the

curling iron. When I suggest to Ruth perhaps the dirty clothes for her pajamas after a week she says, *Why I've never been so clean.*

Ruth desires
horseradish mustard,
pickle relish, ginger sauce.
She hills these little pick-me-ups
around the edges of her Meals on Wheels,
the mounds of Swiss steak and carrots, rhrrred
to mush in the new little chopper—her dentures lost
two months ago, the night her husband of sixty years died.
More maple syrup on your oatmeal, more honey in your tea.
Yes, oh yes. Sweets and the local newspaper. Much is a blur,
but print, squinched at through just the right part of her bifocals,
fills

her morning. She reads me random headlines while I iron: Man
Charged

With Cow Neglect, and random phrases: finally a cure for the
common cold.

We both agree we are not going to follow the story about the baby
abused at his daycare. And greeting cards: Ruth has dozens for
every occasion. For years she's been the Sunshine person for her
D.A.R. I say, We might be able to go to their luncheons. *Oh no*, she
says, *finally I have an excuse.*

Ruth worries
about her daughters:
driving at night, using a
riding mower. Things men
do that aren't safe for women.
Be careful, she tells them. Do you
think you should try that? Her daughters,
nearing sixty, look heavenward. *And* she worries
about catching something: pneumonia or flu, regards
me with suspicion if I cough or sneeze. Her daughters

worry about her feet: poor circulation. For Christmas she got a little foot whirlpool. Could I toothbrush her toes? And what horny nails she has, yellowed with white spots and threatening to curl in upon themselves. I check my own as though early detection might improve my chances. *But* the night lady and I worry about Ruth on the stairs. Ruth, how about using the portable toilet in the dining room? Her walker does not change direction. Five perilous journeys on my watch. Going up: me behind her, with a tight grab on her waist—fall forward if you start to go. Descending, when she starts to list, we sit side by side, and come down on our rears. Ruth on recent falls: *My body goes where it will.*

Ruth fears

Tuesdays and
Thursday afternoons
when she must be in her
house alone. All right you're
all set: your nitro's in your pocket,
your lap blanket's right here, your book
with everybody's numbers, your lifeline's on,
the remote, this little tub of fudge. I'll leave the
kitchen light. Would you like Anne Murray or Miss
Read? Remember all you have to do is push the red
button with the X if you want to stop the tape. Ruth claims
she cannot figure anything out, she never could. I say, Oh that's
just what women do when there's a man to fix things, but if you
had
to, and you were willing to stand there in the cold and puzzle out
how
this little gizmo hooks up over that little whatsit...in order to free
this, you're

going to have to do that...eventually you'd get it. But she never lets that through. I put on my coat and make my final entry in the log. See you tomorrow morning. *Have a nice evening*, she says, *and don't you worry about me.*

