

A Body Divided, 3

by Jerry Ratch

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A group of nuns arrived in the middle of my first night at Hinsdale Hospital. I guess I must have dozed off when this odd noise, like curtains being moved, woke me up. At first I couldn't make out what that rustling sound was in the hallway outside my door. One of them, a tall, bulky woman, came into the room to the side of my bed. She began staring at me in the dark. All I could see of her was a large outline with a strange white shape surrounding her face and head. She stood there like a black hole in space, blotting out what was left of the light, saying nothing. I could feel her eyes though, burning a hole right into my little soul.

She wanted something out of me, standing erect in the darkness of my room. There was a slight wheeze to her breathing. I could only draw a breath through one nostril now, but it was good enough to detect the smell of tobacco. It was the sweet, pungent odor of pipe tobacco. A simple odor like that brought back a flood of memories about a part of my life, making me ache to get out of bed and run right out of that place.

By the time the nuns arrived on the Polio Ward, I had developed a terrible thirst. For some reason they weren't being very forthcoming with water at the hospital. The nuns who had remained out in the hallway took up a murmuring on their own. It turned into a soft chanting noise that rose and fell with what passion they could muster. I could feel the bulky dark presence of the Sister who stood next to my bed, watching me.

"Who is it?" I asked. She didn't say a word.

"What do you want?" Again, there was silence.

"Who are you?" I pleaded. "Who are you?"

The next thing I knew, I felt some kind of drops splashing on my forehead. I didn't know if this was a nightmare or if this was reality. I racked my head to one side, even with the unbearable

stiffness that had lodged itself now in my neck. Warm drops rolled down from my forehead, over my right eye, down my cheek. These weren't tears, however; I knew I wasn't crying. This was something else from outside me. I saw a movement and heard the material rubbing inside her habit, then still more drops hit me in the forehead. Now a real anger started boiling up inside me.

"Stop that, will you?" I asked.

She said nothing and stood there without moving.

"Who are you? What are you doing to me?"

"This is Holy Water," spoke this austere voice. "I'm here for your soul."

I felt the hair along my arms stand up. This was not the voice of anyone I knew, nor was it very warm or comforting. It was a voice unused to talking in any way that could be described as even close to soothing. It was dry, and there was a rasp to its throat, as though the words were being pulled out of the darkness.

"Holy Water?" I asked. "What's Holy Water?"

"Why, it's . . . it's very special water." There was a note of surprise in her voice. "Water that's been blessed by the Pope!"

I had not been raised Catholic. I hadn't been raised anything at all, so I had no idea who'd sent these nuns. Instead, I was suspicious that maybe they'd been set upon me by the people at the hospital to coax me into something. Nobody told me who they were, or why they were there. They couldn't have frightened me more if they had devised a Master Plan just to scare people in their beds. It was bad enough having been left alone in this kind of evil, small-watt light squeezing its way in from the hallway. And to make matters worse, my mouth had grown parched with an overwhelming thirst.

I reached out with my good left hand, still strapped to its board, and latched onto the habit of the dark shape that hovered over me.

"Not on my head!" I pleaded. I could barely get the words out, I was so dry. "Please, in my mouth! *My mouth!*"

"Oh, Lord!" she cried.

"Let me have that," I said. I had her by the sleeve.

"Lord!" she cried. "Oh, Lord!" She wrenched herself free and whisked out of the room like a huge curtain being swept aside at a movie theater.

One of my aunts in Chicago, who was Catholic, had sent this squadron of nuns out to the hospital to pray for my soul and save my life that first night. I could hear the one who'd been in my room, telling the other Sisters out in the hallway: "That little monster — he wanted to drink the Holy Water! *The Holy Water!* Can you imagine? No one else can go in there. We'll continue praying for him, but from out here. No one is allowed back in that little monster's room. He's a monster. A monster!"

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On balance I would say, however, that if it hadn't been for one particular young nurse who looked after me that first night of my disease, the doctors in charge at Hinsdale Hospital would have gotten their way with their tracheotomy plans the following morning.

My parents couldn't take it anymore, I think, and went home after being told the young nurse would be right there all night long to oversee my condition. But during the darkness something would come to visit, leaving its stain, after which my right nine-year-old's arm forgot how to grow.

Nevertheless, that young nurse was there to minister to every need. For my part I was frightened like I'd never been frightened before, and I wouldn't leave her alone. She came to my bedside each time she heard me squeeze the buzzer. I was terrified by now to let my eyes close, for fear the doctors might sneak up on me in the darkened room and try slipping a blade of some sort under my skin. They were dying to cut into people at that hospital. I felt I had to look out for them, because if I didn't, no one else would. And I didn't want to wake up in the morning with yet another foreign tube sticking out of me.

Things began to get even more strange, though, after one of the floor doctors in charge informed the older, head nurse that if I couldn't keep any water down during the night, they were going to perform the tracheotomy first thing in the morning, before my parents got there. He didn't want them interfering, he said. The doctor snapped the clip on the clipboard when he said this. He handed the pen to the head nurse and spun around on his heel. As soon as those two left the room, I squeezed the buzzer, which was on a cord they had placed next to my left hand, to call in the young nurse.

"Please," I begged, "can you bring me a glass of water? Please? I'm so thirsty."

She brought a glass of water and helped me sit up in bed. Greedily my lips tried to form correctly at the edge of the glass. Some of it got onto my tongue, which felt good enough, but before I knew what was happening, I felt a cool sensation down the side of my chin, then my gown along the right side was soaking wet. The water went right out the side of my mouth without me knowing it was happening. I tried looking down at my gown to make sure if what I was feeling was correct, but my neck was too stiff. This was a bizarre new situation, and I couldn't believe what was happening in this place. I collapsed back onto the pillow with a groan. The young nurse bent over me, feeling my forehead. The skin of her hand felt cool against my fevering brain.

"I'll leave the glass right here on the nightstand," she said. "Ring if you need me." She went out into the hallway. I thought she would always be standing nearby, so I was in no panic yet about the water, but I lay there stunned, while still savoring the experience of wetness on my tongue. And I tried figuring out what was going wrong with me that I couldn't keep water in my own mouth. This was ridiculous! I thought. I was starting to get mad at myself.

I must have slipped into a light sleep. I awoke at one point when the floor doctor reappeared with the head nurse. Once more they took my temperature; then they tested my ability to keep down water, but it slipped out of my mouth again and down the right side

of my chin. I couldn't comprehend why this kept happening. The doctor began shaking his head. He noted something on my chart. They rang for the young nurse and ordered her to remove the glass of water she had left beside my bed. "He's spitting up every drop," he stated. "Take it off the night stand."

He marked something else down on my chart and handed the pen back to the head nurse. With force he snapped the clip on the clipboard. "We're going to have to operate in the morning, that's all," he said. "Make sure he doesn't get anything more in him, so he doesn't vomit from the gas." He spun on his heel and blitzed out of the room.

I felt my insides beginning to float away from me. Now I could curl the toes on my left foot, but not on my right. I realized something peculiar was happening and I was no longer in total control of the foot on my right side, but I still felt the cold. That sensation would not go away. I looked at the upside down bottle dripping into my vein and thought they were giving me something peculiar to make these strange events keep happening to me.

The power of the thirst had created a blistering welt along the roof of my mouth, and I grew desperate now for water. I rang the buzzer again. This time, however, instead of my young companion, the head nurse came into my room. When I asked her for something to drink, she went to the foot of the bed and lifted the clipboard.

"It says here the floor doctor indicated no more water."

"Can't I please have something? Please! I'm so thirsty."

She kept looking at my chart.

"It says here you keep spitting everything up."

"What? Where's the other nurse?" I asked. "The one who . . . she was..."

The older woman snapped the clipboard. "The young nurse is on her dinner break," she said. Out of the room she hustled with a scratching noise inside her uniform. I heard the nuns outside my room, murmuring their prayers.

Again I hit the buzzer, but no one came. I rang it once more. A single tone would go off in the hallway whenever I pushed

the button. I tried it a number of times. Bong . . . Bong . . . Bong. After some time passed, I heard footsteps come right up to the opened doorway of my room. I waited for someone to come in, but they didn't. Instead, the next time I squeezed the buzzer, there wasn't even the usual tone in the hallway. There was complete silence. No light went on. Nothing. That was when I realized they had cut me off from the rest of the world.

The thirst seemed to be gaining, taking on a bigger and bigger importance, and my head was pounding with a massive headache, which had been building for days. I struggled to sit up in the bed. There was a small high table on my right side, which contained some of the apparatus they'd been using to clean utensils. Among the various things the hospital staff had left there, beside the thermometer they tested me with nearly every hour, was a glass half filled with dirty, gummy water, the result of my spitting up, together with what may have exuded from my nose when they'd insert a tube to suck mucus out of my system to keep me from drowning in the stuff.

As soon as I spotted that glass, the implacable thirst that had lodged itself inside me began ballooning all out of proportion. Something seemed to grab hold of me, and I attempted to reach out with my right arm — but nothing happened! This event truly rocked me. I was flabbergasted that I couldn't reach out and grasp that snot-filled glass of water. What was happening to me, I asked, that I couldn't do now what I'd been doing for so long, without once having to think about it my entire life? Who ever thinks about things like that happening, or not happening? Reaching out and taking hold of a glass when you have thirst — something as simple as that? What an outrage! I thought.

I looked down at my left arm strapped onto its small stiff board, with the tube running under the tape into my vein. Slowly, deliberately I tried reaching across my own body with my left arm. I could see it approaching the limit of the tubing that came down from the bottle when I was only half way to the dirty glass. There was just enough light, emitted by the night light behind the head of the bed,

to see smudges on the sides of the glass. A residue floated on the surface of the water. I noticed the liquid vibrating occasionally in the glass — but I thought, at least it was wet! My mouth began to work up a terrible, overwhelming paste inside. My left arm kept pulling against the tubing, while the tubing strained against the bottle of liquid, until the stand itself, which held the upside-down bottle, began to tilt — and then I could see it was no use, and fell back into my pillow.

The world seemed to be collapsing around me. For the first time since I had entered my cold, white, calculating room, I had the realization that some things were *way beyond* my control in this place. The doctors, the nurses, even the nuns out in the hallway seemed to be in cahoots to keep me in here — even as something devastating was about to set in upon me and squash me like a bug. I felt more trapped now, more helpless, than I ever had before. I was becoming desperate. I felt my own heart making my skinny little chest literally bounce under the sheet. My mouth hung open as I gasped for breath through a sore wind tunnel scorched from dry air that actually hurt to take in.

I realized that I needed somebody's help, and that was when I decided I had no other choice than to lie back and see if the young nurse in white would return from her dinner. Together we could get somewhere with this, I tried reasoning. I began to understand that I couldn't do everything in this strange place by myself. I needed the young nurse to help me out with this situation. And that was when I settled back into my sick lair and waited for her to come back. I wanted to think of what my friends might be doing in our fourth grade classroom, but since we had just started a new year, I slowly lost focus. I made an effort to remember my new teacher's name, but couldn't retrieve even that. Mrs. . . . Something. Mrs? I couldn't retrieve it.

My mind was swimming with my unfamiliar surroundings. I was so paralyzed with fear, all I seemed to be able to remember were the seventeen-year locusts with their transparent wings on fire as they attempted to fly up from the bonfire in Stephen Wellings'

backyard, against a darkening sky. They would get about fifty feet away before they dropped. From my bed, out the hospital window to the East, I could only watch now as the deep red harvest moon rose over Lake Michigan, while the world itself rolled away from the sun.

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During that long night the young nurse was the only one that I would come to depend on. That *she could* come back at all, that she would — this became the height of my belief. It wasn't much, but that was what I had, and that was what I clung to. That, and my friends at home.

The young nurse was standing beside my bed the next time another floor doctor swept into the room. I must have dozed off again. He didn't say anything at all to either one of us, but he gave the young nurse a look. When he bent over my bed, putting the ends of his stethoscope into his ears, I could smell the odor of Ivory soap on his hands. He laid the cold, round surgical steel of the listening device against my bare chest, and it felt like an electric shock hit me. It felt hot, it was so cold. I let out a yelp like a puppy. My body jumped again when he moved the steel thing to another spot on my chest.

"Lie still, young man, take a deep breath." I had to laugh, cough and laugh. I couldn't hold my breath because the object was so cold.

"Can you warm that thing up?" I asked.

The doctor gathered himself to full height. This was a new one, younger than the previous doctors. I hadn't seen this one before. His arms were bare and had a thick coat of dark hair.

"There's an idea!" he boomed in a baritone voice. He slid the stethoscope from around his neck and handed it to the young nurse standing beside my bed. "Stick this inside your uniform for him, the next time we need to use it." They looked at each other over my bed.

The young nurse took the stethoscope from the doctor, slipping the earpieces around her neck. When the doctor left the room, she opened the top buttons of her uniform and dropped the round steel listening device inside her dress. I heard her gasp. "Jesus, that's cold!"

"I'm thirsty," I whispered.

"What, honey?"

"Can you give me some water?"

"There's no water here anymore."

I sat up, motioning with the whole upper trunk of my body toward the nightstand on my right side. "That glass, there. I'm so thirsty."

"That's dirty."

"I don't care. Anything, I'm so thirsty. I . . . I can do it. I need it . . . something, anything wet. Please!" The young nurse hesitated.

"Wait a minute," she said. She slipped out into the hallway. I thought, Don't leave again! I couldn't believe she was gone. But in a couple of minutes I heard her coming back with a tinkling sound like a small bell inside a glass that was in her hand. She put the glass down on the far side of the room, on a dresser. When she came back to my bedside, she said, "Open your mouth."

I did. Her wet fingers went past my lips and they were ice cold, and good, and then I felt something inside my mouth. It was a chip of ice, so cold, so delicious and good. At first it seemed to sting and to burn. Then I felt the object all over with my tongue. It was a sliver of ice that had the taste of an exotic food. Saliva welled up in my mouth, and I could feel some of it beginning to slide down my chin already onto my neck, but I kept sucking greedily on this little ice chip until it disappeared. And then I knew we were on the right path when I felt some — the smallest possible portion, but some nonetheless — some amount of chilled saliva go sliding down the backside of my throat — going down on the inside. What a feeling this was! Difficult as it is to describe that moment, it was a little like coming back from the dead. As if I were being lifted off the trash

heap of civilization and placed delicately back on the floor of the earth, for another chance.

I asked my young friend for another small chip of ice. That night, slowly, patiently, I would suck and chomp my way through three glasses full of sweet crushed ice. And in that way I eluded the doctor's determination to operate on my throat.

