

## 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 hospital activity. 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 "my pre- and intra-pandemic love lives were indiscernible, and I was really, really hoping..."

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

Nurse Snaute rambles on, leaving out the part where we will be paid less than the busboys in the hospital cafeteria. Touché for her, because during my job interview, *I* left out the part where my parents had sat me down near the end of the

school year. They told 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 semi-classic literature would ensure a future position as a waitress, wearing a polyester vest, and 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 improper use of negation within his diatribe. Secondly, from the attic of my memory banks, I pulled a neatly folded and stored history. The case of my Aunt Opal Dupree—impregnated in 1959 and shipped off to a farm in Iowa. That branch of the family tree gets abruptly clipped at that point and nobody seems to know the story's denouement.

My counterpoint, as one could easily surmise, was defeated, landing me here amongst the five nerd/delinquent amalgams currently paying homage to the Y chromosome.

We hike to the emergency department, where we will all be spending several

nights a week. I have 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 the doctors; they can be real ass wimps. That's what brother advised me when he do internship last year." Khalid—I'm going to stick with Curry-guy—then hits me head-on with a full curry torpedo from his oropharynx. "What is to be your name?"

I may need the services of a toxicologist. "Mindy," I reply, clear my throat, then have 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 him and up the volume just enough for the whole group to hear. "My family will never pay a dowry!" That closes the torpedo hatch and causes snickers around us.

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 Helena quotes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when Nurse Snaute locks onto me. She stops us outside of room seven. Inside, are several nurses attending 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 moment when Jay Gatsby realizes Daisy Buchanan might be even more narcissistic and shallow than himself. Or when Stephen King realizes he was nearly put into

the planet's discard pile by a light blue Dodge van. Fiction and non-fiction interbreeding, I know.

Snaute stares at my skirt, then my name tag. "Mindy, why don't you and Ron start your summer by helping the medical professionals in this very room?" Ron seems equal parts 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 then appears pale while searching for the closest chair. Admittedly, I freeze as I try to process 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 Ron 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 stapled to the front and back. A couple of the guys are assigned "admissions and family comfort." RTF 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.

Curry guy has apparently researched his packet enough to find the cell 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 going in together.”

“Khalid,” big sigh, “my name is Min-Dy with a D, as in denied. That is very sweet of you. 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?”

Now I’m actually starting to feel a little mean, like I am swatting 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 Curry-guy and Minpy are coming into work together?’ So, you understand why that would be impossible, right?”

“No,” he doesn’t.

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. After I tell him my name, he looks more confused. I think it is my new garb. I was issued the frumpiest and dullest green scrubs ever given to a female in this facility. 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 metal cabinet that holds the heated blankets and load them onto my cart.

Walking promptly into room one, I see a young mom holding her infant on her lap. He is looking alertly around and waving his arms like only a one-year-old can. He looks at me and smiles, causing the fishhook impaled in his lower lip to move. This starts the next round of crying. I don't know what to do. I freeze, then run out of the room.

Unfortunately, just before I can compose myself, one of the doctors sees me and asks what the problem is. I try to tell her in a brave voice, but she ends up leading me by the hand into the room. She explains that the medicine to numb up the child's lip is on the way. In the meantime, it will only hurt when he smiles—a *Catch-22* Heller could be proud of no doubt—and he doesn't need 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 the dislocated 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 his 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 at him from toes to head. “Not going 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’m wondering how she knew we smoked. I have never heard of the blue line—apparently some Orwellian statute enforced by hospital administration. 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 scrubs and smoking along every entrance leading to the hospital. We cross the line, choose a bus bench, and RTF passes out Marlboros.

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

RTF shakes his head and laughs.

“You are one big mess of words,” I tell him. “See, when you say ‘desire’ that means someone wants someone else sexually.” Blank look to the left of me, stark interest from 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.

“You are assuming a lot. Actually, I am going to be a writer. My dad made me take this job hoping I would change my mind and *want* to become a nurse or doctor.”

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

“So, a writer, huh? I thought anybody could be a writer 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 tool 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 lots of punctuation, like Elizabeth Kostova.”

I see on RTF’s face that I have lost him, once again. I change the subject. “So, what are you here 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 so that I am smashed between him and Curry-guy. “Actually, I have four hundred hours of community service.”

“Yes!” I shout with glee while jumping off the bench and twirling. “I knew it. What did you do, drill a peephole between boy’s and girl’s locker rooms?” This was going to make shift number one much better than I 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 amazed that Curry-guy is able to follow the whole juvenile delinquency story line.

“Yes,” holding up a finger to show that he was one up on us, “but 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 both 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.” As we prepare to navigate the darkness of the nighttime parking lot, I compare and contrast our trek to a Tolkien-esque adventure, but this falls on unappreciative ears. Next time, maybe a little more Daenerys Targaryen crossing the Narrow Sea and a little less Frodo Baggins’ quest to destroy the One Ring.

The rest of the night has its share of adrenalin surges, but as dawn approaches, I am fighting to stay awake, and envying the patients that I cover with both blankets and warmth.

A couple of weeks later and we are now fully in the groove of our summer jobs. I have pointed out to each and every one of my remaining coworkers that blanket warmer is a job description only. Despite this, Curry-guy is convinced that I am the nexus of information that 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 while 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 that I could not agree more.

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 that they are going to throw up and I should move fast.

It is a rare quiet night when 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 round up 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 talked him into supplying 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 frumpy scrubs, 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 glare 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 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 couple of days 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, Buenos noche.”

He smiles and drives away. My foreign language skills are still quite rudimentary, like when little 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 he is 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 big dope, a beeg fainting dope!”

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

A few weeks later and the end of summer is in sight. RTF is off tonight, and Curry-guy is acting morose for no known reason. Our shift 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 you 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'm able to sneak out about ten minutes later.

It has just rained after an interminably hot day, and dense 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 his name, he turns, and I see remnants of tears on his cheeks. I ask him what is wrong. He stands up, embarrassed, and hands me the book that he has now been reading for over a month.

"You did not tell me on Dan and Ann." He starts to sniffle but then is able to compose himself so that he can proceed in an almost accusatory tone. "They come to end right here in book. You give to me no warning!"

I am stunned. I don't know how to defend myself and/or Wilson Rawls.

"Oh, Curry-guy," I wipe his 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 of me" either.

I step toward him, rise on my toes, and place a hand on the front of his shirt to bring us gently together. I kiss him on the lips and stand my ground. After a couple of seconds, he kisses me back and time melts.

The rain starts back up again. We let each other go and walk silently back up to the hospital.

I doubt that 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.