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Angel of Mercy

The white ducks had left and only the brown ones remained. Desperate women marched their dogs around the lake and the leaves fell, covering the green with layer upon layer of brilliant golds, browns, reds and rusts. It was my favorite scene.

It was also a favorite scene of the old; they watched from their windows the seasons change into years, the days fade into nights and the nights into morning and the minutes tick by --- endless. The old were cocooned from the outside elements by the walls of the nursing home and the ceaseless muttering of the television kept them awake.

I worked in the home for over five years; sixty-one months of routine: morning and afternoon, day and night, breakfast, lunch and dinner. Some came and went, recovered from a fall or allowed weary relatives a rest. Most stayed on until they died and in the comfort of the home it was a slow and painful process. We made lives easier, but at what cost? Saturday was my favorite day --- weekend work never bothered me, for despite the merging of the days in the ever-controlled atmosphere, years of looking forward to "Saturday" could never completely be erased from the benumbed minds of myself and some of the residents. Sunday, God's day, was the most miserable.

I was a care assistant, not enough qualifications for nursing, but it suited my lifestyle: married young with children, two of them, aged ten and eight, though they were younger then of course, and a husband I could live with. So why did I decide to do it? It was the cost, I think. Morning and afternoon, day and night, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I walked the corridors of the home, always clutching something for someone: bedpan, tray, towels. Walking in a uniform and white pumps that made no sound, fetching and carrying, making life easier.

The residents had their own rooms, had saves enough in life to come and die in an expensive home. They were rich and pathetically grateful and every day for six and a half hours, minus my ten minute break, I did exactly as they asked. I wanted to do it for them. In my own way, I loved them. That will sound strange, but we were all close, the residents and me. I knew what they wanted, what they needed more than anything and what they couldn't get for themselves.

I sometimes took my break in Mrs. Barry's room. She smoked,

had never allowed cancer to kill her, and she let me do the same. I always wondered if smoking made me a weak person; it was an addiction, but Mrs. Barry didn't mind the broken rules. she held her cigarette in a shiny black holder but ruined the effect by clutching at the thin stem with gnarled, rheumatic fingers. Clutched it with a fist of a grip, drank in the smoke and rarely exhaled. The nurses turned a blind eye. Her photographs fascinated me; beautiful portraits of black and white youth with a far-away look that I sometimes saw today but usually it was an ugly face, ruined by age. Her neighbor, Mrs. Mitchell, had given up her fight with sanity and rocked in her chair with a strange moaning that penetrated even the sound of the television through the walls. Mrs. Barry had no pity, they had been neighbors for too long; she wanted her peace but the strength of the madness kept Mrs. Mitchell's will alive. Lucidity came and went and when it came the blackness only intensified, the horror would come again but at least it was apart from her consciousness. Realizing who she was, she agreed with Mrs. Barry and prayed, pleaded for release --- but it wouldn't come.

Activities were programmed for the rest. We wheeled them down to the social area and they watched demonstrations of flower arranging. Creations were raffled off at the end and languished in the corners of rooms until the cleaners finally remembered to take them away. I liked to leave them there, the reminder of dead flowers would, I thought, give hope to the residents.

Christmas came, the nurses sent out cards, a menu had been chosen and Christmas lunch was eaten. Decorations put up, pulled down. Over almost as soon as it had began and would have left no mark had it not been for Mrs. Barry's fall. Stretching out from her chair her legs gave way and she collapsed to the floor and stayed there in an agony of frustration and pain until I came in with her mid-afternoon tea and called a nurse. She broke an arm and a leg and encased in plaster understood her neighbor. I tried to visit her on my break but she wouldn't speak, accepted my help but not my company. She couldn't do anything, not even die. It was then that the idea came to me. As I washed her in the mornings and dressed her as best I could over the plaster, I knew why she wouldn't speak, why she hated me and I loved her all the more. We never spoke about it, she never knew what I would do for her until the moment. She rarely slept, the pills we gave her didn't help. I thought about giving her too many, an overdose that would ease her out of her pain but they were controlled by the nurses, vigorously monitored and locked away, it

was part of their job. Killing someone, no matter how much they want to die takes thought and planning. I didn't want to be caught, although I seriously never thought it would happen, just made sure I took precautions --- an overdose wouldn't do, someone would have to be blamed. I suffocated her. She was awake and struggled as a body naturally does, as it had been unconsciously trained to do since birth, but I knew she was grateful. I just couldn't look in her eyes. "It's all right. You'll be all right," I said. I covered her head with a pillow and pressed, gently at first, then harder until she died. They found her in the morning, we mourned but all shared my secret relief. The funeral was moving and within a wee Mrs. Mitchell had a new neighbor.

It was summer, lake life had returned, the view was the same apart from the colors, the layers of golds, browns, reds and rusts had disintegrated leaving the same green, but this time there were new eyes and I was watching them. Watching for a new Mrs. Barry, wanting to give them the help they wanted. I never saw myself as a murderer, more like an angel of mercy, and I was pleased with my role. I don't regret it, never will, though I'm as incarcerated now by these walls as they were by theirs.

Mrs. Mitchell was the next. Lucidity came and she clutched my hand in a desperate grip, eyes wide, pupils dilated by drugs and pain. She remained sane for three days that time, each moment a fear for the future, she just wanted it all to end. Madness carried her away again and she moaned and rocked, eyes watching the lake, drowning in its view, and I choked her. I poured water down her throat and carried on pouring before I closed her mouth and her nose. "It's all right. You'll be all right," I repeated. She uttered a last cough, water dribbled down the sides of her closed mouth and I relaxed my grip. She was dead. I left the room having wiped her face with the towel that had lain beside the basin and carried her peace with me. Her room was filled again, re-painted before the newest resident arrived. The furniture was moved around leaving no trace of the previous occupant, no trace of death. It was all as if it had never happened, but I knew, kept my secret to myself and worked the routine.

Two more years passed before I did it again, people died from natural causes but I think I hesitated to prove to myself that I wasn't addicted, but it was always on my mind. I never told anyone in those two years. Who would I tell that wouldn't be horrified? No one would understand, I was performing the ultimate act of assistance, the most care

I could ever give.

Mr. Sedge, fairly new to the home, was coherent, we talked a great deal. I told him, and one day he asked me to do the same for him, but only when he asked, only when it was necessary. He wasn't shocked, it was something he believed in, just surprised that it was someone like me, a middle-aged housewife, mother of two --- normal. I told him of my love, my care, my job, and he understood. Of all the people in the nursing home Mr. Sedge was my favorite. I used to imagine myself living in his life, he had been a pilot in the war and he romanticized his stories for me, emphasizing the risk, the danger and the thrill. I loved to listen to him talk, he was a man very much alive despite his age, had raced cars in the thirties and liked to read Hemingway. Then one day he had a stroke, paralyzed down one side and lost his ability to move, to speak, and to live. He was reduced to a mind with no body and no voice and he grew bitter. He changed from a man who had once entertained me with stories of his life to a feeble lump of flesh that could only growl when something was done to help him. We fed him, wiped away spittle from his mouth, he refused and regurgitated food from his clothes, heaved him onto the bed at night and onto his chair in the morning, and I knew the time had come. His frustration reminded me of the agony of Mrs. Barry, of Mrs. Mitchell's fear of the unknown madness and it was time to keep to my side of the bargain. It was strange but the actual killing of Mr. Sedge, even though he had been the only one to have actually asked me, was the hardest one so far. He had legitimized it for me but I felt guilt. The days of seeing him in his chair, just sitting and staring at the television, something he had never previously allowed in his room but the nurses had insisted on --- to keep him entertained, they said --- made me do it, to end his torture and incarceration. I had put him to bed with one of the other assistants and was left to tidy up the room on my own. I stood over him and he knew. The stiffness and rigidity seemed to fall from his paralyzed limbs, his contorted face muscles relaxed and he was ready. I placed a pillow over his head and pressed, as gently as I knew how, and his body stiffened and I found myself murmuring the same caressing baby words of comfort, but the door opened.

Mr. Sedge lived ten more years after that moment. Having refused to plead insanity, they locked me up, they found out about Mrs. Barry and Mrs. Mitchell, their relatives were shown on television, used by the media who hunted me down as a witch. Newspapers told my story their way, possessed my life and never gave it back and my children

refused to visit. I knew the truth, that in the pursuit of freedom I had lost my own. They said it would be fifteen long years before I might be released, no one even knew for sure. The nursing home was eventually closed down. It couldn't attract any more residents, and was turned into a maternity hospital. I began to watch television, no one thought I was a threat to the safety of others, just some middle-aged nut that stayed in the safety of the television arc for as long as possible and rarely spoke to anyone else.

It's been ten years now and I'm still here, still sitting in this chair, still watching this television, still thinking about Mrs. Barry and Mrs. Mitchell. Their families had not understood, they should never have found out, they will grieve forever. Mr. Sedge has just died, even after ten years had passed someone remembered and I was mentioned in his obituary. He was the one I felt most pity for; he had asked for my help and I had let him down. His imprisonment had been far worse than mine. I miss my view of the lake most of all. I have a window, but all I can see is sky. I imagine all the old people I have known looking down on me, pitying me. It makes me feel good to know they are on my side. The rest of the prison ignores me and I am glad. Even when I am ill they came nowhere near me. I didn't want them to speak to me, to know me. What little I have left of my life is my own and it's my mystery.

Alison Clayton, WC '98