



Nitwit

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Chapter One

The nurse entered the psychiatric ward of the state hospital. She looked around, and her gaze crossed the newly painted walls. The color was the typical sterile institution green. In her opinion, the color was disgusting.

But studies show, she argued with herself, colors have charms to calm the anxious beast. "I wonder what nutty psychiatrist came up with that idea, anyway?" She chuckled. "Probably one who spent too much time with the crazies in this place.

She sighed, and took a deep breath to steel herself for the day's work, inhaling the distinctive disinfectant aroma. No wonder the people here are crazy, she added to her thoughts. This place could drive a monk to drink.

She nodded hello to one of the patients sitting quietly by the door, watching for someone, waiting for someone to come visit him, as he always did every morning at the same time, for at least an hour.

The morning shift was one she didn't particularly enjoy, but she was stuck with it for every third month in rotation with the other staff nurses. The graveyard shift was her favorite. There wasn't much to do on the grave yard shifts, and she could spend her time watching the television soap operas, which was her favorite activity. "But, this is what I trained for, I guess," she again reconciled her thoughts.

The biggest problem with day shifts were the constant complaints of the patients. They always had something to complain about to the staff nurse. Many times it was the same complaint they aired the previous day, only they forgot the answer. It was how they started their day, which, in itself, was a fact she never really quite understood. It couldn't be due to a shortage in their medications. Everyone got their medications at regular intervals.

"And still they complain," she complained, aloud, as though anyone would pay attention to her mumbling. "Jeez, and Saturday, too! Can't these nuts behave themselves for just one weekend?" She popped a stick of sugar-free bubble gum in her mouth to relieve her tension. It wasn't a cigarette, but it would do for the time being. "At least it isn't a drug," she said to her herself. "But maybe it ought to be," she added in weak humor.

She continued her tirade as she pushed her medicine cart down the hall. "I suppose I do have to do my job," she added, "so the poor souls won't care about being contained, and won't harm themselves, or anyone else."

She stopped the cart in front of the door to the private ward. She only had one stop in the private ward in the day time. There were other patients in the ward, of course, but there was only one she preferred to avoid, and that was the one who most needed the medication each day. It was needed to control the patient, she knew, but even so, she really didn't want to deal with it. "How this nut got a private room is beyond me!" she mumbled.

Expelling a sigh, she unlocked the private ward door and pushed her cart inside. She re-locked the door, begrudging the time it took. She learned the hard way to follow the rules. Turning around, she took a deep breath to prepare for the walk to room number 1313. "You'd think they would number that door differently." she grumbled. "Okay! Here we go!"

The hardest part of her job in the private ward was pushing the cart down the hall. In the private ward there were more nuts than in the other, less controlled areas. In the private ward, you never knew who would be up and about. She always had to endure obscene catcalls. It seemed to her night and day meant nothing to the people here. Jeez, she mused. You'd think some of these patients were fed Viagra, instead of Prozac.

But in spite of her cynicism, there were a few patients in that ward she considered unusual, even funny, in a macabre sort of way. The only saving factor about the private ward was the chance to be amused. Lord knew, her job was depressing enough as it was. She carefully peered around the hall as she made her way to her destination, hoping to see the one patient who never ceased to amuse her.

Oh, there he is! She exclaimed under her breath. She never could keep from giggling when she saw him. He really was such a sight, the poor thing! She knew his physical impairment was not his fault, but one drooping eyelid paired with the other unblinking eye was just too much! Add to that the constant wiggling of his right hand... And he would always look at her with as close to a leer as he could get, and say, "Hey, Honey. Here I am. Where'r'we going today?" Then he'd roll his one good eye, and add, "I'm Clark Gable, you know."

Each day he was somebody else, Often you had no idea who the person was that he said he was, but each time it was someone else. No one could face him without at least chuckling.

I suppose it's not really nice to feel that way, she mentally chastised herself. He can't help it.

She continued her self-admonishment as she pushed her cart down the hall. Well, here it is. Room 1313, she muttered under her breath. She knew this patient to be the most prolific storyteller she ever met. Which, in itself, was not so bad, but sometimes the stories would take hours to tell, and that meant she was delayed in her rounds, which, in turn, meant she couldn't catch up on her daytime soaps. She preferred the daytime soaps to the late night or early morning ones. The daytimes were current, whereas the late nights were often unexciting boring re-runs.

The other problem with Patient 1313, was the patient's ingenuity. There was always a way to escape, and 1313 always managed to either find it, or create another one, if the medication was lacking at any time.

She paused outside the door. She checked her watch, just to make sure she was on schedule, and discovered she was more than twenty minutes late. "Where does the time go?" she asked herself as she reached for the keys to the room.

"I guess I could leave the cart out in the hall, that would take less time," she considered, as she slowly pushed open the door.

She had to be careful in opening the door, for there were times when she hadn't been quite so careful while entering the room, and Patient 1313 scooted through it and down the hall before she even knew what happened. It took more than four hours for the orderlies to locate the patient the last time. Oh, Piffle! She decided after reconsideration. I better not. I never know what these nuts will do with the unattended cart in the hall.

After opening the door, she peeked into the room to make sure the patient was in bed, and not running around loose. She grunted at the extra effort needed to wrangle the bulky cart through the almost too small door, and once inside, she locked the door, just as she was supposed to. She made a racket getting the cart inside, but the patient didn't seem to hear her.

The brilliant morning light from the barred window shined directly onto the bed. She noticed the patient was lying in a back-to-the-door position. Hiding? She asked herself in mirth. Surely the light would have had an awakening effect, if not the noise she made. Oh well, she mused, I guess the last dosage was still working.

She chomped on her gum as she looked around at the shabby institutional bed, bureau and chair, the only furnishings in the room. Humph, she grunted as unlocked the medicine cart. This is a private room! Jeez, you'd think they could do better. She extracted the syringe with a vial of medicine, and plunged the needle into the vial.

She retracted the needle, making sure the quantity was correct with her chart, and carefully put the medicine vial back in the proper tray in the cart. "At least this patient isn't like some of the nuts," she said to herself, grabbing an alcohol swab. There's never any begging for another medication which would mercifully take a person away from reality for a while. This patient never tried bribing me for an opiate derivative.

The medication the other patients wanted was never prescribed by the half-wit doctors, also known as psychiatrists. Most of them seemed to have more neuroses than their patients, in her opinion.

She did feel for the patients, though. The problem was that sometimes critical cynicism and humor were the only outlets for the frustrations of her present job. She was supposed to be an Operating Room Nurse. That was what she hoped for in nursing school. However, the asylums were the only places hiring when she got her degree, so she took the job. Hell, that was ten years ago, already, she considered. My, how time flies when you're having fun. Or was it as the frog said, how time is fun when you're having flies?

The patient didn't stir as she nearly burst out laughing at her own wit. But she managed to contain herself when she remembered how desperate and bored these people really were. The caregiver in her wanted to give them what they wanted. Lord knew she could use the money their bribes would provide, but she just couldn't do it. If she relented once, it would be all over. She'd lose her job and never be able to work as a nurse, again. Nope! Better to come in, do my job, collect my paycheck, watch my soaps, and forget everything else!

As she tested the syringe for air bubbles with a tiny squirt into the air, she thought about the reason this particular patient was prescribed such a heavy dose of such strong medication. So, escaping once in a while? Who's to blame? And besides, no one was ever hurt in the escapades. There was never any violence. She shrugged at the contrast between reality and insanity, checked the syringe again, and addressed the patient.

"Okay. Give me your arm," she ordered.

"Uuaaaggghh!" the patient complained.

"Yeah, I know," she consoled. "But, you know what the Doctor said. You can't go running away all the time. So, give me your arm. This isn't going to hurt. You know that." She blew a bubble with her gum, letting it pop for effect. She ignored the fact that some of it stuck to her upper lip. There wasn't much she could do about it, anyway, since both of her hands were full.

With some reluctance, the patient extended an arm backward without bothering to look at her. She was glad there wasn't any argument, or worse, any attempts at story telling. She didn't need to waste anymore time, as late as her schedule as she already was.

She swabbed the arm, not paying much attention to anything other than the bubble gum stuck to her upper lip. After administering the injection, she would be able to deal with the gum. She hurried back to the cart, disposed of the syringe, unlocked the door, and manhandled the cart out the door, while picking the bubble gum off her lips with a free hand.

Outside the door, she breathed a sigh of relief. There were no attempts at story telling, and she could get on with her rounds. She remembered to lock the door and quickly walked down the hall to the ward door, and her soaps.

After the nurse's departure, the patient waited for nearly five minutes, just to make sure she wouldn't be returning. It was common for the nurses to return to the patients' rooms after administering medication. None of the patients could figure out if the nurses returned to check on their patients' welfare or to figure out whether or not they might have left a syringe behind. The term 'negligent care' often came to the more lucid members of the mentally short fraternity, although the patient in Room 1313 knew the particular nurse on the morning rounds was careful about the equipment she used, and was generally conscientious, even though her gum chewing was a source of amusing mimicry by some of the more normal patients.

After a while, the patient threw back the sheet, rolled out of the bed, scurried to the closet, opened it, and spoke to the person inside it. "She's gone. You can come out now. And remember your promise. I get your lunches for three days for doing this for you."

"I won't forget," the person in the closet said. "How could I forget you?" the person added, just to give the accomplice some feelings of self worth while waiting for the euphoria the medication would bring.

Then, with dexterity not seen in the normal residents of the ward, the person from the closet darted to the window, and opened it with a much practiced twisting of the defective latch. A long reach around the corner of the window provided access to the bundle of clothes stashed there by another accomplice the evening before.

It took less than twenty minutes for the person to change clothes, push aside a sawed through window bar and gain access to the wall surrounding the asylum, to once again taste the feeling of freedom.